

The man who loved women

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

Sometimes it takes years to figure out your father.

My father could be tough, and sometimes, I have been told, he could be gentle. That's what my mother said of my farmer father, the family disciplinarian.

Not long after he died, she mentioned the obvious - that he was a manly man with manly attitudes and appetites. He relished baseball as a player and football for the fun of watching it on television. He killed his Idaho ration of one deer almost every year, occasionally an elk and no small number of ducks and geese.

My grandmother - his mother-in-law - told me when I was about 8 that "for a while, we didn't know what we were going to do about your father. He was always getting into fights at barn dances."

Others in the family provided more detail. They said he became something of an enforcer of people who got out of line. The usual provocation was some nasty drunk smacking his wife or girlfriend around. My father appointed himself the bouncer in those circumstances, trying to get the better of some mean drunk.

My mother saw another side of him. She told me that late at night, the man who prided himself on manly man pursuits, had another side. "He could be very tender," she said.

Looking back, that side of him was typical of many farmers I knew during those years. Their wives worked every bit as hard as they did, and nobody had better underestimate those durable women or show a moment of ingratitude. Few professions are as likely to keep a marriage together as old-school, dawn-to-dusk farming.

My guess is that it is no coincidence that the farm states of Idaho, Utah and Wyoming were among the earliest by far to grant women the vote - years before the 19th Amendment did the same for the other women of America. It took a stupid, unobservant man to overlook the contribution of his wife on the farms of those days.

When my parents moved off the farm and to the city later in life - he working in a grocery store and she occasionally in odd jobs here and there - their work burden was greatly alleviated. And then after a few years, they retired. I noticed the first time I visited them in the small trailer home of their retirement lives that my father, the manly man, was taking his turns vacuuming the carpet and doing the dishes.

He even mastered, on a small scale, boiling water and burning pancakes.

Granted, he was not the most skillful vacuum-cleaner pilot I have ever witnessed. And he got the dirty dishes clean in twice the time it took my mother. But did his best to do his share.

Looking back on that scene and now finding myself in similar circumstances, it has finally dawned on me what was going on. To my father, pitching in on household chores when you are both retired is a matter of fair play. That's partly why he used to sock mean husbands in the nose. They weren't fair, let alone kind.

He thought it was unjust to live in retirement like a king on his throne - a lazy king - while your wife does more than her share of the retirement chores.

After all, this was a woman who hand-milked a dozen cows with him, twice a day, along with a hundred other labors. And so in retirement he wouldn't let the woman he loved do all the housework by herself.

His attitude was built in part on the fact he liked women generally. He liked their personalities. He liked their looks. He liked to converse with them just to hear what intriguing idea was on their minds. He liked to kid them. They were among his favorite human beings.

And a man didn't give them any guff when my father was around or he might sock them in the nose. He was the enforcer of fairness and he loved living in a world among such wonderful creatures as women.

That's why I say now, as it all dawns on me, that sometimes it takes years to figure out your father. I can see now why he tried to do his inept share of the housework. And when it comes to loving a woman, it doesn't get any more manly than that.

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