

THE LOST ART OF PORCH AND LAWN SITTING

By Robert "Bob" Rogers Chaffin

I seldom see anyone sitting in their yard at all these days, least of all their front yards. Oh there are occasional exceptions like the old fellow who would sit in the front yard of the house where he lived with his daughter and her husband. One the hottest July day, one could see the old fellow, dressed in his overalls, with his cane across his lawn chair, and his Co-op cap pulled snugly down on his head, sitting under a maple tree in the front lawn, giving an occasional wave to a car he thought he knew, or to someone who had bestowed a wave on him. In general, however, one will seldom see a grown person sitting in a lawn chair in front of his house. For that matter, one would seldom see anyone sitting in the back yard these days. Someone might be sitting on a deck or a patio perhaps but seldom on the grass they so meticulously mow and maintain.



Our house was on the corner of Jefferson and Dogwood and I suppose one could make an argument over whether we were sitting in the front yard or the side yard when we sat under the sugar maple trees on the Dogwood side. The fact is, the town could not make up its mind either and changed the address from 400 Jefferson, to 901 Dogwood sometime while I was off in Michigan and not there to protest these mindless pursuits of change that I find so offensive. Nevertheless, my family spent a good deal of time sitting in the yard, waving at neighbors as they passed and on occasion they just pulled their cars over, got out, and pulled up one of the old solid metal, red and white, lawn chairs and joined in the conversation.

It was a time in our history when Nashville had a morning and an evening paper; the Tennessean in the morning and the Banner in the evening. Each of the two papers had a particular political leaning and since we were Democrats, we took the Banner. All of us like to read things we already know, gather facts to support our conclusions, and have our leanings confirmed in print. Also, no one in my family had the time to read a morning paper since school and work came early and we were up, had our bacon, eggs, and biscuits and were out the door in pretty short order on any given day. So every afternoon the paper was left rolled up, just like the Up-church boys had fixed it to toss onto the lawn, until Daddy got home from work and unrolled it. It was his paper, he paid the bill, and he expected to do the unrolling then dole out the various sections as he was ready. He started with the front page and worked his way to the classifieds announcing, "Who's got the sports section?" when he was ready for that part and who ever had it was expected to surrender it to him in short order. He wasn't dictatorial, it was just his paper, and the rest of us were simply reading by grace and left-overs.

After supper, we would sit out under the maple trees with the grown-ups talking and sharing the events of their day, while I chased lightning bugs, convinced I would make my fortune selling them to someone in Oak Ridge, or I caught the hard brown bugs that circled our street light in endless dizzying circles. Donnieta did whatever 10 or 12 year

old girls do, generally listen to the conversation of parents and grandparents hoping to gain some clue of what the mystifying adult world was all about. We would sit there in the cooling air of the coming dark until we figured the ambient temperature in the house had lowered to some where below the boiling point. Eventually, I would crawl up next to Mama or daddy and drowsily nod and allow myself to come to that pleasant half awake, half asleep state listening to the drowning voices of the adults.

Finally, Daddy would yawn; a sing to everyone that bedtime had arrived, and someone would fold that days Banner so it would not be soaking wet from the dew sure to form overnight.

It was during these pleasant evenings under the maple trees that I heard the stories of days gone by that have become such an important part of who I am. It was there I learned about making “truckle,” telling riddles, and how things were in “the olden days” of my father’s and mother’s childhood. It was there I learned about growing up in “hard-time” of the Great Depression. I there learned the rudiments of my parent’s theology, the value of family, and borrowed from the wisdom of my parents and grandparents in a way that allowed to me to incorporate that wisdom into my own life. It is difficult to accomplish these high points in human relations during commercial breaks or between video games.

When we built our current house, it was the last of six which we had built together in our married life. I say “last” because after 35 years as a corporate migrant worker, we have no intention of moving again, God willing. One of the things we make sure we provide for was a long spacious front porch that wraps around the corner of the house and a back porch that can be heated in winter and cooled in summer or simply opened up when the weather permits. It is there that we spend much of our time, surrounded by the trees and flowers and beauty of God’s nature; able to spy on the rabbits, squirrels, humming birds, and deer that wander though this little bit of wilderness we have created. It is there we hare with one another the trials and successes of the day and exchange ideas of what comes next on tomorrow and tomorrow as God allows. When our grown children and their wives and children visit, we sit on the front porch and catch up with one another’s lives to the rhythm of the wicker glider, the rockers and the porch swing. Or sometimes we sit on the back porch and pick our guitars and sing to the accompaniment of Flatt and Scruggs, John Denver, or Ricky Skaggs on our iPhones.

We live today in a world short of communication. We have plenty of talk and lots of noise but communication, ideas passed from one human soul to another is in short supply. It occurs to me that a world short on real communication is also likely to be short on real love and a world short on real love will likely to be short of civility, trust, and understanding. Sound like any place you know?

Have a blessed day.

*Read more of Bob Chaffin’s ‘Writers Corner’ and more at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>