

Cabin Gang: Reminiscences 2015

We got the call for a Summit Meeting, 2015, to be held at Art's newly-constructed hunting cabin south of Rushford, Minnesota. The group: Art, Jim, Dan, Father Rich and me. No one wanted to miss the occasion to eat and drink as much as we could and enjoy each other's company in such an idyllic setting. But there was an added element of interest for me. This would be one of the many times that we deconstruct and reconstruct the reality of growing up Polish in the East End of Winona. I wanted to turn the stories that were told in the cabin into a lens through which to glimpse the world we grew up in. Hence this narrative.

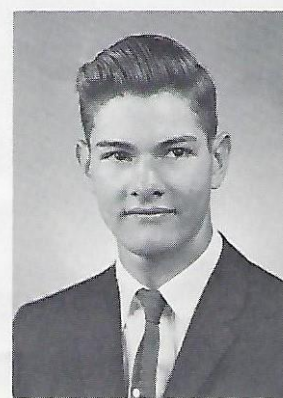
All five of us grew up Polish in the Polish East End of Winona, a busy little river town on one of the more beautiful areas of the Mississippi River. Polish East End is redundant, of course. Everyone in Winona knows that the whole East End is predominantly Polish and that the descendants of the 19th Century Polish immigrants remain proud of their Polish cultural heritage. We five grew up in Winona in the 1950s, arguably one of the best places and times to grow up anywhere. The houses that we grew up in were within blocks of each other; we went to the grade schools taught by Catholic nuns; we went to the same high school also taught by Catholic nuns. We played sports together; we hit the bars together. We know the breadth of our accomplishments and their limits. We are content with what we have made of our lives. So that makes us equally happy with a compliment or with a wisecrack. Indeed, one wisecrack is expected to be met with one in return.



Arthur Speck



Richard Dernek



Charles Sieracki



James Wiczorek

The list of characters in seniority order:

- Art, the owner of the cabin. Successful small businessman. Retired last with a pot of money. Particular about details, which really shows in the quality layout and finish details of the cabin. His quick wit overmatches anyone of us, so we have to overwhelm him like four Shermans attacking a Panzer.
- Father Rich, like me, became a seminarian, who, unlike me, saw the light, was ordained and served the faithful of Winona County in a very personable and caring manner. An outdoorsman and avid hunter. A sportsman and a good sport.
- Charlie, English teacher and community college administrator. A lousy football player but a drinker with a lot of promise. The author of this narrative.
- Jim, an educator. Wise beyond his years when young - and still is. Loves a good joke so gets pleasure from setting off Art and Charlie with straight lines.
- Dan, expert butcher and government meat inspector. One of the best softball coaches in Minnesota. Loves fishing and sports. Will keep only the number of fish, e.g., 12 sunfish, that he can clean in the time it takes to drink a couple beers.

Our first lunch was polish sausages in a bun with sauerkraut. Great beer food. The “beer talk” soon followed. “Did you hear about the guy who won *The Biggest Lie Contest*? His winning lie: ‘I understand women.’”

Jim followed that with a question for Father Rich that he had wanted to ask a priest for a long time. “So, when you hear confessions, whose do you find more interesting, the men’s or the women’s?”

Charlie piped in: “Right, they are doing the same things; it should be a wash.”

Father Rich answered in his best interpretation of Zorba the Greek: “Am I not a man? Doesn’t it follow that the women’s would be more interesting?” End of discussion.

I asked Dan about driving his dad’s car when he was too young to drink legally in Minnesota (legal age 21) and finding his way with it to Wisconsin bars (legal age 18). He always seemed to know the bars in Dodge, Pine Creek, Galesville and Trempeleau. Dan explained that he drove his father’s truck and car to deliver groceries for his father’s grocery store, probably as early as age 12. And in a pinch when carded, he always had Teddy Czap’s ID card. Physical resemblance no problem; they were both Polish. Teddy and friends provided the locations as well as the ID card.

Then Dan launched the discussion of the famous 9th grade Shop class riot at St. Stan’s. Shop was taught in the school basement, a kind of man cave; while the girls had Home Economics in a room that looked like a big kitchen. The Shop class was

taught by a muscular ex-football player named Nardini. All the boys were especially well behaved. Then in the middle of the course, Nardini left and was replaced by a portly (read fat) fellow who lost control of the class because he lost the students' respect. One day, for some unknown trigger, the boys went on a minor riot. And where was the teacher? Some of the boys – Mark, Rudy, Kaz – had chased him up the stairs. One thing led to another and anything was fair game for destruction: projects were smashed, table legs were sawed off, general mayhem. Were there ever any recriminations? Nope. Only the teacher was replaced immediately.

Another successful challenge to authority then occurred to us – that of the 9th grade class that was being held after school by Fr. Halloran, a little priest with an identity crisis. Father Halloran was keeping the whole class after school waiting for a bit of information about some dastardly deed that was not forthcoming. After about a half hour of standoff, Leroy started for the door. Leroy earned extra money by setting traps for muskrats and selling the pelts. Once the sun set, anything caught in the traps would be lost to other animals. As Leroy approached the door, Fr. Halloran marched up to him to stop him. With all the authority in his voice that he could muster, Fr. Halloran said: “Sit down.” To which Leroy answered simply: “I have to check my traps.” Leroy deftly sidestepped the priest and walked out the door. Fr. Halloran did not show up again in class. He transferred out of diocesan work to be a chaplain in the services. No recriminations.

Next, it was the moment for Art to relate the story of the famous “Happy Hour” incident. “Happy Hour” was an hour of detention given at Cotter High School for the most frivolous of reasons. Art, Corny, and Kaz were being disciplined with a “Happy Hour” and were lined up for “Happy Hour” work details to be given out by the Principal, Fr. McCauley. The good Father, who was a former golden gloves boxer, started giving instructions. When Kaz heard his work duty, he turned and mumbled under his breath something that sounded like, “F you.” Wrong thing to mumble. Father had a notorious short temper. His face immediately turned red, and instead of punching Kaz, he gave him a forceful push towards the glass trophy case. Kaz stumbled and crashed right through the glass. Kaz later transferred to the public high school, obviously a safer environment.

Then we got into altar boy stories. All of us were servers at Mass. But that did not keep us out of trouble in the sacristy. To the contrary. Art described his successful effort to scare the bejezus out of Dave H. Art hid inside the cassock closet until the moment when Dave opened the door to Art's grinning face. Dave's scream meant big trouble for Art. Then it was my turn for a story. Carl Bambenek pulled a prank on me while serving at an earlier Mass. So I returned the favor by hiding his winter coat in the cassock closet. Later that morning in school, I got a request to report to the Principal's Office. Not a good omen for the outcome of my prank. The Principal asked if I knew anything about Carl's coat. Yes, Sister.” The upshot was I was to retrieve the coat and bring it to Carl's house so he could come to school wearing it. He got home without it but wouldn't make the return trip to school without it.

I also fessed up that I had been kicked out of serving by Sr. Leone – much to everyone’s surprise. Jerry Boland was cutting up in the sacristy one morning, and apparently I was guilty by association since I was sitting next to him. Fr. Literski, in the sacristy at the time, must have spilled the beans to Sister Leone, the director of the altar boys. Next week while standing before the altar, I showed the altar boy next to me my little trick of holding up my right empty right hand. When I lowered it and raised it again, a rosary had magically appeared. I had hidden the rosary up my sleeve. This little magic trick elicited a chuckle from the altar boy standing next to me. According to Sister Leone, that was strike two and I was out of serving as an altar boy. Later, I was given a hint by another nun that with an apology I could be reinstated. Well, I mulled that over for a couple months and finally relented. I often wonder if I would ever have made it into the seminary if I had not erased that blot on my record. But that is another story.

Midafternoon, we took a break from the chatter and jokes to check out some weeds on the plot that looked like volunteer marijuana plants left over from the days when hemp was grown on the farm. We checked out the possibilities of experimenting with a toke, but decided that we would stick with what we had grown up with in Winona – beer and whiskey.

Seated back at the table, Art and Jim reminisced about their trips to Iowa to visit a girlfriend. The vehicle that took them there was a 1952 Pontiac owned and driven by Jim Price. These were ultra-low-budget trips. Art, Jim, and Jim P. ended up sleeping in a cemetery with tombstones for pillows. When the water pump in the car gave out, they found a replacement in a local junk yard. Funds for food were limited. At breakfast, Jim P. had one piece of ham left on his plate that Art coveted. To distract Jim P’s attention, Art suddenly pointed out the window and said, “Look at that pretty girl.” While everyone was looking out the window, Art deftly moved the ham to his plate. Jim looked at the ham and said to Art, “If you are not going to eat that, I will.” To which Art responded, “No, that’s ok. I’ll eat it.” Which he promptly proceeded to do.

Jim steered the conversation to a trivial incident that had serious consequences. It happened on an afternoon when some of the football players were loading the bus at school for an away game. Jim was inside looking for a wrench. Others were putting the gear on top of the bus. Next to the parking lot, some men were demolishing a house and drinking beer while working. On a lark, one of the football players asked the workmen for a beer. And a can of beer was thrown down from the second story of the house. The precious can was stowed away in a student’s locker. Word of the can of beer was dutifully reported to the Principal by one of the nuns. The upshot was suspension from the team of all the players who were loading the bus. Jim was suspended with the rest of them even though he was not even present. Playing football with the team was the highlight of attending high school. This unfair decision ripped the heart out of the team, and the feeling of injustice simmered in Jim’s heart for years. We marveled at the vividness with which these incidents are

recalled after all these years. Father Rich noted that it was common practice for the Bishop to assign newly-ordained priests to teach in the Catholic high schools. As I saw it, this pretty much guaranteed inept instruction for high school students who deserved better.

On the other hand, we had some wonderful teachers at the school. I mentioned that I had met Sister Gavin at a recent celebration held at the Polish museum in Winona and told her that I thought she should have been named Principal of Cotter High School instead of Assistant Principal because she was doing the real work. Jim recounted an experience he had with her after graduation. He and Ron T. were working out at the “Y.” Afterwards they went to a dance at St. Teresa’s College for Women. But ties were required to get in. Jim happened to have a couple ties in the glove compartment of his car. So they put the ties on even though they were wearing sweatshirts. The girls at the entrance would not let them in without a nun’s approval. The nun in charge happened to be Sister Gavin. She laughed when she saw them and promptly said, “Let those two in.”

For dinner, we sat at a handsome wood table that Art bought online for \$35, but spent over \$300 to pick it up on an overnight trip to Wisconsin. Dan pan fried all the walleye and sunfish filets that we could eat. And we five ate a lot. Fixings included home fries, coleslaw, home-made pickled beets, and Hot Fish Shop style tartar sauce.

The rest of the evening found us relaxing on the four easy chairs and couch. Topics included our gun collections, hunting and fishing experiences, changing DNR regulations, and of course the Viking-Packer football rivalry, but not so much about growing up Polish in the East End of Winona. We went to bed relatively early and got up early. A sign of wisdom, if not age. I needed an early start on my two-day return trip to South Carolina.

Postscript

On my way from the East Coast to Winona and later to the cabin near Rushford, I stopped in to visit Jim. I asked about the overgrown apple trees in his back yard. He gets very few good apples from the trees. Most of the harvest goes to the deer and his pet rabbits. He said that it would cost over \$300 to spray the trees throughout the summer for a healthy crop. You can buy more apples than you can eat for that money, and then there is the issue of the pesticide in the yard where his grandchildren play. When Jim planted the trees, he had visions of baskets of apples for himself and for distribution. It seemed to me that this experience was rather typical for our dreams when young. We have visions, but we don’t get everything quite as depicted in the vision. Jim recounted a number of stories about his colleagues and Marine Corps brothers. I mentioned he should put some of these stories in writing, because when his voice stops, the stories stop. I said offhand that I should write up the stories we tell at the cabin and call them cabin stories. Jim said that would be a good title for a book. It did not turn out to be a book, just this little narrative.

