

IN THE SUMMER OF 1998 I PLAYED THE STAGE MANAGER IN OUR TOWN IN THIS LOVELY CHURCH. OUR TOWN IS SET IN GROVER'S CORNERS, NEW HAMPSHIRE, AT THE TURN OF THE 20th CENTURY. IT PORTRAYS THE SAME KIND OF SMALL TOWN LIFE WHICH THIS COMMUNITY HAS ENJOYED FOR SO LONG. THE PLAY IS FILLED WITH REAL PEOPLE FACING LIFE'S TWISTS AND TURNS IN A REAL WAY. THE REMARKABLE CHARM OF OUR TOWN IS ITS SMALL TOWN APPEAL AND ITS ABILITY TO GIVE MODERN OBSERVERS A GLIMPSE INTO A GENTLER MORE NEIGHBORLY PAST. OUR TOWN DESCRIBES THE END OF AN ERA. WITH THE PASSING OF IRVING FRALEIGH ALL OF US IN THIS TOWN CAN MARK THE END OF AN ERA AS WELL.

IRV WAS A FARMER OF THE KIND WE WILL NEVER SEE AGAIN IN OUR TOWN. IRV AND THE FRALEIGHS LOVINGLY WORKED THEIR FARM FOR MANY LONG YEARS. THEY DELIGHTED IN THE LAND...IN ITS BEAUTY AND PRODUCTIVITY. IRV'S LIFE AND THE HEALTH OF THE FARM WERE INTERTWINED. HE LOVED BEING A FARMER...AND HE FARMED SO WELL. DAIRY FARMING IS NOW A MEMORY FOR RED HOOK. IRV WAS THE LAST IN THE TOWNSHIP. HE IS IRREPLACEABLE.

IRV DEALT IN CATTLE...AND IN HUMAN BEINGS. HE WAS AS GOOD WITH THE ONE AS THE OTHER. HE LOVED MAKING THE BEST CATTLE DEAL YOU COULD IMAGINE. MORE THAN THAT...HE DELIGHTED IN TELLING YOU HOW THE DEAL HAD BEEN STRUCTURED...WHO HAD SAID WHAT TO WHOM...AND HOW PLEASED HE WAS WITH THE RESULT. IF A DEAL WENT ASTRAY...AND HE CAME OUT ON THE WRONG END...HE COULD LAUGH AT HIMSELF...BUT HE DIDN'T LAUGH THAT WAY VERY OFTEN.

IRV KNEW PEOPLE AS HE KNEW FARMING. WHEN YOU TALKED WITH HIM HE EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANT POINTS IN THE CONVERSATION WITH STORIES FROM THE PAST...STORIES OF PEOPLE...DEALS...AUCTIONS...LIFE. IT WAS ALL ROLLED INTO ONE ENTERTAINING PRESENTATION. THESE KINDS OF STORIES WILL NEVER BE TOLD IN OUR TOWN AGAIN FOR IRVING'S REMARKABLY COLORFUL VOICE IS STILLED.

LIKE EVERY GOOD FARMER...IRVING HAD THE PATIENCE OF JOB.

HE COULD OUTLAST A DROUGHT...HE COULD WAIT OUT A COLD SNAP...HE WOULD SHRUG OFF A TEMPEST OR A BAD NIGHT IN THE CALVING PEN. HIS PATIENCE ENABLED HIM TO MAKE THIS FINE CATTLE TRADE OR THAT GOOD BUY. HE WAS A VERY PATIENT MAN. IN THE EARLY 70s I JUMPED INTO FARMING WITH BOTH FEET AND BEFORE I KNEW IT WE HAD 22 BEEF COWS ON OUR PLACE. IRV WATCHED WITH AMUSEMENT AND PATIENCE...HE KNEW WHAT WAS COMING NEXT FOR THE NEOPHYTE FARMER. SOON ALL MY COWS WERE CHARGING THROUGH INADEQUATE FENCES...THEY WERE IN THE ROAD...IN THE CREEK...ACROSS THE CREEK...HEAVEN'S ABOVE...EVEN INTO IRVING'S CORN LOT OVER BY THE CREEK WHERE OUR LAND TOUCHED. I SAT WITH HIM ONE HUMID EVENING ABOUT NINE O'CLOCK ON A HILL LOOKING DOWN ON THAT CORN PATCH...IN WHICH MY COWS WERE ALTERNATELY CHEWING OR STOMPING. IT WAS THE CLOSEST I CAME TO SEEING IRVING ANGRY. BUT HE HELD IT IN...PATIENTLY WAITING. SOME TIME THEREAFTER...FINALLY. UP WITH THE INABILITY TO CONTROL MY HERD....I CALLED IRV AND SAID "TAKE THEM AWAY." HE STATED THE PRICE....I AGREED AND THE CATTLE WERE GONE. IRVING'S PATIENCE HAD CREATED A WINDFALL PROFIT FOR HIM. I CONVINCED MYSELF I GOT THE BETTER END OF THE DEAL BECAUSE I WOULD HAVE GIVEN THEM AWAY.

KAY WAS THE SOUL OF THE FARM...IRVING WAS THE HEART...THE UNQUENCHABLE ENGINE...THE POWER THAT KEPT THE FARM IN FARMING. HE WAS A GOOD FARMER...WITH GOOD INSTINCTS. HE KNEW WHEN TO PLANT....HE KNEW HOW TO SIZE UP A GOOD HOLSTEIN...HE KNEW HOW TO HANDLE THE MILK INSPECTOR.

IRVING WAS A GOOD NEIGHBOR. HE NEVER BOTHERED US...WE NEVER BOTHERED HIM....BUT WE WERE ALWAYS AWARE OF EACH OTHER'S PRESENCE. A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO IRV SET BILLIE TO WORK CLEARING OUR COMMON BORDER. HE KNEW I HAD A WOOD FURNACE AND INVITED ME TO TAKE THE WOOD. I STARTED TO DO THAT. SEVERAL WEEKENDS LATER I FOUND ALL THE NEATLY PILED LOGS GONE FROM IRV'S AND ALERTED HIM SOMEBODY HAD OBVIOUSLY STOLEN THE WOOD. "NO," HE RESPONDED, "A FELLA WANTED TO BUY IT...SO I SOLD. WE'LL HAVE MORE FOR YOU NEXT YEAR." IRV NEVER PASSED UP A GOOD DEAL.

IRVING WAS A PRACTICAL MAN...HE KNEW THE VALUE OF TIME AND THE NEED FOR EFFICIENCY. A YEAR AGO OUR BARNS BURNED TO THE GROUND. IRVING WAS THERE LATER IN THE DAY WATCHING THE SMOKE CURL INTO THE WINTER SKY....MOURNING OUR LOSS. NOT LONG AFTER THE FIRE I RAN INTO HIM SOMEWHERE AND WE TALKED. "PUT UP A STEEL BUILDING," HE SAID, "MAKE IT EASY FOR YOURSELF AND THE EQUIPMENT." I TOLD HIM THAT WOULDN'T DO THE TRICK FOR US. MONTHS LATER...AS WE WERE REPLACING OUR WOODEN 1880s BARN WITH ANOTHER WOODEN 1880s BARN...I FOUND HIM IN THE DRIVEWAY...QUIETLY SITTING IN HIS TRUCK...WATCHING US WORK....TEARS IN HIS EYES. "WOODY," HE SAID, "YOU DID IT RIGHT."

GONE WITH IRVING IS A COMMUNITY WAY OF LIFE. NEVER AGAIN WILL IRV'S HOLSTEINS BRIGHTEN THE LOW LAND ALONG THE SAWKILL IN HIS MEADOW. CHILDREN WILL GROW UP THINKING THE GATEWAY COMPUTER PEOPLE DESIGNED THOSE INTERESTING LOOKING BOXES THEMSELVES AND WILL NEVER SEE A LIVE HOLSTEIN IN A RED HOOK FIELD. WE HAVE LOST LATE AFTERNOONS IN THE WINTER BARN...IRV WITH HIS HEAD PRESSED AGAINST THE WARM FLANK OF A MILKER AS HE TALKED ABOUT THIS OR THAT. WE HAVE LOST A COMMUNITY SPIRIT WHO LOVED FRIDAY NIGHT BASKETBALL GAMES AND DINER FOOD. WE HAVE LOST A FIFTY YEAR MEMBER OF THE HORSE THIEVES SOCIETY.

I DON'T BELIEVE THE GOOD LORD MAKES THEM LIKE IRVING FRALEIGH ANYMORE. THE SOLACE WE SHARE WITH MARY KAY, JOAN, AND THE ENTIRE FAMILY IS THAT HE IS WITH KAY...IN HEAVEN...ENTERTAINING GOD WITH HIS STORIES. THEY'LL PROBABLY BE UP HALF THE NIGHT!

FOR ME...IRV AND KAY WILL ALWAYS BE IN THE ROAR OF THE TRACTOR AND THE THUMP OF THE BALER....IN THE SUNSETS OVER OUR NEIGHBORING FARMS...IN THE SMELL OF HIS NEWLY TURNED FIELDS....IN THE GOLDEN HARVEST OF THE CORN.

HEART AND SOUL OF THE FRALEIGH FARM ARE JOINED AGAIN...WHAT A FORMIDABLE PAIR FOR ETERNITY.

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