

Free-spirited and thinking of others, Tom was one of a kind

By Richard Crook, My Turn

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Tom moved next door to me about 45 years ago. He was a "free spirit" before the term was widely used. He was nominally a plumber, but also worked as a longshoreman.

Born in about 1920, he grew up in Texas and lost his mother when he was very young. His dad was a railroad man and had to be away for long periods. Tom was raised by his sister, three older brothers and neighborhood ladies.

He was on his own a lot. These were Depression times and he often had to get food where he could find it.

Tom took up tools and found he was good at making things. He was hired by a machine shop and was good enough at it that he was kept at home during World War II to make things for our national defense.

This rough upbringing probably explains his two principal characteristics.

For one, he was always carrying "things" home - things like lumber, pipes, plumbing fixtures, windows, hardware, tools, etc. He said he wanted to have them in case he or someone else needed them.

Once we put out our toilet for trash pickup. Next thing we knew, it was hidden in the bushes in front of his house. Few of these things were needed, so they accumulated over the years, and his backyard was full of what everyone called junk. Everyone but him, that is, because he thought all of it was valuable.

"I never bring home junk," he'd say.

Things accumulated in his house for years. He had stacks of newspapers, books and magazines.

He had two nephews living close by. He'd give them work digging trenches. He was obviously preparing to add on to his back bedroom, but since he did not have a building permit, he called it a wooden swimming pool. It was never finished, just left as is with more stuff piled over it.

Then there was the ancient dentist's chair. Tom didn't want to give that up because it was an "antique." And the bathtub; it sat there for years.

His second trait: He was free with his possessions, giving money to educate his nieces and nephews, etc. He liked to help the homeless, aged and down-and-outers. He'd take some in to stay with him a few days.

When they stole from him, he'd excuse them by saying, "They needed it more than I." Once he "kidnapped" an older lady from a rest home because she told him she was mistreated. She stayed at his home two or three days until the police came to get her. Tom did Meals on Wheels in his old 1957 Chevy station wagon.

If he didn't agree with a law or rule of society, he'd not think twice about disobeying. He was well-known to law enforcement and to those who wanted his place cleaned up. The city contracted with a man and his son to clean up the back yard. Tom didn't let them get away with much of his "treasure," and whatever space was vacated was soon filled in with more.

There's another story about his dogs. He had several, but the most remembered was Brownie. Tom called him Mr. Brown. Tom would get an old bicycle fixed up and put a halter on Brownie and have him pull the bike up the street and around the town. I'd tell Tom to not wrap the leash around his hand because he may need to drop it suddenly in an emergency.

One day, after one of his dog-bike runs, he was brought home in a police car. He'd hit a speed bump while going too fast and landed face first on the asphalt.

In the last 20 or so years of his life, he was married to Grace. She has an interesting story, too, having been held by the Japanese as a young girl in an Indonesian camp during World War II. But that's a story for another time.

He and Grace were about as different as two people could be. But life went on. Tom grew old, but never wanted to act old. He wanted nothing to do with government programs for the aged. He died one day when we were away on vacation a few years ago. He was 89.

He was one of a kind. He was a product of the Depression, a self-made man, a helper of the helpless, one who made his own rules, and these rules served him (and others) well. He was one of the misfits in our society, and rather than shun them or judge them, we need to learn from them, and see that their story is told.

I think fondly of Tom, and feel it a privilege to have known this free-spirited man.

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