

You Can Go Home Again

By Mel Lavine

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Out of the blue, I heard from two ancient pals over Labor Day. I'd last known them up in Eureka in the early 1960s when John F. Kennedy, the last of our glamour-puss presidents until maybe now, was in the White House.

I'm still a little shocked from the calls. But it was good shock, stirred memories.

Rod, who lives in Paducah, Kentucky, was noodling around the Internet, when he saw where I'd written a book with stuff about Eureka. The phone rang out in our house, shattering the holiday

slumber.

Rod, now retired, was the city planner in Eureka, but too honest and too intelligent to keep the job for long. His opposition to a shopping center outside the downtown cost him. He'd argued the move would gut the heart of the city, and he was right. The painful proof has been visible to this day.

Bob, who got my number from Rod and is now nearly 90 and lives in Whittier, called the very next day. He was the city manager, the first, I believe, in Eureka's history. But he was too honest and too intelligent, and he eventually paid the price as well.

But you got to hand it to Bob. One day the fast-talking fellow who ran the Chamber of Commerce, a stooge for the big boys, came to Bob's office, and, in so many words, told Bob that if he wanted to keep his job he had to be more cooperative. If he didn't go along, all the visitor had to do was pick up the phone to a few people, and the city would be looking for a new city manager.

"So what did you do?" I asked Bob.

He chuckled. "I threw him out of my office."

This called for a big laugh since we both knew the odious fellow.

But Bob, in fact, was pushed out of city hall. Eureka's loss was his gain. He went on to top jobs. For a time he was the treasurer of Los Angeles.

Rod, the city planner, who also fared well after Eureka, said he would never forget the characters who "abounded up there." He remembered the publisher of the paper, my boss, "the jolly, fat orangeman," chasing me down the street begging my forgiveness about something I've long since forgotten. And someone named Herb, "a former Barnum & Bailey clown, who ran Herb's Kosher Kitchen at the back of one of those long narrow skid row Two Street bars." And the Two Street "squatter lady" who lived in a colorful waterfront shanty and wore the most colorful clothing and a stovepipe hat with a single flower in it." And other characters, long gone, as Two Street has vanished into respectability with book stores, boutiques, coffee shops, and a store front museum.

The two old friends said they were going to buy my book. I started to thank them, then caught myself and said, the hell with it. I'm picking up the tab. Money should not taint those memories, I added, even as the Lady Friend is shaking her head.

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