

IN MEMORIAM: MARK R. HEPNER

It was soooooooooo Hep. He got in the last word for the last time.

During the funeral service for Mark R. Hepner, Pastor Dan Craig of Kewanee used Mark's own words for the remembrance. It was based on a paper written for his lodge after Mark had gone to a funeral where that minister asked the people present, "Who would mourn at your funeral?" It was a means of expressing his belief in what mattered most in life. The lesson was simple: give time to those whom will appreciate the time spent with you once you are gone.

This was after he had requested that his entire obituary read to the congregation. The full obituary which contained around five pages of accomplishments.

Not knowing if I would be called upon to speak at any part of the services, I prepared my own eulogy. But as the pastor said when I spoke to him after the ceremony, if anyone else was allowed to speak at the mass it would have lasted for days.

So I reprint what I had written beforehand:

My name is Paul Pinderski. I was a college friend of Mark's. We shared stories with some of you last night, but, because of timing and distance, some of his friends could not make it here today. On their behalf, I am here to honor Mark's memory and legacy.

Our friendship grew in college, but it was solidified after graduation. In 1979, Mark posted a piece of news copy on the college radio station bulletin board as a sign-up sheet for his annual high school reunion on his farm in Kewanee. Many of us city-suburbanite college kids signed up for this road trip and came to the "Hepner Hilton." Mark's event made a lasting impression on all of us. That began an uninterrupted streak of annual college reunions, most of which were hosted by Mark here in Kewanee. Our core group consisted of Mark "Rocky" Rogstad, Matt Piescinski, Jerry Przybysz, Mark Hepner and myself. In Kewanee, Mark was the most gracious of hosts. These reunions would give us peaceful sanctuary from the grinding elements of our daily routines.

The farm and the open skies gave us quiet surroundings that bonded our mutual friendship. In some respects, this setting shaped Mark's fine character. Mark was probably the most even-keeled person I have known; he was a man of high intellect, good humor, sly wit and fierce loyalty to his beliefs. The only time I can remember where he was truly rattled was when he lost his credit card at a restaurant in Bozeman, Montana. We kidded him what would a bunch of college kids do with a lost credit card with a high credit limit? He was not initially amused but quickly got over it.

I also remember when we would go to various cities, we would wind up at a local book store. Mark would wander off to the history stacks. He considered these book stores "free libraries." He would take a book off the shelf

and sit down to read it. If you wandered past him, he would begin to tell you all the historical errors made by the author.

Throughout the decades, we shared many happy events such as weddings, baptisms, vacation trips to Hawaii, New Orleans, Bozeman, Minneapolis, Omaha and parts in between. We would have lively debates over current events, politics and weird news items of the day. And every time we would meet, it was like picking up our last conversation in mid-sentence.

We also shared some hard times as well: including career moves, unemployment, and the deaths of family members and the recent sudden passing of Rocky in 2009.

Mark grew up on a farm. He took pride in being a farmer. Having a connection to the land helped shaped his values: hard work, planning, goals and strong principles that would lead to an everlasting bounty.

He took pride in his community. He joined many organizations. He gave his time to community projects. He wanted to preserve and pass along the history of his community through the brotherhood of his lodge to working at the local historical society.

He took pride in himself and in his accomplishments. As George Washington Carver said, "Education is the key to unlock the golden gate of freedom." He educated with stern discipline, respect and accountability. Mark excelled at the challenges of public education. He passed this test with flying colors and helped unlock the opportunities for his students.

If I had to sum up Mark in a bumper sticker it would say FAMILY, FRIENDS and FAITH.

He truly believed in those relationships. His core values were his character. It was his great character that brought us and held us together. It was the Lesson that he taught us well.

Mark was proud of his community, his work, his friends, and most especially, his family.

Mark embraced life with all that he could wrap around his big arms. He had room in his heart for his friends, his students, his family. We are so happy that he found Annette who made his life complete by bringing love and joy to him; and for Linnea, who was the apple in his eye. There is no doubt that Mark lived his American Dream.

Let me paraphrase what Mark said in Rocky's eulogy:

"As we leave this place and go our separate ways, let us take a profound truth with us. Let us not mourn what might have been from a life that was too short. Rather, let us cherish and hold fast the good times and good memories that each of us has of Mark."

He taught us history and helped shape our past. Our memories of him will shape our futures.

I always called Mark a gentleman farmer. He was the salt of the earth. Mark will be greatly missed by everyone who knew him.

May God bless Mark Hepner and his family.

Mark was laid to rest on May 4, 2013 at the Garden of Peace, within the sight line of his house and family farmstead. After an 18 month battle with cancer, he passed on April 29, 2013 at the age of 55.

Hundreds of people came through the visitation line on Friday. Hundreds of people attended his burial service. As his obituary stated, his life touched so many people.

Outside the church, I met a nearby farmer, Ray Bates. He was not surprised by the large turnout at the church. I noted that Hep was a "volunteer's volunteer" that he touched a lot of people through his organizations. He asked how many people it would have taken to accomplish what Mark did, and I replied, "a small army."



Hep in Bozeman, MT on July 1, 2005.

SPRINGFIELD 2011

The last bit of normalcy occurred during the 2011 reunion in Springfield, IL in August.

It was a reunion picked quickly in the spring. Jerry was going to be in Decatur and Hep may be going to the State Fair. It was another state capitol for the gang to conquer. Hep would not pass up an opportunity to walk through the history of his state.

Hep looked and acted fine during this weekend. Little did we know that he would in a matter of weeks diagnosed with cancer.

We did touristy things like visit the Lincoln Museum and the Old State Capitol Building. The General Assembly was not in session and the downtown area where we stayed was a wild west ghost town.

We learned that they fried everything at the State Fair. Meat, fish, potato, other veggies, fruit,

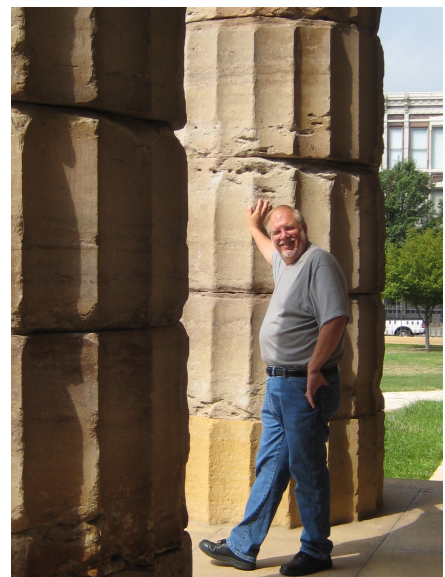


and candy. There were sparse crowds so there was no real lines to deal with during our visit.

At the Fair, we ate in the pork tent; went to the demo derby and did a fair deal of walking around the grounds.

Hep was not the most tech savvy, but he would accommodate strangers as he took snaps for tourists at the Old Capitol. (above) He also posed next to the crumbling pillar representative of Illinois' state finances. (below)

Pat Boylan and Hep look at the menu board outside a food tent at the Fair. (left)



KEWANEE 2012

Matt Piescinski was in Peoria in June, 2012. He decided to run up to Kewanee to visit the Hepners. He found his family outside Hep's land yacht down the road in Francis Park.

They sat around the campground for an afternoon until Matt was chased home by a threatening thunderstorm.

On November 2, 2012, Matt returned to Kewanee for a day with Hep. This time I joined them.

We spent the afternoon in Hep's living room conversing like would normally would do during any such reunion. The election was coming up but he was not too optimistic for his Republicans.

We went downtown to the local diner near the tracks. He informed us of the massive government spending on the new Visitor's Center, besides the tracks, that would greet only two Amtrak trains a day. You could



have built several houses for the cost of the small building. Then in true government fashion, he said the powers that be forgot to budget for staff to even open the center.

In his last lengthy email after the November, 2012 election, Mark wrote:

Data is starting to show that in raw numbers, Romney did not garner as many votes as McCain did in 2008. In fact, in raw numbers, McCain even got more Mormon votes! This is in spite of the fact that the LDS Church is one of the fastest growing churches in America. Demographics are certainly a factor. However, there may be more at play as well.

What happened (in part) is that many conservatives stayed home or voted for a 3rd party (i.e. Libertarian) because of a single issue or two that Romney did not share with them. The fact is we live in a firmly entrenched two-party system. When you vote for a third party, you are throwing your vote away. We conservatives need to stop looking for the "perfect" candidate, and instead look for the best candidate that embraces our core values. Yes, W.C. Fields is right.



Many times you need to vote against a candidate rather than vote for one. Would it have made a difference in this election, I am not sure. But the 1 or 2% that the Libertarians got would have certainly narrowed the gap.

Speaking of core values, we need to clearly define our conservative values, adoption of which will have a great impact on our nation as a whole. The social issues embraced by many of the "old white guys" are killing the Republican Party.

For example, we lost two Senate seats (Missouri & Indiana) because of truly idiotic statements by the Republican candidates. Let me offer two examples. I consider myself pro-life. However, I also recognize that in extreme and painful situations a tough choice needs to be made by a woman, her family, and her doctors.

Government has no business inserting itself into such a situation. I am no big fan of gay marriage and do not accept it on religious grounds. But again, government has no business inserting itself into my church telling us that we must (or must not) perform and sanction it.

Such a decision is between us and God. I believe in equal rights. Regardless if a person is gay or not, they should be entitled to the same tangible benefits for a partner or relative that a married couple would be entitled to. These views are typical with a very large portion (if not majority) of the American public, especially among the under 45 crowd. I also feel these views are consistent with my conservative principles of limited government and individual freedom.

By holding on to hard-line positions that have no direct impact on the strength and prosperity of this nation, we only drive voters away.

If we stick to the core values of a strong national defense, free enterprise economics, individual liberty & freedom, fiscal responsibility & reform, and limited government in business and our daily lives; we can easily win over Hispanic voters, young voters, women, the old white guys, and everyone else to become a majority party for years to come.

My two cents worth...



At the 2009 WELH reunion.



Mark on a trip to Montana in 2005.

Hep was never at a loss for giving anyone his two cents worth on any subject. He prided himself on absorbing knowledge like a sponge. He was a historian, and we learned that he was an avid writer in his school, clubs and private life. He wrote down his reactions to current events, documenting his own history for future local historians.

He was a proud history major in a current environment when history teachers are in an educational decline. He got his administration degree to get out of the school and parental politics of the modern regulated classroom for more job security in the executive wing of the school. He was keen on looking to the future by applying his knowledge of the past to make a present opinion.

He was proud of his family, his farm, and his friends. He was proud of his community and his country. His gracious attitude gave us a place to hold our reunions. His approach to life gives us hope. History will be kind to our friend, Mark Hepner.



At the end of the 2009 reunion.