

Cousin James Estep

Pier Fishing in Jacksonville

I visited Steve in 1969. Naturally, we went fishing. This Jacksonville Pier was long – 200-300 yards long. The trout were running. I got my line in and instantly started catching 5-10 lb. trout. Steve couldn't get his line in because he kept getting tangled in other lines. He hated this. I kept catching trout – trophy fish in East Tennessee. I had caught 5 or 6 major fish - Steve none. Finally, he got untangled for the second or third time and was angry. He pulled a pyramid weight from his tackle box that weighed like a brick, attached it, and announced to the world "lets see if these S.O.B.'s can cast here!" With that, with both hands hurled his line into the distance 100 yards. That is how long his line was. I watched in humor and amazement as his line shot out in an upward angle to the fullest extent. I remember the sound of his line stretching when it reached the end of his reel.

What happened next defies description. His line shot straight back at him at super sonic speed and would have taken his head off if he had not ducked. Over the pier it shot a full hundred yards in the opposite direction. At its end it was level with the pier. Both our eyes were bulging. We had never witnessed such a thing. Again, that sound of line stretching then coming back at 100 miles per hour. This time it shot under the pier full extended it flew back over the pier, extended again under and then over. His line wrapped around the pier until his sinker and bait dangled above the water all 100 yards!

Steve threw down his rod and walked 100 yards to the concessions, came back with a 6-pack and watched me catch trout for another hour. I told this story 100 times. Steve was never amused. What he remembered about the experience he told 100 times.

I caught a 12 inch fish, silver with a black spot near its tail. I threw it down on the deck and baited again for trout. A man approached me and asked, "Can I have your spot?" I looked at him and moved to my left a few feet and said, "Sure." His eyes searched me for a moment and then he asked again, "Can I have your spot?" I moved further to my left. According to Steve the man then asked, "You don't know what I want, do you?" And again, according to Steve, I responded "Yeah, you want the whole damn pier!"

As I write this story, I'm laughing out loud. Phyllis asked what I'm laughing at. I respond "You'd have to be there." As I retold the story countless times Steve never laughed either. He would have had to been there.

Driving in Atlanta

Steve's attitude was, if you look you will chicken out – so he didn't look. For years, he drove an old Comet that Uncle Robie had wrecked in Afton. It was totaled out, but you know Steve. He got the thing running, beat out the fenders from the tires, pried the door so that one of them shut and wired down the hood. Because he put an Oldsmobile radiator in the Comet, it made shutting the hood impossible.

We were driving to a particular exit where I had parked my Mercedes when it blew up. He was in the extreme right lane on an eight-lane highway. We were both looking for the exit. "There it is" I announced as we flew down the road. Steve wheeled left, not looking, of course, and creamed this card! It was a wreck, a major wreck in the Atlanta interstate. Both cars ambled off the road and a young man got out of his car to survey the damage

to his vehicle which was sizable. The right side of his car was gone – chrome everywhere. I stood at the right front of his car trying to conceal the awesome damage. The young man was walking around the front of his car nearing where I stood. Steve announced, “Look at my car!” The young man stopped just inches away from seeing the side missing from his car turned and began examining the Comet. “My God,” he exclaimed, “Your car is totaled!” Steve seized the moment. “Yeah, I know, but I am willing to forget about it if you are.” With that, the guy got in his car and drove off. Stuff falling off as he drove away. We got out of there forever speculating about what he did when he finally saw that his car was worse off than the Comet.

The Rescue

Sammy had flown in from Texas or somewhere and Steve, Sammy, his student and I decided to go fishing in a boat he had borrowed. It was a small, aluminum boat with no motor, just two paddles. The student and I were going to fish while Sammy and Steve scuba dived off the coast of Jacksonville Beach. We were way off shore when Sammy cramped up. He and Steve were 100 yards out at sea from us. The tide was doing weird things, pulling them out while forcing us back. “Help, Help” Sammy yelled. Steve went for him, trying to reach him before he went under. He made it just in time. I saw Sammy go under more than three times. I have never been so scared in my life! Once Steve caught Sammy, he started yelling, “Help!” over and over. I knew the situation was desperate. I was paddling to a point of utter exhaustion, as was the kid. I knew we were not going to make it. “Get rid of the gear,” I yelled, “tanks and all.” Steve wouldn’t – they were borrowed. Sammy was on his back like a log, Steve clung to him and swam feverishly in our direction. We paddled with every effort. The kid never gave up, neither did I, even though at times it seemed we were growing further apart. I prayed, I panicked. Steve never gave up. “Help, help.” I heard his disparate call. How he hung onto Sammy, how the kid and I kept on is still a mystery to me. Eventually, utterly spent, we connected. Steve held on to Sammy and the side of the boat for long minutes. Steve saved Sammy’s life that day. Of this, there is no doubt. And yes, the kid and I saved both their lives that day, not because Steve couldn’t have made it to shore, but because Steve refused to let Sammy go.

Walking through the woods with Steve in Maryland one time, I recall learning how he became what he always was – a teacher. He was a biologist, aviator, historian, psychologist, sociologist, philosopher, behaviorist, and anything else you would bring up. Why? Because he was a genius. Why? Because he had a true photographic memory. He remembered everything. For some reason, I remember that particular day. He was at his best. I marveled at his knowledge on the one hand, and my own ignorance on the other. I understood that I would forget almost everything he taught me except one thing – him!

Story Writing

In 1990, Steve decided that he had done enough research for the story of “The Shelton Laurel Massacre” to be written. Books and dissertations had already been written about this awful tragedy, but none by “family.” So we did it, with a lot of help from Phyllis. The story was published in *Story Telling World*.

I encouraged Steve to take Dr. Flora Joy's story telling course. He did, and what followed was the most prolific series of stories I have ever read. Steve went into a story telling and story writing frenzy. This is not the point. Here's the point. He sent me a copy of everything. They were the best-written stories I have ever read. Keep in mind that I am a historian. I read classical and contemporary stuff. But, never have I read such moving pieces. They connected me to my family's past and I cried many times as I read his accounts. He had a twist, an irony to his interpretation, a genius of expression that made me a bore to my friends as I pulled them out, over and over, and read them aloud. I was the only one that cried.

Mid Air Crash

Steve never wanted to alarm his student pilots. Everything was always routine, even when he cut off the gas supply and forced them to decide upon an emergency landing. But this day was extreme even to Steve. I was in the back seat of the Tri-Pacer with Steve and student in front. We were approaching Tri-City Airport. From my vantage-point, I saw a Piedmont jet taking off from the airport. I calculated in my mind that if the jet was to turn eastward, it could be close. My worse nightmare unfolded in broad daylight. The jet banked towards us as we approached with tower permission to land. I tapped Steve on the shoulder and announced my concern, pointing to the jet. He ignored the impending danger and me. I remember glancing to my right at Boone Lake and calculating my chances of surviving a mid-air collision. Sure enough, the jet climbed into our approach path. I could see the faces of the two pilots as they finally saw us. They did a radical over maneuver to avoid us! I thought of those poor unsuspecting passengers suddenly upside down. When we landed we could hear the tower loudspeaker asking for us to come to the tower immediately. Steve went and returned shortly thereafter. He said that he asked them to play back to him the recording of the tower's communication. They refused. Steve was right, of course, but it almost cost us our life. It is ironic that Steve would go to such extreme to protect a student pilot from crisis and at the same time calculate times when he would put student pilots into crisis. I suppose he wanted things on his own terms.

Restricted Air Space

Steve decided that he wanted me to see the huge C5A's hangered on a military post near Atlanta. We flew into restricted air space for this. I will always remember how at least half of those huge planes protruded out of the hanger. Minutes later, as we flew over the city of Atlanta, we were intercepted by three jets. They flew so close as super speeds that our plane was thrown into a vortex of air turbulence. Steve never flinched. "Hmmmmmmm" he said. "Looks like they caught us."

Studying for Exams

Steve lived with me during college, not every day, but especially before exams. We took many classes together. When a final or mid-term exam came up he would move in with me. I would study notes and test all night – literally. He would be asleep before midnight. On the way to school the next day he would ask me to read my notes to him and occasionally ask a question or two. The test results were always the same. He would score 95+ and I would score a 85+. I graduated with honors and so did he, but I worked for mine ten times more than he. By the way, he never pointed this out.

Snoring

I have never met anybody who snores like Steve. When “we studied” and he fell asleep, he would interrupt my work with sounds like I can’t explain. I would sometimes pinch his nose, put a pillow over his head, anything to survive. Years later when he visited me in Maryland, he snored so loud that he shook the house! It vibrated. I woke Phyllis and asked her to listen. I don’t know if she went back to sleep that night or not. I had a “sound conditioner” that I turned all the way up and finally drowned him out. Years later I asked Julie “How do you sleep with all that snoring?” She responded, to my amazement, “I can’t sleep unless he snores.”

Two Hamburgers and an Order of Fries

My bedroom was offset near our driveway in Limestone. How many times was I awaked during the night by Steve driving up to my window, and once awakened, hear him ask me for “Two burgers and an order of fries, please.” He would then drive off into the unknown leaving me to contemplate what kind of friend did I call my “best.”

The Night I was Paralyzed by Fear

Sometime in the middle of the night, I was awakened by sound from my window. What I saw almost scared me to death. We had no air conditioning. I kept my window fan going at full blast every night during the hot summers. Consequently Steve could not get my attention this night. So he decided to remove my fan from the outside. I woke up and saw two huge hands sitting my fan on the floor. Totally freaked out, I started fighting this intruder with my pillow. I whaled, flung, beat and threw my pillow at those arms, all the while yelling some sad grunted lament that I found totally embarrassing moments later when I heard Steve laughing on the other side. I had a loaded rifle near my bed. Thank God I didn’t shoot him.

The Martin

Steve and I loved to go fishing. We took Uncle Elsie’s boat and Steve’s motor, a Martin, and went to Douglas Lake. Things went fine at first. We never caught anything, but that’s not the point, as any fisherman knows. All at once, the motor died. What happened next could be written up in *Ripley’s Believe It or Not*. In those days, one had to wind the cord around the starter wheel and jerk. It was Steve verses the Martin. Again and again, he wound the rope and pulled with such force that I had to hold on. A thousand times, he wound the rope, grunted violently as he pulled the stubborn crank wheel – nothing. Every time he jerked the rope, it slapped him across the back. Huge, red whelps rose up. The more it hurt, the more determined he became. If I hadn’t finally waved down a passing boat, he would have flogged himself to death. He never wanted to talk about this.

Shooting Dynamite

There were a lot of rabid foxes in the mid 60's. Greene County was paying a bounty for fox-tails. Steve and I were always broke, so we decided to make a few bucks. I loaded my rifle and Steve stuffed his pockets with ¼ dynamite sticks. He would use cherry bombs to detonate them. Our plan was to discover the fox den along the banks of the Nolichucky River and blow them up, collect the tails and then the money. We found a couple of dens, blew them to smithereens – nothing. Bored with this frugality, we lit and threw cherry bombs. On the way home, Steve announced “I still have ¼ stick of dynamite, but no more cherry bombs. We'll shoot it”, he concluded. He set it up. I got drawn behind a log, took careful aim, squeezed the trigger-BOOM! I picked gravel out of my face for a week. Steve laughed over this a thousand times.

Throwing Out Chickens

During our college days, Steve and I spent a lot of time together. So much so, that we picked up a mental rhythm. We were on the same frequency. Steve or I would start telling something, anything, and the other would chime in. We would build up each story to an outrageous and sometime hilarious level. We could be the life of the party. We both boasted many times how parties would be re-schedule if both of us couldn't attend. We told the story of how chickens would struggle to fly when we threw them out of an airplane. We repeated it so often that we would argue among ourselves whether or not the story was true. It wasn't.