

FRIENDS AND NICKNAMES THAT ENDURE

"Your friend," said Elbert Hubbard, "is the man who knows all about you, and still likes you." Friends possess the peculiar ability to see beyond shortcomings and failures that mere acquaintances stumble over. True friends endure.

Perhaps I was too much of a stick in the mud, too slow to adapt to the drastic change in circumstances. But my recollections of college aren't particularly rosy. Duty and drudgery compelled a slow plodding through tedious classes that frequently smacked of irrelevance. The first course I remember truly enjoying didn't come until my junior year.

Though acquaintances outnumbered close friends, I focus today on two amigos from that era: Paul Clampit and Bill Childs.

When Bill and I entered college in 1963, Paul was already a junior. Nevertheless, we smoothly fell in together--and quickly assigned nicknames that still stick today.

After recounting tales (embellished for effect, I'm sure) about the Kingsland Wild Man, a fabled creature near his hometown, Bill naturally became Wild Man. Because of the similarity of Paul's last name to that of the Beverly Hillbilly TV Clampetts, we simply pegged him as Clampit. And when some doofus mispronounced my last name as "McAlizard," Lizard Man would become my perpetual cross to bear. We developed a lot of useful skills like these in college.

Along with our wives, we last assembled 19 years ago. But at Paul's initiative, we converged this past weekend at the Childs' hacienda north of Dallas. All retired from rigid professional endeavor--and empty nesters to boot--we enjoy greater flexibility and mobility.

Though demanded by a 19-year hiatus, obligatory assessments of each others' relative march toward baldness, pudginess and general oldness consumed but moments. Four decades of life's hammering had drastically altered our shapes on the steely anvils of birth, death, family struggle and disappointment.

While the ladies departed for an enjoyable lunch and shopping excursion, Lizard Man, Wild Man and Clampit quickly fell into time-worn patterns. And despite obvious dissimilarities and differences wrought by Father Time, the once-ubiquitous technical chit-chat resumed. Now, however, discussions circled around computers, software, and internet rather than professors' idiosyncrasies, slide rule technique and vacuum tube radios.

Chickenfoot dominoes punctuated by explosive laughter highlighted the evenings.

Though memories anchor us to a common past, we have evolved to different ends. Paul, to a no-frills, Model-T practicality in an oft-inefficient-but-flashy Ferrari world. Bill, to high-tech guru still sought after. And I, to the subterfuge of a touchy-feely poet in engineer's clothes.

What would we do differently could we begin again--but knowing what we know now? Perhaps we'll circumnavigate that puzzle when we reconvene in two or three months.

Tying up the loose ends of a past once fraught with frailty and foible helps reconcile us to a future we may not always understand. And I am blessed with friends willing to help me sort out who I was--and where I am. Lizard Man or not.