

So Long, Big Fella

East Aurora is the kind of place that misses you when you're gone. Maybe that's the way it is where you live, too; I wouldn't know, since I've been a one-town kid for most of my sixty-six years. (You've heard the old joke: Have you lived here all your life? "... Not yet." Might make a good book title.) All I can tell you is that when you leave the 14052 for whatever reason—work, retirement or the promises of the pot of gold at the end of rainbows in Elysian playgrounds like the Carolinas, Florida, Colorado, Texas, Arizona, we feel your absence. And when you inevitably come home, having found the pot of gold only pyrite, the fire ants ubiquitous, the friendships not as substantial and the tedium of waging the Civil War over and over oppressive, we embrace you once again with a hearty "Welcome home! We've missed you."

My childhood best friend, Teddy Nichols (461 Oakwood across from the Ohler homestead at 472), hasn't lived in East Aurora since the early '70s, but he makes an annual pilgrimage from the Left Coast for the Reunion Weekend festivities. No sooner has he set foot in the village, than he is hailed as if he never left, as if Teddy Nichols sitting down to a plate of wicked-hot wings or a beef on Weck with nasal-piercing horseradish is part of our quotidian (RIP, Snake) village-scape. And every year, I point out the available houses and condos that would suit him. And every year he becomes a little more interested. I'll get him some day. People who know me are aware that one of my unofficial jobs is to gather as many stray sheep back into the fold as possible.

Unfortunately, there's one reason for leaving us that makes us miss you even more, because there isn't a darn thing we can do to make you come back. And that brings me, at long last, the point of this week's musing from Right Field.

The Grim Reaper had a busy year: Prince, David Bowie, Muhammad Ali, Harper Lee, George Martin, Glenn Frey, Leonard Cohen and too many more went the way of all flesh in 2016. Mr. Reaper set his sights on our fair town this year, too, and struck a might blow, not quitting until a few days before the dawn of a much-anticipated 2017. As if East Aurorans Ned McGrath, Alex Gurney, Rosie Holmes, Allen Ott, Sr., Douglas "Snake" Vogt, and Tim Sievenpiper (a wonderful man and a prime mover in the campaign to preserve the Mill Road Scenic Overlook) weren't enough, he took someone in the middle of his years, with, we all hoped, his most productive days ahead of him. Lance Holmes, owner and operator of Wallenwein's Hotel, southeast corner of Oakwood and Elm, left us a couple of days after Christmas. He was a week short of his 40th birthday. He leaves behind his father, Stubby Holmes; his mother, Debby Cudmore; his sisters, Tabitha and Stacie; his aunt, Debbie Holmes Grew and her partner, Doc Slosson; an armload of first, second and third cousins that have

sprouted from the expansive Holmes family tree; friends from Wally's and beyond; and his dog, Rosie, just a few months old.

He also leaves me behind.

Lance and I were friends for more than half of his years and easily a third of mine. We had a special relationship that sprung from a most basic disagreement: he had been brainwashed by his father and his grandfather, Walt Holmes, Jr. (the first Holmes to own Wally's), into supporting a certain baseball team from the Bronx with the letters "NY" on their caps, standing, I assumed, for "Next Year." I on the other hand, come from a better lineage, where we Ohlers, starting with my grandpa, bleed the red and blue of the Boston Red Sox. So Lance and I spent many of our days ragging on each other in that most playful and good-natured way that only those who disagree passionately about something that, in the Grand Scheme of Things, is unimportant, can. We never missed an opportunity to point out the other team's shortcomings or to predict its impending demise. It never got old.

Lance was loveable, boisterously big in a St. Bernard kind of way, slap-ya-on-the-back jovial, good-hearted, funny, generous to a fault, popular with the regulars and newcomers. I knew that if I was standing at the bar and a catcher's mitt-sized paw thudded down on my shoulder, it would be Lance, telling me that the Sox had just traded Big Papi David Ortiz to the Yanks for five bucks and pack of bubble gum cards. For several years, he grilled free hot dogs and filled bowls with Cracker Jacks for the first Yanks-Sox game of the season and he and I would bet who could bring in the most fans to support our respective teams. That lovely print of Fenway Park hangs to this day at Wally's in testimony to my victory in that bet a few years back.

Lance knew more about the bar and restaurant business than he sometimes let on. A place as successful as Wally's requires management that we patrons can only guess about. I remember one night when a patron with a snootful had been shut off by alert mixologist Snake Vogt. Some unpleasantness ensued and we all assumed that the police would soon come calling. Lance put that big paw on the fellow's shoulder, calmed him down and gave him a ride home. Case closed. Lance also knew that when I, as manager of Wallenwein's Dudas Fifty and Over Wood Bats Softball League team, came to him for a sponsorship, it was a good deal on his part. He'd whine and scream bloody murder as he parted with the \$400, but he was smart enough to know that it would come back to him several fold, as we celebrated our wins (and losses) with pizzas, wings and jugs of beer. It was with Lance's blessing, funding and encouragement that we built the Duda's trophy case in the southeast corner of the taproom. Check it out.

Opening day of baseball season—now 83 days away, but who's counting—will be a tough one for me without my main antagonist. There are plenty of people left to rag on me about the evil intentions of Red Sox Nation (as perceived by myopic Yankee fans), but no one had the knack like Lance. I might even root for the Yanks for an inning or two in his honor. Naw. But I'll miss him. For a long, long time.

