

*In which we meet another colorful character, the town dog warden, who, at six-foot-five and three hundred pounds, is not tiny at all*

Tiny Gleed died a little while ago, but you would have had to look hard to find the two-line obituary in the paper. Seems short shrift for a guy who was such a visible member of the community: lifelong townie, EAHS Class of '64, Army vet (maybe a Nam vet, it's not actually clear), dog warden, janitor at Immaculate Conception Church, active in Boy Scouts, junk scavenger. He wasn't, of course, tiny, far from it. At six-foot-five, well over three hundred pounds, hair and beard that suggested more Sasquatch than man, and driving that rusted Dumpster-like GMC Jimmy with all the junk lashed to it, he was a constant, if alarming, presence in our midst. In the end he succumbed to diabetes and neglect, dying somewhere east of here in a VA hospital or a homeless shelter or a church home—we're not sure. The family asked that there be nothing in

215

the paper except for the dates—"just the facts, ma'am." And so it goes. I'm sure that for many it is good riddance to a pain in the ass. Lord knows he caused a lot of trouble around here, and I doubt that anyone would nominate him as "the face of East Aurora." The jury of public opinion was hopelessly deadlocked when they were asked to decide if he was just a mental deficient incapable of knowing which end was up, or a savant who, behind that bushel basket of a beard, was laughing at us as much as we were cursing him. But I'm going to propose that, regardless of your opinion of him, we are diminished by the loss of him,

a less colorful tapestry with him gone. Give me a few pages to explain. I remember Tiny first when I was a hotshot sixth-grader at Main Street Elementary and Tiny was in high school. All twelve grades were in the same building back then, so when one of my teachers wanted to show a film in class (not PowerPoint, not SmartBoard, not DVD, but reel to reel film), they called for an

AVE (audio visual ed) student to help with the mystifying process of threading the film through a serpentine course of rollers and clips. In those days we were incorrigible smart-asses who thought that the AVE guys were greasers with slicked-back hair and pointed black shoes (known as Puerto Rican fence climbers) who lived way out in West Falls, trapped raccoons for sport, married their cousins and were only AVE because it got them out of real class work. Imagine our surprise when this monstrous kid, troglodytic in manner, not particularly coordinated, dressed head to toe in Boy Scout gear, pushed the cart into Mrs. Ireland's room. Somebody—it wasn't Teddy Nichols, because he was over at Immaculate Conception getting his knuckles rapped with a ruler by Sister Alberta—looked at the insignia, “BSA,”

and whispered, “big, stupid awkward.” Truth be told, we were awful to Tiny, making fun of him, calling

him names, questioning his intelligence, his parentage, all the really sensitive stuff that kids did to each other. Go ahead, call it bullying.

Hell, I remember when someone—okay, it was Teddy—gave him Ex-Lax gum while he was spinning disks at a Saturday night sock hop, another province of the AVE guys. Do you remember how short those songs were back then? Not nearly long enough for a trip to the boys' room unless he put on Johnny Mathis' “Twelfth of Never,” a slow song that ran three minutes and forty-five seconds and gave us boys a

216

chance to slow dance with that newly emerging element of our society, pubescent girls. Be still my heart.

I guess Tiny survived high school, and went off to the Army, so they say. When he returned he managed to get a job at this new fast-food joint at the Circle called Jester's. The building was round

and full of windows; it looked like something from the Jetson's and featured bad food served in a hurry. Tiny, as some kind of high muckety-muck there, wore a paper restaurant hat and blue-green shirt with the name "Rick" embroidered on it. When one of us smart-asses asked why they didn't put his real name, "Tiny," on the shirt, he grabbed a broom and chased us out of the store. By this time Tiny was easily six-foot-four, two-fifty, and had the gait of Herman Munster.

But Tiny didn't really become a bonafide character until the '70s when he was named the new East Aurora dog warden. You see, somewhere around that time Tiny's dad, a village Department of Public Works worker, had died in a terrible accident on the job. The village fathers assumed that Tiny was, well, a few cards shy of a full deck, a few crayons short of a box, not retarded, but not nearly Mensa either, if you get my meaning. So they figured the least they could do was care for him after his dad passed in service to townfolk. They gave him the job figuring he couldn't get into too much trouble as a small-town dog warden. Besides, he was still busy a few hours a week cleaning at Immaculate Conception and helping out with the scout troop that met in the church basement.

Dog warden had always been a part-time job, one where from time to time you received calls when a dog was a nuisance or was lost. Tiny, however, ramped up into full storm-trooper mode. Imagine this: here was a Goliath of a man with beady black eyes that sunk into a face covered by a long, scraggly beard, and a mat of unkempt hair. If the Harry Potter books had been around back then, you'd have called him Hagrid. He outfitted himself, apparently at his expense, since no warden before or since has looked like this, in quasi-military fatigues with huge jackboots. Around his considerable girth he strung a line of gadgets: nightstick, flashlight, radio, mace, knife, gloves, length of rope, pouch with dog biscuits. He looked ominous. He took the job as a mandate to insure his fellow citizens that never again would a dog

wander from

217

its yard unleashed, never again would an East Aurora garbage can be violated, never again would a dog owner whose pet deposited a calling card inappropriately go unpunished.

In today's parlance we'd say he was "proactive," the way he'd hide behind a hedge (had to be big damn hedge to accommodate him) and entice law-abiding dogs to leave their property with biscuits on a string, thus making them canine criminals, pooch perps, doggy delinquents. Then you'd have go to the pound at the Sinking Ponds, pay a fine to get the beast back and get a lecture in code infractions from a man whose appearance became more and more frightening as time went on, his beard reaching ZZ Top length, his hair wriggling uncombed toward his shoulders, his weight well north of an eighth-of-a-ton, much of it at his equator.

I remember once when he discovered my mom's nineteen-pound beagrel—a mix of beagle and who knows what else—at the neighbor's house, a house where she often went and where the neighbor lady, Mrs. Standeven, welcomed her. He ground his warden van to halt in the middle of Oakwood Avenue and gave chase. The dog, no dummy, ran home and into Mom's house. Well, Tiny began beating on my mother's door, commanding her to hand over the dog. To say my mother, four-foot-eleven-and-a-half, and at ninety-eight pounds, less than a third of Tiny's weight, was frightened is to understate it.

The complaints against Tiny—trespassing on private property, luring dogs out of their yards, harassment, etc.—filled many a folder in the Village Hall, but somehow the village fathers could never bring themselves to sack him. Eventually, though, Tiny did himself in and saved them the trouble. The story, evolved now into myth to such an extent that I'm not sure how accurate it is, involves a dog that strayed leashless into Hamlin Park and onto the

ball diamond, a no-no of capital proportions. Tiny, crazed with anger that a dog would so disregard the rules (there's a sign there plain as day, "NO DOGS ALLOWED"), floored the van into the park and proceeded to fishtail around right field like a mounted cowboy chasing a calf. Visitors to the park, especially those in the general vicinity of the out-of-control van spraying outfield turf every which way, took exception to Tiny's methodology, and the deal was done. No one remembers if the fugitive quadruped was brought to justice.

218

From there Tiny went downhill in a hurry. Living on some sort of meager disability policy, he marshaled his energies into junk collecting, a term we have come to know, in our fascination with TV programs that showcase the unfortunate, as hoarding. Tiny, in a leviathan GMC Jimmy that was in an advanced state of oxidation and general decomposition, would cruise the village streets. Almost anything that you put out as garbage, Tiny would recognize as useful. Empty plastic jugs, an old croquet set, splintered furniture, scraps of wood, bits of rope, wrinkled flashing, twisted fencing, rusted appliances would all find their way into and onto the Jimmy until he looked like a refugee moving all his possessions toward some new encampment. People said he had a nose for trash. The sound you made half a village away from his house by dragging a piece of garage detritus out to the curb would perk his ears and he'd be there within minutes as if conjured by magic.

In time Tiny's house was engulfed by the spoils of his collecting, as he off-loaded the stuff from the Jimmy. It was as if a rogue variety of kudzu vine, Latin name *Castofficus unusabilis*, made of wood, metal and plastic had invaded his property. I'm told that the inside of the house was so gorged with his treasures that shoulder-wide paths were all that led from room to room.

His neighbors, for some reason, did not share his affinity for stuff that had been destined for the landfill until he rescued it. Neither did any of his other fellow villagers. They complained, the village cited him and then fined him, he didn't pay, the village was reluctant to play the heavy with a fellow of limited intellectual and financial resources who appeared to have no idea what the fuss was about. The situation was a virtual stalemate. Through it all he came off as a nuisance, certainly, but as a loyal townie, too. He was never violent or disruptive, in court, on Eyewitness News where he became a regular, or on the street picking through your trash. Even when the village was making plans to bring in high lifts and dump trucks to clean his property and even as they threatened to condemn his property or seize it for back taxes, he was a fixture around town, showing up at the Kiwanis chicken barbecue to help set up tables (and fill his Jimmy with junk) or at a parade or a ballgame at the park. He'd engage strangers and acquaintances alike in conversation, offering opinions about the latest town controversy.

219

According to Tim Buchanan, he was the first to arrive and last to leave his Class of '64 reunion parties. This was his home and never once did you get the sense that he considered himself any more or less odd than other folks on South Street or any other street.

Eventually he rose to cult status; his house was often on the drive-by route for townies and tourists alike. You'd meet someone from Clarence or Kenmore, tell them you hail from East Aurora, and quicker than you can say Lusitania, they'd bring up the guy with all the junk.

It never had the feel of a story that would end well, and it didn't. Diabetes and a worsening addiction to hoarding weakened him, until we heard through the grapevine that he landed at the Veterans Administration hospital in Buffalo and then was shuffled off to

another VA in Batavia. There were occasional reports that he shuttled between charitable mission residences, finding himself again and again cast out for hoarding and increasingly belligerent behavior. Sometime in the fall of 2006 he passed away, and the weeds began to overtake his property until all the junk he had left in his wake was barely visible.

I'm not suggesting that we beat ourselves up over this. Just that we understand how much he added to what passes for diversity here. I compare him to that one dandelion in an expansive carpet-like lawn that dares to grow, resistant to all attempts, chemical and mechanical, to eradicate it. He didn't ruin the lawn, just made it more interesting.