

Then & Now

Memory Is Like the Fountain of Youth

Hubby became his old smiling self
thanks to a well-planned surprise.

By Cathy Reits, Byron Center, Michigan

DURING THE 1930s and '40s, Frank Longcore, Bob Russell and my husband, Bill Reits, were buddies from Paw Paw, Michigan and did everything together.

In 1945, Bill was drafted into the Navy, and Frank and Bob were drafted into the Army.

Bob moved to Indiana and kept in touch with my husband, but they both lost track of Frank after he married.

Bill eventually bought a roller rink, and that's where he and I first met. Bill and Bob were best man at each other's weddings.

Some 50 years later, Bill and I moved from Paw Paw to Grand Rapids. Bill often mentioned that he'd sure like to see Frank again.

We had no idea where Frank was or if he was alive. Since Bill can't hear very well, hates to ride and definitely doesn't like to sit for even 15 minutes to chat, it seemed that trying to find Frank was useless, although he obviously was on Bill's mind.

One night, Bill couldn't sleep; he said he was thinking about Frank and how he'd like to see him again. He spent the next hour telling me about some of the silly, stupid and mean things they'd done together.

Bill laughed and laughed, which was totally out of character for him.

He hadn't felt good for a long time, and little had seemed funny to him.

As Bill continued, I realized that this was a rare treat to hear him reminiscing and I decided to do anything I could to find Frank.

The next morning, I made some calls discreetly and discovered Frank was still living in Paw Paw.

When I called, Frank was so excited at the thought of seeing Bill again. We decided to make the meeting a surprise.

How to Pull It Off

I called Barb Beeching, a friend whom Bill just loves, and asked her to meet us at the McDonald's in Paw Paw. I told Bill that Barb wanted to say good-bye before heading south for the winter.

During the 90-minute drive, Bill complained about the cold, nasty day and that we could have called Barb instead of wasting a tank of gas.

I'd never met Frank, so I had no idea what he looked like.

When we arrived at the restaurant, a man with a big beard looked up at us.

Bill followed me to the counter, and the bearded man set down his tray and looked at us again two or three times.

Finally, I said, "Are you looking for someone?"

The bearded man said, "Yes, and I think I found him."

He shook Bill's hand and said, "Hi, Bill."

"I don't think I know you," my husband replied.

"Well, you should...I'm Frank Longcore!"

Bill's eyes filled with tears, and he hugged Frank.

"Oh, my gosh. I can't believe it," Bill said. "This makes the trip all worthwhile."

They were both excited, and I was crying harder than either of them. Bill said it was such a coincidence, and Frank told him I had planned the whole thing.

I sent them to a quiet booth and brought Bill's breakfast, but I don't think he even noticed it because they were so engrossed in reminiscing. After 5 hours, the guys decided to wrap up their visit.

What a day! Bill, normally a quiet and expressionless man, probably said "I'll never get over that" 30 times in the next few days.

More meetings have occurred between the old friends since then, and I think I've had almost as good a time.