

Friendship, The True

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Test Of Parenthood

By **BEN MAIDENBURG**

My old home of Marion, out in north central Indiana, the town of which I've written many thousand words, hardly exists for me any more.

All the town truly meant lie buried side by side in the ancient Independent Order of Oddfellows cemetery—the memories marked only by two small gray rectangular stones.

One of the stones, my father's, has been there for two decades. The other, Mom's, is new. She has been there a little over a year alongside the man with whom she'd fled Europe at the century's turn and with whom — through extreme poverty and some relative comfort — she'd nevertheless found these United States overflowing in everything any human desires.

WE WENT out to Marion the other weekend to have the unveiling of Mom's cemetery marker — a brief ceremony, largely of prayer.

Yes, it is inevitable. Man and woman are born and at some time they die. And we are supposed to be so philosophical about it. Some of us can be philosophical. Perhaps if I live long enough I may tend to for-

get my two good friends out there in their endless sleep.

Good friends.

That's the way I'd describe my father and mother. That I was born to them was a happening of nature.

WHAT HAPPENED after was the true test of parenthood.

Not only for me, but for every one of you reading this.

A friend is not just an acquaintance. A friend is one on whom you can lean when you are tired; one to whom you can turn when all the world seems to be against you.

My mother and father were my friends. Oh, I couldn't begin to count the times when, in callow youth, I thought they were old fogies; when I disagreed with their philosophies; when I said to them that they were "living in another world."

I CAN EVEN remember the awful day when during an argument over something, I said to Mom, "I hate you." Hearing these words come out of my mouth put me in a state of shock for days. I recall vividly Mom's face when she heard me. She looked at me with weary sadness,

and then smiled a bit and said nothing more.

It really wasn't till after I'd left home that I really started appreciating my parents. It wasn't till after I'd left school that I really started appreciating my teachers.

Isn't it odd, and sad, that we don't give thanks for so many things until we have moved away from them, or lost them.

When I was a kid, I sprang at every opportunity to get away. When I was grown up, I sprang at every opportunity to come home.

AND SO THERE we were in the cemetery. A man with whom I'd grown up — I could remember him in knee-pants; this man spoke the prayers, and he said a few nice things about Mom. There were many others at the scene. Two were close friends of my mother and father — same ages and all that. The others were, so to speak, newcomers. But it made me feel warm that they would join us in this ceremony.

I looked at the stones but all I could see was my father and mother, and the thought passed through my mind: I wonder if underneath all that sod and earth, they are holding

hands? Mom and Pop (as we called him) were that close in life.

As I said at the time of Mom's passing, she wasn't a mother among mothers. I imagine that 95 pct. of those reading this had mothers like mine, and fathers. I speak this way about my parents because they were MY friends. And to the very end of their days. I could lean on them when tired; and turn to them when problems entwined me — and expect them to forgive when I erred.

AS I STOOD there in the cemetery I could hear Mom say, "Thank God." These two words she used so much. She truly felt that whatever happened was from on high — good because we were good; bad because we sinned.

She had the feeling that this country, the U. S., and Heaven were synonymous. That she escaped the horrors of her native land, that she had such a happy married life, that she had either a crust of bread or a whole loaf, that she lived in the United States — all these and many more she believed were blessings. And so about every fifth phrase that

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came from her lips were the words, "Thank God."

My father was no less religious. But he didn't wear his faith so openly.

WELL, the little stone was uncovered, and the prayers were ended, and we started to move away. All of a sudden Marion, Indiana, seemed like the name on a map of Montana or New Mexico.

Oh yes, I have brothers there and nieces and nephews and in-laws. But they now seemed so distant.

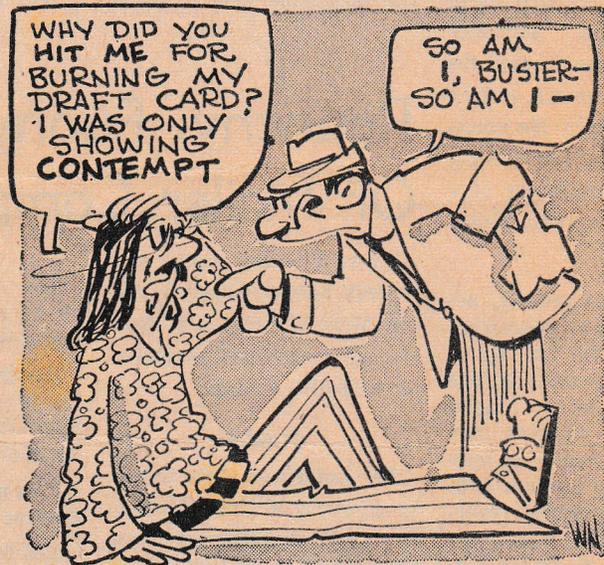
Where once we had had something about which to rally — the old home — we were now, in a sense, polarized; apart.

I USED to write about the Mississinewa River and now-gone Boots Creek and Matter Park and so many other things to be seen in Marion. Suddenly they meant nothing. We drove by the schools which I'd attended.

Once I remembered them with such a glow — even the time the old principal, Salmon T. Bowman, blistered my pants with a length of bicycle tire for dipping a girl's pigtails in an inkwell.

Now they looked just as any building might.

The answer came as we drove over Rt. 224 back to Akron. Marion was mom; and mom was Marion.



I'M SORT of happy that Mom wasn't there to hear a rather vigorous discussion that took place at a family dinner the evening of the cemetery ceremony.

All sorts of subjects were gotten into. While we are one family, we don't see eye to eye on many subjects of the day.

For example, the Liberals got into it vs. the Conservatives. I don't like these terms, and I use them only because I can't think of synonyms that are catch-all's.

ONE OF the "Libs" was challenged: "Well, what would you do if

you saw someone desecrating the flag, or burning a draft card?"

The answer was not that, "I'd give them what-fer," but instead something like this: "Well, I'd have to find out just why they did it?" Call me a flag-waver or whatever, I thought that answer was about the most-lacking I could imagine.

I think that if Mom had been there and heard it, someone'd been slapped physically or verbally.

Let me remind you that Mom thought Heaven and the United States were one and the same. And neither was to be talked down or insulted or whatever.