

When negative campaigning meant eating lutefisk

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By Jean K. Wolf

A little nostalgia creeps up on me during campaign season. I remember a simpler time.

Fifty years ago, when I was 5, my father was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives for the first of nine terms.

His election campaigns were, well, low-key. In fact, you had to look very closely to see that he was campaigning at all.

An 8-by-12-inch placard with his picture might show up in the window of the local hardware store. "Re-Elect Harold R. Anderson," it said. Or he might drive 10 miles to St. Peter, the county seat, where he would speak to the VFW or Lions Club.

For the church dinners, however, family participation was required. These were often in the far reaches of Nicollet County, maybe even 20 miles away. Dinner included the requisite mashed potatoes and gravy, Jell-O salad and fried chicken. And sometimes lutefisk as an alternative.

Trying to hide my desperation, I'd say, "The chicken please, ma'am."

Mom chose the lutefisk.

During and after dinner my dad would chin with the farmers. That's what he called it, "chin-ning," the heart of his campaign. If it were a Catholic church, my brother, sister and I would play bingo. Never at the Methodist or Lutheran churches. The *pièce de*

résistance, however, was the fishing booth where, for a nickel or dime, we could take a rod, drop the line behind the screen and, *voilà*, a trinket appeared on the hook.

And campaign funds. What campaign funds? One local, well-meaning resident gave him \$100, which my father promptly returned. A department store executive from the Cities routinely sent Christmas gifts of \$100 to each incumbent. After dad returned the first of these gratuities, the executive responded by sending him \$25 Christmas ties. That was when you could buy a pretty nice tie for \$5. But dad would sooner have worn a tutu than a \$25 necktie. He passed them along to a friend whose tie collection prospered.

The Varmint

So it went until about eight years into his incumbency. Then the Varmint materialized. The Varmint, it became apparent, posed more formidable opposition than previous competitors. He and my father had been rivals in high school where they had had a crush on the same girl. The Varmint triumphed—he married her and they settled on a farm just outside of St. Peter.

The whole matter of the Varmint created a sense of unease in our household. My mother, who coined the epithet, could say it with just the right amount of disgust and indignation, as if she had

just discovered a dead rat in the bathtub.

The family shared an implicit understanding that this man had no right to run for this particular political office, no, not against our dad. And when my mom heard rumors that the Varmint had been campaigning in our town, he might as well have jaywalked right through the middle of our house and made a pit stop.

My dad campaigned a little harder. He added a church dinner or two and maybe an extra speech.

The Varmint, on the other hand, actually knocked on people's doors. He made the mistake of appearing on the doorstep of my grandmother's little white house. When she realized who he was, she squared her sturdy Norwegian shoulders, eyed him contemptuously, and shooed him away. She had no truck with the political competition of her illustrious son-in-law.

Such rejection was no risk for my dad. He would have worn a hair shirt or subjected himself to instruments of torture before he would have brought his campaign to anyone's doorstep.

And at the time he didn't need to. His margin of victory over the Varmint was comfortable, although not overwhelming. He continued his service in the Legislature and received accolades for doing the work that he loved. Besides, his campaign style saved him the necessity of adjusting his

strategy in the election years when he had no opposition.

As he approached his 10th term, however, another rival appeared. Although I have no idea whether this man is actually small in stature, at our house we referred to him as Little Carl Johnson, another of my mother's inventions. I had grown and moved away by now, but I kept track. Word was that Little Carl had been to every house in the district. Likely he even left literature if no one was at home. Now that is serious self-promotion. He was apparently running a systematic and aggressive campaign.

It paid off. Little Carl wasn't so little. For the first time my father lost an election; he was profoundly disappointed. He had worked hard and represented his people effectively. Now he felt let down by them.

Times had changed

But, unwittingly, he had let himself down. The times had changed and he never caught up. Campaigning, even at the local level, had ceased to be a mellow business, simply a mild inconvenience of holding public office. The likes of my father could not be elected today.

As for my mom, she's an 83-year-old widow who rarely misses a lutefisk dinner in the county. I'll still take the chicken.

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