

Four guys and a breakfast table hold great memories

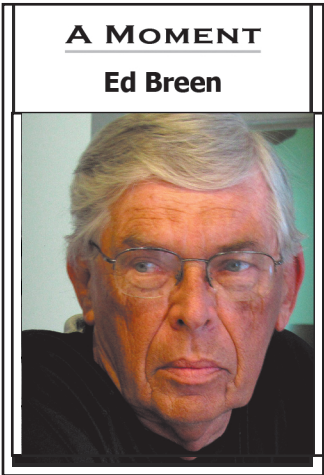
Eleven years ago and four old guys who do not have enough to do decide it is time for breakfast. First on Tuesday, then Tuesday and Friday, but never on Saturday. Every Tuesday, mostly, for eleven years.

There is Jerry; bombastic, impatient, well-travelled and educated beyond good sense. He is our Falstaff, the one quite capable of launching an F-bomb across a crowded room.

Ed is the most refined and restrained at the table. He has made his living being both refined and restrained. He thinks before he speaks, which is a nearly unpardonable sin at this table.

There is Ralph. The smoothest little infielder that the Marion baseball diamond ever saw back in the day. And then the same down at IU in Bloomington. There should have been a College World Series for him and Dick Persinger and the others but the football guys had cut just too many corners and the NCAA put the whole place on probation. A damn shame.

He loves those silly



hats. Not baseball caps, but hats. Like old guys wear to the beach. Cubs hat in the summer, Hoosiers hat the rest of the year.

And there is the other Ed. He is EdWARD. The one across the table is EdWIN. Both despise the old joke about two Eds being better than one. This one has spent his life pretty much snooping in the lives of other people and then writing about what he found: The good, the bad, and the ugly. Made a living doing that.

It is a sort of movable feast. The first table-for-four was at Poochie's restaurant at Sixth and Branson streets. A little scruffy, but so were we. But a reliable bunch nonetheless. Only the ex-

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treme cold in winter and the vicissitudes of old age kept any away ever in those early years.

There were some ground rules. Medical updates were confined to the first 10 minutes, beginning at 9 o'clock for sessions that might not end until it was time for lunch elsewhere. Ralph had to have a menu. Makes no difference that there was no need for one. Two-by-two-by-two. Eggs. Bacon just short of charred; crisp, he called it. And toast. Or biscuits-and-gravy; it's a Hoosier thing.

Ralph's assigned duty: To keep score of the second Ed's storytelling. If I launched into one of those tales that all had heard before, say, three or four times, Ralph put three fingers in the air. Like he was calling balls and strikes. Ed shut up. Sometimes.

Jerry was a natural born Hoosier but he'd been away for too long and had little tolerance for those who-married-who-back-when hometown chats. He would dissent by simply picking up the ketchup or mustard bottle on the table and begin a dramatic reading of the ingredients label.

Ed One – EdWIN – knew far more than anyone at the table about what made Marion tick back in the day, but he really preferred to talk about fly fishing. Describing a special stream and a special time would cause his eyes to blur. And he and Ralph were merciless in lobbying Jerry to stock the pond at Jerry's rural home. How are we to catch fish if you don't put any in there?

The restaurant closed — as in, went out of business — and Athos ,

Porthos, Aramis and D'Artagnan rode on to Gabriel's out at the Mall. And when it closed, it was on to Ninth Street Café for an extended stay, but the noise was just too much for old deaf ears and the last move was to Jimmy's King Gyros, which is catty-corner from what we all still call Fisher Body. But you know that.

You knew winter was coming when Ed One would vanish to Ireland or Portugal or some other really nice place for the duration. No cause for concern. Spring would bring him back. Spring and his green Volkswagen Cabriolet convertible. Sort of like a roller skate without a windup key.

The battles with ill-health increased. All fought back with varying degrees of success. That's what old guys do. Jerry liked to grumble. Claimed to have an exotic disease unknown to most doctors and anyone else at the table. He had plans for a foundation to raise money to conquer it, but that never happened.

Jerry was the first to take his leave. Just about this time five years ago.

Then Ed last year. But

not until he and Nancy made one last great drive across Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho and Washington to the ocean, all on a two-lane highway with the Golden Retriever in the back seat.

Oh, others dropped in. Some stayed, like Mike and Bruce, and some drifted way. The old stories were still there to be told to new victims. But it was just Ralph and the other Ed trying to explain themselves to the new guys.

Then COVID took everything from all of us. Go home, stay there and don't come out for six months. Because it was guys like us that the virus was devouring.

Then Ralph left last week. Just worn out. The smooth little shortstop had lost more than a couple of steps and it was no fun anymore. Time to hang it up. Bag the bats and go home. And he did.

The table is still there. And, no, we don't need the menu. Ralph isn't here. And neither are Jerry and Ed.

It is very lonely right now.

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