

The Myrtle Grove Bar and A'Nara Miller  
Monday, March 26, 2018  
By Tom Sylvest, Jr.

Many moments touched me on my trip with Dad. Standing at the World War II Monument in Washington, DC topped them all. Visiting the gravesite of his great-grandfather in Charlottesville, Virginia ranked up there. Stopping at each home in which our family had lived and hearing his stories about them compare well with other moments.

One moment stands out from the rest. I cannot describe my feelings about this set of minutes. Perhaps if I tell you the story, I will find adequate words. But if I don't find the words, you might imagine my feelings.

We left Pensacola Beach before sunrise on Monday. We drove the coast road through Perdido Key, Florida, Alabama and Mississippi. We reached Louisiana and found US Highway 90. Dad had not been on this route in many decades. He enjoyed seeing some of these old paths.

We decided to drive to Chalmette, Louisiana where we had lived in the late 1950s to 1961. We saw the old home and resurrected fond memories. Dad told me some of his recollections as we drove through St. Bernard Parish and entered Plaquemines Parish. We had no real plan in mind at first. Gradually we thought it might be fun to see each place where we had lived from when Dad, Mom and I were a family of three. Then we could visit each home in which we lived as our family grew to two parents, a grandmother, and seven children. By the end of this day we accomplished that mission.

We crossed the Mississippi River at Pointe a la Hache. Within thirty minutes we were on Udstad Lane in Port Sulphur, or Happy Jack as some claim. We stood in the shade of the oak tree, the only thing recognizable about the property where we lived from April 1961 to April 1968. Katrina completely scoured the lot and nothing remains of our old home. Just that oak tree stands.

Tripping down Louisiana Highway 23 brought a flood of memories. We overwhelmed each other with stories. We learned so much about each other and the different ways we saw the same past events. These stories and remembrances will disappear altogether one day. We knew that. We treasured the fact we could entertain ourselves with something so precious, fragile and fleeting.

After a tour of places like Venice Marina, Fort Jackson, South Plaquemines High School, St. Patrick Catholic Church, and the Old Freeport Office we pointed ourselves to Belle Chase, New Orleans and home. The end of our trip loomed a few hours away and we felt a little sad knowing it had to end. We moved along at speed and came upon Myrtle Grove.

At 55 mph it takes less than a blink of an eye to pass through Myrtle Grove. As intent as I was to beat the afternoon traffic in New Orleans, I slammed on the brakes and made a U-turn. I rarely ever leave Plaquemines Parish without stopping at The Myrtle Grove Bar for a restroom stop and a beer. I had never made this stop with Dad. I would never have forgiven myself if I had missed this chance. We both agreed a restroom stop and a beer were a perfect way to begin to leave our past behind us.

We rolled into the white oyster shell parking lot of The Myrtle Grove Bar. Only one car, occupied by a white woman, sat in front of the bar. Standing at the window of that car was a young black woman. The two were having a light conversation and as Dad and I exited our vehicle, Dad tipped his WWII Veteran's cap and said, "Good afternoon, ladies!"

They stopped and looked at us and gave us their greeting. The young black woman stepped away from the car and the other woman said, "Well, I'll talk to you later," as she backed out to continue her travels.

"Can I help you guys? I'm the bartender," the young woman said while she walked to the door.

“You sure can help us. My dad and I would like to get a beer each and use your restroom,” I announced as we stepped into the dark bar.

Dad’s eyes needed to adjust before he could see well enough to walk to the bar. I walked straight to the bar and the bartender asked, “Is he okay?”

I smiled and explained, “His eyes need to get accustomed to the darkness having just come from the bright light outside.” I called back over my shoulder, “Dad, what kind of beer do you want?”

“A Miller Light will be fine,” he replied.

“We’ll have two Miller Lights please.”

“Sure thing”

I told Dad I was going to the restroom and I’d be back in a moment. By the time I had returned, Dad had situated himself at the corner of the bar. I took up my position and the young lady approached with two beers.

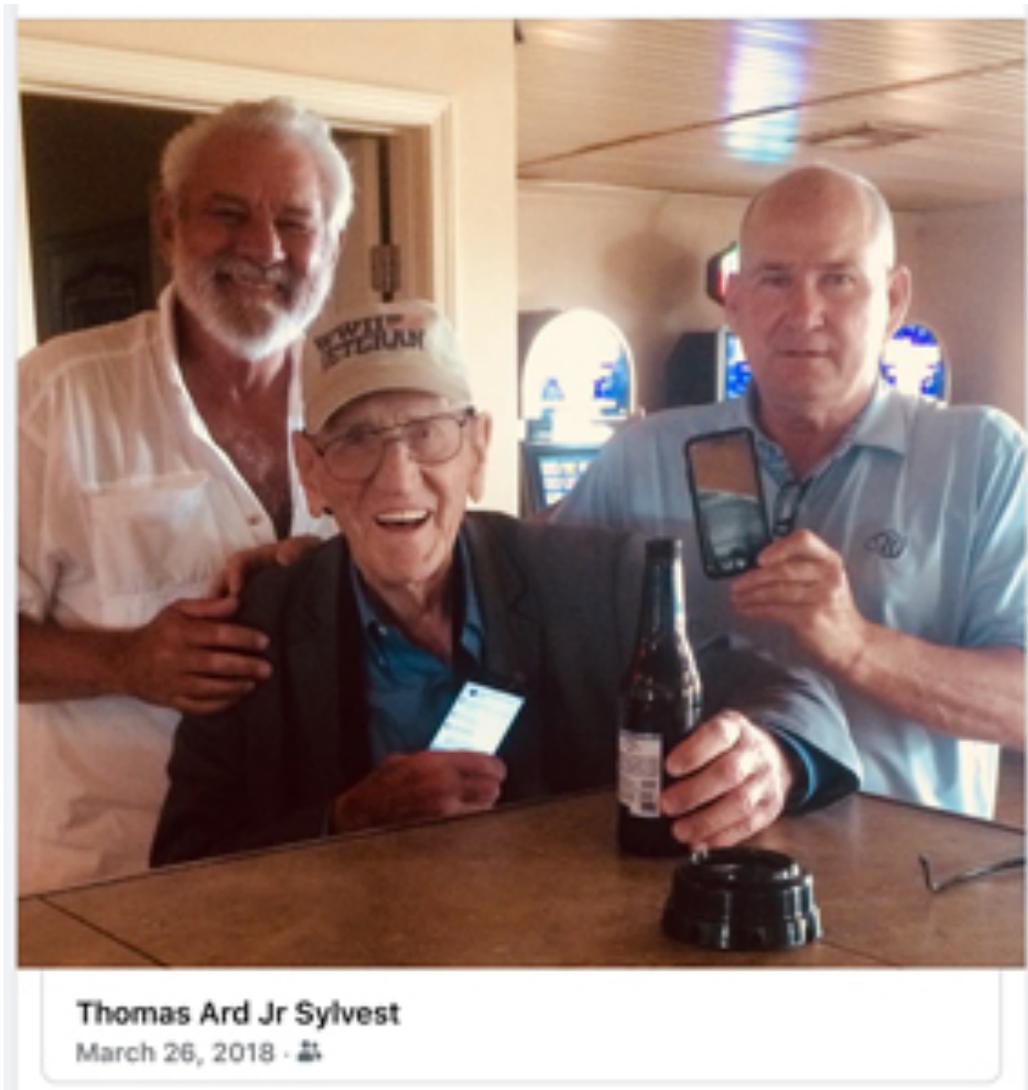
Just as she reached us, another man in his forties stepped in and rushed to the bar near us. He appeared to be in great distress. He introduced himself and said he had lost his iPhone. He claimed someone picked it up on a counter in a Subway in Gretna, drove down Hwy. 23, and threw it out the window along the road near Myrtle Grove.

James Ray then said, “If someone has an iPhone, I can locate it with the Find-a-Phone app.”

“I have one. Use mine,” I said.

Dad said, “I have one, too.” He pulled it out of his pocket.

I handed James my phone and he found the app he needed. In seconds got a signal from his phone and located it on a map in the phone. I took Dad's birding binoculars, stepped to the door and looked down the road to find the nearest intersection that coincided with the coordinates indicated. I pointed to about where he should look. He bought our beers and went off to find his phone.



He came back about 10 minutes later with his phone and a relieved grin. He couldn't thank us enough.

We introduced ourselves as the Archangel Thomas and the minor angel Tommy.

When he left, our bartender said, “It was a good thing you guys were here. I don’t have an iPhone. Not even a flip phone.”

Dad asked, “What’s your name?”

She said, “A’Nara Miller.”

I’ll describe A’Nara. She was about 5’4” tall, with thick black hair and dark, coffee-colored skin. She had a little more weight on her than she probably wanted. Her big eyes were almost black and were a little larger in relation to the size of her round face. Her complexion was clear, smooth and unblemished. She was very pretty.

“That’s an interesting name. How do you spell it?”

And she spelled it out for us. She continued to explain where she was from and how old she was. She was a delight.

Dad opened the conversation wider. “A’Nara, I am ninety-two years old and I have been having an iPhone since they first came out. It is a wonderful tool. I know they can be expensive, but you might find a used one that doesn’t cost too much. I encourage you to get one. You’ll see how valuable they can be.”

“I hadn’t thought about a used one,” A’Nara replied. “I’ll think about that.”

I said, “Yep! A’Nara. This guy here,” pointing to Dad, “has grandkids and great-grandkids that call him the ‘Paw Paw That Rocks’.”

A’Nara smiled and we told her our names.

Dad reached over the bar and said, “A’Nara, I want to do something for you. Give me your hand.”

She eyed him with a bit of suspicion. She warily put her hand into his.

Dad said, "A'Nara, I may be the last person you touch that knew a man who was a slave. You may never meet anyone ever again that is old enough to have known and to have touched a slave. I wanted to give that to you."

Huge tears came to A'Nara's beautiful eyes.

"I knew a man named Gus McGaskey when I was a child. He was a former slave. He lived with his son, Henry McGaskey. Henry and his family were our neighbors when I was growing up. Gus McGaskey must have been in his seventies or eighties when I was a preschooler. Gus' father, Ransome McGaskey had also been a slave. He had lived with Henry until he died. I was too young to have known Rans. Have you ever met anyone in your family or amongst your friends who had met someone who had been a slave."

She shook her head, "No sir. I never did."

"And you may never after today," Dad said.

A'Nara's tears flowed.

Dad started to withdraw his hand, but she held it a moment longer. She said, "I never met a WWII veteran before either. You may be the only one I will ever meet. I so appreciate you."  
Dad started crying.

I couldn't help it. I started crying.

I'm crying now.

That moment embedded itself in my brain. I see it all as if it were before me right now.

That moment stirs emotions I cannot describe.

I have stopped in Myrtle Grove a few more times since then. I saw A'Nara one of those times. I doubt we'll forget each other.