

Politics, Grandfathers and Fish · *Wayne Fields*

LOYD ST. CLAIR was dead of cancer before Richard Nixon had much more than unpacked from his first vice-presidential campaign, but already he had taught me that in this life only three things are worth arguing about: land, religion, and politics. Land, not only because he was an occasional farmer, but also because it was what the other two were all about. Without land, how could you know enough about living and dying to talk about religion? And politics was what people used to squeeze you off the land. So politics became a sort of holy war between us and them. Since he was one of a handful of Democrats in a Republican county, “us” meant the family and “them” referred to the host of Republicans who lived around him. He had enforced that vision on the surrounding countryside, according to neighbors, by piling brush on his highest hill from 1928 until word came in 1932 of Hoover’s defeat, and then, around a fire that could be seen for twenty miles, by whooping and shouting until he lost his voice.

Now family integrity requires me to make clear that neither Grandpa St. Clair nor my father’s father, Grandpa Guy, were really farmers, at least not the kind you see in *The New York Times* presenting prize bulls to Nikita Khrushchev or Ronald Reagan. Grandpa St. Clair tried a dozen trades in turn—everything from bridge building to wiring—and even went to California once, but each time the novelty wore off and he came back to the farm and waited for some other diversion to be invented. Usually this meant that the farm didn’t show much profit, and once he had to buy it back when it was auctioned off at the court house steps for unpaid taxes. Grandpa Guy, during most of my childhood, was a carpenter and returned to his farm only to hunt rabbits and quail. Then, in his fifties and working on the Muscatine Bridge, he fell down an open caisson and broke his back. When his lawyer sold him out to the insurance company, Guy went home to his farm and, corseted up in elastic and stays, worked the land.

Neither grandfather ever showed any interest in owning anyone else’s land, and neither seemed to understand that the point of a farm is to raise things to sell. Guy, at eighty, still thinks a good spring is one when nothing interferes with the quail hatch. They were anachronisms who did not know that the end of land is the accumulation of capital; they thought 140 acres a farm, not a country estate, and the notion of “idle acreage” always seemed to them a contradiction in terms.

In short, they were not farmers, at least not in the modern sense, and since they weren’t, their politics was of a purer sort than that of their neighbors or even of their descendants. In 1932 Grandpa St. Clair did not vote for Roosevelt; he voted against Hoover. What he celebrated was Hoover’s defeat, not Roosevelt’s

triumph and, though they didn't know each other at the time, the same could be said a county away for Grandpa Guy. "Us" did not mean anything so grandiose as the Democratic party which everyone knew was a coalition of contradictory groups; it just meant "us," a remnant. And if the Democrats were a motley collection, the Republicans were a consistent, monolithic crowd—"them." They owned the banks, the factories, the money, the country. They were Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians. They controlled the Clark County Court House, and they kept the road to the farm from getting graveled. The purity of St. Clair-Fields politics was that we always knew who we were against even if we were suspicious of the candidates we supported. We always knew we voted against a bastard, but we never promised that we hadn't voted for one. The exception, of course, was Truman, and then only some of the time, and not just because he was a Baptist and from Missouri but because he had that glint in his eye which showed he could identify "them," too. It also helped that he hadn't shown all that much evidence of success: it is hard not to like a man who can get to be President and still seem a failure.

Both sides of my family spoke politics, and so in 1952 when Richard Nixon was nominated and elected to the Vice-Presidency, he became an important part of our vocabulary. If he had been obscure before, he was now the new star, especially for Grandpa Guy. Guy was younger than Grandpa St. Clair and quieter. While Grandpa St. Clair would work on all the subtleties represented by "them" picking a General for their candidate and would dismiss this Californian who had become the running mate, Grandpa Guy reacted from the gut. For him, Eisenhower was the military equivalent of boss or bank president: as a General he built his career on the work of other people. While others ran the risks, he lived in the splendor and safety of his office—the perfect Republican—and as a consequence was to be reacted against categorically rather than personally. But Nixon was the one. Here was the lackey who wanted to be one of "them," a little man who in his weakness sold his non-identity for a mess of political pottage. From 1952 until the resignation in 1974, Guy never identified Richard Nixon by any name other than "that lyin' son of a bitch." For twenty-two years no one else ever received that designation, and for twenty-two years the snort of scorn which accompanied the epithet was more majestic than any political office.

The problem came in 1960 when the Democrats hopelessly complicated things by nominating a Catholic. Both the St. Clairs and Fieldses were Southern Baptists nurtured in the little country churches typical of northeast Missouri, churches not designated First or Second like banks, but called Woodville and Providence and Bear Creek with part-time preachers and summer revivals where ex-convicts pleaded with sinners. Here the papal taint was seen as the work of anti-Christ, and the conviction endured that Catholic churches had basement armories stored up against the day they would seize America. There

are Catholics in that part of the country but they tend to stick close to towns named St. Patrick—at least until they are converted. Grandma St. Clair was a Barber and while they were Irish, her side of the family had seen the light. They did not cut all ties with their Catholic kin, but they were the most anti-Catholic of all my relatives—except Grandma Ruby, Guy's wife, but as you will see, she is an uncommon woman.

So when Kennedy was nominated to run against “that lyin’ son of a bitch” a difficult issue of conscience was created: which of the two “thems” did we distrust the most? My father and mother had moved to Illinois and we were living in a city. My father was a trade unionist and more liberal about groups like Catholics; in our house, there was no question as to whom we were against. But things were not so clear in northeast Missouri. Grandpa St. Clair was dead, but he had never put much credence in the likelihood of the Pope taking over America, and I was fairly sure where he would have stood. Grandma St. Clair, however, was another matter. For years she had stood in her husband's shadow, rarely questioning—at least publicly—his ideas or judgments. What she would do in his absence was unclear. When she came for her fall visit she tried to avoid all talk of the election, an impossibility in our household, but, when we persisted with our questions, at last announced, in a voice strained by the moral complexities of it all, that she would vote for Kennedy, God help her. “I voted against Al Smith,” she said, “because he was Catholic, and Loyd said the depression was God's judgment on my bigotry. I can't let that happen again. He would never forgive me.”

Grandpa Guy was not about to miss a chance to vote against “that lyin’ son of a bitch” even if it meant supporting the devil and all his angels. But Ruby could not be moved. Her entertainment was listening to radio evangelists, and she kept up to date by reading the Billy Graham Newsletter and “The Word and Way.” She would not vote for an Irishman, much less a Catholic. The lines were drawn. When talk of the election came up she would ramble on about the nearness of the second coming or the fulfillment of Revelations. And Guy, who rarely said much about anything, would mutter, “that lyin’ son of a bitch will show you a second coming.” Finally he swore he would chain her to the porch before he'd let her cancel out his vote. Of course they both voted, but she would never tell him whether she had voted for Nixon or left her ballot blank.

In 1968 they were reunited. Somehow the “lyin’ son of a bitch” was back again and this time the Democrats had the good sense to nominate an innocuous little man who bounced around on the television screen—he actually boasted of having been a pharmacist—making speeches which could put to sleep the most tormented soul. But he was a Protestant, or more precisely, he was not a Catholic. And if his eagerness for the job was too obvious, he was still a legitimate way to vote against “them.” He lost.

Grandma St. Clair had died about the time Nixon was losing the California gubernatorial election, and no doubt she left this life with the reasonable conviction that Nixon wouldn't be here to kick around anymore either. That would have satisfied her politics. But not Guy's. Nixon's return was the ultimate vindication of Grandpa's view of original sin, of the malevolent workings of the universe, and the outrageous perversity of Republican politics. The negative principles dearest to his heart had been affirmed beyond the shadow of a doubt. Yet 1972, not 1968, was the pinnacle of Fields politics. If the Republic endures for a thousand years, it can never more perfectly attain Fields family expectations than it did that year.

At some point during the Vietnam War when all of their neighbors were proudly covering their bumpers with patriotic slogans and were crying for the blood of war protesters, Guy and Ruby decided the war was sinful. It was an amazingly simple decision reached without any elaborate theological or philosophical argument. Grandma's view ran something like this: on the one hand she gave money to world missions because all souls are precious to God and it is the Christian's responsibility to work for the eternal salvation of each of those souls. Napalm and high altitude bombing interfere with the work and reduce souls to body counts. Guy agreed in essence, but the construct was slightly different. On television he saw farmers (they wore pajamas but they were clearly farmers) herded off their land by American soldiers and their allies. Then crops were burned and fertile land was systematically ruined. Suddenly "we" had become "them." There are loyalties that run deeper than those to governments, and loyalty to land is one of them. So a war which pitted generals and corporate powers against farmers became anathema. That Richard Nixon was presiding as Commander-in-Chief simply provided more red ink for Guy and Ruby's moral ledger.

I saw Grandma and Grandpa at Christmas, 1973. The newsletter sent to the faithful by the Billy Graham Crusade Incorporated was no longer on display. When I asked why, Ruby ignored the question and talked about not having preaching at Providence. Guy cried out in a voice rusty from disuse, "Won't give money to anybody who prays for that lyin' son of a bitch."

Ruby, still unsure of the betrayal, couldn't simply let this pass. "Everybody should pray for the lost," she chided as Guy went to water the hogs. Then she confided that it had been a disappointment when Graham had failed to see anything wrong with the war or Nixon.

By November, 1972, they seemed almost totally alone. Most of their children were openly supporting Nixon and treating Guy and Ruby as political neanderthals. At least one was supporting Wallace as the working man's friend—Guy said he might as well vote for "that lyin' son of a bitch" as be a different kind of the same fool. The oldest son, my father, had not concealed the fact that he would see his sons in Canada before sending them to Vietnam.

But he was an anomaly, a hard hat who argued against the war during his lunch break. The next son was an ex-war hero who refused to argue until others spoke against the protesters. Then he would redden, say at least they knew it was wrong to kill, and leave the room.

But it is a large family and to the younger children their parents and oldest brothers were political naifs. The ranks of “them” were swelling while the “us” were getting fewer all the time; and that, of course, is the way Guy expected it to be. The way, in fact, that it should be. When George McGovern was nominated by the Democrats, Guy and Ruby embraced him not just as an opportunity for voting against “that lyin’ son of a bitch” but as a kindred spirit. He spoke a blend of politics and religion (even though he treated words as unyielding shapes, like bricks, to be stuck together with conjunctions). He could not win, not even in the family and, while other Democrats saw this and either opposed him or apologetically declared him the lesser of evils, the neanderthals in the Fields family hailed him as a brother and, to the embarrassment of relatives and friends, didn’t even change their tune when Tom Eagleton went home to pout in Missouri. If it had not been for Massachusetts it would have been perfect, but then nothing is perfect, and this was, at the very least, the political sublime. Guy and Ruby and a few children against the unanimous force of “them.”

Such moments are fleeting and at the age of seventy-six Guy could hardly expect to encounter its equal again. Things turned for the worse. In 1974 everyone was against Nixon; and there is no virtue in being part of a majority. It is a first principle of Fields-St. Clair politics to be defeated as often as possible, always to stand against the tide. When their bastards lose or when most of “them” come over to your side, the game is suspended until you can, once again, work yourself into a hopelessly outnumbered minority. The joys of victory are few, but the privileges of defeat are without number. So, for Guy at least, 1974 was a very hard year.

In 1968, the summer that Richard Nixon was once again nominated for the Presidency, my wife and I left Chicago in the midst of riots and the Democratic National Convention. We left with a new daughter, a new job, and a new mortgage. The mortgage was on land fronting an overlooked lake—overlooked by the power company, among others—in the National Forest of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Every summer after 1968 we trekked north to a one-room shack and an outhouse, sacrificing running water, electricity and news of coming disasters. First we took one daughter, then two, and, by the time Nixon was six months into his second term, a son. We hauled water, smashed mosquitoes into the wall by lantern light, and in a bumbling fashion learned to fish.

Meanwhile we discovered a sort of “Bermuda Triangle” effect. When we

went to the lake, we gave up all contact with the world we knew the rest of the year. Newspapers and television virtually disappeared from our lives. It is true that we had the car radio, but it picked up only a station which interspersed polkas with trading posts and year after year insisted that "the Pack was back." When, late in August, we returned to our other life, we would inevitably learn that strange, unthinkable things had taken place in our absence. One year Bishop Pike was lost in the Holy Land; another year people tried to convince us that not only Ho Chi Minh, but also Everett Dirksen, had died. So it was appropriate that the Watergate hearings and the crisis of 1974 should take place during the summer while we were at the lake and virtually beyond the reach of the twentieth century.

But not quite. And that is how we get to Hagerman and the end of this story. Hagerman Lake, though worlds away, is also in Michigan's Upper Peninsula but suffers the misfortune of being overlooked by no one. It is lined with Swiss chalets and A-frames, blue lawns and aluminum docks. Teenagers and vacationing executives race around in sleek motorboats. Tireless skiers slash back and forth across the water in the same, unchanging patterns. There are lights that illuminate an entire yard, stereos that can be heard in the middle of the lake, and color television sets with forty-foot antennae. Hagerman is a seasonal suburb of Chicago and Milwaukee with all the inconveniences of home.

Normally we have little to do with Hagerman, so the fact that we were there on August 9, 1974, requires another explanatory step backwards. In 1972 the Michigan Department of Natural Resources decided that the large perch the kids caught and the pike which we could see but never hook were inadequate justification for our lake's existence. Therefore, in collaboration with the United States Forestry Service which controls four-fifths of the shoreline, they poisoned the lake. Bushels of perch washed ashore and three-foot pike rolled in like driftwood. Eagles and loons, after one last gluttonous binge, left and were replaced by frogs and bats. The next year the Department of Natural Resources dumped in thousands of walleyed pike. They promptly died. They added trout. They died. Then they tried walleye eggs and in 1974 the hatch was promising (they didn't die until the next winter), but you can't con kids into fishing for two-inch minnows.

When children are small you tell them to wait until non-existent fish grow. When they get to be six, you promise to take them some place else, and eventually they make you keep that promise. Sarah, our oldest, turned six in May of 1974.

The summer passed with weekly renewals of my promise to take the family fishing and with occasional rumors that the President was about to be done in. The promise I did not keep, merely repeated, and the rumors seemed more like *National Enquirer* headlines than real possibilities; United States Presidents do not resign, they aren't impeached, and no one was going to put Gerald Ford in charge.

But by August, Sarah and Elizabeth were endlessly nagging me to live up to my word, insisting that I take them someplace where there were perch. Still, there was the baby and the irritation of loading the canoe on the car, and so I stalled. I stalled until August 8 when my wife came from town completely convinced that this was, in fact, the end for Richard Nixon. That would be something. Not just political retribution but history. And history is an impressive thing, even in the Upper Peninsula. It doesn't happen every day, and if the "lyin' son of a bitch" was going to resign, I owed it to Guy to be there—or at least close to there. So we decided to go to Hagerman where a friend owns a cabin complete with television and where there are fish.

We went in a holiday mood even though we didn't really believe Nixon was going to step down, or that it was possible to catch fish with a boatload of children. Still, we were going to the land of flush toilets and hot water and this was, after all, America where anything could happen as Nixon himself had proven many times before. We expected to be disappointed but were willing to be surprised.

When we arrived at Hagerman it was still too early for perch to be feeding but the baby was fussy and Elizabeth and Sarah couldn't wait, so we put the boat in the water and paddled out from shore.

Perch are relatively small fish with yellow bodies and dark stripes; they look like the common denominator of the fish family, the cliché that everybody knows. They eat worms, minnows and each other. They do not bring surprises. They do not fight or look evil, nor do they contain golden rings or offer three wishes. But they do keep kids happy. So I put worms on the girls' hooks and sat back to wait. Nothing happened. We waited some more. It kept on not happening. I tried to act knowing and said things like, "still too bright," "water's too warm" but all the time wondered what to do if my daughters continued not catching fish. Sarah had started to ask cynical questions which were just informed enough to expose the edge of my ignorance.

In addition to the worms, I had brought along a dozen sucker minnows so that I could fish for northern pike—purely an afterthought, I told myself, a way to pass the time while being a dutiful parent. Now, desperate, I decided to put one of the largest suckers on Sarah's hook so that she would feel its tug on her line and pretend that she had caught a real live fish. Too, there was always that remote chance that a northern, equally desperate, would strike. But Sarah stood firm. She said she did not want to pull a sucker through the water and that she did not like any fish but perch, and that of the fish she didn't like she liked northern pike the least. Six is that kind of age. I asked her if she wouldn't like to go back to the house and watch news bulletins. She stopped complaining.

We trolled back and forth until five or five-thirty. The only other fisherman in our vicinity was an old man anchored about seventy feet from shore who

sat hunkered down, a fishing rod locked on either side of his boat. Because he didn't move and because he was old, we decided his must be a choice spot, and so each time we passed we swung a little closer to him. The water was deeper, darker there, but nothing took our bait.

In fact, Hagerman had become, for Hagerman, exceptionally quiet. The usual din of powerboats and waterskiers was missing, and although it was a bright, warm day, there were no swimmers. Even the yards were empty. If you didn't look at the houses, the lake seemed uncluttered and serene. But just as we were ready to row in and watch the pomp that precedes the fall of a President, Hagerman subtly changed. The surface broke in small regular swells and the sun was darkened by clouds moving from the west. Not far from the boat something jumped. We said it jumped, but not jumped so much as rolled, rolled with a flash of white before disappearing. Bass feed on the surface, so we decided it must have been a bass. I put another worm on Sarah's hook and then searched in the tackle box for something a bass might eat. Finally I put a sucker on my line and began to troll with that.

The old man, when we rowed past, was still hunched over, his face dark under a misshapen hat. Then the rod on the left side of his boat doubled in a steep arc. As he grabbed for it, his line snapped and the rod shot back straight, vibrating like a tuning fork. He pushed his hat back on his head and mumbled but moved quickly to put on a new leader and repair his line. Then the rod on his right dipped sharply, touching the water. This time he freed the rod from the side of the boat and began to reel in, but the hook was not set and he lost the fish. When he jumped up, thinking the line was broken again, his hat fell into the water. He pulled it into the boat and thrust it back on his head. He sat there, not moving, a halo of water dripping down, and we could hear him, the words just audible across the water, "Jesus Christ all to hell."

We kept rowing but by now there were flashes of white every few minutes. And, inevitably, my bobber went under, not all at once but in one long, steady sucking pull and then just as slowly, just as deliberately, was released. The sucker, still hooked through ugly pouting lips, was dead, gouged from head to tail with deep gashes. Bass aren't capable of that kind of violence.

By now the surface was broken not with jumping fish but with the heavy rolling of northern pike. They were rising to the surface like shiny lengths of cord wood, then, with a grotesque grace, tumbling over and sinking back to the depths.

Now if a perch is your model finny fish, a northern pike is something altogether different. He has none of those simple, pleasing lines that early Christians took as their mark. He is not the docile creature one thinks of as bread from the waters. Long and thin with a low browless head, he doesn't mature until nearly two feet in length. He is an anachronism, as primitive as a flying reptile. His jaws are lined with sharp, irregular teeth. Bulbous eyes

stand out like turrets that can rotate in any direction. His upper body, flecked with red and yellow, is the dark green of water weeds, but the underside, hidden until he breaks the surface, is white—so bleached it looks like paste. It is the color of death; the color you see in carp, floating belly up in polluted streams; the color of papier mâché vases in funeral homes. But more incongruous, all along the sickle jaw the white is broken by small perforations, round and evenly spaced, all the more disconcerting precisely because they are so perfect in their circularity and placement. Their function is not apparent, at least to the layman. Hieroglyphics carefully imprinted on this slab of fish, their meaning remains a conundrum.

Northern pike feed on other fish; they do not break the surface like bass or trout because insects are too small a prey for their appetites. Instead they hold motionless, except for the rhythmic surge of gills and the slow, controlled movement of tail and fins, waiting in the thick weeds and bottom debris for perch and blue gill. This dusk they were rising to the surface all across Hagerman Lake, crashing over, exposing their colorless undersides like prehistoric beasts in a parody of play. They robbed our hooks and broke our lines. We reeled in the scarred remains of suckers, or we reeled in nothing.

Each time we passed, the old man was frantically working over his tackle. We called to him but he did not notice; he just kept baiting hooks and cranking away, all the time calling out to no one in particular, "Sweet Jesus, sweet Jesus." We had seen him land at least four pike, ranging from two to two and a half feet, but despite his heavy tackle he snapped line after line. All the while, even bent over repairing his line, he sang his litany, not in anger nor with the rush of an excitement strongly voiced, but softly, happily.

At six-thirty, fishing the same hole that he had fished all afternoon, the old man pulled in a northern pike that he later measured at forty-five inches and weighed at twenty-two pounds. And he stopped fishing. We watched him haul the fish aboard, straining with its netted weight and then, as it thrashed around the boat, beat at it with the blunt edge of a big hunting knife until it was quiet. With the solemnity such occasions deserve, we paddled over to where he had docked. Older than we had thought, he was subdued, drained by the afternoon. The pike lay on the dock not flopping like the smaller ones on his stringer, but straight and quiet, though its gills still kept their regular movement. The color was bright on its sides, and the eyes glared with a deep malevolence. When the old man lifted it up to kill and fillet it, the perforations were as large as dimes, dark openings beneath the fish's white jaw.

Nixon did resign. I missed the beginning of his speech because, after everyone else had walked back to the house and the old man had gone off to gut his monster fish, I paddled alone to the hole where he had been anchored. I sat with the line in the water, the last of the suckers on the hook, and waited. But dark was settling in. The wind had calmed; the water was still, reflecting nothing. No northern rolled on the surface.

I rowed back and sat with the others in front of the television as a President of the United States, looking small and tired, gave up what he loved more than honor. The children, unimpressed with the wonders of history, splashed in the first bathtub they had seen in two months and with their laughter the mood of the afternoon returned. We tried, dutifully tried, to watch Richard Milhous Nixon resign, but one or another of us would recall the absurd glory of all those rolling pike or the broken lines or the old man and his enormous fish.

I thought of Guy and knew he would be sitting in Missouri watching the “lyin’ son of a bitch” in this final reckoning. I was wrong. A belt had broken on the combine and Guy was still driving home from Quincy when Nixon gave his speech. But the next day Grandpa watched the sky, convinced that Air Force One would pass over the farm on its way to California, and he wanted to be damned sure it didn’t turn round and double back.