

## —Lifting the ‘Vale—

### What's Your Handle?

By Jim Follis

I'm bad with names. No, I'm terrible with names. It's always been that way. I can remember my dad embarrassing himself by calling my friends by the wrong names. He's moved on now--died at a very early age with Alzheimer's. Don't think that worry doesn't enter my mind. Every time I forget The Wife's name my eyes get wide and I can just see my Dad staring at his freshly laundered socks wondering what they were for.

We just finished a riverboat cruise and got pretty acquainted with about 140 people who we rubbed shoulders with for two weeks. The Wife knows all their names, hometowns, and pedigrees. I'm still trying to recall the captain's name.

I think the above-mentioned malady might be the cause of my penchant for nicknaming everyone. It helps me remember who they are; and more likely, covers the real truth that I've forgotten their name.

I adjust some people's names to fit their mannerisms and others because of similarities to like-sounding names. Still others because of convenient alliterations. I became Slim Jim to new acquaintances on the cruise ship. Anyone married to a Bert or Ernie automatically becomes the other name. Bert just goes with Ernie.

Some people get names that match their personality. Bright Eyes perfectly described a bouncy young activity director whose name I continuously slaughtered. Julianne--a nice German name, but far too formal for such a spontaneous personality.

Maureen from Dallas became Debbie to me. Debbie and Dallas just go together. Besides, she was so opposite of a Debbie, the dichotomy

made me laugh. (It made The Wife frown.)

And then there are the charmers who love where they're from (no matter how many years ago they lived there) and make reference to "back home" in every sentence. If they're just the ordinary "stuck in a rut" boredoms, I'll label them Tex or Collieifornia. But if they've got an attitude, I'll fit them up with an antithesis that would frost them over if they ever knew it. Tex would become Okie, and Georgia would become Arkie.

Naturally there are always those custom characters that are so obnoxious that they beg a naughty nickname. Big blowhards that lecture loudly on subjects they barely can even pronounce get monikers like gas bag, wind mouth, bad air, or mega mouth.

The Wife has tamed my hobby of human nomenclaturing, but I've been doing it too long. I wrote sports in college and more than several athletes can thank me for their nicknames. Naturally, I was kind to them; I would never print or share a cruel name; that's not much fun.

I'm not the only one who plays with names. People have been saddled with animal names forever. I know a man who is called Mouse. He is small in stature, has big ears, and is very timid. When the union struck his company, he was afraid to go out on strike. I would never call him Mouse; but his coworkers have no problem at all, and he seems to be fine with it.

On our recent cruise there was a very busy travel agent who had a group of elderly folks she was taking care of. I guess she was probably a nice lady, but I was a little put off by her plastic cutesie little baby talk voice and

mannerism that reminded me of a hyper rodent. I labeled her Minnie Mouse. American Idol's Simon retained his job after suggesting that one of the talented contestants should "lose the Minnie Mouse voice," so The Wife shouldn't be so upset.

We love our nicknames. The Dawgs, Socks, Blue and Gold, Fighting Irish are names that we love to associate with.

I'm thinking that perhaps we should be a little cautious with our nicknames. How many well meaning parents have saddled their little darlings with a nickname that stayed with them forever? Scooter or Dimples doesn't go well with a suit and tie. Sugar is cute, but leaves a sour taste in your mouth if she's your boss.

I knew a man who was one heck of a rock wall builder and his name was Tic and Tin. This was a result of his ordering different shaped rocks from his apprentices while chewing on a wad of tobacco the size of a grapefruit. "Gimme that tick one over dare, this one's too tin."

If someone looks like a pit-bull and I name them Muffy after a friend's fur-ball lap-dog, I give myself extra credit. I very nearly got my wings clipped in high school when I tagged a very stiff and brusque chemistry teacher named Mr. Fender--Freddie.

As I rationalize this issue of nicknaming, I'm reminded that it's really quite commonly accepted. Isn't it the governor of our most precious state that sports The Governator as his nickname?

Ah, heck. What's in a name anyhow?

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