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## **Wheelbarrow Blues**

By Thomas V. Lerczak

The morning was hot and muggy, not much good for doing anything out of doors. And yet, I found myself moving some wood mulch with a wheelbarrow, and it reminded me of a man and some incidents that happened about a quarter century ago.

At the time, I was living in a tiny rental house along the Illinois River just north of Havana. My retired landlords, Lawrence and Doreen, lived in a spacious home across a narrow sandy lane. Lawrence frequently hired a local laborer, from down the road, Bill, to do yard work and maintenance on both of our homes. Often, I would see Bill making multiple trips back and forth between the properties with a wheelbarrow, his face stoic and unreadable.

Bill was in his mid-60s, slow and low talking, Great Depression-lean, and tough as iron. He wore long-sleeve work shirts rolled up to his elbow and a dirty John Deere cap that seemed too large for his wiry build. He was a hard worker, but sometimes it looked to me as if he stretched the work out. Lawrence, a highly educated engineer who designed and ran foundries, must have known this, but he wanted to help Bill out by giving him work.

“Five dollars an hour,” Bill used to groan in a voice seasoned with years of hard work as a farm laborer with little chance of financial gain or movement up the social ladder. With few savings, an unhealthy wife, and still supporting a pajama-boy son—who

couldn't seem to find, let alone hold, a job—I imagined Bill was glad to earn whatever extra cash that he could.

Bill worked consistently and did what he was told. In fact, he did exactly what he was told, even when the orders might send him in the wrong direction, so Lawrence had to be careful with his instructions.

Once, Lawrence purchased several sapling trees that he directed Bill to plant alongside my rental house. “They go in here, here, and here,” Lawrence hastily and absent-mindedly indicated with a shovel, making slight depressions in the ground. Would I have taken the initiative and measured an even distance between the holes and set them in a straight line before digging? Or would I have done what Bill did and planted each tree exactly where Lawrence's shovel arbitrarily touched the ground, even though they were not evenly spaced or in a straight line? I'm not really sure.

When Lawrence returned later in the day to check on Bill's work, he nearly shouted, “Why did you plant them in a crooked line and so close together?”

Bill, ever defiant, replied, “You said ‘Here, here, and here,’ God damn, and that's what I did.”

“What can I say,” Lawrence replied, “you're right, but dig them up and replant them evenly and in a straight line.”

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At some point well after the fact, Doreen related to me the incident when Lawrence instructed Bill, “Burn those leaves,” most of which had been blown by the wind near another small house that Lawrence owned just beyond my backyard.

After hearing the story, I surmised that Bill probably thought it would be easier to add leaves to the existing pile and burn the pile in place, rather than raking everything into a new pile. Fair enough. Except once the fire began, the flames quickly grew, spread, and began moving ever closer toward the house.

Unsure of what to do, Bill responded to the situation by running in a panic for Lawrence, who was in his home, probably relaxing with a book or watching the news. Bill’s loud banging on Lawrence’s front door certainly got his attention without delay. “We got trouble!” shouted Bill. And the two old guys moved as quickly as they could, ultimately controlling the fire before it reached the house.

There is no way to know what words were exchanged between the two after that scenario, but I would not be surprised if Bill blamed the near catastrophe on Lawrence for not telling him to move the leaves away from the house.

Bill was notorious for blaming Lawrence’s instructions when situations went awry. And he and Lawrence would argue back and forth about the proper way to carry out a task. On the occasion when Lawrence’s way was not the best way, I

imagine that Bill felt more than a little self-satisfaction. Over the years, though, I have known quite a few men going through life with a chip on their shoulder, with an unmistakable “us” (working man) against “them” (management) attitude. And Bill fit that mold.

I know the attitude well because that was the world from which I came. It was learned behavior, and where I learned it was at a paper factory, my second job two years out of high school.

A major part of my work was watching large sheets of paper, several feet in length and width, gently fly off a noisy conveyor belt and pile up on a platform that could be lowered or raised. When the pile of paper accumulated, I pushed a button to lower the platform a few inches, allowing room for more paper to pile up. If I became distracted and forgot to lower the platform, the paper would build up until it jammed, and the entire operation would have to be shut down until all of the crunched-up paper was removed.

So pushing that little button was an important job, even though I knew that a dog could have been trained to do it and stay focused on the task—unless an uneaten biscuit lay within smelling distance. Still, I felt far down the warehouse social hierarchy. Only the box packers in the mailroom were lower. When a “white shirt and tie” from the office entered our warehouse domain, I felt they considered themselves better than me. We in the

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warehouse used to joke about them being afraid of a little dirt and hard work.

When someone in the office made a mistake, we were quick to say, "Of course, they don't know what the hell they're doing, them and their college degrees." On a daily basis for two years, then, I was schooled in us-against-them thinking. (At the same time, no one ever said that any one of us could not aspire to more.)

Bill may have resented me in a similar way. Lawrence and Doreen, though over thirty years older, quickly became my closest friends. They frequently invited me over for drinks, meals, and their own family get-togethers, where I met many of the extended relatives.

Bill rarely if ever crossed their threshold. And at least a part of his work was directed toward my house and property, while I, as the renter, was never expected to do much related to maintenance. I also worked for the state of Illinois and had all of the usual holidays off, plus plenty of vacation and personal time. One of my favorite activities was sitting under the shade of a large hickory tree in the yard, watching birds and reading a book for hours on end, probably with a glass of ice water or a beer within easy reach. Many times, while reading, I would see Bill working, plodding along, and sometimes I would hear him muttering "God damn" under his breath. If he looked in my direction, I'd usually wave, but without getting much recognition in return.

One day Bill and Doreen were talking in her yard, trying to determine how her flowerbed had been flattened the previous night. "Who would do such a thing?" Doreen asked in exasperation.

"I know who done it," Bill said and pointed at me. "It was him! I seen him."

Bill was right, of course, and he didn't hesitate to rat on me. The previous evening I was in my canoe on the Illinois River, and I saw Bill near the riverbank as I paddled past his house on my way to a tavern up the river for a six-pack of beer. I returned well after dark on a moonless night; then, following a path up the river bluff along the edge of Lawrence and Doreen's property, while pulling my canoe behind me, I slipped and fell. But because it was so dark, I was unaware of having fallen on her flowers...until Bill's ignominious accusation.

Of course, I immediately apologized. As for Doreen, her anger melted into a smile and laughter.



*Evening on the Illinois River, near Havana, Illinois.*

After I purchased my first home and moved away from Lawrence and Doreen,

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we continued to maintain our friendship. In this way, I learned of Bill's death from cancer only a few years after my departure. He must have had a special suffering that he kept inside all the time I knew him, never saying a word.

While Bill may have been a difficult individual, I'm glad I knew him during that brief period when our lives intersected. These days, I hardly ever think about him, except when I have to use a wheelbarrow. And if my wife Julie is around, I'll look down as I trudge forward and mutter, "Five dollars an hour." We both smile.



*New York Times 1937 photograph courtesy of the National Archives.*

Author's note: Names have been changed to protect anonymity.