

Shortgrasser Claims Friends Are Poor Substitutes For Prosperity

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If poets and song writers aren't on a love binge, they're carried away on the subject of friendship. Old women can't be happy unless they're busy needle-pointing the same thing on dozens of useless pillows. Enough rhetorical babbling has been done on "my old pal" and "that old buddy of mine" to overload the archives in Washington.

Many years ago, I ran an appraisal on my friends. Everybody was always talking about how they wouldn't take anything for their friends; so I figured, with the ranch business being as bad as it was, I'd better find out what mine were worth.

In case you are interested in running the same kind of a deal, don't waste your time. The market on friends is identically the same as the market on stray cats and dogs, the one exception being that dog catchers will take pets off your hands, and there isn't an agency in operation that'll pick up unwanted people. Even if there were agencies to handle after-hour guests and week-long visitors, some smart alec would probably exploit it by using the program to process relatives and in-laws. It's too hard to see how that would get out of control.

To show what a mess friends can cause, follow what happened last week:

One of my partners called, wanting me to help gather campaign material on an ex-Shortgrasser who is running for governor of New Mexico. A newspaper up there had called, wanting to know if there wasn't something in the candidate's past to color up his background. It seems the scribe wanted a dab of tarnish added — a bit of blackwash, so to speak. Not scandals, but youthful pranks such as breaking window panes or skipping school.

Under normal conditions, that wouldn't have been much of a favor to ask. Most young people of any era get into enough meanness to satisfy several inches of newspaper space. I'd always thought, in the past, that the crux of that matter was to cover, not uncover, the episodes. But I knew right off that it was going to be a major undertaking to pin anything on this old boy.

You see, years ago I'd known the candidate and his wife. The prospect of telling on them wasn't a pleasant one.

They had, for example lived less than 50 blocks from the toughest part of San Angelo. I couldn't definitely say how bad an effect that had on their early upbringing, but sociologists, claim environment is an important factor in our lives.

As a kid, the man didn't leave too good an impression. He wouldn't hang around the pool hall long enough to learn to play snooker. He did lap up a little beer now and then, but to my knowledge he was never proficient enough as a drinker to know how to pen a beer bottle with a pocket knife.

His wife-to-be was, as I remember her, a sort of plain type of girl. All the assets she had were her wits and beauty. She circulated in a fast social set. I'm nearly sure that she was going around in mixed company by the time she was 16 years old.

Their parents weren't anything unusual as I recall them. The boy's daddy was a doctor and the girl's people were in the dry cleaning racket. Each family had money, yet they never did show the good grace to act like they were better than anybody else. You know yourself that quality folks ought to develop an air of class distinction. Don't ever trust a person who won't put on airs. That's just the way they acted.

When they became college students, I lost track of them. I do remember hearing that they graduated in the bottom 85 percent of their class, so I don't suppose they were any great shakes as scholars.

Anyhow, having friends ask you to check on old friends is a good example of the grief and misery friendship can bring. It puts you on the spot more times than it ever helps. In particular, you can get in a wreck supporting politicians before they are elected. The time to help your old compadres with their political ambitions is at their inauguration balls. Nothing but an idiot would want to be committed to a bunch of self-seeking vote grabbers until it becomes certain that they're the winners.

The old ladies, the bards and the songsters can write forever about friends, and it won't change my mind. The very idea, asking a man to help a fellow get elected governor of New Mexico when he knows full well that the odds of getting an appointment out of the deal would be less than nothing!