

MISCELLANEOUS STORIES TO TELL, PART II

MY LAST NAME

I don't know how long my father's side of the family has been in the U.S. because no one ever seemed to care and certainly didn't mention it. I do know the name is of Scottish ancestry. There was, in fact, a Scottish member of the House of Lords, Alfred Lord Balfour, who served as Prime Minister and issued the Balfour Declaration after World War I establishing Israel as a homeland for the Jews. (It took a while to get that implemented.)

Skip ahead to recent times. Before I retired, I served for 14 years as Chair of the Department of Management and Leadership in the College of Business, University of South Florida. One of my occasional duties was to participate in "meet and greet" sessions with delegations visiting the College. These were often groups from other universities, typically international, but were also sometimes business or governmental groups. On one occasion we hosted a delegation from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Yes, the St. Andrews of the Royal & Ancient Golf club and course, although I believe the university was there first.

Were were in a conventional meet and greet line, exchanging names and handshakes when I introduced myself to one of their women professors. I said, "Welcome. I am Alan Balfour." She gave me her name and said, "I am pleased to meet you, Dr. Balfer." We then went our separate ways for the day until there was a social get-together before their departure. She came up to me and said, "It has been a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Balfer." I was certain that she had not misunderstood me and that I had not misunderstood her. I asked her, "Is my name pronounced "Balfer" in Scotland?" She

said, “Indubitably.” I guess the Scots have a way with words – and it is different from ours.

MY FIRST NAME

Remembering that story reminds me my first name has also provided challenges for me.

I was born Gerald Alan Balfour and named after my mother's elder sister, Geraldine.

(She was Aunt Gerry to me). As I grew up and began to understand the concept of names and that one had been assigned to me, I realized my name was “Bucky”.

Everyone called me that. As my mother reasoned, they couldn't call me Gerry because we “already had one in the family”. Who thinks like that? What is the purpose of “honoring” someone else if you don't use their name? Heck, my mom was never that

fond of her sister Gerry anyway. My mother had “Second Daughter Syndrome”. You can look it up if you are not familiar with it. It was pretty real to her.

So, I understand why I wasn't Gerry. But why was I “Bucky”? Because my father hoped I would become a major league baseball player and “Bucky Balfour” sounded major league to him. So I was Bucky to everyone I interacted with. That was everyone except teachers at school. They had class rosters. They assumed I was Gerald and would answer to it. My memory about this is not flawless but I do believe I sometimes didn't answer when they called me Gerald or Gerry. I think they may have believed I was hard of hearing, defiant, inattentive or learning challenged. There may even have been an arranged conversation with my parents about it. I guess it was worked out and I became Bucky even at school. It worked for me up to a turning point.

That turning point came in the 8th grade. Eighth grade is a difficult transition for many

children. I suppose I was entering puberty but had no idea what that meant or did. I did know, however, that the Ipana Toothpaste Company had come out with a series of television commercials featuring a cartoon beaver also named Bucky. My eighth grade world was not big enough to have two Buckys (Buckies?), especially if one was a cartoon beaver and the other was a prepubescent boy.

My classmates were bombarding me with the beaver's slogan: "Brusha, brusha, brusha, with the new Ipana". They, of course, sang it to me. You can easily understand why I HAD to change my name. But to what? Gerry had already been ruled out by precedent. What did that leave? Well, an obvious choice was my middle name, Alan. I had absolutely no emotional feelings either way about it. I guess it would "do". But then I had an epiphany. (I may actually have known that word in the 8th grade as will become apparent from what follows.) I announced to everyone, including my teachers, that I would henceforth be known officially as G. Alan Balfour and they could call me Alan. How did I come up with that moniker? You won't believe this unless you know me well. Then you will believe it. I decided in the 8th grade, mind you, that I wanted to become an author as an adult and thought it sounded scholarly or, maybe, artistic. Actually, what it was was pompous but I may not have known what that word meant then. What 13-year-old boy wants to be an author? Well, me. It was likely I wasn't going to be a major league baseball player and I needed something "to fall back on". The name stayed with me through junior high and high school. I was often referred to supportively as "G. Alan".

That served me well until I went off to Albion College as a freshman and had another epiphany. I looked at my name and at this time, judged it to be pompous (I for sure did know the meaning of the word by then) and pretentious. I dropped the "G." without any comment to anyone and told people I met that I was "Alan". They all believed me and it

worked for both them and me. This was about the same time I was acquiring a taste in décor for “Scandinavian minimalism”. The two changes may have been related. I have remained ever after, Alan Balfour, except to the Social Security Administration.

MY FRIEND BOB'S NAME

After graduating from high school I attended Albion College in Albion, Michigan.

Albion was an academically well-regarded small, private, liberal arts college of 1,600 students located in southern Michigan between Detroit and Chicago. It drew many students from those two urban areas. Being private, it was expensive if you had to pay for it yourself. I didn't have to very much because I was the son of an automobile assembly line worker in Detroit. One of the reasons Albion admitted me and helped with my expenses was to diversify the class. They needed some “poor kids” from working class families who would be the first in their family to attend college. That was me. (Isn't it funny how diversity was thought of differently in 1962?) Almost all the rest of the freshman class were children of white upper-middle class professional types and were predominantly from urban areas. Another exception to this stereotype was Bob. I met Bob in the freshman dormitory to which we were assigned. I knew everyone in the class equally – that is, not at all. That wasn't true for everyone. Some knew each other from high school or knew someone who was already at Albion. That did not apply to me or to Bob. We both realized quickly that we were atypical – at least on matters that seemed important to us. I was the son of a “poor” union worker. Gasp! I perceived my classmates' parents would have looked down on my parents. It was worse for Bob. Bob was a country bumpkin. I mean like from out in the sticks of rural southwestern

Michigan. If you looked at a map of the area, you would understand what Gertrude Stein meant when she said, "There is no 'there', there." He came from a town with a population of 800. He literally lived on a farm. No one still did that in Michigan in 1962. Beyond being a bumpkin from a farm, he talked like it. Another gasp!

Bob actually pronounced the name of the nation's capital with an "r" in it! To him, it was WaRshington, D.C. The rest of us had only heard this pronunciation in comedy skits and thought he was tugging our legs. He was not. Being young and unsure of ourselves, we forgot our manners and made fun of him endlessly. In fact, we nicknamed him "Warsh", a name that stayed with him through graduation. So what makes this so funny rather than just sad or mean?

Bob's last name was Washburn, which he pronounced exactly the way it was spelled. It never seemed ironic or inappropriate to him that he put an "r" in the city but not in HIS name. We couldn't get over that and he couldn't recognize it. Basically, I think he deserved what he got.