

Who says you can't go home?

We've all heard the song. The duet sung by Jon Bon Jovi and Jennifer Nettles (of the country duo Sugarland) and written by Bon Jovi and Richie Sambora?

I'm reminded of it when I visit my hometown in northern Wisconsin as I just did last week. There were 348 hardy souls there when I was a young boy there and 531 in the 2000 census. There's no Walmart in town but a major retail operator has forced virtually all of the small stores out of business over the years.

All told, I spent less than 11 years in that little town. But, it's still my hometown. Always will be. It has amazed me how many of my classmates remained in the same zip code - that one - virtually all their lives. There's nothing wrong with that - it just wasn't what I wanted to do.

I visit my hometown once or twice a year. I wasn't even born there - my family lived 26 miles south when I was born. We moved to this little town when I was five. I attended a little over nine of twelve years of school there - I went one year at a town 45 miles away and most of two years of high school in central Montana. We didn't have kindergarten in my hometown. I've always told my wife, who did have in her nearby hometown, that we didn't need it. Some do, we didn't. Several of my family still live in the area. Born one of eight children, three of my five living sibling live in my hometown. My older sister was away most of the 20 years her husband served in the Air Force and some of the years after he passed away at the age of 50.

What's the attraction to a small town like that? It's home. It's your hometown. These words of Bon Jovi and Sambora say it - not quite perfectly, but adequately:

When this issue of the Cheyenne Herald hits, we will have just returned from an eight day vacation back to the Homeland. Always eager to get there - just as eager to get home. Cheyenne is now our home, while it can never be our hometown, even though we've been here for 23 years.

My memories of growing up in a small town are good. My family didn't have a lot of money - my dad was a pulpwood producer, my mom a homemaker. I never felt like we were poor. There was always money for food, clothes, basketball shoes, baseball spikes, my Don Hoak model bat, and Rawlings baseball gloves I might need. There was always a couple bucks for the road trips I took in baseball and basketball. My mom, whose birthday is today - July 21 - died far too young from pancreatic cancer at the age of 53. She always found a way. She was a great mom, treating all eight of us as equals - even though I know she always liked me best. Like Dick Smothers mom.

People are surprised to learn that I went into the Navy despite not knowing how to swim. I always thought we'd have ships to get across the water. And I knew if our ship went down in the middle of the ocean, I had the same chance of swimming to shore as the proficient swimmers. Zero. Growing up in northern Wisconsin, with lakes all around, people assume I would have learned to swim as a kid. I tell them that when I was nine years old, my dad would come into my bedroom in summertime at 5 or 6 in the morning and never offer me the option: "David, would you rather come to the woods with me today or go to the lake and swim with your friends?" I never heard those words. And I didn't care. Swimming would have to wait. So long as I could play baseball

any day of the summer we had practice or a game and any day of the winter we had basketball practice or a game, swimming was not a concern. My dad never held me out of school to work in the woods with him and my older brothers and he never made me miss a practice or game. There was no doubt he could have used my help but he did not cause me to miss anything important to me to help him earn a living and what he did was a tough way to eke out a living.

I enjoyed school and did pretty well. Because I was never held out to work, I could maintain good grades. I took great pride in attendance - that might have been born of my passion for sports - and had perfect attendance in almost every year of school. I still think a person should be where they're supposed to be - always.

I grew up with a bunch of guys who had an unusual talent for playing baseball. We probably didn't win every game we played as teenagers - I just refuse to remember those we lost. We won almost all of them. Sometimes, small towns have a group that grows up together and forms teams of exceptional success. That happened in Chugwater a few year back with their boys basketball team.

We loved to play baseball. Our field did not have lights back then (it does now) but not even the 747-sized mosquitoes could not discourage us. We'd hit and field until it got so dark we risked hitting each other in the face with the baseball. Taking batting practice for us meant standing near the backstop (no catcher) and having our ace throw to us. He held nothing back and he was probably the best left handed pitcher in northern Wisconsin at the time. That's a major reason we won so often. And, of course, we couldn't use new baseballs for batting practice, they were reserved for games.

He would throw his best stuff at us - at dusk and later and baseballs that were grey, worn out and weather beaten. Almost invisible in the darkness. If we would stay in there against him and hit the ball, we could hit anybody throwing a new baseball at us in the bright afternoon sun. At 15, we beat the adults in town and they were a good team themselves.

Those guys I played baseball and basketball with long ago grew up to be first-class citizens. I organized an old-timers basketball tournament in my hometown in 1989 and almost all former varsity

players came back to participate - yes, some *had* left the zip code. I had sent a questionnaire to each of the guys, asking them questions about their personal lives - families, careers, military service, etc.

The guys that I grew up with matured into solid, responsible men. Most traveled back with the same gal they married out of high school. Most had forged good careers. Small towns produce good people. To my knowledge, there were few illegal drugs in the community in my day. The athletes didn't even smoke. We just didn't. We treated girls with respect. Beer was something else. It was Wisconsin, for crying out loud. The legal age to drink beer in Wisconsin was 18 and some found ways to get a headstart.

Our recent trip was to attend my family reunions Saturday (maternal) and Sunday (paternal). The organizers are thoughtful enough to schedule these gatherings so I can attend two reunions on the same trip. Of my parents and their 16 sibling, only six remain. All are in declining health and only three of the six were able to attend either reunion.

Family reunions are now an opportunity to get to know members of younger generations. And, with age comes interest. Many who did not attend ten or twenty years ago now appreciate what they would miss and join the rest of us. We see babies born since our last trip and younger generation's kids new wives or husbands - and catch up on things.

Will I travel to my hometown when there are none of the oldest generation left? Of course. It's my hometown. I can visit the old ballfield and retreat to the backstop and remember trying to swap mosquitoes at the same time as trying to see that grey baseball coming out of the darkness at speeds and breaks and to locations no other pitcher I'd face could duplicate and try to drive it to or over the snow fence. Sometimes I did. Sometimes I didn't. Or, I can go to the K-12 school I directed the referendum to approve in 1993 and visit the playground there that my family raised the money to provide. Those kids don't have to ride school buses to a neighboring town because of the new school. And, of course, I always visit the local cemetery to pay my respects to so many of my family who are gone. There will always be reasons for me to want to get back to my hometown.

Who says you can't go home?

*"I spent twenty years tryin' to get out of this place
I was lookin' for somethin' I couldn't replace
I was runnin' away from the only thing I've ever known*

*Who says you can't go home?
There's only one place that call me one of their own
Just a hometown boy, born a rollin' stone
Who says you can't go home?*

*Who says you can't go back?
Been all around the world and as a matter of fact
There's only one place left, I want to go
Who says you can't go home?*

*Every step I take, I know that I'm not alone
You take the home from the boy but not the boy from his home
These are my streets, the only life I've ever known
Who says you can't go home?"*

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