

Memories of a brother

by **Dave Featherly**

Tuesday morning, the 8th of March, I received an email from one of my younger brothers, telling me that our older brother Garry's health had gotten worse.

"Big G", some called him. He was a woods worker all his life - pulp or logs - and the moniker probably evokes a mental image in the readers mind of this large, overweight, tattooed, beer drinking dude.

Not so. In his prime, Big G was about 5'7" and 145 pounds.

Telephone conversations with family members back in northern Wisconsin elicited that a doctor, who was as much a friend to Garry as physician, would come to the house that evening after conducting a class in the Twin Ports (Duluth, Minnesota / Superior, Wisconsin).

All through the day, my thoughts were on him. But I couldn't decide what to do until after hearing what the doctor had to say.

And, that would be inconclusive. You see, my brother would not "doctor." He would never allow a needle to be used on him. Not to give a shot or draw blood. So it was impossible to diagnosis his problems. Even the most capable physician needs lab work to confirm a diagnosis.

So the doctor was reduced to a visual exam and discussion about symptoms, etc., with those closest to Garry.

We had known that Garry suffered respiratory problems for a decade or more. I always attributed his asthma, which he did not have as a younger man, to his breathing diesel fumes for years.

His job, in a family of pulpwood producers and loggers, was to drive the truck. From 13 years old, he was our truck driver. Included in that job was operating a loader, which had a "bucket" at the end of cables or hydraulics and grasped a number of sticks of pulp and placed them on or off a truck flatbed or frame.

Day after day, night after night, he would climb up and down the steps to the seat above the truck's cab and load wood - then haul it into a town with railroad tracks to load onto boxcars for shipment to a mill or to a mill at some distant town from ours in northern Wisconsin. Those trips would often be a few hundred miles one-way and

Garry would make more of those trips than anyone else, commonly working 18 hour days. His energy level and dogged determination were unmatched.

I took a shot at that kind of work when I was young - up until leaving my teenage years - and decided that there had to be something easier, safer and more financially certain. It was not my calling but I have also had the utmost respect for those who did that work. Every job I've ever had has involved the use of paper. A lot of it. Mostly printing on it. Someone had to produce the pulp that became paper. My brother was one of those someones.

Our original family consisted of eight children. I had five brothers and two sisters. Another brother came along in my dad's second marriage, after my mother died of pancreatic cancer at the too-young age of 53.

Garry was a little older than me but the brother in between seemed more distant from us and we became best friends.

Finally, at 9:30 that Tuesday night, I received another email from my younger brother. (We had begun to use email for contact because I'm hard to get by phone and it is often faster by email.) That message was that the doctor gave Garry from one day to two weeks to live.

It became not if, but when, I would leave.

I would have left that night but that still might not have gotten me there in time to be with him and might have gotten me killed by falling asleep behind the wheel.

I knew I had a Herald due to be printed on the following Monday, March 14th. I tried to sort out in my mind what the trip would do to my ability to print that paper - or what delay might be necessary, depending on various scenario in Wisconsin. And, I take the responsibility of producing this specialty paper on a schedule very seriously.

But my place was in Wisconsin, at my brother's bedside. There was no other consideration and I knew readers would understand.

I decided I would leave at daylight on Wednesday morning and drive straight through. It's a thousand miles plus a few to my hometown in northern Wisconsin. 950 miles is freeway - then two lane.

At a little after ten that night, I pulled into the yard at Garry's house.

He was still alive.

I spoke with my sister-in-law Wednesday morning before I left Cheyenne and again as I passed through the Twin Cities to let her know where I was. Each time, I asked her to tell Garry that I was on my way and to hang on for me. He did.

For exactly 100 hours, we stood vigil at his bedside. He had his better times and his worse times. But he was never alone. One or more of us were always by his side.

We were resigned to losing him. But we did not want him to suffer or linger on for us. A part of the process is for loved one to "give permission," and that was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Selfishness wanted him to be there. Letting go was not easy for any of us.

Large families sometimes have factions. Ours did. At times, some got along with some but not others, then at another time, got along with different others. The one constant in our family, for his entire life, was that this brother was never in a faction. Garry was our Sara Lee. Nobody doesn't like Sara Lee and nobody didn't like Garry Featherly.

When I was young, I, like so many others in the family, just wanted to be around him. That sometimes meant taking trips with him as he delivered "loads" to the mill. I'd want to ride with him even if the noise from the truck made it hard to talk to each other. Even if the heat from the engine and the heat from the northern Wisconsin summer made the truck cab like a sauna. I just wanted to be in his company. So did his children and other sibling. Such was his personality.

He was not the best athlete. He was not the best student. He was not the most successful. He was not the most handsome (he'll probably resent that reference) and he was not the wealthiest. But he was the most genuine and the most decent of our family. Of most families. He possessed a goodness and kindness not found in many. To say he would give you the shirt off his back would be an understatement.

At the visitation, relatives I hadn't seen in decades and friends of Garry's that I did not even know, approached me with a common compliment.

One after another after another said: "He was the hardest working guy I've ever seen." Even the minister who conducted the funeral services, who had been a wood producer before attending bible college, talked about his personal relationship with this quiet, unassuming guy, my brother. "He hauled my wood," the minister said. "When he told you he'd be there at a certain time to load, he'd be there. Always."


Garry did more generous things for others than anyone I've known. During our years of racing stock cars, he would provide his competition with spare parts, gasoline, tires, etc. Whatever would keep them in the race. He didn't have to worry. He was the best. By a country quarter-mile. A roomful of trophies is proof.

It is occasions such as this that one is introduced to relatives. Garry and his wife had five daughters. Five prettier girls no one has fathered. All of them were home during the time I was there - 24/7. Two were his primary caregivers, ably assisted by our older sister, and the other three kept the house clean and the food prepared. Each found their role and did it perfectly.

Relatives and friends came. All of his living sibling spent time with him. Even two who had always avoided such things. They didn't think they had it in them to be by a dying family member's side. They did. Garry's trucker friends whom I had never met sat by his side telling me stories of their working time together. When asked to serve as pall bearer, each of the six said the same thing. "I'd be honored."

During this time of great sadness, during this time of tremendous loss, there were bright spots. Granddaughters made great announcements. One announced her pregnancy, with a baby due in November. Another announced her engagement, with the wedding date to be determined.

The younger brother who sent me the emails is an award-winning video producer. He produced a memorial video to our brother Garry. As he pored over scrapbook after scrapbook for the best pictures, it became obvious how much family had meant to this kind, generous, decent and caring brother of ours. Picture after picture showed him with his daughters, his grandchildren, and his great-grandchildren. He had no bad side. I am privileged to have been his brother. Garry died at the age of 66 at 2:20 am, March 14th - the day I was to print the Herald. That is where I was. I know readers understand.



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