

Tim Giago: Remembrance of a lapsed friendship...

In writing my remembrances there are some who have achieved considerable note and notoriety. One such person is Tim Giago, national columnist and newspaper publisher.

Tim and I attended school together at Holy Rosary Mission on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the 1940s. We were the best of friends then, and resumed our friendship for a short while in the 1970s, after many years apart. The early memories are precious – we shared a boyhood world of fantasy and heroic deeds. We grew up in the era of WWII, which movies and news reels and local heroes and flag-draped caskets brought home to us. We both dreamed of serving in the Navy, and although I ended up in the Army, he fulfilled his at sea in the Korean conflict.

In our age group, Tim stood out as the most sophisticated, if that word could be used to describe anyone in the entire school, student or teacher. He spent much of his early years in Rapid City, South Dakota, a hundred miles away from Pine Ridge. The city was the second largest in the state, with a population of perhaps 30,000 at the time. From Tim's description, we envisioned it as among the largest cities in the world. To us, he was a street-smart city lad.

He was fair in complexion, cute and bright, and a favorite with the prefects and nuns at the school. Most of us had goofy nicknames, and his was Little Peaky, after one of the nuns whose nose peaked up and got the name Sister Peaky.

Tim's latent career in journalism was destiny, perhaps, for he was always a great story teller. He would regale us with story lines of entire movies, replete with horrific descriptions and sound effects. In Rapid City there were three theaters, he told us, and a person could see a movie anytime, not just on Saturday night. It was unbelievable to us. Movies that were shown at the mission school were B-class horse operas mostly, and played, grainy and censor-gapped, many weeks and months after they had played in Rapid City. Tim would preview them for us, with only tantalizing hints of surprise endings. Groups of us would crowd around him in the noisy playroom, straining for every word.

In the summer of 1943, my mother took me and two brothers by bus to Rapid City to find work. I was too young to get a real job, but was taken on by the slum lord who rented us the shack we lived in, windowless and dank, in the Indian sector called Coney Island. My job was hauling rocks by hand, but in the end I was never paid. My mother found work in a café kitchen, where Tim's mother also worked. That brought us together again, and we would venture out to see the wonders of Rapid City.

Each September Tim's mother would bring him down from Rapid City and enroll him at the mission school, but it seemed he was always gone by Spring. Digging through the musty photo archives at the mission school and in the tattered yearbooks, I find him in few of the class pictures. But in my memory, I recall him in various stages of childhood and adolescence; so he must have been in the school several years, even though the class photos don't bear that out.

In the late 1940s he went his way and we didn't see each other for many years. I did receive a letter from him while he lived in California in the mid-1960s, but we did not follow up corresponding. In his letter he said that he was exploring his roots, and changed his surname to

Gallegos, which is the original name that was anglicized to Giago.

We met again in Denver in 1973, where he was writing poetry and operating an American Indian Chamber of Commerce, as I recall. In celebration of our reunion we had dinner together in the swanky Top-of-the-Rockies restaurant. At the time I was Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians, and I remember telling him that one regret I had was leaving journalism, even for the honor of heading up NCAI. Three years earlier, I had been a principal in the founding of the American Indian Press Association, and saw that as something truly historic. I told of our dreams in AIPA of a national Indian newspaper with inserts to localize news for the various regions of Indian country. The Navajo Times and the Tundra Times were already in place and perhaps they could be brought into the syndicate we envisioned. On a bar napkin, I drew a map of the US, showing how the tribes organized into regional intertribal political groups, and these would be ready markets for the national newspaper concept. But our dreams at AIPA were never realized.

We had a wonderful evening, and he commemorated the occasion in a poem titled “Wobbie,” my nickname from our youth. The poem is included in his book, “Aboriginal Sin.”

Later on Tim became a TV reporter on Indian affairs for a Rapid City channel, then went on to establish the Lakota Times in 1981, one of the first private-sector Indian newspapers since the hay day of the Oklahoma tribes during the oil boom in the early 20th Century.

When he started the Lakota Times, I felt pride that our conversation about the Indian press that evening in Denver might have had something to do with Tim’s decision to get into journalism and very successful venture. However, in 1984 I received a letter from Tim which threatened, “If I wanted to use my newspaper to attack you or your business I have the perfect vehicle to do it with in the Lakota Times...” His ire was in reaction to my inability to help him get a BIA grant for his fledgling newspaper venture. He saw that as unwillingness on my part to help him, and accused me of being a selfish Washington insider. The threat was followed by a Nixon-like disclaimer, i.e. “...but I would never do that.” But to me the threat was clear, or why would he have written it in the first place?

The press to me is a public trust, and to use it as a personal weapon of intimidation or retribution appalled me. Our lifelong friendship was over.

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