**HAPPY HOLIDAYS AT RAY ARSENAULT REALTY,**

1. **ROBERT HARDEMAN ROAD, WINTERVILLE, GEORGIA**

--It is more blessed to give than to receive.

*Bible*

--If a man does not make new acquaintances as he advances through life, he will soon find himself alone. A man…should keep his friendships in constant repair.

Samuel Johnson

In his later years Ray Arsenault ended up a lonely man, or did he? It was not always so. He had served in the military in Korea (1950-1952) where he made many friends, but he gradually lost track of them over the years. After he was discharged from the Army, he graduated from Penn State University where he majored in business administration and where he was a wide receiver and where he met his wife-to-be, married her, thereby fusing with her large close-knit family. They moved to Pittsburgh, and he obtained the MBA from Carnegie-Mellon University, an expensive private school which his wife’s well-to-do family financed. Ray Arsenault was a happy, educated, and soon-to-be-wealthy family man, becoming affluent by his own ingenuity and drive.

He owned and operated the Ray Arsenault Bar and Grill. The name was changed to McCully’s Bar and Grill, and business improved. As the owner and chief bartender, he had lots of friends. Now he had lots of friends and relatives.

His wife was unable to conceive, so they had no children, Ray’s first disappointment in life, but not his last.

After 17 years of blithe and blissful marriage, it was suddenly over. What could have happened to have changed her mind so suddenly and thoroughly? Ray would never know exactly what befell him. Ray never remarried.

He made a geographical decision. His close classmate at Penn State, Hugh Nash, who obtained a Ph.D. in real estate and finance, had taken a faculty position at the University of Georgia. They had kept in contact. His Penn state buddy wrote glowingly of Athens, Georgia, the consummate college campus and community. It was a fast-growth place filled with opportunity for an enterprising entrepreneur like Ray.

So Ray moved to Athens and launched Ray Arsenault Realty, opening an office in the Bell’s Grocery Shopping Center, also known as east Plaza, on the east side of Athens after he obtained a realtor’s license by taking classes and passing a qualifying test in Atlanta. He was ready to soar, and eager to establish new friends and colleagues, using his naturally gregarious personality to sell real estate, lots and lots of homes in the Athens college environs to a growing and prosperous populace.

Ray Arsenault realty quickly proved to be a tremendous triumph in the local real estate market. Ray was able to hire several effective and accomplished sales people. He wanted individuals, young and old, male and female, black and white. He took great umbrage at some real estate colleagues and competitors who subtly practiced redlining policies. Ray’s was a flourishing company.

His one employment mistake was to hire a Mr. Marion F. Cartwheel to his sales team. Ray soon fired him. Was it a mistake to fire Mr. Cartwheel? No, because Ray learned from experience that the most successful sales personnel were smart, easy-going, and, yes, talkative and resolute, but not pushy, officious, loud, or abrasive.

In 1974, my son Alan became morning shift manager of McDonald’s on Gaines School Road on Athens’ east side. It was only two years before that I was flying to Chicago, when the passenger seated beside me finished his second gin martini and started a conversation with me. I noticed the little golden arches embossed on his elegant brief case and quickly learned that he was some kind of vice president for McDonald’s. Upon learning I was from Athens, he proudly informed me that there were two McDonald’s in Athens. I corrected him saying there was only one, located on Prince Avenue. He then said, “Well, there should be at least two in a place as big as Athens.” A year later the Gaines School Road McDonald’s opened with others to follow.

My son remarked to me several times that a group of old men met every morning over coffee and lies. These little groups of retired coffee-drinking men existed all around Athens, and all across America for that matter. What Alan found noteworthy, however, was that the group included one of his former professors, Professor Ray Arsenault, from whom he had taken a class in real estate development before he switched his major to English. The remainder of the antiquated male club members appeared to consist of roustabouts, loafers, and retired local farmers and the like. I noticed them, too, usually 8 to 10 of them. It was easy to pick out the aforementioned “professor” by his effusive manner and unremitting chitchat. I observed him and his cohorts on many a morning. He had many friends.

The erstwhile professor was Mr. Ray Arsenault as I would later learn.

His Penn State compatriot, Hugh Nash, had now been appointed head of the Department of Real Estate and Finance. Mr. Ray Arsenault, so successful in local real estate, buying, selling, and investing in numerous parcels of land, commercial lots, and residential homes, had become an experienced expert in the pragmatic, down-to-earth realty business. As the Department of Real estate and Finance was so overwhelmingly theoretical in its pedagogy, Professor Nash recruited Ray Arsenault to offer an occasional course on the nuts and bolts of the industry. Professor Arsenault, as he was periodically known on campus, loved the opportunity to share his utilitarian knowledge with his young, bright students and exhibit his gifted charisma. His students were his friends.

One Sunday morning—it was now 2006—as I was leaving McDonald’s with a take-out order, I observed Mr. Ray Arsenault over in a corner sitting all alone with a newspaper. I had never really spoken with him before, but he had seen me there as I had seen him there. Actually, he did ask me once to join his retired team. I declined as I was on my way to work. Now I inquired, “Where’s your group?” He said, “They don’t come on Sundays.” I asked him how long his group had been meeting for morning coffee. He replied, “Since 1974. We met at that little restaurant next door to my office two doors down from Bell’s,” a local grocery chain named after another Athens entrepreneur, Mr. Donald Bell. And it was now approaching Christmas, 2206, more than one score and ten years later.

We exchanged names, though I knew his. He said, “Sit down with me. I’m lonely.” I graciously obliged. We had a very long and largely one-sided chat, as I knew the home microwave would rewarm my carry out fare. Ray had no family, his parent deceased, no siblings, no children, and no wife. The long-abiding coffee club had changed greatly over the years, many had died and there were newcomer replacements. Only one other, besides Ray, was an original member. “He lives near me and I bring him here every morning. After I take him home, I generally go bowling at Showtime Bowling on Macon Highway. My Ray Arsenault Realty Office is located in a trailer now next to his house at 1660 Robert Hardeman Road.”

Just when I believed his life-long account was about to wind down, he hit me with his most confidential and private secret. I guess he had to tell someone, especially with his knowing of my University of Georgia association. He said, “I don’t have anyone to leave my real estate to, and it’s worth a fair amount. So I’m leaving it to the Department of Real Estate and Finance at University of Georgia. Just to give you a hint, you know the land where 316 intersects with the Athens Perimeter? Well, I bought up nearly 80 acres about 20 years ago. It was cheap then. I sold it all for that big office park they’re still building for $6.8 million. That’s just a fairly small part of what’s going to the University. Will you please keep this our secret? Hugh Nash is the only person who knows and he has all the paperwork.” I pledged I would not reveal the secret to anyone.

Because of my quiescence and focused attention, Ray succeeded in recounting virtually his entire life story. William Shakespeare once wrote—a long time ago—“A friend is an ear.” That morning I had to activate both my ears, but no artificial aid.

After that morning’s monologue, when Ray’s effervescent personality made his life story quite enlightening as well as informative, I would on occasion join the coffee group with my unsweetened ice tea to listen but not say much, because I, like Ray, was a Yankee.

What had I concluded from Ray Arsenault’s verbose verbal autobiography? That he was a lonely and articulate 75-year-old man. Ray also told me, in a fairly hushed voice, that he feared he might be coming down with Alzheimer’s “dementia” as he termed it. He made an appointment with a doctor for a checkup but revealed, ironically, “I forgot the appointment.”

Mr. Ray Arsenault’s 2006 Happy Holiday celebration at his residence and the adjacent single-wide Arsenault Reality Office at 1660 Robert Hardeman Road was organized surreptitiously by Professor Hugh Nash, Ray’s former classmate at Penn State and his long-time Athens friend and colleague. The coffee group from McDonald’s was invited, even me, as I had served on a couple of doctoral committees with Hugh in Real Estate. There was a small number of others whom I did not know. We all arrived at his residence at 8:00 p.m. or thereabouts on Christmas Eve, 2006. No gifts were to be tendered. Just warm friendship and pleasant tête-a-tête.

Mr. Ray Arsenault, a self-declared lonely man, did indeed have friends right up until the end.

Though, for the record, I attest to the fact that I wrote this account only following Ray Arsenault’s recent and unexpected death on February 7, 2007, I actually wrote it in mid-January.

*Addendum:*

Ray Arsenault is now sitting directly across from me at the Gaines School Road McDonald’s drinking coffee. It is another Sunday morning, January 28, 2007. He is very much alive. He has read the Ray Arsenault story I had given him the previous Sunday morning. He realized that part of the story I had made up. He was nervous. He avoided eye contact. He knew I could change part of the story if I wanted. Other parts of the story were so true and accurate that he seemed to confuse the real with the fiction. He had told me too much detail about his life. Would he really die on February 7, 2007? What did I know that he didn’t know? He remembered he had been feeling short of breath in the last few days when he got up from his afternoon naps. He was apprehensive.

Finally insecurity gripped him. He now made eye contact and gave me a long, sharp double-eyed stare. “Could you change the ending, you know, about my death? I like the part about the surprise party. That really happened didn’t it? Maybe you could leave off the February 7 thing, all right?”

He was so scared he actually thought I had all the power.

I got up and brought him a free coffee refill, with crème, and left.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to Mr. Ray Arsenault in 2008 and in many more years to come!