

MDF: 1/21/02

The Uncles

Every Tuesday night for about 40 years, my great uncles got together and played poker. They started this tradition when they got back from World War II, and there was no reason to stop. The original group included:

Uncle Sam, the oldest of 8 children including my Grandmother on my father's side. When I knew Uncle Sam, he was a patriarch in the best sense of the word. He and Aunt Mary were wise and almost stately, and people deferred to their opinions. Uncle Sam presided over the Seder each year. He was a doctor (of the MD persuasion) and part of the financially well off part of the family.

Uncle Ben, the next oldest I think He was in the army with my father and I saw pictures of them together in Germany. Uncle Ben was a person who really cared about his family and he would always be very interested in what I was doing. But Uncle Ben was born with fewer switches than most people. And he was pretty openly prejudiced about Blacks and most anyone who wasn't Jewish. He was married to Aunt Stel, who was a piece of work. Where Ben was on the dull side, Stel was outright stupid. She wore too much makeup and big bouffant hairdos and looked like something out of Long Island pawn shop. In addition to being stupid she could also be nasty. No one liked Stel and everyone felt sorry that such a nice man as Ben had to be married to her.

Uncle Jack. Most of the times, the poker games were held at Jack's house. Uncle Jack was, and still is my favorite. Although you're not supposed to have favorite uncles just like you're not supposed to have favorite children. I once tried to tell Uncle Jack that he was my favorite and two things went wrong, so that I still cringe when I think about it. First, he brushed off the compliment as if to say, "You're not supposed to have favorite uncles," which anyone should know, and Uncle Lou, who was my next most favorite uncle overheard me, and I think he felt hurt. Anyway, Jack was the best. He was part of the smart, and mostly well off part of the family. He smoked a cigar and had a twinkle in his eye and a wit quick enough to catch the humor in things around him. He had been a pharmacist, like my father. But the part of his past that most intrigued me was that he was a full Captain in the Army and was in charge of an entire hospital in India which served wounded soldiers from the Southeast Asian theater. When I was in college he took me to lunch at the officer's club in the Navy Yard in Philadelphia, where he still had privileges. He had a captain's insignia on the bumper of his car and the guard saluted him as we drove through. At the time it was very uncool to like military things, but I loved it. Jack was the nicest, and along with Uncle Lou, the most generous of the uncles. Uncle Jack was married to Aunt Audrey who was not particularly bright but made up for it by being the absolutely sweetest person you could ever meet. Jack and Audrey had one daughter, Lila, who married Milt. Lila was certifiably the most obnoxious member of the family. It was a mystery how she could possibly be Jack and Audrey's daughter.

Uncle Lou was a great man, physically and in most other ways. He never married and lived for many years with his sister Rose after her husband died. When I was growing up he was a role model of putting family first. He had a Chevy Impala which he would lend out to other members of the family. When I was 16, my family took that car all the way to Florida and back. I had just gotten my drivers license and got to drive part of the way. It was a great treat except for the fact that I hit a dog on a high speed stretch of road in St. Augustine. Lou would routinely drive his niece Phyllis and her brood all the way to Las Vegas or Huntsville or someplace like that, with little kids screaming in the car. And as far as I could tell, the more kids screaming the better for Uncle Lou. He would always bring us candy. And he was very strong. He worked for Westinghouse (along with Uncle Ben) making electric turbine generators. We once went to visit the factory on family day. And it was a big open floor with machinery everywhere and chain pulleys hanging from the ceiling and dust and smoke. He was very proud showing us these gigantic turbines sitting half made in the middle of the floor. Since his job basically consisted of paid weight lifting, he had a grip that could turn coal into diamonds. And he loved to squeeze our hands hard when he shook them. Except for the fact that it actually hurt, we loved it, because it was one of his ways of showing affection.

So that was the main group of Uncles. Uncle Sam died when I was pretty young, so I didn't get to know him that well. But the others were regular parts of my family's life. The Tuesday poker games were open to other adult males, and there were some regulars and some occasional players.

My father was one of the regulars. Now it is hard to summarize my father in the same way I have just summarized the Uncles. But everyone liked my father. Not just uncles, but the whole family. And not just the family, but pretty much anyone who ever came into contact with him. He had an easy smile and a great sense of humor. And he would listen to and befriend anyone. He was a pharmacist, and my brother Bill and I spent many hours visiting and later working in his stores. In the pharmacy in Coatesville PA, there was one mentally retarded customer who would come into the store almost every day and sometimes more than once a day. He never bought anything that I remember. And he was loud and difficult. But my father greeted him, and talked to him, like he was the mayor. My father practically was the mayor. I never saw him with other businessmen, but I got the impression that they all liked and respected him. My father would go to the poker games without fail. And he dismissed the gambling part of the night by saying that over the long haul everyone broke even.

Now a word or two about gambling. Tuesday night poker was definitely gambling. At the beginning you traded in money for chips of various colors. The minimum bet was a dime, and dimes could quickly add up to pots of \$20 or more, which was a lot of money at the time. Now being good upstanding citizens, those in my immediate family were of course opposed to gambling. But this kind of gambling seemed OK. And the rest of my extended family, Uncles on down, had no qualms about gambling of any sort. My Uncle Lou went the race tracks regularly. And all of them, aunts, uncles, cousins went to Atlantic city casinos after the were built. My immediate family would never do this. I didn't set foot into a casino until I was almost 30. And then it was just to see what they were like. They were smoky and noisy. And I couldn't get over the sight of hundreds of people sitting there and putting money endlessly into machines. On a much later trip to Reno Nevada, I had a vision of these slot machines as minor gargoyle

type devils permanently sitting back on their haunches with their mouths open. But, being honest here, I have since come to enjoy slot machines - purely as a form of entertainment mind you. The part of the family most into gambling was Uncle Leon and Aunt Eleanor. They liked it so much they actually moved to Las Vegas and eventually died there. No doubt several casinos were draped in black.

Uncle Leon was another regular at the poker games. He was from the great uncle generation by marriage. Aunt Eleanor was one of the 8 brothers and sisters. Leon and Eleanor were from the not too bright and not much money part of the family. Leon drove a bread truck and Eleanor was some version of a housewife. They were both genuinely nice people. But Leon was thin with a slim mustache. He talked with a thick Philadelphia accent. And he always seemed like a minor character in a cheap murder mystery. I don't think he ever murdered anyone. But you could sort of imagine it. Eleanor was without any graces whatsoever. She was overweight and slow and she spoke a language that only approximated English. My most vivid memory of her was at one Seder, when the meal was finished. She went from place to place emptying people's plates into this giant clear plastic garbage bag. It was for the two or three German Shepherds they had back home. It wouldn't have been so bad if the bag hadn't been clear. But that was Eleanor. Leon and Eleanor had two children: Irv and Phyllis. Phyllis is the one with the screaming brood in Uncle Lou's car. She married a rabbi from South America and went to live in Israel for a while. She inherited many of her mother's qualities. Cousin Irv. was different. He was cool, in a vaguely degenerate and dangerous sort of way. He had fast and fancy cars. He once took his hands off the steering wheel and lighted a cigarette while I was in the front seat. Years later I learned the trick of steering with your knee on the bottom of the wheel. But at time I thought he had lost his mind. He got a great kick out of my panic. Both Leon and Irv were regulars at poker.

The poker game was open to any adult male in the family. And being invited to the poker game was a right of passage. My brother Ken joined and played for many years. Irv's sons came. Cousin Eddie and his sons came and they sometimes hosted the game. But I was always away; away at college, away at work; visiting for the weekend but not Tuesday night. So I never got to go to the games until I had been an adult (by some measures) for some time. I got to play poker with the Uncles exactly three times. I treasure the memory of those times. The only poker I knew was simple five card draw poker - and never played for money. Poker it turns out is simply a boring game when nothing is at stake. But when money is involved it becomes a plunge into the human psyche, gauging what other people will do, and what you should do, when not all the cards are on the table. The play was fast. And there were so many versions of the game. Each Uncle had his favorite: **A**low hole wild, **A**follow the queen, **A**baseball, **A**high low seven card stud and the list goes on. The first night I had trouble understanding what the rules were, let alone applying them. They all tried to teach me, chiding, and cajoling, like I was still in high school. No matter how old I was, I always felt like a kid around the Uncles. In the later years, Uncle Jack became nearly blind. But he held his cards two inches from his face and stared through his thick glasses, refusing any help. That was also a part of these men. They would help anyone in a heartbeat. But they would never accept help themselves, not if they could help it. And of course, Jack didn't want anyone else to see his cards. This was real competition. Winning and losing meant something here. Not the money, but the honor of being smart and a little crafty and a little lucky, all the things that had gotten them through nearly a century of life. Halfway through the evening the cards were put aside to make room for a great spread of corn beef and rye bread and deli mustard and potato salad and cole slaw. It

was probably not very different from the meals they had when they first gathered after the war. In some ways nothing was different. The poker game was timeless. Perhaps more than anything else, it was an excuse for coming together. And it was a celebration of family. We had a great family, mother, father, grandmother and grandfathers, brothers, sister, aunts and uncles and cousins. In spite of the sometimes odd characters, there was much love in this family, and we knew we were lucky to have this. In many ways this was the point of the poker game. What the Uncles believed in their bones, and taught without teaching was that family was the most important thing; and that no matter what cards are ever dealt us, family is always the winning hand.