Lalley: Workin' man wisdom from Ol' Pete

Perspective on Smithfield Foods moving out of downtown, and more, from a booth at Orion Pub.

By Patrick Lalley

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I was snuggled up in my favorite booth at the Orion Pub as dusk settled in over the Best Little City in America, banging out the final bits of a story on my laptop when a crusty old codger pushed through the front door.

He wore faded, droopy blue jeans and a tan canvas Carhart jacket, obviously acquired in an era before that sort of thing was cool among teenagers and hipsters. Work and weather left their imprint in dark lines along the creases of the coat and his rugged cheeks, visible just above a scraggly gray beard and beneath an equally worn Miller High Life baseball cap.

He took a few steps in and looked around the long, narrow bar that is the Orion, a downtown pub created to serve a clientele that appreciates a cold beer and a pickled egg after work.

It feels old, like something you'd come across traveling back roads of the Upper Midwest, where old guys in old clothes get together for a shake-a-day and a marginally true yarn about past glory. But in the middle of the city with better music.

"Mind if I sit?"

It took a moment before I realized that the old man was talking to me so I didn't answer right away.

"What?"

"Can I join you?"

The bar was otherwise empty as it was late afternoon. It's a good place to work and the bartenders don't mind me taking up a little space before the customers start filtering in.

There was an uncomfortable pause as I tried to process the situation.

"Sure," I said.

The old guy slid into the booth with his back to the door. I moved the collection of gear piled up on the table to the bench beside me so he'd have room to rest his arms.

He gave the bartender the universal sign for "I'll have what he's having," which at the moment was nothing.

"Sir," I said, because I'm polite like that, "not to be rude, but have we met?"

"We have now. I'm Pete."

"Good to meet you Pete. I'm Patrick."

"I know, except it's Pat, right? Is it OK if I call you Pat?"

"Usually only people who have known me a long time call me Pat, but that's fine. My best friends call me Lal. Call me whatever you like."

"OK… Pat."

The bartender walked up with two cans of Miller Lite and put one in front of each of us.

The old man threw down a $10 bill. "Thank you Thomas."

"You bet Pete."

Pete took a long pull on the tall boy, head back, eyes closed, as if it was the first or last beer of his life.

I just looked at him because this was, admittedly, weird.

He put down the can, looked past me for a moment and then smiled.

"Glad I caught up with ya'," he said.

"So… you came here to see me?"

"Pretty much, yeah. There's something I want to talk to you about, something I've been meaning to tell you."

"But we just met."

"Sure, well, you just met me. I've known you for a long time."

Which isn't totally implausible since I've lived in Sioux Falls most of my life. All the branches of my family have lived in Sioux Falls for several generations. I've been writing about Sioux Falls for somewhere north of 30 years.

That part happens sometimes.

“Thanks for the beer,” I said, hoping for some signal of where this was going, whether I should send up a warning flare or get out my notebook.

“My pleasure.”

“What is it you wanted to tell me?”

“It’s about this thing with Morrell’s.”

Uh-oh. Anybody who calls the Smithfield pork plant John Morrell on first reference has been around.

“You mean moving the plant out of downtown?” I said.

“That’s part of it.”

“It’s a big deal, that’s for sure. Jobs, the market for pig producers, not to mention what it means for downtown.”

“Well, I’m not an economist. I’m just a guy who has worked his whole life, put a little bit away. I’ve had a good life here.”

“Looks like it.”

He smiled again. “I suppose that’s true.” He took another long pull of the Miller.

“It’s not just Morrell’s,” he said after the drink. “I’m afraid that Sioux Falls… what do you call it again?”

“Best Little City in America.”

“Yeah, that. I was watching the City Council thing the other night where the people out by where they are putting the new plant are upset because they don’t want to live near a packing house.”

“It’s kind of sad,” I said. “Some of those people have lived there a long time. It would suck.”

“There’s already a bunch of factories and huge operations out there. I just drove by the other day.”

“Still, if it were me, I’d be pissed too.”

“How long has that been a heavy industrial park? It’s been more than 10 years. It was going to happen.”

“Fair point,” I said, because it is.

“I’m worried that we don’t want jobs like Morrell’s in your Best Little City in America. What happens then? I worked down there for 18 years, left after the strike and never looked back. It was a good job, but it was a hard job.”

“That’s what I hear.”

“You heard right. But there are a lot of hard jobs, and I’ve had my fill of them. I was never going to college so there wasn’t much choice, other than the Army but that was during Vietnam and people like me weren’t volunteering for the Army in those days.”

“How did you not get drafted?”

He just smiled again and looked past me again. “Luck… just dumb luck.”

“So… kind of preaching to the choir here Pete.”

“Don’t get uppity.”

“Gotcha. No uppity. Did you just want to get this off your chest?”

“You're not listening to me Pat.”

“Just trying to piece this together Pete.”

“What I’m saying is that you have to tell people that without work, real work, not all desk jobs and phone jockeys, that you lose something. We need to make things and sometimes that’s big and ugly and smelly, but it’s part of being a city for everybody.”

“I getcha.”

At this point, and I’m not exaggerating, he kind of slapped me up alongside the head, like the nuns would do back at Cathedral to get your attention.

“You say you get it but you don’t get it. People need work but the city needs the people. We need to make things here, not just killing pigs, but making things, from steel and aluminum. Parts of other things. Machines and door hinges and oil coolers and turbines.”

“Turbines?”

“That’s what you picked out of there?”

“Well, yeah, it’s just.. Never mind. You were saying.”

“Manufacturing, my boy, manufacturing! We can’t lose that, ever.”

“I see, I see. You’re saying that if a community, or a country, loses its manufacturing base they make themselves vulnerable to the whims of the market, or war, or pestilence.”

“Pestilence? What are you, Moses?”

“Pete, c'mon, I’m working with you here. You get what I’m saying.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. That’s right. It’s the big macroeconomic stuff but also on the community level, like there has to be a way for families to work their way up. People have been coming here from all over the world for a chance to start over. I’ve met a lot of people in my time, I’ve heard their stories, and now I’m seeing their children and grandchildren, and they’re going to school and graduating from college and starting businesses and families of their own.”

“For sure, Pete. There are two candidates for City Council in the June election who are the children of refugees. It’s satisfying to see that, to see them succeed when the odds were so against them.”

“Now you’re getting it. The big stuff. That’s what I’m talking about.”

He got out of the booth, tipped back the Miller and drained the last few swigs before crushing the can in his hands.

“Pete,” I said, “are you sure you’re not an economist.”

“Something like that.”

He smiled, turned and walked out the door onto 10th Street, headed east.