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Editors

W. Christopher Scruton

Stephen Claas

Layout

David Brown

Logo Design

Ruth Cronje, and Jan Swanson;

based on the original design by Dr. Robert Dunlop

Cover Design

Shawn Welch

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Leave no footprints: How to get along in the neighborhood

Robert Baarsch

The first step in getting along with neighbors is acknowledging that you borrow air, peace, and quiet from your neighbors. They probably borrow yours, too. We do so without permission—as we all realize, we are not islands. In the past when all the kids smelled the same in the morning on the school bus, livestock odor was a non-issue. Now the school bus picks up children of doctors, policemen, IBM managers, and a cross-section of middle class America. Odor becomes an issue to your neighbor the day they produce less odor than you. So when their dog urinates on the rosebush that your wife has had to replant twice before, remember your hog smell may be accompanying your neighbors as they take their evening stroll about their country castle grounds. Take the phone out of your seething wife's hand, take her out for dinner, and tell her how the pig company is going to replant her rosebush for her.

Moving into a new neighborhood brings on a whole new set of challenges. In small rural communities, buildings, trees, roads, bridges, and vistas can have special meanings. Odd things can have meaning. I purchased a property one block off of Main Street. Behind the building was an old coal shed. In the coal shed was a pile of old clay roof tiles. I asked the city engineer before demolishing the old shed what the story was on the roof tiles? He reported, "They came off the old library." Many of the older community members thought it was a travesty that the city would replace these unique tiles with a more modern asphalt shingle roof. So the city saved the tile. I immediately went to the mayor and the local self-appointed historian (wife of the undertaker) and stated that I was not going to touch those clay tiles and that I was more than willing to assist giving them away to an appropriate party. The tiles were removed by the city and their whereabouts are not known to me to this day. Imminent danger avoided. Lesson learned: You can get into trouble just trying to clean up the neighborhood. You may have bought it, but that doesn't mean you own it.

I built hog barns on an old farm that had been out of the dairy business 10 years. The closest neighbor, who—up until the last few years—had hogs himself, was located 1800 feet south. Other than that one neighbor, I had clear sailing for a mile in every direction. I had a visit with him upfront and found him very concerned about his property

values. I told him I didn't think he would smell the farm very often, as a straight north wind in our country is rare and he had a mature windbreak between us. I could see my reassurances were more comforting to me than him. I indicated that if it was a problem to him, I would consider planting a second windbreak on my property, which I really didn't want to do. During the construction phase his Labrador retriever made friends with my renter's Labrador. This wasn't a problem until we started to compost pigs. My renter had since left, but our new visitor took on a special taste for pork. Labrador retriever home alone outside and being limit fed on discount dog food will travel. How do I approach the subject of his dog? The dog had the run of the neighborhood before I came; now it needed to be tied up. He stated, "I'm not going to tie up a dog like him and he's not cut so he's going to keep running." I listened trying not to think of what my father would have done. "I'm not going to spend \$80 bucks to castrate him, I will just have to put him down," the owner announced. The image of the dog eating the feed that leaked out of one of my feed bins kept popping into my head, making me wonder what do two testicles have to do with hunger? That was it! It had nothing to do with it! The problem wasn't that the dog had two testicles or that he was hungry. The problem was that it didn't exist until my arrival with two hog barns next to the neighbor's castle (well, it's going to be a castle someday). I announced, "I don't want you to shoot the dog, otherwise every time you think of your old dog you are going to think about me." "What if I have your dog neutered?" "You'd do that?" questioned the astonished neighbor. "Yes, I will." "I'm not sure it is going to work, but it is worth a try." He looked at me once more and said, "You'd be willing to pay for the castration?" "Go down to the local vet and charge it to me," I said. I haven't seen the dog since, or a vet bill. Lesson learned: Empathize, understand, and communicate understanding and caring with concerned neighbors. Most of them know you can't fix their problem; they just want you to understand they are giving you a gift and want you to appreciate it. I give all my close neighbors a Christmas gift of pork. I thank them for being good neighbors and give them a token of my appreciation. Two hundred dollars' worth of pork gifts pall in comparison to a protracted litigation or a strained relationship. I encourage my growers to do the same.

Another way to help neighbors is to plow driveways if they need it after we get a big snowfall or to blade roads if they get roughed up after the manure haulers are finished.

Advice

- Make donations that are public and popular; you never know when you will need a withdrawal.
- Nip problems in the bud by communicating face-to-face as soon as you find out who has the problem.
- When coming into a rural community go to the EDA and ask them for help, then go to the founding fathers and ask for their blessing.
- Don't lie or stretch the truth; honesty is the only policy.
- Share your hopes and dreams with everyone you can; we all need hope even if it is someone else's.
- Show proper concern about your neighbors' safety by giving them notice when you start to haul manure by their homes morning, noon, and night.
- When eating breakfast at the local café for the first time make sure you don't sit down at the big table next to the coffee pot, unless invited by the eight elders that will come in at about 8:30 a.m.
- Smile, wave to everyone ,and don't shoot the neighbor's dog; if you do accidentally run over it, don't buy them a cat . . .

