

I've often heard that the art of diplomacy is dead. It certainly seems like some people these days refuse to engage in civil debate. They tend to yell loud, make weird accusations, interrupt each other and are often just plain mean. However, I'm not sure if it has ever been any more "civil". Especially when I consider some of my father's stories about early Florida "dispute resolution".

My grandfather was a good man and would give someone in need his last dollar, but he was not a diplomat. In the wild and unforgiving environment of frontier Florida, he was notorious for his quick temper and habit of acting quickly and violently, to protect his family. At the time, these were necessary tools of survival. My father tells a story that demonstrates his father's "problem solving skills" and that helps me to better understand my father and myself.

My grandmother was preparing to set up at the Farmers Market at the Courthouse in Ft. Myers when she found her usual table to be occupied by a "carpetbagger". "I'm sorry sir", she said politely, "but this is my table. We set up here every Wednesday to sell okra." "Too bad lady" the man replied, never looking up. "But it's how we make our livin" my grandma pleaded. "It's first come, first serve... now GET woman!" growled the carpetbagger. Now, my grandma was no push over, but she knew that my grandpa would be passing by soon, so she and her sons sat down on the wagon and waited.

Before long, the two boys (my father and my uncle Charlie) saw their father riding up on his horse. The boys couldn't believe their luck. "This is gonna' be great!" my father whispered to his brother as they both crawled up into the nearby oak tree for a better view. Charlie nodded, "It's about time somebody else gets it." My grandfather slid off of his horse, looked around and asked his wife..."Why ain't you set up yet." My grandma was ready. "That there carpetbagger took our place. I told him, but he won't listen to me." My grandfather as usual said nothing. He dropped the horse's leads, walked casually up to the man behind the table and stared at him through narrowed blue eyes. The carpetbagger, who clearly didn't understand the gravity of his situation, pointed at my grandma and yelled, "That woman is crazy. And those boys..." Those were the last words to ever find their way across the man's teeth... well, while they were inside of his mouth. As the carpetbagger explained later to the sheriff (while showing him his teeth wrapped in a handkerchief), my grandfather had, without saying a word, punched him in the mouth, dumped all the trinkets off the table, made sure his wife and sons were set up and then, rode off like nothing had happened. The sheriff smiled and pushed a piece of paper across his desk. "Here's a blank warrant, you go on out there and bring him in and I'll arrest him."

Of course, each generation tends to change their ways with the times and my father, Ben Sr., has developed a "more refined" method of dealing with conflict. Yes, he inherited his behavioral "tools" from his dad, including the notorious temper, but it's controlled... well, kind of. He uses a more "verbal" approach when kicking your butt and is well known for thinking through a situation in order to come up with a more creative solution to a conflict. For example...

My father went down to a jobsite one day and discovered that his bulldozer had been used over the weekend. He followed the tracks and came upon a house where someone had done some land clearing with the machine. After some thought, my father fired up the bulldozer, dug a giant hole and buried the "guilty parties" new truck, leaving about 6"

of the roof sticking out of the ground. We kids were all delighted, because it was always funny when “someone else” was on the receiving end of one of his diplomatic solutions.

I guess that’s why now, when I see people red in the face, yelling, making strange accusations, it really seems kind of tame to me. I mean, I don’t like it much, and of course I wish we could do better than that but, maybe, at least in our day-to-day dealings, we are more civil.

(Although, I am tempted to bury a truck now and then.)