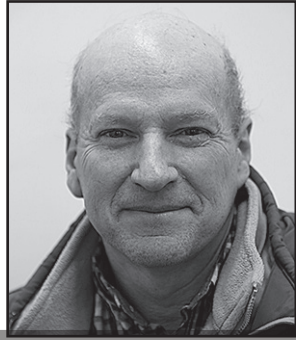




Commentary

The Maple Creek News welcomes letters up to 350 words in length regarding local news items, as well as other topics of general interest. Letters must include the writer's full name, address and day and evening telephone numbers. Letters may be edited for length, grammar and accuracy.

My Friday evening at a Pearl Party



All in a Day's work

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Welcome to the party: Debbie Arnold.

On Friday, September 6, I attended a Pearl Party at the Legion Hall put on by the Maple Creek Royal Purple Lodge #386. It was my first Pearl Party. As I was to discover it involved multiple ingredients, including auctions, an app, cards, a spinning wheel, a sharp knife, oysters, pearls and chains with pendants. There were also door prizes and jokes aplenty.

Walking across the empty parking lot at the side of the Legion, then seeing the closed front doors and no lights inside, I thought my much-anticipated Friday night's entertainment had been cancelled. It was nudging 7pm and far too quiet.

Turning the corner, however, I saw at least 10 cars parked either side of the road. I pushed open the door of the Normandy Room and, to my relief, met several familiar faces, including the Mayor Michelle McKenzie and Debbie Arnold, president of the Maple Creek Royal Purple. Other faces behind them were unfamiliar.

"Ah, here you are," beamed the Mayor. "I was just about to do your job and take some pictures."

Everything seemed very bright in the room, not just the smiles. I felt a bit like Lucy in The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe entering the snowbound parallel universe of Narnia through a magic wardrobe, only I had apparently stumbled into a sun-baked tropical resort; virtually everyone was wearing Hawaiian leis, there were palm tree images on the walls, and the front desk contained elements of a tiki bar. Next to it was a fake palm tree. The only thing missing was the ocean and sound of a ukulele.

More than a dozen people sat at tables shaped in a horseshoe pattern, with the angles straightened. I took my seat and proceeded to scoop up a cupful of crunchy caramel popcorn; it was an action that would be replicated a ridiculous number of times during the

next two hours. Thankfully, there was a plentiful supply of nibbles on the tables to keep my supper-deprived stomach satisfied.

We were asked to introduce ourselves. I winced. As an observer, I thought I could be excused. Alas, I was mistaken, although maintaining anonymity with a camera plonked before me would have been nigh impossible. I gave a typically fumbling introduction, praying my presence wouldn't wreck the evening. Is any being more detrimental to fun and relaxation than a reporter with his notepad out? Perhaps a psychiatrist or a uniformed policeman.

I discovered that the two ladies on my left were Nickels - Lorraine, from Swift Current, and Shari, from Gull Lake. To my right was the Mayor and farther down the line were Sharon Berreth, Michael Morrow, Lester Nickel, Walter Arnold and Darlene May, president of the Kindersley Royal Purple lodge. A group of ladies from Shaunavon sat on the opposite table.

Debbie Arnold initially floated between tables, gave a welcoming speech, then settled at her own station: a table aligning one of the walls and bearing small metal frames from which hung 28-inch chains with pendants. She resembled a jeweller at a trade fair, a pink-handled pair of pliers by her elbows.

Our emcee was Sandi Loughheed, from Beechy, chairman of the Charity Partnership Committee of the Saskatchewan Royal Purple.

Behind her, seated at her own table, was MaryLou McCarthy, from Elrose, north of Swift Current. With her knife and bowls, she looked every bit a scientist about to perform an experiment. On a screen behind

her was a video image of everything she did. Afterwards she told me she was an "oyster shucker."

Finally, there was David Courtemanche, Legion bar manager. Like myself an observer, he would play a role that went beyond serving me a Legion Lager: he drew someone's name out of a bowl for a prize.

So now we all knew each other ... more or less ... the party began kicking into higher gear. The mysteries of a Pearl Party were soon to be revealed.

Hours earlier I had boasted to friends about my Friday night plans, fully expecting, and hoping for, befuddled expressions. I wasn't disappointed.

"What's a Pearl Party?" they would say.

"I don't know," I responded. "According to the internet, it involves a hostess, oysters and a very sharp knife."

One friend looked up a Pearl Party video, but it was more confusing than enlightening.

"Let me know how it goes," she said.

I was on a mission of discovery. I wondered how James Bond would fare with such an assignment.

When Sandi took the mic, she spoke about the Royal Purple spirit.

"We want to have some fun," she said.

The Royal Purple's aims, she added, were to support the community, children and the Saskatchewan Brain Injury Association. Over the last five years, \$100,000 has been raised for the association - a mightily impressive figure.

"I hope you got that down," someone said to me.

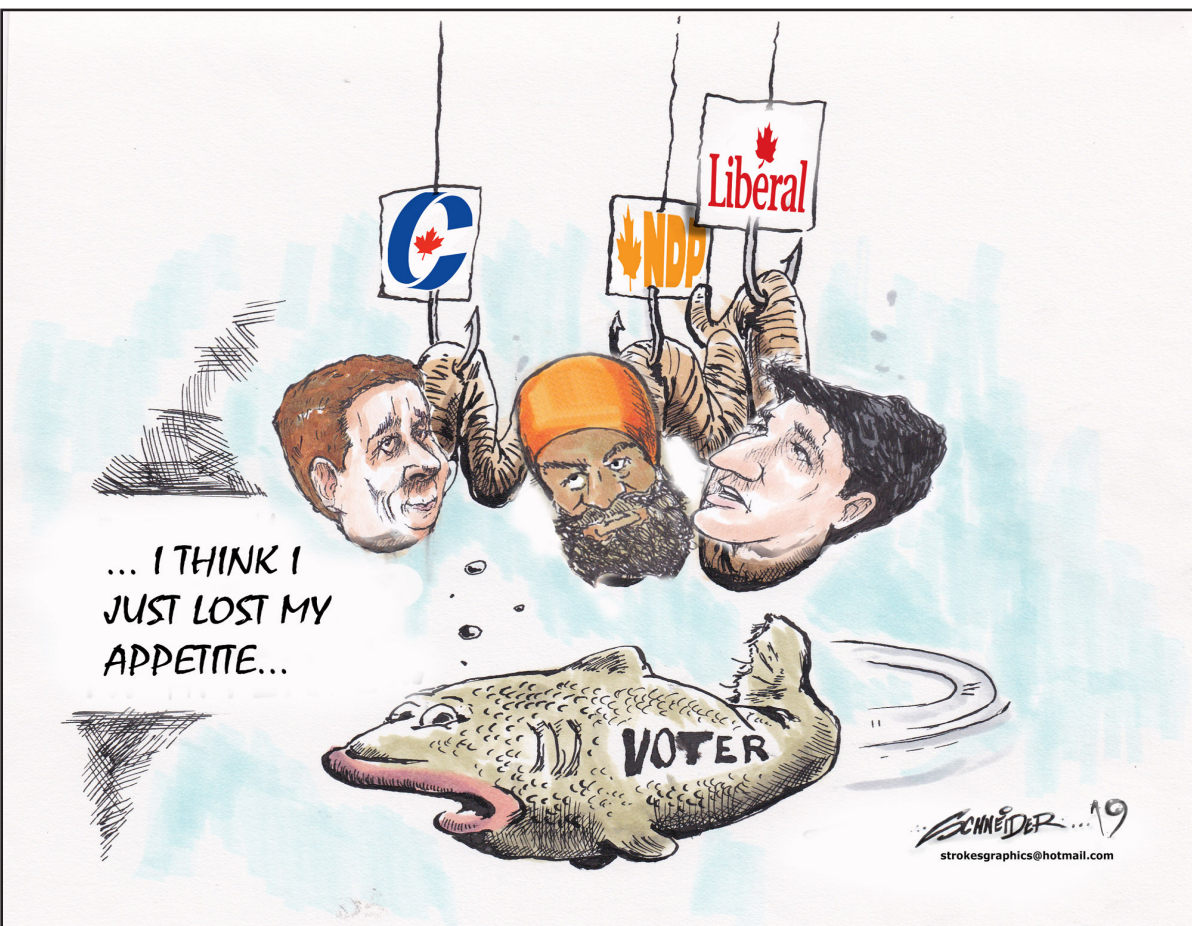
I think I had ... or maybe I hadn't, not quite. I pointed apologetically to a can of Legion Lager in my hand (one of my Nickel neighbours had kindly bought it for me), suggesting that the alcohol had dulled my senses. Which it had, I'm ashamed to admit.

Debbie Arnold came over to ensure my note-taking was up to scratch: \$100,000 over the last five years. I underlined the amount.

With the preliminaries over, the party got under way in earnest ... with an auction. One loonie per bid. The prize? An oyster. Or rather the pearl inside.

I've heard Tyler Cronkhite deliver a chant that would outpace a super-charged rap artist, I've heard Sheldon Smithens in full flow at an old-fashioned farm & household auction. Now I was hearing Sandi's more informal, laid-back, humorous approach.

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