

Regular or Decaf?

They gather each morning all across America. In small town cafes in rural districts of Kansas, cozy corner trendy shops in New York City, small diners along major highways, and even kitchens of major corporation offices. They are the outgrowth of an earlier era where small groups of folks once came together around the old pot bellied stoves to begin the new day. The order of business there might begin with a discussion of the current political situation, a lively Monday morning quarterback debate or simply a particular view of the local town gossip. They are simply called coffee groups, and the meetings are as important as any other event of the day. They often become so habitual that an absence of a particular member of the group becomes a somber event, and the others speculate that something terrible must have happened to the missing regular.

While as a geologist working in many rural areas in the oil fields, and after arm wrestling 5 or 6 posted barbed wire gates to get back to the nearest settlement for a bit of breakfast, I have often walked in to one of these gatherings in what is usually the only open place in town. Many times I have felt a sensation that was similar to that felt by the lone cowpoke who just rode into Dodge and pushed the swinging doors of the town saloon open to be confronted with staring inquisitive faces and the abrupt stopping of music from a honky tonk piano. The very minute I walk in, the lively conversation of these groups suddenly comes to a halt, and all heads turn towards the unfamiliar person entering. You can just hear their thoughts."Who is this stranger, what is he doing here? Why...none of us has ever seen him before. What mystery has he brought to our close knitted community?" There are usually one or two nods of the head to serve as a token welcome, which is somewhat reassuring, but after a few minutes, the animated chatter resumes and I am basically ignored. However, to the contrary, on one occasion or two I would be greeted by a big "Howdy", and one of the locals would start a conversation that would make the Spanish Inquisition seem mild. After telling them that we were drilling wells in the area, they suddenly would get very interested in what I had to say. Having this happen to me a number of times where I would sit wells near these small communities, I became aware of a repetitious pattern of behavior exhibited under these circumstances, and one day decided to turn the tables on a particular coffee group.

As a background, I had been partly raised in a small community near El Paso called Clint, Texas. Now Clint was widely known all over the southwest as the place where folks sent in various sums of money to purchase items advertised on that famous 50000 watt border radio station XELO, Juarez, Chihuahua located in Mexico. But due to postal regulations all correspondence came into the tiny post office in Clint. The standard address given was "Send it in to Clint, Texas.spelled..C_L_I_N_T,

Texas.” The town therefore became famous for that address all over the United States. Although it may never be proven, many often joked that they heard that autographed photos of Jesus Christ were for sale over the air there and that they were inscribed with the irreverent phrase..”Good Luck..JC” I never truly believed it but knowing the outlandish stuff that came over the radio station in those years, anything was possible.

Getting back to the main subject at hand, I had known most of the local men in Clint when they were just boys but had not seen most of them in 40 years. I had heard that they had a regular coffee group that met in a small café in town each morning, and that they always attended by rolling dice to determine who was to pay for coffee that day. One of my cousins was a member of the group and, while visiting El Paso one day, I forewarned him that I was going to come to the valley gathering one morning, but to not let on to the others that he knew me. Walking into the tiny coffee shop, I calmly entered the doorway, sat slowly down at a lone table near the group, ordered a cup of coffee, all the while pretending to be just a passing stranger. The silence was deafening, and you could see inquisitive expressions cross the face of the men who were now grown and the pillars of that small local community. They soon started mumbling among themselves and after a few minutes, I saw one of the group whisper to my cousin. He rose from his seat and cautiously walked over to where I was sitting and scratching his head said...”Say. Didn’t you used to be old so and so?”I broke out with a big laugh, barely able to contain my self-further, saying“I still am that old so and so and I just wanted to see what would happen if I strolled in here after 40 years to see if you guys recognized me.” The jig was then up and after a full round of overdue handshakes and long time-no see type banter, I was informed that I should have to pay for all the coffee for pulling that stunt.

In some places today, however coffee groups seem more sophisticated. Patrons are now gathering in places like Starbucks which offer a multitude of flavors in upscale shops that seem to be located on just about every corner every city in America. Many are living “La Vida Mocha” paying 2 to 3 dollars for a single cup of what used to cost a mere nickel. (For years, the Petroleum Club in Lafayette, Louisiana would only charge five cents for a cup, well into the 1980’s.) Now Cappuccino and Espresso has suddenly crept into the lifestyles of some that prefer a European touch. We have come a long way from when cowboys simply put some coffee grounds in the bottom of an old Folgers or Maxwell House can, and boiled them with water over a campfire.

Today, a lot of the out of the way spots across the rural areas of America still retain that touch of a home away from home. The preferred places for many naturally are those that offer a free refill and have that old time atmosphere. It may be a little corner spot, or that old bricked building on the courthouse square that still serves a basic cup of Juan Valdez’ finest. Wherever it is, it remains a place where many tales are told and friendships are solidly maintained. It’s a must every morning, before heading out for a day’s work, to flock together over that hot, dark brew with ones

friends. The traditional bunch of pals that simply and affectionately ask each other day after day ...”Are ya gonna be at coffee in the mornin’?

**Jim Richards
February 2001**