



# Jeanne Robertson

People around "these parts" might remember when Sheriff Andy Taylor has to evict Frank Myers from his home in the episode "Mayberry Goes Bankrupt." Andy winds up inviting Frank to come and stay with the Taylors. Frank brings along some of his important stuff in a little box: a brass medallion from the St. Louis World's Fair; a spoon with the skyline of Milwaukee on it; a "gen-u-ine" whalebone napkin ring; a red, white and blue sleeve garter; and a bond issued by the town of Mayberry in 1861. They're "valuables" to Frank, but he knows they "ain't worth a tiddy-boo." Every time I see that episode, it reminds me of a friend of mine, Ira Hayes. It would have taken more than a small box to load up Ira's sentimental relics.

During a speaking trip to Florida, I had a chance to visit with professional speaker/friend Ira Hayes. Ira was older than I and had been a speaker for a long time. His tremendous success in the speaking profession was due not only to his talent but also to the fact that he was a "gen-u-ine-ly" nice person. People liked to be around him. He was humble and quiet, and then hilarious on stage. He relished his travels and adventures, and was thankful for the opportunities he had been given. That said . . .

Ira Hayes had the junkiest office I have ever seen. It was organized junk with charm and a true monument to the word "memorabilia." When I visited him at his home that day, his wife Carol said it was a room set aside just for Ira's "stuff." Smiling, she even told me they had downsized, moved to Florida and brought all of Ira's stuff with them.

I came to a quick stop when I walked into Ira's office. Whoa. What in the world? I've always had a lot of memorabilia in my office but this was over the top. "Stuff" was everywhere, but as I stated, organized. Ira stood nearby and didn't say a word while I tried to take it all in. For starters, the walls were completely covered with more than four thousand name tags push pinned into them. I didn't do a count. I took his word for it. The tags were actually layered on top of each other. As I stared, Ira pointed out specific items. "This one is a little unusual," he said in his low-key style. "It's from a convention in 1948. Way back that far. Can you believe it, Jeanne? And look at this one. Ever see a name tag that big?" I had not.

Plaques from audiences covered

up some name tags in spots. Gimmicks representing thousands of meetings peeped out from available spaces. If a group gave it away at a convention and Ira spoke there, he had it. The word today is "swag." Framed photos overlapped the name badges in places. Ira had been President of the National Speakers Association and I noticed the plaque for that. I also noticed the statue presented when he received that organization's top honor.

"Remember this?" he quizzed with a glint in his eye. It was a 1978 photo of the two of us. We looked funny, not just because of the change in style and hair. Unlike gymnasts, for example, there is no "correct size" for professional speakers. Stretching and standing on his toes, Ira came to my shoulder. In the picture, I'm kissing him on the top of the head as he looked at the camera with a sheepish grin. Did I mention he had perfect timing?

Standing there with Ira, staring at the walls, I could sense that he was happy in his room. I was also thinking that one lighted match would make the place convention history, but we don't always say what we think. Instead, I said, "Ira, this is . . . wonderful." He must have known what I was thinking. He stood quietly for a few seconds and added with a smile, "The kids will toss it fast but it'll take them a while to get it all down." Then he became serious. "These are memories of a lifetime, Jeanne. Everything in here is a reminder of one of the places I spoke and of the nice things people did for me."

I nodded because I understood, and then I noticed that high on the walls was one shelf that encircled the room. On the shelf were tiny bottles lined up in a row. They looked like miniature whiskey bottles flight attendants hand out on some flights. Normally, a shelf like that would have had an electric train to circle the room. This one had miniature whisky bottles about four inches tall. "What's that up there, Ira?"

Ira fixed his attention on the small bottles for several moments before replying. "That is very special, Jeanne. That's my dirt collection."

I nodded again to give myself time to think. You'll be happy to know that I resisted saying, "I have dirt collected all over my house, but I don't display it in little bottles." Ira was serious about this and he probably had heard that

comment from others.

"Jeanne, those bottles hold dirt from each of the states and countries where I was privileged to speak," this leader in the speaking profession for decades explained, still staring upward to admire the collection.

"You're saying those tiny liquor bottles are full of dirt?"

"Yep. I took a sack and spoon on trips and would ask my client to pull over on the side of the road so I could scoop up a little dirt from their state. Then I brought the dirt back home in the sack, filled up an empty airplane miniature bottle and labeled it." He smiled as he remembered gathering the dirt. "See. Montana, New Jersey. There's your state, North Carolina." We looked at North Carolina in silence. What does one say in this situation? Probably what I said. "I've never seen anything like this."

We continued to gaze from tiny bottle to tiny bottle. White dirt, black dirt, tan dirt, red dirt. Every tiny bottle was a little different. It struck me that I could go around North Carolina and gather dirt of various colors, put it in bottles, and say it came from far-off places, but I didn't mention it. Others had probably mentioned that. (I didn't even ask if he drank all the liquor in the little bottles. I figured he had heard that too.) The mental picture of him bent over on the side of the road or in a field somewhere - spoon in hand while others waited in a car - made me smile.

More silence and gazing upward. "There's Hawaii," he pointed out. "Alaska's to your left. They're in alphabetical order by states and then countries."

"Ah," I muttered, nodding my head. "Sounds reasonable."

I continued to throw in comments such as: "Well, that is really something, Ira" and "It must have taken a long time to get all these different dirt." I didn't know what else to say. Then, eureka! Something dawned on me.

"You know what, Ira? You may have the only personal, fifty-state and foreign country collection of dirt in miniature whiskey bottles in the entire world."

That's when Ira, turned toward me and grinned. "Nope. I made a set for each of the children."

And I say, "Why not? He had the dirt."

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