

I went to a bar the other night with a friend. He knew the band that was playing and they needed someone to man the door and collect the cover charge. Being that my daughter was having a bunch of ladies over to spend the night and celebrate her 18th, I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to get out of my daughter's way and still have a good time.

Let me tell you something, Andy Smith showing up at this bar was like Ted Kennedy showing up at a Pat Buchannon rally. A Chevy pulling into a Ford parking lot. Madonna showing up at a Baptist Women's luncheon. Wearing paisley with plaid.

Not that I'm complaining. I've never been much of a conformist, so being the odd man out doesn't bother me. But I must say that I was a bit hesitant when I walked into this world.

This was a beer joint. A wine spritzer seemed out of the question. I drank seven up.

Big cowboy hats seemed appropriate. My San Diego Charger baseball cap didn't work.

Several times guys walked by me and called me Bubba. I smiled a lot in fear.

I kept cleaning my glasses thinking they were smeared, only to realize that it was merely the haze from all the smoking. I took enough second-hand smoke to bring back memories of L.A.

And it didn't take long for me to realize that I wouldn't have much to contribute to any conversations of the evening. I pretty much listened and observed while I drank my seven up.

What I heard and what I observed was certainly an education for this old city boy.

It's funny how your first impressions are always your worst impressions. When I walked into this bar, I quickly convinced myself that I was going to die. I would end up on tomorrow's front page.

"OUT OF PLACE DUDE FALLS VICTIM TO RED-NECK BAR"

Just as quickly, I realized that I was a tad over-anxious about all this.

The truth is that these people made me feel very welcomed in their world. Though clearly from a different life style than mine, these were nice people. Hard workers who gathered every Saturday night to let their hair down with beer, cigarettes, loud music and, most importantly,

their friends. Everyone was having fun. No one seemed put out by my presence. I was a square peg trying to fit into a round hole, and these people made it an easy fit.

I enjoyed myself, though I have politely turned down subsequent offers from my friend to go back. I'm glad I went. I learned once again that labels are never a fair judge of who we are. Whether you are a city slicker or a red neck, odds are that you are simply a person who works hard and enjoys spending your free time hanging out with people who share some common thread with you.

But I do hope that next year, my daughter finds another way to celebrate her birthday. I'm much too old to be closing down bars with a bunch of red necks.

Just A Thought