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## As others see us

By Alison Burns

I recently read about a fellow expat who, despite having lived in Orinda five times longer than I have, still feels that she is regarded as a foreigner. Whilst in no way wishing to belittle her sentiments, I'd like to reassure Orindans - with just one exception - that my own experience has always been entirely different. I first moved to the U.S. in the mid-70s, three days after my wedding (my husband, already working in Detroit, had told his employers he had a dentist appointment around the Fourth of July . but hopped onto a London-bound plane instead).

America was a different country back in 1975 - the dust was still settling from the fall of Saigon, the grass on the White House South Lawn, flattened by Nixon's departing helicopter the previous August, had finally sprung back, and beach attendance all across the U.S., after the release of "Jaws," had plummeted to unprecedented numbers.

Americans were delighted with these young English newlyweds who had suddenly turned up in their midst. My Michigan years found me hovering at many a deli counter while I listened to some man 30 years my senior waxing lyrical about his escapades in wartime England. We met their kind again on flights home to England as they rampaged up and down the aisle, thrilled as kids to be going back to military reunions. I hope that all those faraway places with strange sounding names were every bit as good as they remembered. And that not too many of their buddies were missing.

Michiganders who'd never met any Brits used to ask us to "say something English" and we'd always reply (in magisterial tones) "this is the 9 o'clock news." Their questions were so unvaried that we joked we should hold up boards with phrases already printed on them, like "I'm from Surrey, he's from Yorkshire," "since 1975," and "yes, we love it here."

Almost 50 years after leaving Britain, I still have the accent, despite having lived in several other countries along the way. And maybe that's not such a bad thing since I've been told that anyone with an English accent appears at least 25% more intelligent than your average American. Not true!

I have never felt that other people's enquiries about my birthplace are intrusive or ill-mannered, knowing that their interest is borne out of genuine curiosity and enthusiasm: innocence rather than guile. Nor have I ever considered those questions to be confrontational (except for that one exception). In fact it's rather endearing.

I, in my turn, love to pinpoint the subtleties of American accents, having lived not only in the Midwest, but also the East coast, South Carolina and California.

And that one exception when a stranger yelled at me to go back to my own country? It happened one Friday afternoon earlier this year, when I opened my front door to insistent bell-ringing and found a man videoing me, laughing maniacally and informing me it was 5 p.m.

When you're a guest in someone else's country, you're very careful to abide by the rules - I have the Orinda Noise Ordinance emblazoned on my heart - but I felt it best not to argue. He obviously didn't like the sound of chainsaws. Neither do I, but since I had a massive live oak (rather an oxymoronic term at that stage) straddling both my house and cottage roofs, and its three conjoined tree trunks hovering on the brink of crashing down at any moment, I was anxious to get the problem solved before 6 p.m. Personally, I'd think twice about including a chainsaw-wielding tree feller in my abusive rant, but our uninvited guest continued his tirade, totally unaware of the foolhardiness of recording every offensive word and gesture on his phone. Apparently, I had to go back to where I came from, "back to the United Kingdom," because "nobody wants you here."

But as I told him: I'm not going anywhere, thanks. I like it here.

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