

Rachel Kovaciny

THE PONY EXPRESS

Would you apply for a job that said the applicants needed to be skinny, young, courageous, and preferably orphans? That doesn't sound like a great opportunity to me, but to many men in their late teens and early twenties in 1860, it looked like a fun and exciting way to earn money. Especially since the organization hiring was the news sensation of the moment: the Pony Express.

Prior to April 1860, it took between three weeks and three months for mail to cross the American frontier. That included personal letters, newspapers, and government messages. But the Russell, Majors & Waddell freighting company aimed to change that. They claimed their new courier service would carry mail between St. Joseph, Missouri, and San Francisco in only ten days. This made their venture front-page news across the country.

To shave two-thirds off the fastest ordinary travel time, the Pony Express riders would cross the West instead of meandering between settlements the way existing carriers did. They would use the fastest horses (fed the finest grain and kept in peak condition) and ride at top speed for ten to fifteen miles before changing to a fresh one. Each rider would ride for only a few hours at a time, passing the mail along in a relay system that let it travel day and night. The idea looked great on paper, and Russell, Majors, and Waddell gambled their company on it.

Amazingly enough, it worked. The Pony Express reliably delivered mail between St. Joseph and San Francisco in ten days. Its riders weren't all orphans, but they were all young, healthy, and strong. They weighed between 100 and 125 pounds because the less weight a horse carried, the faster it could run. Any riders who weren't courageous didn't keep their jobs long, thanks to the dangerous conditions the Pony Express faced. Riders rode across deserts. Forged flooded streams. Endured blizzards and blazing summer heat. They had to evade angry native warriors, trusting their grain-fed horses to outrun their enemies' grass-fed mounts. One rider completed his run with an arm shattered by bullets and his jaw broken by an arrow, courtesy of some



angry American Indians, but he reached the safety of the next Pony Express station. In the entire history of the Pony Express, only one rider got killed, but his faithful horse completed his run for him, bringing the mail safely through on its own.

It was more dangerous to work at one of the 180 Pony Express Stations than to be one of the 80 riders. Local American Indians burned or destroyed several stations during uprisings, and killed several station workers. The stations were ten to fifteen miles apart depending on the terrain. This let the riders travel at top speed with no need to slow down and rest their mounts; by the time the horses needed to stop, they reached the next station and switched mounts. A rider got two minutes to change horses; the station masters were supposed to have a fresh horse saddled and waiting for them, which meant the rider could spend his break eating or drinking before riding off again. They rode between three or four stations before passing the mail on to the next rider.

They used a saddle that weighed ten or twelve pounds, unlike ordinary western saddles, which weigh thirty. Pony Express Riders carried the mail in a leather blanket-like device called a *mochila* (Spanish for knapsack) with four pockets with locking clasps, and two slits that let it slide over the saddle's horn and cantle. It could accommodate letters, government

dispatches, and newspapers weighing up to twenty pounds, and it took mere seconds to pull the *mochila* off one saddle and slide it over the next.

Riders carried a pistol for protection with extra cartridges in their pocket. They rarely needed to use it because their horses could outrun any others. The Pony Express chose only the fastest and hardiest mounts, and paid up to \$200 for a single animal, four or five times the usual price for a horse. They paid their riders handsomely, too. Riders made \$25 to \$50 a month in a time when a farm hand earned \$15 and a skilled laborer made \$40.

The Pony Express revolutionized the way mail traveled, but only lasted from April 1860 to October 1861, when the transcontinental telegraph meant news could travel across the country in minutes instead of days. Anyone willing to pay the high Pony Express prices (\$5-\$10 an ounce) would pay 75¢ a word for a telegram. The Pony Express never turned a profit. Its freighting company went bankrupt shortly after it closed down.

Only a few Pony Express stations remain standing. The National Park Service maintains a few. As a kid, I visited one, and it thrilled me to see a real Pony Express station, since I loved Old West history. I'd love to visit it again one of these days, to get a glimpse of the world of those 80 skinny, young, and courageous Pony Express Riders. ♦

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BEST LAID PLANS

Charity Bishop

There's an old saying. Make your plans, so God can laugh at them. I don't think God is out to get me, but it sure is, uh, entertaining when the weather, electronics, other people, or much of anything disrupts my plans.

Take January. I had a to-do list. I intended to start my year full of ambition and get a lot of stuff done so I could begin the new year on the right foot. Instead, I got Covid and did nothing but lay on the couch for three weeks feeling like a semi-truck flattened me. I felt too sick to even get mad that I accomplished nothing but watching episodes of *Gilmore Girls*. So much for my to-do list! But not-eating lost me three pounds, which spurred my weight-loss journey, so I guess it wasn't a total loss.

In February, I suffered from such intense cabin fever and boredom, I decided to take up a temporary hobby of making stuffed animals based off cute patterns purchased on Etsy. I borrowed my mother's sewing machine and made a test bunny! So cute! And... five stitches before the end, the sewing machine jammed, never to work again despite my repeated attempts to fix it and as many swear words. So, that hobby is on hold until my new machine arrives. All I can do is look at the cute, colorful fabrics and wait. (I am not patient.)

I did a low-spend January, in which I bought nothing but groceries and saved a decent amount of money. Good thing, because my refrigerator died. It lasted all of two years and left this mortal coil in the middle of the night. I bought a new one, and instead of sending me one of the four in-stock at a local store, they shipped one in from Texas. I'm still waiting on that. (Sigh.)

On occasion, they rerelease some great old film in theaters and I try to attend, but it often snows. I got lucky a few times and could still make it. So far, I've tried three times to have guests over to watch *Wicked!* ... and all three times, it either snowed or got below 10 degrees, so we postponed. It reminds me of my angst-driven youth; whenever I would plan an event for my birthday, it rained 6 inches. Year after year, I wound up having birthday parties weeks late. It got so bad, I stopped inviting people over at all. Since we had a few dry springs, I figured, "June is a safe time for my out of state friend to visit." Nope. That year, it snowed and rained from October into July. I couldn't even make it to the airport to get her, thanks to the muddy roads, so she had to stay with a mutual friend. Then we went up into the mountains, followed by rain, and had to beat

home another storm four days later and pray we could get her to the airport. Now you know where the saying, "God willing and if the creek don't rise" comes from!

Since there's nothing we have control over, not our finances nor or health or the weather, all we can do is ride out life's ups and downs with a sense of grace. I'm still working on that last part. When the good Lord handed out patience, I must have been behind a door. I get things into my head, and want to do them here and now... not in a week, not in a month, today! Before the fun and allure has faded! Well, I guess we know what to do if we want more rain or snow this spring: just tell me to plan something or invite someone to the house! ♦



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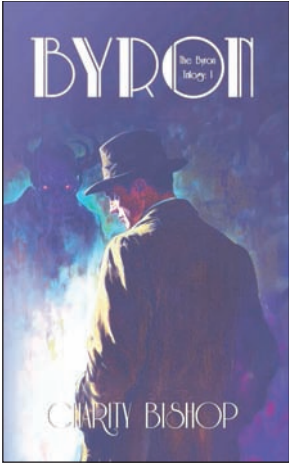
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Charles Oz Collins

Plum Crazy

I had just finished a presentation to a social club on my research on Great Plains Privies. An old gentleman approached and said, “I’ve got a story I think you’ll like.” He told me he was born in Oklahoma in the 1930s, youngest child of a large family. Hearing that, my mind formed a context for his tale. While the Great Depression gripped the nation and many unemployed stood in line hoping for even a “make work” job... from building dams to privies, to killing rats, Oklahoma endured a double trauma. These were the “dirty thirties” of the Dustbowl and Oklahoma seemed ground zero for this environmental catastrophe so forcefully depicted in Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*.

Times were hard and feeding their large family challenged his parents. They would go for groceries and try to bring him and his siblings a treat. Their favorite was a can of plums. His mother cut the plums in two so each child got their share.

His father was one of the few men in the county who could read technical blueprints, the skill the Works Progress Administration needed for the many construction projects undertaken to get people back to work. His skills were in great demand and he left to supervise the construction of elevators in different Oklahoma towns.

With a steady and adequate paycheck, now trips for groceries were not such a strain on his parents. They

need not choose one item over another. Life improved. It got even better when his father got the job of supervising mass construction of privies and could stay home most of the time. Higher powers (no doubt someone in DC), concluded the Great Depression was an opportunity to improve rural health and sent so-called Sanitarians across the country preaching the ills of poor sanitation, namely the use of poorly made pit privies. In some locations, privies were not even available, forcing citizens to resort to what Washington DC labeled “promiscuous defecation.”

The old gentleman’s father got put in charge of a group of men who, in assembly-line fashion, turned out approved “sanitary privies” with concrete vaults, ventilation systems, and solid construction. There

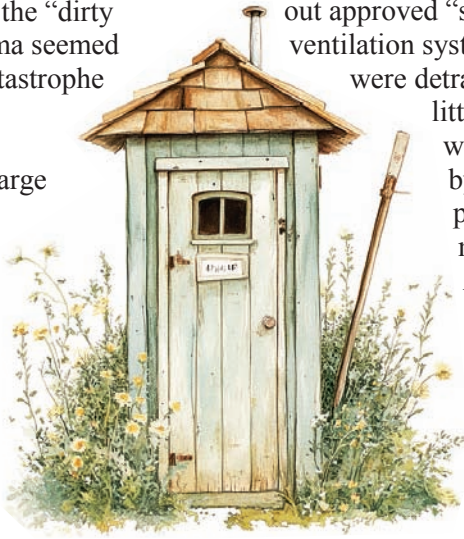
were detractors who derisively dubbed the little houses “Eleanors,” and said they were the single true “relief” provided by FDR and his “alphabet soup” programs. To such folk, W.P.A. meant We Piddle Around or We Poke Along.

Not only did the family now have a steady income, the vintage family “three-holer” got replaced by a new sanitary privy, in the typical one-hole configuration. And there was more! Their parents returned home from shopping with a real treat.

Otherwise known as a full case of their beloved plums. Each child could have an entire can!

The old gentleman laughed as he recalled that the effects of this generosity were not long in arriving. The rich plums in his young system prompted an urgent call of nature. He responded by running from the house to the reliable old “three-holer,” only to find his siblings already lined up and anxiously awaiting their turn in the new Eleanor, which had but one seat. In desperation, the boy ran down the lane to the high hollow stump of a large tree, years earlier killed by lightning. Scrambling up the stump while undoing his bib overalls, he dropped in, only to find the possum that occupied it protested the intrusion.

At this point in his story, the old gentleman stopped. He did not give further details, but I could see by his broad grin, he fully enjoyed both the remembering and the telling of this unique memory. Yes indeed, “Relief” can come in many forms. ♦



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Pancakes

Berene H. Ingram

Mom cooked my favorite breakfast on the weekends, an unrushed pancake event which filled the kitchen with vanilla hugs. Pancake batter sizzled on the griddle with little bubbles that popped to the surface on the uncooked side and drew us close to the kitchen like an invitation to a special gathering. Mom lifted the edge of each round cake with the slotted pancake-turner to see when the cooking side became golden brown. It took less than two minutes and felt like a lifetime.

Pancake batter provoked an unanswered question. How did it become round on the griddle after it left the spoon? She slid the pancake-turner beneath each cake, lifted it off the griddle, and executed a fast flip so the bubbly side landed with a soft plop on the heat. If not quick enough, the uncooked side dripped and broke into pieces, which ruined the pancake. The round black cast iron griddle, 12 -inches in diameter with a loop handle, held the heat steady for cooking three pancakes at a time.

“Come and set the table” Mom called, and we crowded into the kitchen, set the plates and silverware, chairs, poured the milk, and set out the thick brown



a distant second to our attention. My goal included eating a million pancakes each time Mom cooked this breakfast.

The cakes, warm pillows to the touch with a tender crust on each side, and fluffy soft on the inside beckoned us to cut a wedge, pick up a forkful and put it in our mouths for the first bite. Each forkful paused in the mouth, raced to the stomach, and contributed to a full and satisfied, joyful goodness. “MMMMMM!” an involuntary sound escaped from a full mouth, and eyes rolled in appreciation. Mom brought out another platter of warm pancakes after we inhaled the first platter. With bulging cheeks, we sopped up the remaining syrup on the plate with the last bit and chased it with milk, thick and smooth.

Mom made pancakes from scratch. All this enjoyable eating may not have existed if the pancake batter failed, and it didn’t. She used the cookbook recipe or the flour bag recipe and customized it over the many breakfasts to the perfection we knew and loved. The wet ingredients included vanilla extract, shortening, eggs from our chickens, and whole milk from our cows. Dry ingredients included all-

purpose flour, salt, granulated sugar, baking powder, or baking soda. The sieve mixed and pushed air into the dry ingredients to relieve the heaviness of the packed flour. This manual method aided the achievement of tender and fluffy pancakes.

Through trial and error, Mom determined the level of heat to cook the pancakes just right, and the amount of shortening to coat the griddle. A mist of water bubbles which danced and evaporated on the griddle told Mom when to pour the first one. She refined the technique of how long to stir the batter, and its thickness, once all the ingredients were in the mixing bowl. She used the electric mixer or the wooden spoon and produced a good customized thick batter that rolled off the spoon in small clumps. We ate pancakes every time during those experimental days. Sometimes, Mom added lemon juice to the milk and let it sit for a few minutes, which curdled the milk and gave us buttermilk pancakes.

Mom cooked until the batter bowl emptied and then sat down to her own plate of pancake goodness. A quarter-sized pancake from the last bit of batter scraped from the side of the glass mixing bowl with a rubber spatula notified us of the end of breakfast. Satiated on this pancake

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maple flavored syrup containers, a sweet crown for this much-loved breakfast. Mom put a large platter of tender saucer-sized brown warm cakes in the middle of each table, because we were a family of nine, including Dad, for breakfast. Mom cooked enough to start us all with three pancakes. We unloaded them from the platter to our plates with the fork and took turns getting them to swim in gallons of syrup. The second platter of sausage patties, bacon slices, and scrambled eggs for each table were

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weekend, we emerged from the sweet goodness covered in syrup, with sticky faces, hands, and clothes. Full bellies and wobbly legs moved us away from the table. We cleaned ourselves, cleared the table, washed the dishes, griddle, mixing bowl, beaters, and related tools. Afterward, I refused to give in to that drowsy feeling which threatened to send me to bed after eating. On sunny days, for nearly an hour, our collie dog and I walked through the hayfields on the worn cow paths near the fence lines. Back at the house, my stomach felt comfortable.

Mom taught all of us to make pancake breakfasts, a valuable skill because “You won’t always be able to eat out or to have someone cook for you.” ♦

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RISKY BUSINESS

Denise Fortman

The dark, moonless night made excellent cover for what was going to happen in the next few hours.

Would all the months of planning be worth it?

Grave danger lay ahead for this brave man named Jeb.

He had reached the point where he couldn't stand the horrible abuse, the chains, the starvation and the beatings. If only he could reach safety. Jeb felt glad he wouldn't be alone this night, but feared for his companions as well. If they got caught... he wouldn't think of that. This *had* to work.

Quietly, and ignoring his aching knee, Jeb moved to the barn where they stored the big old lumber wagon. This beast had an important role tonight, and he hoped it would start. He saw the boy in the shadows and felt glad he was there already. He too risked his life, and he felt bad about that, but it wasn't to be helped. The abuse must stop. Only Jeb had ever been kind to the boy. He lived in this place all his life, and it was the only home he could remember. He had heard stories about his parents and the accident that took their lives. Jeb knew the boy would do anything for him.

They climbed into the truck and, after a few grumbles, it started. Jeb and "Old Reliable," the truck, both had old, aching bones. They would drive a distance away from the barn and leave her there for later. Old Reliable would play a big part in tonight's adventure. Jeb prayed it would live up to its name.

The partners in crime made their way back to where they had witnessed such cruelty and neglect. They had decided to do something so bold they surprised themselves. Jeb had never been brave. Nobody really noticed him. He went about his tasks quietly, causing no problems... until tonight. Like the boy, he'd lived most of his life in this place. Years ago, it had been a good place, but now it was old and shabby. There was never enough money, even for food, and they all suffered.

They had to be careful so as not to alert the guard. At this time of the night, he'd be passed out from too much whiskey. He no longer took any pride in his work and had gone downhill just like everything else here.

The old man opened the rusty lock and entered the cage. Rudi lifted his head and snuffed with his long trunk. Jeb loved this gentle giant. He'd been here forty-nine years, and Jeb felt determined that he wouldn't see his fiftieth birthday here. They said Rudi would kill anyone who came near him unless they chained him up, but the chains had been on for so long they made it painful for him to walk. When he didn't want to walk, his infuriated owners hit him. Jeb knew how hard it would be for Rudi to walk with him, but he didn't have the tools to remove the chains. The elephant rose when the old man gave him the sign and embraced him with his trunk. Jeb had saved some vegetables and Rudi chomped on them, always hungry.

Jeb and the boy coaxed him from the cage. Rudi slowly followed; he trusted the old man and would follow him no matter how painfully. Somehow, he knew Jeb wanted to help him. They snuck down the pathway to where Old Reliable sat waiting. They had made a ramp for Rudi to get into the truck and the elephant climbed into it. The truck started, and they were off. So far, their plan had worked. The months of scheming had paid off. They still had many miles to go to reach the sanctuary and safety of their passenger. Jeb drove slowly and carefully so Rudi's sores wouldn't hurt him from the bouncing of the old truck. Finally, they saw the sanctuary gate. The lights were all on. The staff waiting for them cheered as the truck arrived. They knew the risks involved. If the circus owners had caught them, the night would have ended badly for both.

With Rudi safe in his new pen, the men removed his chains with bolt cutters, avoiding the infected sores on his legs. One man kept shaking his head and said over and over, "How could they do this



to such a gentle soul?" It took several hours to remove the chains and when the final one clanked to the ground, Rudi lifted his trunk and bellowed. Everyone had tears in their eyes.

All of this time, another elephant watched from nearby. It now came close to where Rudi stood and stuck its trunk through the bars in a greeting. Rudi touched it with his own, curious. He hadn't seen another of his kind since his youth.

The sun lightened the sky as a new day dawned. The night had left the old man and boy with a serious problem. They had no place to go. They would get arrested if they went back to the circus, but they didn't want to go there, anyway. It was a sad place since the original owner had died; the new owner only cared about making money. He was a cruel, greedy man.

Somewhere nearby, breakfast was cooking. They could smell the aroma of bacon and coffee. They enjoyed watching Rudi with the other elephant. The head of the sanctuary asked if they wanted to stay for breakfast. Oh yes, what a wonderful offer! Starved, they dug into the good vittles. Then the man asked if they wanted to stay on, because he needed extra help. Delighted, Jeb and the boy agreed. From that day on, they had a wonderful home with Rudi, the elephant they had saved. ♦

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Not So Stupid Pet Tricks

Kimberly Hamelin

One beautiful spring day, some friends and I went out to the country for dinner. In the warm weather, the daffodils were poking their little heads from the dirt. After being cooped up for the long winter, we were ready for a road trip.

The forecast called for light snow, but we weren't worried. We had a four-wheel drive and packed warm clothes to take along, just in case. We ate a lovely dinner with plenty of conversation and laughter and were having coffee

afterward when we noticed snow falling at an alarming rate; the sky sloughed off huge flakes of crystallized water which piled up fast. Too fast. We would try to get home in the morning. We all got places to sleep and called it a night.

Morning came, along with clear skies. The pristine field of snow sparkled in the sunlight, with tiny diamonds shedding color in every direction. Every color of the rainbow reflected on us. It had an indescribable beauty, and it enchanted me.

You never see this kind of thing in the city. City snow is dirty as soon as it falls, so I took time to absorb it all. A single set of footprints heading from the house to the chicken coop broke the newly fallen snow. Animals must get fed, no matter how deep the snow is. We had breakfast ready for our friend when he

returned, and after eating, did something nice for him while he attended to his other chores by shoveling out a path to the chicken coop.

It's a good thing we packed warm clothes because we needed them. Long Johns under the jeans, wool socks, snow boots, three layers of shirts, and hats, scarves, gloves and coats. We went out and realized we needed sunglasses as well. The sunlight reflecting off the snow was blinding, to say the least. At last, we were ready to get to work and gathered on the back patio. Surveying the situation, we were all

discouraged. It was a long way from the house to the chicken coop, and the snow was at least a foot deep with three-foot drifts. We looked at each other and wondered what to do. Then I had an idea.

We called out my friend's trusty dog. Caley is a blue heeler who adores tennis balls. She also loves to play in the snow. She's a working dog, trained to herd cattle and such, and she needed a job to do. My friend had mentioned he had little time to play with her lately, and we had all spent time the afternoon before throwing the ball for her, so I gave her another workout and a job. We started throwing the ball toward the chicken coop, following his footsteps through the snow, and Caley broke a path for us.

It was hilarious watching her try to find the ball in the snow. She'd poke her nose in the drifts, trying to smell her slobber, and came up with a snout covered with frosting. She traced



her steps in a zig-zag pattern to home in on her scent, just like the avalanche dogs do when they need to find a buried skier. Back and forth, she searched for the ball, making the trail wider and wider. The more of the path cleared, the further we threw the ball.

Caley had a ball, literally, and we were laughing like loons at each other, taking turns trying to throw the ball just so, aiming for the chicken coop. It turned into a friendly competition, with one of us keeping score on distance and accuracy. I'm not really sure how we determined who won, but we had a blast. We followed the dog down the trail she made, shoveling as we went, and in record time we had a good wide path cleared for my friend. You don't have time to do this in the city!

Turning a chore into a game is the best way to go. We spent hours together, did a good deed for our friend, and had fun. I love snow days. ♦

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One of the chief uses and delights of the home is conversation. If home is about sheltering souls, and warmth, beauty, cleanness, and organization are about feeding and growing souls, then one of the chief things a home facilitates is conversation which unifies souls.

Conversation is when we express our hopes and dreams, fears and struggles, tears and laughter to others for them to be examined, calmed, trained, or corrected. It's the intimate sharing of our minds and thoughts. Conversation builds comradery, both in its silly, pointless forms and its deeper, more intense ones. It also builds friendships.

Do we want to be friends with the people in our home? Want to count our husbands as friends and our children as friends? Build stronger communities?

Leave room for conversation.
How?

Love:
conversations should be a big part of the intangible warmth of our homes and that means we need to make room for them, understanding they will seldom happen at a convenient time, if ever. This means we start with our own hearts. We hold conversations dear, not labeling them annoying or in the way. We avoid stifling them for the sake of chores.

Chores must be done, yes, but conversation is what our homes shelter. Our chores support conversation as much as they do our families staying clean, alive, and thriving. Creating a place for conversation starts with choosing to love it. The best ones are unplanned. We can schedule them up to a point, like mealtimes, but even then, conversations can run long. Learn to love long talks. Remind yourself that this talking, even leisurely talking, is more important than temporary things.

If an appointment cuts them short, try to set that expectation at the beginning. If a frantic feeling about the To-Do List rises, write the list down, even if you have to make a note in the middle of the conversation. Knitting, cross-stitching, and even note-taking while talking to our loved ones can help our focus. Some of us chat better when our hands are busy. Some of us may need to set a timer if we get so wrapped up in a conversation we forget to cook dinner.

Creating an environment for conversation starts with a choice to love them. We guard and garden our hearts so we don't slip into a habit of avoiding them or pushing them low on the priorities list. We engage with a good attitude.

Some of my best family memories are Saturday morning movie discussions over pancakes. When we were little, Dad would tell us about the movie he watched on Friday night. As we got older, it became a joint viewing and a discussion. This spring-boarded into philosophy, theology, art, and more. As a family, we still love discussing movies and stories. This doesn't happen if we don't hold conversation in high regard, or see its value.

With Mom, we talked while doing laundry, cleaning, making beds, and cooking. It is fine to teach kids to follow us as we work...and maybe husbands. Many wonderful conversations between mothers and daughters and girlfriends happen over, under, and around chores just as often as they do a cup of coffee. This requires the love of a good talk and what it produces.

Non-Frantic Environment: The next important part of managing conversation is maintaining a non-frantic home. Nothing smothers conversation faster than a frantic heart and mind and schedule. The rhythms of our homes are our handmaids. They aid us in establishing places for conversation. Yes, we may have to say, "I love you, but I must do this right now. Can we talk when I finish?" Conversation is communication, and proper communication produces calm homes. If we never stop to listen to our children explain the value of their rocks, or teens share a ridiculous and wild opinion, or our husbands sort through something, sharing or



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directing, we need to reset our priorities, look at our commitments, and scale them back.

One of the big elements of a well-tended home is room for conversation. Give the whole family breathing room to mosey through a conversation by not living frantic lives. Good talks take time. If we can't set aside a Saturday morning or a Friday night, if we can't work and talk or create environments, like a nice easy dinnertime, conversation won't happen and our whole family will drift apart. There must be warmth, comfort, a cup of coffee, a glass of wine, a crackling fire, and



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pockets of time. If every moment of our days is chock full of stuff, conversation and families will drift apart and away.

Nourishing: The last component has two parts. First, to have a conversation, we need things to talk about. It doesn't always have include sharing our souls. Sometimes they are a loud, opinionated rampage about our favorite or most abhorred books. Books, movies, music, politics, philosophy, sports, arts, theology, and culture can take us to interesting places, if we stop to enjoy them.

Second, nourish conversation with food. The best ones happen over lunch. Food is the platform from which conversation springs. Drink is the oil that makes words flow. If we want to nourish an environment for us, our husbands, our children, friends, and family, we must take cooking seriously. Nothing invites a good long talk like a hot drink. A bottle of wine shared between spouses or friends brings laughter and long conversation into a room. A pot of hot soup, a roast, charcuterie boards, any favorite meal, and even PB&Js can be the catalyst for souls uniting through words. Taking cooking seriously is the best way to create a nourishing environment for conversation.

Conversation not only builds communities and cultures, but is one of the sincerest delights of home and family. What is home, what is a family if not a long running conversation of the frivolous and the profound, the inside jokes and the new things? Let's help our families by choosing to love conversation, creating a non-frantic environment, and providing nourishment so that conversation becomes a cornerstone of our homes. ♦

Peril on a Photo Shoot

Tony
Catanese

The call came at 6:45 pm just as my wife and I sat down for dinner. At first I felt tempted to have the caller leave a message, but then I saw the name. My agent. I picked up the phone. “Congratulations. You got it. I’ll shoot you an email tonight with all the details. Way to go, Tony.” I hung up the phone and turned to my wife with a silly grin on my face. “You got it, didn’t you?” She held up her glass of wine and said, “I knew you would.”

That night, I anxiously awaited the email. The photo shoot would take place in Lyons the following week on a Wednesday afternoon and run from noon to 5pm. That’s usually when I have my Creative Writing class, but fortunately we were on a two-week break. There were directions to where I should park in Lyons. A van would take me to the shoot fifteen miles outside of town.

I arrived in Lyons at 11:30. The van was waiting for me and five other actors. The drive to the site was nothing like I expected. Winding, narrow dirt roads guided the van towards its destination. We passed farms and ranches as the road kept ascending. When the driver said, “Here we are,” I observed my surroundings with awe.

In front of me was a century old, large wooden framed house. All around were acres and acres of open space with views of

mountains and trees. A barn and a corral with horses. Three dogs jumped up and down, excited to see who would exit from the van. As we walked up the driveway, we noticed trucks with wardrobe, cameras, technical equipment and lights. Standing around were at least thirty crew members preparing for the shoot.

The director and his staff greeted us and told us to proceed behind the barn where lunch awaited us. It had an incredible spread, with everything from two kinds of chili, various salads, fried chicken, and an assortment of fruits and pies for dessert.

At 1:30, preparation for the shoot began. Makeup, hair and wardrobe went into action and secured the locations. They called me to the barn and directed me to a pile of chopped wood with a picturesque view of the barn, the trees, the mountains, and an expansive blue sky in the

background. They told me to lean on an axe and contemplate the magnificence of my surroundings. It was an easy direction to follow. As I posed, the photographer went into action, taking hundreds of shots in less than a few minutes.

Suddenly, the photographer and his assistants froze. Time stopped. What was happening? What should I do? As I scanned their faces, I saw confusion, shock, and fear. For themselves? For me?

The art director, Jill, told me, “Tony, put





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down the axe gently. Do not turn around. Walk slowly towards me. Try not to make any sudden movements. Say nothing and ask no questions. Just keep walking slowly until you reach us.”

I did. I sensed a problem but knew to keep my mouth shut. My heart racing, I put down the axe and began walking. I kept my focus on Jill as I moved closer to her. Everyone, including Jill, froze. When I reached her, I turned slowly and saw what everyone else did.

A brown bear with her two cubs had emerged from behind the barn. All three were eating the food prepared for lunch and enjoying the remnants of fried chicken and fruit pies. When they spotted us, they stopped and stared. Then they ambled over to my

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woodpile and tore it apart. The two cubs approached the white backdrop screen used by the photographer and punched a hole in it like it was a toy. Their mother sensed we weren’t a threat to her cubs, so she didn’t approach. To play it safe, no one in our group moved or spoke. After ten minutes, the two cubs followed their mother away from the site and through a row of trees.

Besides the white screen, they damaged none of the other equipment. The crew set up the shot again. We continued the shoot. The other sites used that afternoon had me in the kitchen preparing a salad, washing dishes, and in the den reading by the fireplace. My last shot of the day, I sat on the deck sipping hot chocolate and watching the sunset.

I found the drive home pleasant and relaxing. When I arrived, my wife had dinner waiting for me. She prepared my favorite meal, eggplant parmigiana.

A week later, my check arrived. Not bad for a fun day in the mountains. I also received an email from Jill. She thanked me for “keeping my cool” and told me to open the attachment and “enjoy!” I did. It had a photo of me facing forward, frozen and wide eyed. Not far behind me were the bears exiting the barn, holding fried chicken and fruit pies. Priceless! ♦

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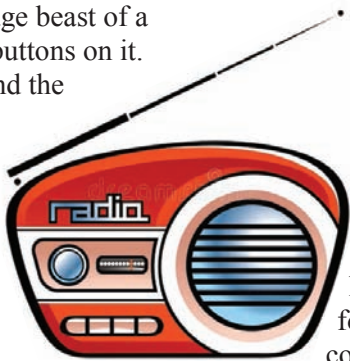
Buttons and Knobs

Jerry Bishop

As a small child, I remember gathering around the radio on Saturday nights to listen to *Fiber McGee and Molly*. Or the *Lone Ranger* and *Hopalong Cassidy*. While a huge beast of a thing, our radio only had two buttons on it. One for tuning the station in and the other for volume. Later, my parents got a console with a built-in record player turntable. It had AM, FM and a shortwave. It was a fine-looking piece of furniture with cabinet doors that hid all the equipment when you weren't using it. It had a few more knobs so you could adjust the bass and treble. Sometimes I would tune in the shortwave and listen to broadcasts from England and Australia. We listened to the sound of the Sputnik, the first satellite to orbit the earth and that threw our nation into a panic on that radio.

In 1964, the transistor radio hit the market. These pocket sized (a big pocket) radios sold for a week's wages, but what a marvel they were—a true status symbol of the highest order. Sort of like a cell phone was 15 or 20 years ago.

These devices were still easy to operate. A few buttons and knobs and you were set to go. I think the confusion conspiracy really took hold



with the VCR. At first VCR's just had buttons and knobs too, but soon models began appearing with programmable digital controls. The fiends behind this plot were also quietly working on TV remotes at the same time. This simple tool became like the control panel of a 747. Another brilliant invention, the microwave, started out simple enough too. The first one we owned cost \$300 in 1985. It lasted a long time and had two knobs for operation. The last one we bought cost a lot more and you can program it to do everything except serve the main course, never mind we use none of those options.

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Car and truck manufacturers soon followed the trend. Now, on most models, a computer runs your vehicle and if it quits or won't upgrade its software one morning, good luck getting to work.

Where will it end? One of the main reasons we bought our car is I can set the heater/AC and tune the radio with buttons and knobs while going down the road at 75 mph. Lest this have a perfect ending, this car offers satellite radio with 150 stations to choose from. We never listen to it, so we are right back to that modern day square one dilemma, too many choices.

Lest you think I'm complaining, I'm not. We have never had it so good. We live longer, have more things, and live at a higher standard of living in this great country than at any time in history. Let's count our blessings, even if it means learning how to do digital instead of just buttons and knobs. ♦

Walking Around the Fence

Dorothy Miller

While in the third grade and going to a small church school in California, I got my foot caught in the front spokes of a bicycle. The broken spoke dug down to the bone and left me on crutches when I returned to school. Watching the other kids run and enjoy themselves at recess bored me to death. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the time came when I could get rid of those crutches.

We had a rule printed and hung on the wall: "NO RUNNING IN THE SCHOOLROOM."

On a nice, warm afternoon, we ate our lunches and went out to the playground. Our teacher, Miss Seaton, sat outside the open door of the classroom. We were playing a game of "Chase" with me as "It." While chasing Mary Jane, she ran into the schoolroom and I followed her.

"Girls, girls," Miss Seaton's voice broke into our fun. "What does the sign say, girls?"

Uh oh!

"No running in the schoolroom." I could read, even if I had a poor memory.

"But you were running in the schoolroom, weren't you?" Miss Seaton looked at us.

"Mary Jane ran in here and I followed her. It wasn't me." While sorry Mary Jane had broken the rules, I didn't consider it my fault.



"You were running too, weren't you?" Miss Seaton's logic was wrong.

"Well, yes," I admitted. "But she ran in here first and I had to get her. It wasn't my fault."

My arguments did no good. I had broken the rules and had to pay the consequences. For several days, Mary Jane and I spent our recesses walking around the fence. Boring!

Fed up with this, I packed up my books and took them home with me. When I got home, I announced it to Mama. "I'm never going back to that school." I put my things on the table.

"Oh, you're not?" Mother looked at me.

"Nope. I hate that school."

"Why?" She didn't look exactly overjoyed.

"Because every recess we just walk around that old fence and I'm tired of it."

"Well," Mama said, "we already paid your tuition, so you'll have to go back."

"But, Mama!" I was miserable.

"I'll talk to Miss Seaton if you'd like me to," Mama added. That might help.

The next day, Mama went to school with us. Miss Seaton looked surprised when Mama appeared in the schoolroom before school started that morning. Mama said, "Dotty has decided she doesn't want to go to this school anymore because she's so tired of walking around the fence all the time."

They talked for a while. Mama explained my

over-exuberance came from being on crutches for so long. "Well, maybe I was a little harsh," Miss Seaton admitted.

"If she promises never to run in the classroom again, could you let Dotty have recess?"

I kept my fingers, toes, and eyes crossed, hoping she'd say "yes."

"All right," Miss Seaton said.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Oh, happy day! I was free, and so was Mary Jane.

I had learned one lesson: never run in the classroom. But I still felt it was all Mary Jane's fault. ♦

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Railroads of Old

Julia McMillie

My memories of railroads throughout my lifetime are many and pleasant. They begin at five years old. My family and I went on a train trip all the way across Nebraska on a passenger train. I never forgot my experience. Nebraska is an elongated state, east to west, a total of 400 miles, and we began our trip at our hometown of Seward, which lies along the Missouri River on the far eastern border. Our trip ended six miles from the western border of Nebraska, 30 hours later.

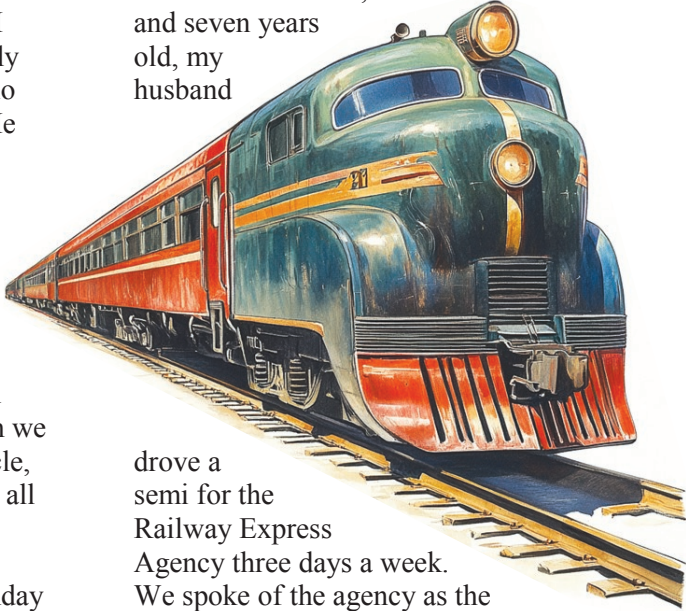
I close my eyes and recall the sights, sounds, and smells of that trip. Oh, how I loved the velvet-covered seats that slightly reclined and the pleasant black porter who helped rein in my two siblings and me. He helped us into our bunks that night and showed us how to operate the curtains between my sister and me, and our mom and little brother. He showed us the bathroom and how to navigate from one car to another as we bridged the time gap across the state. I have no recollection of a dining car, although I'm certain there would have been one. When we finally arrived at our destination (our uncle, aunt and cousins' house) Mother gave us all baths to rid us of the detested light gray smoke film.

In my childhood, my mother spent Sunday afternoons writing letters to her family, and we took them to the railroad depot six blocks away for mailing. It seems odd today to mail letters at a depot! I enjoyed those walks with her.

My sister and I took our four granddaughters on a train trip when they were elementary-school age. We chose the railroad between Antonito, Colorado, and Chama, New Mexico. It had an eight-hour ride with a stop at a mountain pass halfway between the two depots for lunch while the train filled with water and coal. The girls standing on the grass at the edge of the tracks were showered with steam as the engine released built-up steam at our rest stop. We rode in an open-air car with

verandas at each end for those who enjoyed the outdoor observation experience. Each granddaughter wore a light-blue denim hat with a big sunflower on the front of it, for identification. They ranged in age from five to 11. We had planned this trip for months and it did not disappoint us. We stayed two nights in a hotel, before and after the train ride, and I recall granddaughter Amanda ordering nothing but pancakes for every meal.

Early in my first marriage, when my children were three, five and seven years old, my husband



drove a semi for the Railway Express Agency three days a week. We spoke of the agency as the "REA." The television show *The Beverly Hillbillies* opened with a Railway Express Agency semi in the background. My children lived for the moment they saw "daddy's truck" on TV. They called the show "The Heverly Bills" and it became a Friday night staple in our household. We still speak of it today using the vernacular.

My older son Chip learned to spell the word "ready" in first grade, and he taught his younger siblings. At night, each child would put on their pajamas, wash their little hands and faces, brush their teeth, and climb into bed, yelling "Mom! R-E-A-D-Y" which meant they were ready for me to come to their bedsides, read a book, say our prayers

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and kiss and hug goodnight. They felt extremely clever for spelling out a word with dad's truck in it. REA, a great employer, provided my husband with a good salary. Our connection with the railroad hub in Alliance was a good one.

When Chip was ready for Cub Scouts, about 1967, I took on his troop as leader. We did various activities, including field trips, and one took us to the roundhouse at the Alliance railroad station. We walked throughout the roundhouse looking at the engines in various stages of repair, then came to a distant location with an enormous engine sitting all alone in it. This engine had a huge two-faced shovel attached to the front. Our guide explained how engines like this one worked during snowstorms to clear the train tracks of snow. This one hadn't been in use since the Blizzard of '49, when a three-month-long blizzard in the late months of 1949 and early months of 1950 hit and left people stranded and starving.

My friend Harriet tells about going to the local railroad station with her grandpa when she was young. They watched the passengers arrive and depart, each dressed to the nines, men wearing three-piece suits and hats, women wearing suits, hose, hats and gloves. It is a whole different ballgame these days. Jeans and T-shirts are the norm for men and women. Everyone rode the train back in the days. Few do now. Amtrak is the only passenger service we have here in the United States and it is under-staffed, under-maintained, and usually off schedule.

My grandma told me a funny story years ago: once upon a time a man traveling alone in a railroad car watched a young mother with six children come aboard the car. As they piled into the seats, he said, "What a nice group of children. Is this a Sunday school picnic?"

The bedraggled mother looked at him with disgust. "No, sir. These are all my children, and believe me, this is no picnic."

Today's railroads are impersonal, used for big business only, and a vital part of our economy. Our country would be in big trouble if it were not for the railroads and what they do to transport our goods from shore to shore, east to west and north to south. I wish everyone had my pleasant experiences of traveling on trains to sustain them as they age. ♦

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One Room Country School Teacher

One bright October morning in 1927, I rode over the hills on the trail through the sagebrush to the little Cottonwood Schoolhouse. Entering that little schoolroom fulfilled a dream I'd had since I was 6 years old. I became the new Cottonwood school teacher! Seven children came eagerly, wondering what I would be like. Their former teacher had been called by her first name, so I felt I should as well. They weren't long in nicknaming me "Florie," to which I objected, and they soon forgot it.

One-room country schools had been my education for the first eight years of my school life. Even though I had just graduated from high school, I felt confident to teach the different grades, except for my little first grader. He and I worked together and little Joey eventually learned to read and count.

Their parents came from Europe—Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The children spoke good English and their parents' native language. They found it fun to teach me words!

Each morning we sang from our song books—patriotic songs, and those written by Stephen Foster. I taught them hymns, which they enjoyed singing. I disposed of the tattered, worn out flag on the wall privately, as the flag etiquette book suggested. We heard of a plan for schools to earn their own flag and the children were soon selling pencils all over the neighborhood. When our new flag arrived, we had a special patriotic program on Washington's birthday. How proud we were!

A teacher's dream classroom would look nothing like mine. Long planks ran along the two walls, supported by huge stumps of trees. These were the seating for the bystanders, at school or a dance being held on a Saturday night. They had boarded up the lower windows to avoid glass breakage as those seated leaned back. A huge, high, clumsy table stood across the front of the room behind the teacher's desk. A mixture of oil and dust blackened the floor.

It wasn't long before a plan formed in my mind. I knew it would have to be carried out gradually so as not to antagonize the community. Little by little, one step at a time, things changed. The boards came off the windows, and the planks lay neatly piled along the outside of the building. I don't remember what became of the huge stumps, but they disappeared. I moved the crude table into the adjoining room built on for my apartment. We replaced the cracked and chipped windowpanes with new ones and the windows washed sparkling clean. We scraped and sanded the carvings of many years on the desks and applied a shiny coat of varnish. I scrubbed the floor to its natural wood color.

The next step was to write notes to the

parents, suggesting a fresh paint job. They had a tremendous response. They gathered over the weekend and not only painted the schoolhouse inside and outside, but built a bookcase and a bench for our lunch pails and wash basin. What a joyful surprise awaited me the following Monday morning! The children felt delighted and so proud of their "new" school. My mother surprised us with pretty curtains for the windows. She and I had an extensive flower garden with many varieties of flowers. From this I kept fresh bouquets on my desk. When the county superintendent visited our school, she exclaimed, "Your school room looks so sweet and clean!"

On the Fourth of July, we had a large neighborhood picnic on Elkhead Creek. Someone suggested having a dance at Cottonwood School that night. As the idea grew, I felt I shouldn't interfere, except to ask a mother to go to the school and take down the curtains. The next morning I did not arrive at school at the usual time, but waited until the children would be coming. Together we surveyed the damage—broken desks lying in the yard, and inside a terrible odor and filth. We all pitched in and by noon could begin classes. I sent an expensive order to the school district for new desks. Never again during the three years I taught there was there any mention of a dance being held.

My pupils were appreciative of anything I did for them. They loved art and were excited when I brought new materials. They often remained after school to help clean blackboards and sweep the floor. Several would ride my horse and we all went down the lane together, and then our separate ways. I visited their homes and got acquainted with the families.

In the spring, we planted a wild cucumber seed outside a window. We each carried our drinking water to school, which had no well. We poured every leftover drop on that wild cucumber vine. And did it grow! Each day it grew an amazing six inches farther up the wire!

The first book I read to them for opening exercises was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The little slave girl Topsy often exclaimed to her mistress, "Laws, Misses!" One day, as Steven and Andrew rounded the corner of the schoolhouse on their way home, Andrew, just for fun, punched Steve in the nose. Instantly the blood spurted out, and I

rushed to his aid. Andrew looked at me seriously and said, "Laws, Misses!"

I wanted to teach my pupils honesty. When I discovered Andrew had cheated, I kept him in at recess to talk to him. I told him it was best to be honest and tell the truth. His reply was, "If you tell the truth at home, you get a whippin'." I remembered my mother saying the same about her father. I hope I caused a child to tell a lie!

As I conducted a recitation, a loud crash broke the quietness and my eighth-grade girl lay on the floor amid the parts of her school desk. Steve's desk sat beside it and his brother cried out, "Steve, do something quick! Irene is suf-fer-ring!" At which we all, Irene included, burst out laughing! She picked herself up, we put the desk together, and school went on as usual.

We had a nice fenced yard where we enjoyed playing games. One morning as we came to school, an angry neighbor chasing his herd of cows out through the open gate met us. He began screaming and swearing at us (me in particular) for not closing the gate, thus allowing his cows to get into our school yard. We didn't know who had left that gate open, but knew the cows had damaged our playground!

Since we had a summer term of school, we sometimes walked the half mile down to Elkhead Creek. I bought each child a cotton swimsuit, and we had fun wading and paddling in the water. It was worth having no recesses and only 10 minutes at noon to eat our lunches, in order to finish recitations early.

We shared a set of encyclopedias with another school in the district and, after our turn, I needed to get the set to them. We saw the rural mail carrier coming up the road with his covered sled and team of horses. I, with all my pupils, carried the books to the road where he would be passing. I expected to pay the carrier to deliver them. The young man explained how regulations did not permit him to charge a fee, but he would do it as a personal favor. Five years went by before I saw him again, this time as the teacher of the adult Sunday School class at Lower Elkhead Church, which my parents and I were visiting. This same young man and I were married two years later.

I had observed in former years that teachers who taught the same school over three years often experienced unpleasant situations during their fourth year. I resigned at the end of my third year. That last day of school was a sad parting for all of us. ♦



Florence Fredrickson Welch

WYATTS COPPER STALLION

Nancy Heyl Ruskowsky

Buying and selling horses becomes a standard for successful business people in the horse industry, but unlike livestock, crop, or other agricultural-related endeavors, we seldom forget those horses as they fade into the dusty horizon. This is the story of one man who never forgot his horse and the horse who remembered just as well.

Wyatt Heyl's disability stole his capacity to ride and, later, his mobility, but nothing could alter his love of horses and training. After emphysema grounded him, Wyatt's mind remained full of one quarter horse stallion, Valienta Mio—dappled copper—racing through the pasture.

The broad-shouldered (but frail) five-foot-six-inch man and the well-bred quarter horse had a special relationship from the beginning. Wyatt transmitted his cues to the yearling by sense more than muscle. Val would only do his best for Wyatt. Even though his health deteriorated almost daily, Wyatt continued to handle Val. His whistle from the house brought the stallion to the pasture gate at a run. As Wyatt's wife held her

breath, Val waited patiently to be halted, then moved ever so quietly as Wyatt leaned on him for support.

Finally, the day arrived when his shortage of breath no longer let him walk to Val's corral. The rest of his family had moved miles away, so he put a price tag on his favorite horse. Much too quickly, a veterinarian from a distant community paid it. Bent over his cane, Wyatt stood at the kitchen window, pale blue eyes cloudy as he watched

Val streak across the pasture. The stallion almost slid into the pole fence before

spinning around in one fluid motion. Wyatt continued watching, his knuckles white against the cane as two men cornered the feisty animal. They halted Val, then led him into the trailer, rearing and pawing; not at all the standard of discipline Wyatt had set for him.

Months went by and Wyatt quit going to that kitchen window because

the empty pasture haunted him. He continued to listen for the morning nicker that sounded only inside his head, and time went on.

Over a year after Val's departure, Wyatt's children arrived from St. Louis. Despite his poor health, he'd promised to attend a family reunion with them in his old home town. It involved a long drive and a hard day, but on the way home, they passed through the area now home to Val.

"Dad, would you like to stop in and see him?" asked his daughter.

The flash of copper and streak of white mane colored a series of scenes across his mind, making Wyatt hungry for one more look at his old friend. The doctor wasn't home, but the housekeeper said, "Oh, yes, they've got a stallion out there in one of those pastures someplace. He's with a bunch of mares."

Wyatt's son-in-law helped him from the car, then stepped back. Wyatt walked slowly to the fence, stopping frequently to breathe. He propped his free hand propped against his knee as the cane steadied him. Wyatt gave a long whistle. At first he heard no response but on his third try, shorter and more shallow than it used to be, they heard the stallion's answering whinny, faint but firm. The sound of hoot beats, like distant brush strokes against canvas, grew in volume. A jet stream of dust ate up the pasture long before the pained blue eyes could see the

metallic flash. Val charged through the far gate, muscles rippling, bulging, nostrils flared, head high in search of his friend.

The family stood by the car, intruders on an intimate scene. Val pressed against the fence with his head over Wyatt's shoulder and Wyatt scratched his neck, right where he knew the stallion liked it best. Later, as the family headed down the road, Wyatt breathed heavily, his head twisted to hold the stallion's image; Val still pressed against the corral, head high, eyes searching.

Wyatt's disability robbed him in many ways, but nothing could take the picture of his trusted friend remembering his whistle. That image provided the peaceful scene that carried his mind through the many painful months ahead. ♦



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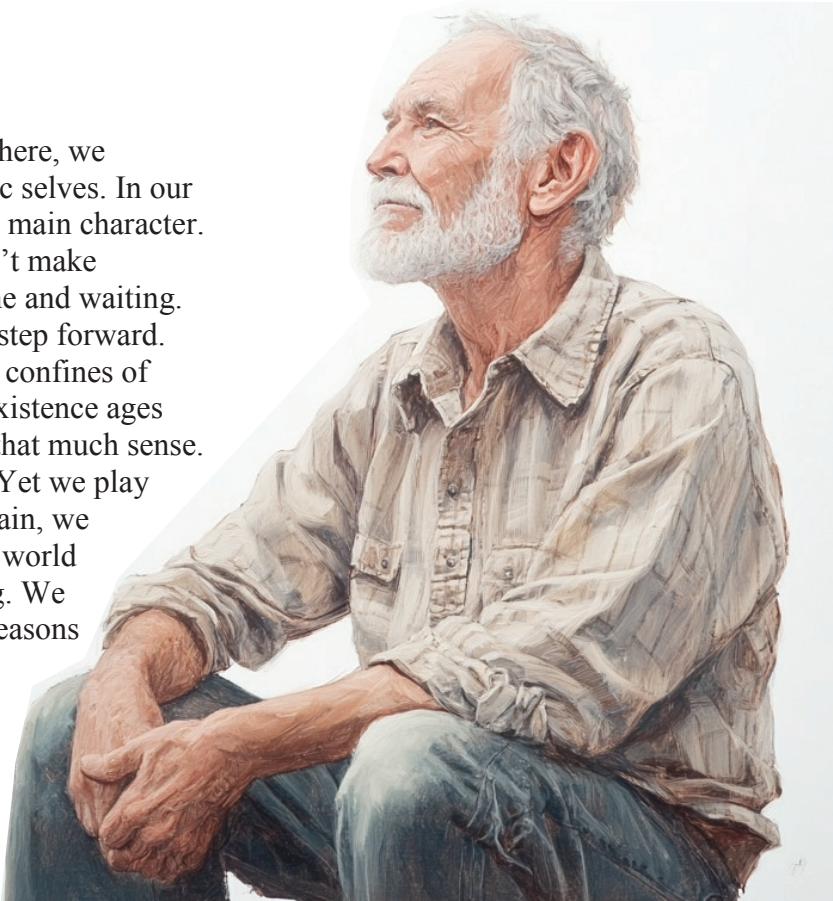
More and more often these days, I can catch myself when I'm being mean or saying something out of anger. For example, "You need to look at the positives rather than focusing on a couple of negatives." Then I think somebody actually needed to hear that, turn inward and direct it to the individual that *really* had to hear it: me. I pause. Rediscover gentleness in my approach with others and myself. I remind myself to breathe, close my eyes, and imagine great things. I change the story into something positive and incorporate those thoughts into my being. Where there

within. When we look in there, we discover our true, authentic selves. In our lives, each one of us is the main character. The leading role. You don't make progress by standing in line and waiting. It's made when we take a step forward.

We often live within the confines of storylines we wrote into existence ages ago. They don't make all that much sense. Our pain is self-imposed. Yet we play the role. Over and over again, we play the role. We live in a world that is constantly changing. We have no control over the seasons or when the day lengthens or shortens. Yet we deny the natural progression of changing ourselves. The stories we tell ourselves can save or destroy us. We can stop giving power to the negativity. Stop paying attention. Change the channel and tune into another frequency. Those people that annoyed you or situations that consistently brought you down? They take up less space in your life or fall away completely. We own the copyright to design our lives as we see fit.

If life here on earth was already perfect, we would never strive for anything else. Something better. Something we already own within. When we cast a new spell with our words and thoughts, beautiful moments and incredible experiences become the norm. When we treat ourselves well and with respect, we naturally treat others the same. We radiate joy, happiness, and love. Like attracts like. Reflections become purer. Lovely and interesting individuals enter your life all the time.

Our life is a message gifted to the world. Make it a good one. You alone can change



the characters and the plot. Start writing a chapter you're really going to enjoy. What seems impossible today becomes possible tomorrow. Is it going to happen one day? Or is today going to be day one? ♦

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ceases to be a problem, there is no longer a solution to seek. I vibrate higher.

As we move along, we notice other people and things in our external environments. Much of it is beautiful and inspiring. Other parts are destructive, irritating, or painful. The people in our lives and the situations we encounter are often reflections of our inner being. Chances to tackle our own shadows. In all the people that cross my path, I often see myself in bits and pieces. Maybe part of my past. Possibly a glimpse into the future. Or a replica of the here and now.

Noticing the blind spots in others and understanding how those unappealing traits act as a mirror for our own fault lines allow us to take some of the first baby steps. Steps in changing the only person we can change: ourselves. The journey begins

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The Great Frogger

Nightfall. As I lay in bed, a smile came over my face to hear distant thunder and crackling of lightning, followed by the peaceful sound of a soft rain. My plans were finally developing. I'd heard fishermen used frogs for bait and intended to sell them some and get rich. Tomorrow, the ditches would be full of water and the frogs would be out in vast numbers!

What a wonderful, fresh smelling morning! I donned my holey tee shirt and my britches with one torn pocket and threadbare knees. These were my favorite duds, and I had to be sure to avoid Mom because she would make me go back upstairs and change. We weren't poor, but I seemed to always look like it, if I got the chance. After all, these were my most comfortable clothes and just right for frog hunting.

I glanced out my bedroom window to see Mom hanging wash on the line. Racing down the staircase and down into the basement to snatch a gunny sack, I sprinted to the kitchen, where I gulped down a bowl of my favorite cereal, Cocoa Puffs. I swear I kept General Mills in business! Afterward, I felt full of energy, which is a must for great hunters. I ran out the front door and bounded down the porch steps, never alerting my mom to my presence.

As I approached the road ditches, I could hear the frogs croaking. Yup, I was right! The ditches were plush with grass along the edges and water in the bottom. I stopped to roll up my pant legs. I was in business!

Stealthily, I sneaked up on my first victim. Somehow, he saw me coming and plopped into the water. I still pursued him, as great hunters do, slipping on the grass, right into the water. The back of my britches were wet, but I figured they'd dry before I got home. The frog jumped three times before I caught



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him. Into the gunny sack he went. Those little guys are pretty slick, but before long I had twenty-five frogs, and deemed it enough for now. If need be, I could catch more later.

On my walk home, I found my precious frogs were kind of heavy in the

gunnysack. I finally made it and put the tied sack on the grass while I ran a little water into a wooden barrel cut in half. Then I put a couple of big rocks on the bottom and dumped in the frogs. A piece of old screen went on top. I stood there, fascinated, while I watched my prizes. I would sell them tomorrow. My first customer would be my neighbor, as I knew he loved to fish. He was a nice man and would be happy to see that someone had frogs for him to buy. I would sell them for five cents apiece and get rich!

The next morning, I walked out to visit my frogs. Boy, they were just so cute and happy when I put some bugs I had captured in their barrel for breakfast. Guess I'll let them fatten up and sell them tomorrow.

I wandered over to the neighbor man's place and inquired if he might be interested in buying some frogs for five cents apiece? He was interested and said he'd like ten of them. I said I'd bring them by tomorrow.

Morning came, and I went out to look at the frogs. They were still so cute and croaked so prettily. Thoughts of them being on a fish hook entered my mind. I stood there awhile, pondering if selling them was the right thing to do. I lifted the screen off and reached in to take the big rocks out, scaring the frogs into a frenzy of wild jumping. When I tipped the barrel over, out they hopped onto the green grass and off into the field. There went all my wealth, but I didn't care.

The great frogger, isn't so great. She liked her quarry more than money and will never get rich off of frogs! ♦



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The Wee One

Shirley Howington

"So ye say you got a wee bit of the Irish in you?" the little guy asked.

I answered, "I do."

"And when St. Patty's Day comes around, you get out your green?"

"Yes."

"And ye drink green beer?"

"Of course."

"Then why in the world don't ye believe in me?" he hollered.

I sighed. "Because you're a figment of my imagination."

"A figment of your imagination, doggoned it!" the little guy retorted and jumped off my shoulder. He stormed into my living room and kicked my dog's ball. To his surprise, he couldn't budge it. Instead, he fell to the floor with a soft thud and a low moan. The little fellow lay motionless on the floor. This was a lot of commotion for a figment of my imagination. But leprechauns are folklore. Right? At all of three or four inches tall, how he thought he could kick my dog Mandy's big 10-inch ball is beyond me. Every stitch on him was green, right down to his top hat with a black band and a gold shamrock in the middle, and his green shoes with gold buckles. After another low moan, he moved. "Did ye put rocks in your dog's ball? I should have been able to kick it!"



"No, I didn't put rocks in my dog's ball. You're not even real, so that's why you couldn't kick it," I answered.

"Oh, fiddlesticks. I'm as real a leprechaun as they come. I can dance an Irish jig; make shoes; play tricks on those that doubt me; and I even have a pot of gold," he indignantly replied.

"You pretending to be real is trick enough for me."

"There ye go again, saying I'm not real. Watch this." The little fellow did an Irish jig. He looked cute as he danced around. "So, what do ye think of that?" he asked.

"Very impressive, but you're still not real." I answered.

"Alright, ye doubter ye. Watch this. I am going to make a pair of shoes. They will be tiny, as I can only make shoes for fellow leprechauns." He made a very nice pair of tiny shoes using a wee hammer, table, leather,

and string. "How do ye like these?" he asked.

"They are very nice, but I still don't believe you are real."

"What must I do for ye to believe I am real?"

"You said you have a pot of gold. Give me one gold coin and I will trust that you are real."

"That will be difficult as I cannot let ye know

Prairie Parson

A Lesson From Mud

I've always thought one ranch dog is enough, especially when he is built like a Mac truck, with a bark that scares the living daylight out of folk. But my wife has a soft spot for strays, so one day she brought home Mud.

Boy, I sure have done some prayin' over that dog. He gets into everything. You tell him "No," and he translates it as "Yes." If there's any cussed old thing to do, he'll do it.

It got so bad last week as I stood starin' in disbelief of the mess he'd made of the chicken coup I was workin' on, that for one blessed moment I thought about grabbin' that dog by the dern scruff of his neck, putting 'im in the truck, and drivin' him to the shelter. I threw down my gloves and aimed to do just that... and darned if the Lord didn't speak to me.

As usual, it was through my wife. She stuck her head out the kitchen door and shouted, "JIM, DON'T YOU DARE LAY A HAND ON THAT DOG! HE STAYS!" Comin' down the porch steps, she added, "You gotta have patience with that dog."

"Darlin'," I said, "so far he has torn up my new wire fence, dug up all your flowerbeds, chased the horses plum near down to the crick, and spent half the night barkin' at coons."

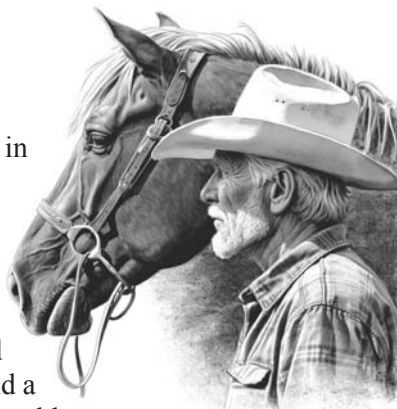
She put her hand on my shoulder, and gave me one of her big ole smiles. "You gotta look at 'im like Jep," she says.

That set me back a piece. Come to think of it, there is a bit of a resemblance.

Jep has been knocked around the block a few times. He's a mean old cuss with half an ear

missin' (lost in 'Nam), a vocabulary that would make a sailor blush (also learned in 'Nam), and a stench that would knock a bull flat. His idea of bathin' is to splash a little water on top of the grime, once a week. He comes to church twice a year: Easter 'n' Christmas. Last Easter, he sidled up to me, pickin' at the patch in his overalls, and said, "Preacher, I asked the Lord into my heart."

Everyone got excited. They expected to see 'im comin' to church more, and clean up his language, and stop bein' a mean old cuss that yells at the kids who tramp through his ditch on their way home from school. I 'spect they even



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where me pot of gold is or even let ye see it."

"That figures. I knew you weren't real." I walked away and chalked the experience up to my imagination. That night I felt something on my pillow but saw nothing. The next morning when I awoke, a tiny gold coin lay on my pillowslip with a wee note. It said, "I'm real." ♦

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hoped his newfound faith'd improve his smell. They were disappointed. Jep still don't come to church, though I see him regular. He still turns the air blue, though he does it less when I'm around. And he smells. But that don't matter.

Some would say it "didn't take," but I know different. I've seen the Lord do big things in people's lives right off... and, I've seen Him not do much for awhile. Doesn't mean it didn't take; just means God has a slower, different path for Jep. He's changing' but it ain't obvious unless you're lovin' on and lookin' 'im in the eye. He don't get that fierce glare he used to, even though he still loses his temper. He's stopped yellin' at the kids when they splash in his ditch. Don't seem like much but it's a start.

Sometimes, when you turn yer life over to the Lord, things don't change a whole lot all at once on the outside, but that's coz He's tearin' us apart on the inside and doin' some "heart remodeling" first. Fer some of us, all that's wrong is our outside. Fer others, He's gotta clean us up inside first.

I decided to love on Mud, the way I love on Jep... by bein' his friend no matter what he smells like. He'll make progress too, if I take the time to work with 'im a bit. If the Lord does it with me, it's the least I can do. ♦

Poverty Starts in Your Head

Jim Bunting

“You grow your own potatoes? You must be nuts. They’re only a few cents a pound at the store!”

Growing most of your own food is very unfashionable, but wow, can you get nicer meals? For most people, “nicer meals” are something they do on special occasions. Only the French apparently think food is important enough to spend effort making it “nice.” We Americans are just too poor (or too busy) to have “nice meals.”

The reason most Americans are poor is that they don’t think they earn enough money. At least, that’s the current theory of poverty. Working for yourself saves much of the expense of employment, besides offering more satisfaction in your achievements. You accept that you’ll spend more hours to achieve your standard of living, but when you’re enjoying life, who cares?

We self-employed think of ourselves as pretty independent. Just because our cash flow falls below some government figure that they call the “poverty level” doesn’t mean we have to be poor. Nor does it mean we feel cold, underfed, or downtrodden. Quite the reverse, we feel happy, comfortable and confident.

So how does it happen that people with little money can be so sure of themselves? Why, we work, we think and we consider the plight of those really downtrodden people who have no self-confidence or money, and we thank God for our blessings. For instance, when husband and wife both go to an employer, they probably need two cars. With children, they’ll need paid caretakers, and will end up spending much more giving the kids entertainment (and toys). The workers also have to shop in the evening, and go at crowded times to the parks, beaches and theaters. Children without their mother are less disciplined, so they behave less well—break things, demand things. You don’t need “things” when the children are comfortable and happy with their parents. Few schools are attacked by kids whose mothers stay home.

We have always lived in old houses. The earliest one was built in 1550. It had two feet thick stone walls with stone floors and roofing. It had the advantage of

having many people live in it who looked at the problems of heat and cold, and had land attached. There wasn’t any electric wiring, no piped gas, and water comes from a pump. There wasn’t a dishwasher (except Dad and the kids), lights were gas, or kerosene, and we cooked on a solid fuel stove. So fuel, from that scoot of land at least, was free. One improvement we would have liked to add was solar electricity. When we lived there, the technology was too new to be affordable. Today, “photovoltaic” systems can generate electricity for less than the cost of having Excel bring you the wiring. It’s free to use, the price doesn’t go up and your power outages are very rare.

Another house we lived in was nearly new, built in 1920. The walls had no insulation; the timbers weren’t too well seasoned, the windows leaked, and it had a front door leading directly into the living room. One way we reduced heat loss involved filling plastic milk jugs with water and fitting them neatly into the walls between timbers.

“Oh, yes?” you say, “and how do you think these jugs survive frosts?”

That’s a secret we can pass on that must be worth a lot. Water expands and stretches a plastic jug. When the water warms and melts,

the jug will leak if the stretching cracked the hardened plastic, so we inserted a small, sealed plastic bag full of air and with a small stone inside into each one. When the water freezes, it squeezes the air in the bag, and the container doesn’t split. We insulated the entire house with water. It kept it cooler in summer and warmer in winter. It’s much cheaper than using fiberglass or even hay bales, unless you’re a farmer. Incidentally, glass jars work too, if they’ll fit in the walls.

It worked so well, we wore winter clothes inside all summer, taking them off to go outside. We solved the cold floor problem by wearing heavy, lamb-wool footwear. It’s really comfortable, and being leather, we re-soled it ourselves when needed. A visitor who came in the winter complained, “I guess if you keep the house at eighteen degrees, you use a

lot of calories keeping warm. That must explain how you’re all so slim.” We took the thought to heart and spent a lot of time preparing a book, *Slim the Cool-Fast Way*, but finally decided it would not fly. Besides, we only had ourselves to measure.

The same tip about water cooling will make a cold frame in the yard that allows gardening to start earlier. For the old house we had, the vast yard made it easy for us to keep hens, a goat, and other food sources. Fresh eggs differ from the supermarket and you can eat them raw. Store-bought eggs can (and sometimes do) carry salmonella bacteria. Pretty dangerous infection for the unwary, so most of us never take a raw egg. But your own? We’ve eaten them for decades—hey make delicious eggnog, and cakes frosted with raw egg and sugar keep forever. We never worry about salmonella.

Our children have always had “chores” for entertainment, and learned skills at the same time. Some children have too much time on their hands. While playtime is good for kids, “the devil finds work for idle hands” is a sensible Victorian quote. We knew pretty intimately what our children thought, so they didn’t keep guns in their closets, or “weed” at school. We didn’t home school them, as some people do, but still felt close as a family, even in the teenage years. They grew up with self-esteem, plus an ability to stand up for their own (unusual) ideas. While most families usually have all the requirements for fighting poverty, it just takes the willpower to resist the peer pressure of those employers who want you to work for their profits, not your own. Farms probably are the least able to use our techniques because of the land taxes and government regulations on farming.

But beware the IRS, who argue that producing one’s own potatoes is “income.” ♦





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Take Some Time To Enjoy THESE BEAUTIFUL SPRING DAYS

Carol Mayer Guthmiller

As I write this, we are on the downside of corn planting. The end is very near, and that is a good feeling. At the very beginning, we encountered a snag. While changing the oil in the main tractor, my husband found antifreeze in it. We had a five-day delay before he got the tractor up and running. Along with success came a shift in much better attitudes. I welcome that. It makes my job easier, whatever my job is. There isn't a name for it, really. And if there was a name for it, no one would believe it anyway, so it is best to leave well enough alone.

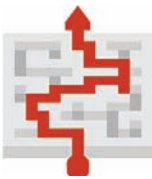
It is a Sunday morning. I am out on the deck "bird watching" before the day begins. I hear woodpeckers boring holes in trees, a pheasant give its call, and a kill deer fly overhead, giving us its "kill-deer" message. A meadow lark sings its bright song, a crow gives its earthy "caw," and a duck near our dam quacks in the distance. I cannot identify all the bird songs I hear with a name, but morning out here is a regular symphony of bird calls. I rarely take the time to be a part of it. As a matter of fact, I think that will be my Mother's Day present to myself: sit out here on the deck and enjoy the sights and sounds of nature.

Bright little yellow finches with black markings have found my bird feeder. How in the world they know where a feeder is hanging is truly a mystery. I enjoy watching their antics in their pursuit



of food. They don't sit still very long. A Yellow-Shafted Flicker appeared on the ground under the feeder. His markings were so distinct: a black bib, a small red mark on the back of his head, and a mean-looking beak.

Last evening I went for a walk while everyone was still in the fields. It was almost dark. We had been to a funeral that afternoon. I hate funerals of any kind. They certainly disrupt the flow of life for everyone, but they make us stop and look at our own lives, and give us a better perspective on our whereabouts. Walking or being outside is a therapy for losses of any kind. The fresh air and exercise felt good; the quiet stillness about the evening had a calming effect. In the distance hummed tractors in the fields. When I looked up, the stars were sprinkled here and there in the sky. What an awesome sight. There is a beautiful stillness and peacefulness in the early morning and early darkness out here that gives a calming effect to one's mind, body, and soul. We are truly blessed, if we can only take the time to notice. ♦



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Suzan L. Wiener

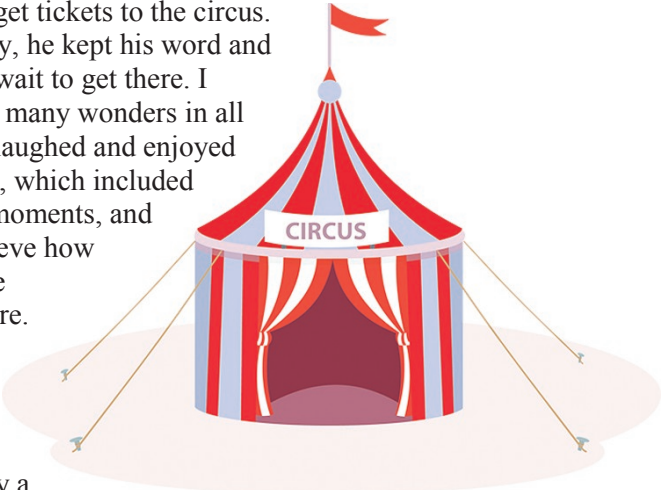
When I was ten years old, the circus came to town. Our teacher announced it, and all the kids were excited about it, and talking a mile a minute about how great it would be. No one paid any attention to our teacher after that, but she didn't mind.

I felt too nervous to take the day off from school and attend. Myself and a few other kids didn't go to the circus the next day, and we wound up reading a book. I felt annoyed at myself because my parents were eager to take me. I think they wanted to enjoy it as well.

Many years later, I mentioned this to my husband, Howie, and he promised to get tickets to the circus. That Saturday, he kept his word and we couldn't wait to get there. I never saw so many wonders in all my life. We laughed and enjoyed the sideshow, which included a few scary moments, and couldn't believe how enormous the elephants were. We even fed them peanuts which they seem to enjoy a lot. Howie fell in love with them, and one of them, Pete, seemed to reciprocate his feelings. Pete kept pressing his nose near Howie's chest. This seemed terrific until he sneezed and spewed peanut shells and mucus all over Howie. Everyone burst out laughing, including my husband.

Howie said, "Next time I come to the circus, I'll wear a bib!"

If ever the circus makes a return, Howie and I will be in the audience! ♦



Jake, Dawn of a Summer Day

Gallump, swish, plop. The rubber boots spoke softly to the dew-wet grass and weeds growing beside the ditch bank as a tall, lean man strode purposefully along. He wore a battered tan straw hat with dark irregular sweat-stained lines creeping above the headband, his shovel balanced on his shoulder.

Quickly, the determined man looked ahead as if hoping to outdistance the newly freed water in the ditch, which tumbled ahead, hoping to outdistance the man. Too late! With an inverted shovel, the man quickly sealed the edges of a canvas dam to the sides and bottom of the ditch using damp earth. The water pooled around his boots, its headlong rush slowed by the barrier in its path. The water sought to find its way over the top of the dam. Without delay, the man stooped and began coaxing water into many curved metal tubes. Soon the water trickled down miniature ditches through a rustling forest of corn plants.

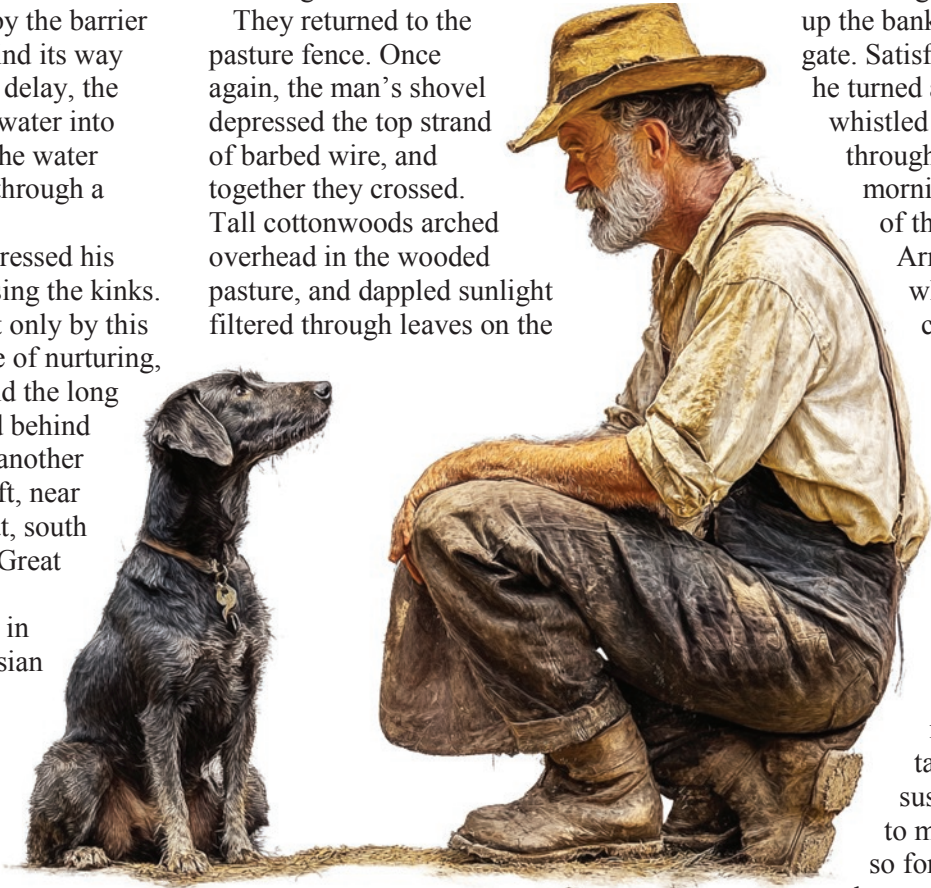
The man straightened up and pressed his hand to the small of his back, easing the kinks. He felt connected to farming, not only by this moment's work, but by a lifetime of nurturing, planting, and harvesting crops and the long chain of ancestors, who stretched behind him across the ocean and across another continent to a village named Kraft, near the Volga River. (And before that, south to a Germany that Catherine the Great influenced when she invited her countrymen to make their homes in Russia, while wedded to the Russian Emperor Peter.)

Swinging the shovel to his shoulder, the man retraced his steps. A white tail waved rhythmically above the hay in the adjoining field. For a moment, a sensitive pink nose emerged, sniffing the air to check the man's progress. Bounding eagerly, the dog nimbly leaped the ditch to join his master. Moving at a leisurely pace, the man checked the flow rate of each tube, adjusting those that flowed too slowly with a gentle nudge of his boot or a quick thrust of his shovel into the shallow

waterway of a row. The dog came up from a clump of weeds and rushed to catch up as the man strolled at an even pace, checking the ditch bank for weakness with his practiced eye.

Man and dog reached the pasture fence. His shovel pierced the earth as he depressed the top strand of barbed wire, and swinging first one long leg and then the other, crossed over the fence. The dog crouched down and scrambled beneath it. The dog sometimes spurted ahead, then raced or lagged to sniff out a tantalizing odor issuing from a clump of weeds. He rushed up again to catch up with the man still checking ditches.

They returned to the pasture fence. Once again, the man's shovel depressed the top strand of barbed wire, and together they crossed. Tall cottonwoods arched overhead in the wooded pasture, and dappled sunlight filtered through leaves on the



gnarled branches. An owl peered sleepily down from his high perch in one tree, while other birds chirped and cooed as they flitted about, busy with their own affairs. Solemn-eyed cows stopped their grazing to watch the progress. Even some curious calves took a few tentative steps in their direction until warnings

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from their mothers stopped them.

Crossing a second fence, the man clambered up the bank of the main ditch to check the head gate. Satisfied with the reading on the gauge, he turned and ambled toward home. He whistled an old German tune as he walked through the cool, clean air of the early morning. He savored the dawning beauty of this day and the promise it held.

Arriving at the kitchen door, his whistling stopped abruptly. He concentrated on stamping the remaining mud from the soles of his boots and sat down on the step to pull them off. The dog flopped on the grass nearby, rolling from side to side a time or two to dry his damp fur as he basked in the warmth of the sun, content with his morning excursion.

The man heard a faint clatter of dishes, unlike the noisy bustle of his boyhood home. There, ten or more people crowded around the table for the hearty meals needed to sustain them as they labored together to make a place for themselves in a land so foreign to their parents. The rich brown aroma of coffee drifted temptingly through the open window.

Ravenous, he opened the screen door and padded softly into the kitchen in his stocking feet. "Did you just get up?" he teased his wife. "The day's half over, and you have already missed the best part. Is breakfast ready?" ♦

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DAYS GONE BY

Barbara Hoffinan

“Now tell me, Harry, what happened?” The school nurse, Miss Barnes, stared at the twelve-year-old boy sitting at the far end of her office.

1940 neared the end of the Depression, but most families were still struggling. They welcomed any extra money. Harry’s contribution was to work and maintain a trap line.

The young lad began his story. “Dad and Mom had already left for work. Do you know that traps have to be looked at every day?”

Taking a quick breath, the nurse responded, “No, I didn’t, but go on with your story.”

“Well, as soon as Pug—that’s my dog—sees me put on my jacket, he knows it’s time. So he’s gone. He really takes off as soon as I open the door.” Harry nervously looked over at the nurse, shifted his weight on the chair, then thought, *I’m in real trouble*. He continued. “Pug, he runs way ahead of me. If I see him just make one circle ‘round the burrow and go on, I know there’s nothing there. Those burrows can be twelve inches across or they

can be much bigger. They’ve always got a lot of dirt pushed out when the animal digs the hole. Did you know muskrat pelts bring the best price?”

“Harry,” Miss Barnes spoke impatiently now, “what happened?”

“As I was saying,” sighed the boy, “I know there’s nothing caught in a trap when Pug runs around it and goes on to the next one. You gotta put the trap way back in the hole, so I always stop and look to make sure it hasn’t sprung. Pug, he’s circled every hole until the very last one. He stopped, he’s peeking in, then he kind of whimpered and began rubbing his snout on the

ground. There wasn’t much to rub his nose on, being winter and all. It’s pretty cold too. Hard on that old nose. What’s in that hole? I thought. So I got close as I could and looked in. When, darn, I got blasted real good by that



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skunk! Pug and me went home. I tried to clean myself up. Washed my hands and my neck. Even put on a clean shirt. I couldn’t change my jacket, being my only one. I guess it did little to take away the stink, huh?”

Miss Barnes lowered her chin and shook her head.

“That’s why all the kids walked away. No one would sit with me today. They made me go way to the back of the bus. Am I being expelled?”

“No, of course not. But I made arrangements to take you home. A driver has volunteered to transport you on one of the smaller buses. And Harry...”

“Yes, Miss Barnes?”

“Sit in the back.” ♦

Green Leaves

George Rice

As a small boy, I spent long hours during the summers gazing up at hawks soaring under billowing clouds in clean blue skies, at vast expanses of rolling prairie, herds of cattle, and fields of ripening grain. I yearned to draw, so I could preserve those fleeting images my mind’s eye saw, and be able to recall those wonderful things any time I wanted to. One day in the third grade, the teacher said, “Today we’re going to draw and color.”

I frantically opened my crayons, took out my tablet, and began drawing and coloring all sorts of things my mind’s eye recalled.

“Stop that,” the teacher said. “I haven’t given you instruction yet.”

I put away my crayons and watched while she drew a flower with a stem and two leaves. Then we all drew flowers with stems and two leaves. When we could all draw flowers that looked like hers, she showed us how to color them. She colored her flower red, and the stem and two leaves green. I colored my flower yellow with brown leaves, remembering how the marigolds looked in the fall.

The teacher scolded me, “Didn’t I show you to make the flower red, and the stem and leaves green? You should do as you’re told, young man.”

I wanted to please her, so I drew a flower with five petals, a stem and two leaves. I colored the flower red and the stem and leaves green. Then we could all color inside the lines, and make red flowers with green stems and

green leaves just like hers, and she was very pleased.

But I was still a young boy and the next summer I spent long hours gazing up at hawks soaring under billowing clouds in clean blue skies, at vast expanses of rolling prairie, herds of cattle, and fields of ripening grain. And I still yearned to draw, so I could be able to recall those wonderful things any time I wanted to.



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Then it was fall, and time for school again, and one day my new teacher said, “Today we’re going to draw and color.”

I waited for her to show us what to draw.

“Well, go ahead, draw something,” she said, smiling. “Take out your crayons and color something. Anything you want to. Anything at all.” She

was nice, and I wanted to please her. So I took out my crayons and drew a flower with five petals and colored it red with a green stem and two green leaves. ♦

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Kitty!

We all have certain habits people don't like. For me, it's my tendency to exclaim in a loving voice "Kitty!" every time I see a cat. My kids told me to stop doing this, because it scares the cat. This has rarely happened and only a couple of cats reacted with surprise when I did this around them. I am not trying to scare them; I only do this because I love cats so much and I enjoy seeing them.

While I continued to do this without the cats being frightened, my kids persisted in telling me to stop. They put up with it, but one time this habit actually helped someone, without scaring any cats.

I used to work as a Direct Support Professional. I supported individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Because of my deafness, there were only so many individuals I could support. I worked at one program in a duplex, but kept to my side of it. One morning, I entered to find a couple

of my coworkers chatting. Not wanting to interrupt them, I glanced out the window and said, "Kitty!"

"Where?" demanded one of them.

I pointed out the window to the cat outside. She ran outside to retrieve it, while her friend said the person living on the other side of our duplex had lost her cat when it slipped out an open door. "That's her cat," she said.

I gasped in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes," she said, nodding.

I grinned, happy not only had my "bad habit" done good for someone, but the cat and owner were now reunited. ♦

Dawn Colclasure



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Nancy Fischer

From Failure to Fabulous

My Modern-Day Sourdough Saga

I watched the videos over and over and over. I bought the cookbook, the special razor called a lame, the ancient starter from places far away, the special flour, the special basket to raise it in, all these tools that will bring me the crispy, yet fluffy, tangy, gut healthy loaf of sourdough bread. Yet it would not happen.

During Covid, when stuck at home all of the time like many of my peers, I started a batch of sourdough starter. For over a year, I fed it, talked to it, and kept it warm. In return, it treated us to delightful sourdough foods. There were waffles, pancakes, crackers, pizza crust, rolls, and the lovely loaf of crusty bread filled with those trademark holes of goodness.

Once I went back to work, my starter went in the back of the fridge and didn't survive the move we made a year later. After getting settled in the new place, a dear friend gifted me some of her thirty-year-old Alaskan sourdough starter. I felt so excited to begin my sourdough journey again. We had missed that tangy taste to our bread items.

After several tries following all of the directions, I had yet to get a good loaf. The discard made tasty waffles and brownies and even granola, but every loaf failed. They would not rise. It had a fine taste and an okay texture, but none of them made that beautiful crusty loaf we longed for.

I consulted the internet. I bombarded my friend with questions. Her breads from the same starter were magnificent. Why did mine refuse to cooperate? I felt at my wit's end. Finally, I had a long talk with Angeline, my starter. I asked her what she wanted to be happy. She "told" me she felt cold. I moved her to a warm spot at the back of my stovetop and, like magic, she tripled in size in just over an hour. Now we are back to baking those divine loaves and filling the house with that wonderful aroma of homemade bread. ♦

Mid-Point of the 2025 Legislative Session: The GOOD, the BAD, & the UGLY

It is an honor to serve the citizens of Elbert, Lincoln, Kit Carson, and Cheyenne Counties, as well as the rural eastern areas of El Paso, Arapahoe, and Lincoln. With approximately half of the 120-day session now over, the legislature is in full swing. 465 bills and 38 resolutions have been introduced. Some good, some bad, and many ugly. If you treasure freedom and small government, the Gold Dome is a disturbing place to be. As Gideon John Tucker famously said, "No man's life, liberty, or property are safe while the legislature is in session."

Let's start with the UGLY—House Joint Resolution 6. Passed by the majority party after over five hours of debate, this resolution inaccurately labeled and slandered many Coloradans who took part peacefully and patriotically in the events of January 6, 2021, as

"Insurrectionists." No one has been charged, let alone convicted, with this. Yet, our current legislative majority—acting as judge and jury—maliciously defamed people innocent of this crime to pander to their extreme left base. This resolution sets a dangerous precedent for condemning individuals without due process, reinforcing a divisive and politically motivated narrative rather than seeking truth and unity.

The BAD? Well, if you are looking for a government focused on protecting your rights as individuals, do not look to those who control the Capitol. Senate Bill 003, which started as an assault weapons ban, has now morphed into a bill that requires undefined training, certification, and a requirement to ask permission of your local authorities to exercise your right to bear arms. This is an outright attack on the Second Amendment and creates bureaucratic barriers to lawful gun ownership.

House Bill 1133 restricts the purchase of ammunition for adults aged 18-21. You can sign contracts, own firearms, and even fight in our military—but the legislative majority doesn't trust you to buy ammunition. Soon we will hear a bill that requires even vendors who sell t-shirts at gun shows to be licensed, insured, and hold a Federal Firearms License. These efforts to strip individuals of their God-given rights are appalling, and they highlight the ongoing overreach of government into the lives of law-abiding citizens.

The GOOD? Yes, there is some. We are pulling some legislators over to our side—just

not enough at this point. Those of us in the minority have brought forward bills to increase the rural voice in CDOT planning, eliminate the cage-free egg laws that have contributed to high

costs, eliminate delivery fees, and repeal ridiculous bag fees. Unfortunately, all these bills were killed, but not without lengthy debate. However, there are signs of hope. Some majority legislators are coming around, and more and more often, we are seeing bipartisan opposition to some of the worst bills being proposed. The trend is moving in the right direction, and that is encouraging.

You can review and find the status of all bills at: <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills>. If you want to know more, please sign up for my weekly newsletter at: [Richardson-HD56.com](https://richardson-hd56.com) or reach out to me at:

Chris.Richardson.House@coleg.gov.

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Tiger

Wayne
Carlson

Of all the cats that have agreed to let my family share their house with them over the last forty years, Tiger was the best. He was special in so many ways.

My wife was the first to meet him at her friend's house. Liz was forever reprimanding a little kitten that insisted on climbing drapes and sharpening his claws on her couch. She often excused herself from her guests to peel him off some item of furniture. Two weeks later, Tiger had outlived his welcome. Either he or Liz had to go! Since Liz knew Carol was a cat person, she called and begged her to take the cat off her hands. When Carol and I went over to check him out, Tiger seemed to understand the possibilities of the situation. He climbed up on Carol's lap and purred and acted just like a politician the day before the election. It won us over, and we took him home to meet his new family.

He quickly became one of the family. He liked our four-year-old son Randy and absolutely adored Carol. Tiger adjusted his nap schedule to coincide with Randy's. His favorite napping location was wherever Randy was, snuggled as close to him as possible. He developed the habit of licking the back of Randy's head and neck as Randy slept, probably because it fulfilled his craving for salt. When Randy arose from his nap, he sported some rather unusual hair styles and had the cleanest neck in the neighborhood.

During Tiger's first summer with us, when he was six months old, he started feeling his male hormones and got into fights with the other cats in the neighborhood. He had an assortment of cuts and bruises and we worried about him, so we took him to the vet, who deprived him of his aggressiveness with a few snips of the scissors. Tiger's personality underwent a major transformation. He no

longer wanted to prowl the neighborhood, but felt content to hang around the house. His favorite spot was on our new deck. Tiger loved to lie on the picnic table or the floor of the deck, usually in the sun, and watch the goings on around the house and yard. Since our three active sons had lots of friends and playmates over, Tiger had a lot to watch. He had a healthy appetite, so he grew into the king of the household.

The second summer of Tiger's existence, we got a kitten! We called the new guy Sugar but when Randy said it, it sounded like "Booger," so after a while that became his name. He was a cute little blue point Siamese with crossed eyes that really complicated his life. He saw two of everything! Tiger became Booger's mentor. Everywhere he went and everything he did, Booger imitated it. Tiger's beautiful blonde tail became an item of fascination for his protégée. Booger loved to pounce on it, bite it and tease it. The

more Tiger twitched it in frustration, the more intriguing it became! The only times Tiger could relax and play his role as king were when Booger fell asleep.

One of the main things Tiger had to teach Booger was how to use the window in the utility room to enter and leave the house. We wanted the cats to have freedom during the summer months to come and go as they pleased, so we left it open a

crack. We positioned a bench next to the side of the house they could use to gain access to the window. From the bench to the window required a four-foot jump and the dexterity to grab the windowsill with the front paws, then the strength to pull and scramble up and through the window. For Tiger, this was a simple task, but for Booger and his double vision, it was more difficult. He was never sure which of the windows he saw was the right one. He fell to the deck a lot, but Tiger proved a patient teacher and Booger eventually mastered the skill.

The next task on Tiger's agenda for his young friend was the art of stalking and catching mice. They spent innumerable hours in the field behind our house practicing and perfecting this skill. Tiger became so adept he liked to show off. Anytime he caught a mouse (usually late at night), he wanted to bring it inside and show it to Carol, whom both cats worshipped. Tiger announced his presence with an attempted meow. Since he had a

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mouse clenched in his jaws, it came out as a unique, distinctive sound. Anytime Carol and I heard that sound, we knew we were about to be joined in bed by two excited cats and one slimy, frantic mouse. Usually it escaped into the darkness of our closet, and we'd have to catch it the next day and get it out of the house. These late night encounters were especially traumatic for me, since I have always been afraid of mice!

Over the years, Tiger and Carol developed a remarkable closeness. They invented a game both loved to play called "mousy." Carol got down on her knees in the hallway at the top of

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the stairs to the basement, and Tiger went down near the bottom of the stairs to feign disinterest. Carol would scratch on the wall out of Tiger's sight and say "mousy, mousy." After a minute or two, Tiger sprinted up the stairs to pounce on Carol's hand, usually with claws sheathed. Once in a while, his excitement made him forget, and he did minor

damage to her hand and wrist. Every time I tried to play, Tiger looked at me with boredom written all over his face. Booger never joined in either. He just didn't understand the concept.

Carol spent lots of time at the kitchen table over the years drawing, painting, and planning art projects. Tiger looked forward to this.

He had an intense interest in art and always jumped right into the middle of the project! His favorite activity was watercolors, and he possessed a considerable amount of talent. Tiger exhibited remarkable dexterity. He could paint equally well with his right or left paw!

Tiger was mild-mannered, even-tempered and the best cat I ever knew. He brought many hours of enjoyment and love into our home. None of us will ever forget Tiger. ♦

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The Dudley Effect

Troy Seate

Last month, I wrote about bringing a new member into my household, Dudley, a mixed-breed pup. I'm happy to report that his penchant for chewing on TV remotes or dragging my older Husky, Stella, around by her collar is diminishing. Their relationship is now close enough to capture cute photos of playtime and slumber-time.



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This isn't to imply that peace reigns, however. Our morning walks remain a challenge—two powerful dogs pulling little old me along for the ride, looking for a chance to charge at squirrels and bunnies who cross our path. I tried walking them one at a time, but separation anxiety soon ended that idea. The pooch left behind nearly scraped the paint off the back door.

Then came the day I needed to take Dudley to the vet for an ultrasound. I was afraid he'd chewed and swallowed enough

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toy parts, sticks, and bamboo wrappings holding a beloved Indian Queen's Chair together to develop a blockage in his plumbing. In the interim, Stella had to cope without him. As Duds and I pulled away, we heard a mournful howl of what could have been a bereft, lonesome coyote calling to his mate. I returned home as fast as I could to check on my sweet girl. Maybe the separation would give her a restful break from the roughhousing?

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Yeah. Right! Stella waited for me at the door in stoic silence. A quick glance showed the paint intact on the door. I patted her head and ruffled her fur for being a patient dog before venturing further. Praise given too soon.

I found a disaster in the kitchen. She had opened the cupboard holding the dog food bags (Huskies are notorious for their ability to defeat knobs, latches, and sliding doors). Pellets scattered the floor like spent cartridge shells. She had gotten my cookies and powdered donut holes off the counter, their easily compromised plastic containers revealing the carnage.

I stepped past this battlefield fearful of what might lie ahead, with Stella tiptoeing behind me to make sure I missed nothing. The living room and den where she and Dudley sleep were undisturbed, but she

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had pushed open the laundry room door and left me a brown present. If ever there was a time to repeat Marlon Brando's line, "Hey Stella!!" it would have been then.

She didn't follow me down the steps, but her expression told me, "This is what happens when you and Duds take a powder."

I learned my lesson and took Stella with me to pick up Dudley. He did not have an obstruction, just a shaved tummy to show for his daylong ordeal. The sniffing and playing began in the lobby while I paid the enormous bill, and continued home. No one worse for wear except a temporarily bruised ego for man and beast.



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The other day, as we started on our morning stroll, I found myself on a sheet of unforgiving ice I couldn't dodge. My feet went up, and I fell hard, my head banging off the frozen asphalt. I saw stars, then felt for the leashes. I called their names while lying in the street, trying to regain my senses and to rise atop the slippery surface. My worst fear is my dogs getting away and running amok after some other furry creature and into traffic.

When I got to my knees, a wet tongue licked my face, clearing away the cobwebs. Instead of trotting off, freedom at hand, Dudley stood next to me, curious to know, "Are you alright?" Stella sat a few feet away, asking, "What's the deal? Let's go."

We went, but it was straight home where I hoped I hadn't suffered a concussion. Some of us, me in particular, are slave to our beloved pets. We accept their shortcomings for the loyalty, comfort, and happiness they provide. And I guess they accept us for the same reasons. ♦

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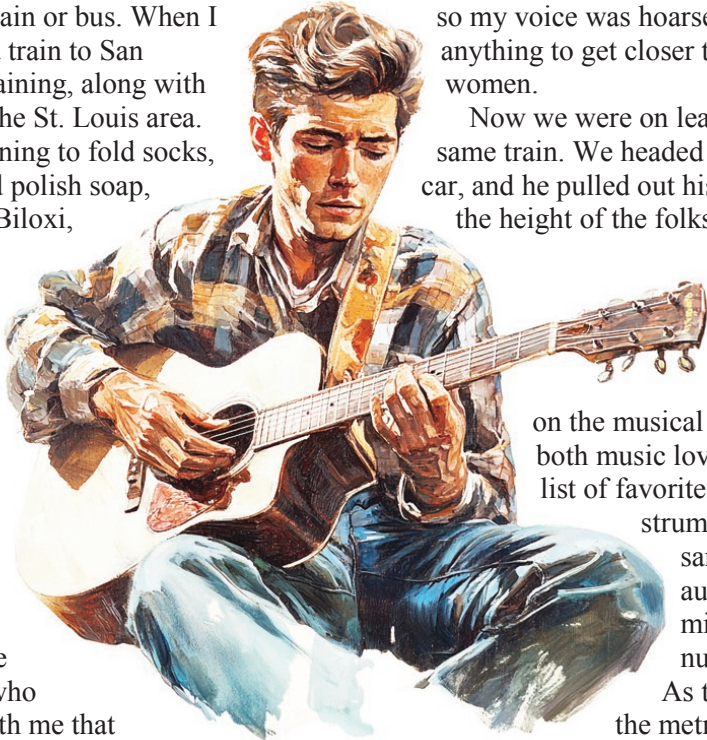
Strangers In The Night

Don Boyer

In 1962, I felt disillusioned after two years of college. At twenty- years old, without school or work, I would be subject to the draft and the Vietnam “conflict.” I had to do something, so I enlisted in the Air Force.

In my imagination, I saw myself soaring above the clouds on missions of glorious adventure. Nope. The Air Force transported me by train or bus. When I enlisted, I boarded a train to San Antonio for basic training, along with other recruits from the St. Louis area. After six weeks learning to fold socks, make bunk beds and polish soap, they shipped me to Biloxi, Mississippi, for my technical training. By now, it was 1963.

After training ended, I boarded a train to go on leave. I made temporary friends in my time in Biloxi, many of them now long faded from my memory. I forgot the name of the friend who boarded the train with me that evening, but I remember other things about him. He played the guitar in a band before he joined the service and, on weekend passes, I followed him to the beach or to a bar



where he played. His guitar was a girl magnet. In a town with a military training base, there were few opportunities to talk with the heavily outnumbered girls. I stuck close to him on leave. Going to the beach, he told me to say we were a traveling folk band and not in the Air Force. I played the stand-up bass so I couldn’t bring it. Also, I caught a cold in the motel pool so my voice was hoarse. I agreed to anything to get closer to the young women.

Now we were on leave and on the same train. We headed for the lounge car, and he pulled out his guitar. 1962 hit the height of the folksong revival. Belafonte, Kingston Trio, Weavers and Pete Seeger laid a firm foundation on the musical scene and we, both music lovers, had a long list of favorite tunes. He strummed, and we sang, but our only audience was a middle-aged man nursing a flask. As the rails provided the metronome, we sang into the night. I had a dubious harmony, but he strummed his guitar without flaw. Old songs made new again by youthful exuberance. The old man tapped a foot in time.

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Looking out the windows, we saw nothing except occasional country lights. Around midnight, the train pulled into Memphis. (Yes, we were on that “Night Train to Memphis”.) My friend continued to Indiana. I transferred to a train for Illinois. We knew we’d never see each other again, shook hands and departed. As my train headed west, I sat in the dark car, realizing I had a real folksong experience. ♦

Prairie Times Congratulates A Local Winner in the 2025 National Western Stock Show

Lazy H Ranch, Colorado has raised registered Angus and Charolais cattle in Elbert for more than 20 years and found recent success with their herd sire, LHR He Aint No Saint 2206 TW, selected as the Champion Charolais Bull at the 2025 National Western Stock Show in Denver on January 20, and the 56th National Champion Charolais Bull at the 2025 Fort Worth Stock Show in Fort Worth, Texas on February 1.

Raised by the Rohr family, “HANS” is out of DCC Ms Outsider 1801, a cow Maguire Rohr purchased from Caldwell, Texas in 2018 now owned in partnership with Gamboa Ranch of Kiowa, Colorado and by TCCS Saint Christopher, the 2017 Champion Charolais Bull at NWSS.

“It has been a lot of fun hauling HANS to shows the past few years, we are really proud to raise one this good,” said Rohr of Lazy H Ranch Colorado, which focused on registered seed-stock cattle, selling bulls private treaty in Colorado and surrounding states as well as show heifer prospects and replacement females. “He is exactly what we needed for our program, and we are excited to see his first calves this Spring.”

Rohr says he enjoyed meeting breeders from across the country and Canada at both shows who were interested in HANS semen. He started showing cattle through 4H at eight years old, and joined the American International Charolais Association in 2015, later serving on the Junior Board of Directors. With many accomplishments in the show ring, he now runs Lazy H Ranch with his family, aiming to raise quality Charolais and Angus show heifers for other juniors.

“HANS brings so much to the table in terms of completeness and balance,” Rohr added about the bull. “He is sound and functional, with big, square feet and a smooth shoulder. He’s a bull that has presence and a unique look from the profile while still being powerful from behind.”

HANS was successfully campaigned by Lazy H Ranch in his show career, winning both stock shows in 2025, reserve champion Charolais bull at the 2024 Fort Worth Stock Show, and Champion Intermediate Charolais Bull at the 2024 National Western stock Show. He also earned 2023-2024 Top 5 Show Bull of the Year honors recognized by the AICA. ♦





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FRONT PAGE NEWS FROM YOUR COMMISSIONERS

Get Involved with the 2025 Elbert County Noxious Weed Board!

Elbert County has long committed to maintaining its beautiful landscapes and ensuring the health of its ecosystem. The 2025 Noxious Weed Board is excited to continue these efforts and is calling on citizens to join in the mission to control and eradicate invasive noxious weeds. We are seeking enthusiastic and dedicated Elbert County residents who are passionate about preserving our natural environment. Your participation will play a crucial role in safeguarding our native flora and fauna, ensuring that our county remains a haven of biodiversity for future generations. This year, the Board will introduce several community-driven initiatives and volunteer opportunities aimed at controlling the spread of noxious weeds. From educational workshops to hands-on removal events, there will be plenty of ways for you to get involved and make a tangible impact.

Keep an eye out for more information on how you can sign up to take part in these exciting initiatives. We will release details on registration, training sessions, and specific volunteer events soon. We are also exploring innovative strategies, including the potential use of biological controls like beneficial insects, to enhance our weed management efforts. By joining the 2025 Noxious Weed Board's efforts, you'll have the chance to connect with fellow community members, learn more about our local ecosystem, and contribute to a healthier environment. Together, we can make a difference and protect the natural beauty of Elbert County.

Stay tuned for updates and be ready to roll up your sleeves—because every bit of effort counts when it comes to preserving the land we love. For more information, keep an eye on our official channels, and be sure to attend our upcoming informational meetings and events.

Your contribution can help transform our vision into reality. We look forward to working alongside you in this important mission. Sign up for Request-A-Bug Waitlist at <https://rb.gy/4p7263>
Interested in joining: Contact Chairman Kevin Hall (303) 475-7559 kevinhall1190@gmail.com



January 14th Swearing In (left to right) Mike Buck, Commissioner District 1, Byron McDaniel, Commissioner District 3, Dallas Schroeder, Commissioner District 2

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