

Introduction

Ten years of travelling the province writing stories for the *Winnipeg Free Press*. I can hardly believe it.

I didn't set out to be this rambling rural reporter for the paper.

I'm one of those people for whom other people always seem to know what's best. I didn't apply to be a reporter with the *Free Press*. I was quite content where I was at the farm weekly, *Manitoba Co-operator*. Then *Free Press* city editor Pat Flynn phoned me one day and, as is his wont, pretty much got around to the reason for the call within the first 15 seconds. "We'd like you to come work for us," he said.

I didn't come up with the idea to write true crime books, either. Great Plains Publications owner Gregg Shilliday approached me. I wasn't a crime reporter at all. "I'd like you to write a book about some of Manitoba's most famous crimes and criminals," Shilliday said. Really? Me? The result was *Crimes of the Century*, and *Crime Stories*, both now out of print, unfortunately.

I was less eager when approached to take on the post of rural reporter for the *Free Press*. I turned the job down twice. The offers came about two years apart. I turned the job down for two main reasons. One was it wasn't important enough. I wanted to do more important work at the newspaper, one of the glory jobs. Maybe somewhere down the line I could be rural reporter.

The other reason I refused is because the two previous rural reporters had quit abruptly and they had quit, by and large, because of interference from editors. It's not that the editors were evil; it's just that editors never have enough resources to cover news, as opposed to the less time-sensitive stories a rural reporter writes. They just can't keep their hands off a reporter who isn't writing for tomorrow's paper. My two predecessors were testament to that.

So I said no. I was emphatic about that.

Finally, our managing editor at the time, Nicholas Hirst, got involved. I'm sure Nick was behind the solicitations all along. He told me he thought I would be perfect for the post and wanted to know why I wouldn't do it. I didn't get into the first reason but I did tell him the second reason. The newspaper didn't treat rural coverage like a real beat. If it wasn't a real beat, I wasn't interested.

I'm thankful to Nick today, just as I'm thankful to all the other people who knew what was best for me when I didn't. He set it up in such a way that gave the rural reporter independence and freedom to roam this province. If he saw me in the office, he'd try to kick me out. "What are you doing in here? Get out, get out," he'd say.

Margo Goodhand, the current managing editor, came along later and moved me up from the back pages. Margo both gave me a forum, called Open Road, and freedom to write longer features.

The result has been unique coverage in Canada. I don't know of another daily newspaper that has a dedicated rural reporter. I know it's tried from time to time but I've never seen it work for very long. One editor told me when I started that I wouldn't still be doing the beat after two years. His thinking, I believe, was that there wasn't enough material to sustain such a beat.

So for these reasons, that my position put me in conflict with editors immediately above me, that many newspaper apparatchiks don't believe there is content for such a beat, and also because I have a distrusting nature, I've always felt my position was tenuous. I've always felt like Scheherazade.

Scheherazade is the wife of Persian King Shahryar, who staves off her execution each night by diverting him with a story. Betrayed by his first wife, the freakishly powerful king has concluded he must kill his new brides after each wedding night to be on the safe side. So Scheherazade spins these wonderful yarns each night to take the king's mind off his misogyny. Hence, *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*.

There aren't 1,001 stories here, thank goodness, but I have always felt the sword of King Shahryar hovering, compelling me to come up with interesting stories. If not for the threat, I would be back chained to my office desk. Which

would almost feel like death now.

Ah, the country. Take a deep breath. What an incredible landscape to put to canvas.

It's a bit like the slow food movement, in terms of news gathering. Instead of doing the stories by 15-minute telephone interview, you drive up all these long narrow driveways. Dogs come running out to see who you are. Only occasionally have I decided I'd better stay in the car until someone came out. My funniest farm-dog story involves a chihuahua. It's true. I stayed in the car and looked around. Well, this seems safe, I said to myself. I was expecting a pack of wild dogs to come running up behind that yappy little hairless chihuahua, but it was the only farm dog. It was like that old Superbowl commercial about the cat herders. "Herdin' cats. Don't let anyone tell you it's easy," a cowboy says.

I've seen wolves, coyotes, snapping turtles, deer, while on assignment. I've driven along gravel farm roads, in August, with naked farm fields all around and high, lush grasses growing right up to the shoulder, and had a deer jump out of the grassy ditch as if out of thin air and almost hit me. I've stripped down to my shorts on an empty farm road after a short walk through some grasses to look at the Souris River, only to find myself covered with wood ticks. I pulled off something like 35 and, believe me, those ticks can move when they want to. They were just running up my legs.

The slow-motion, collapsing trapezoid farm buildings, the rusted vintage car on the edge of a field, the family photos on the fridge door, all become part of the story somehow. So do the busy café at coffee time, the "Be Back Soon" signs in shop windows, the rubber tire from a tree overhanging a little river, the coiling, caramel-coloured flypaper hanging from the ceiling with its catch for all to see. Every naked light bulb shining above a community hall entrance, every moon-like yard light glowing in the distance, feel like parts of the tales I've written. I've stayed in many bed-and-breakfasts and gone for solitary walks down their gravel connections in the evening. I've come to know hotel owners by their first names, and rely on them for local information the way newspaper columnist Alan Fotheringham used to rely on cab drivers.

I happened to read the other day, in the midst of composing this intro-

duction, an essay in the *London Review of Books* by August Kleinzahler about road stories.

“The literature of car trips across America usually revolves around colourful local characters the narrator meets along the way. This is true of [John] Steinbeck, [Jack] Kerouac, William Least Heat-Moon in his *Blue Highways* and so on.”

It’s true that it’s the people you meet along the way who make the road trip. But I wouldn’t say it takes colourful characters, or even characters. I’ve certainly met colourful characters — you couldn’t get more colourful, or more enjoyable, than Henry Makinson and his dancing bison. But I find a lot of people are pretty colourful on the inside in less obvious ways. I tend to be at least as interested in a rich inner life as a rich outer one.

It’s hard to say which are the most memorable stories. Things memorable to me might not be for readers. One story I’ve always liked is Dennis Dunlop’s business just outside Ste. Anne. Dunlop made cedar shims. Just shims. Nothing else. It reminded me so much of helping my dad. My dad built a lot of things and he was always shimming. We’d have to shim a floor board or a window, make a shim out of something to level something or other, or use a shim to stir the paint or contact cement or whatever. To be honest, I was bored by a lot of it and hardly even knew what my dad was talking about with his shims. But we always needed them. Then I found the world headquarters for shims right under our noses! From his little enclave in southeastern Manitoba, Dunlop made shims by the millions and shipped them across North America.

Dunlop sold his equipment and shim contracts four years ago to an American outfit. Now the world headquarters for shim-making is in the United States unfortunately, like so many things. That makes the story dated and so I haven’t included the story here. I’ve tried to update other stories where it seemed needed.

I’ve toured a lot of interesting rural homes — from those elegant Eaton catalogue models to a house that one ambitious couple from MacGregor built right into a hill. I’ve seen some of the most interesting cottages imaginable, including cottages 80 to 100 years old.

INTRODUCTION

I'm fond of some of the history pieces I've gotten to write, like the survival story of John Pritchard, a talkative greenhorn from England who became lost for 40 days naked in the Manitoba wilderness in 1805, and the forgotten story of the Battle of Grand Coteau, a Manitoba 'cowboys and Indians' battle like you see in the Westerns with a loss of life much greater than the Battle of Seven Oaks. And then there was the story of Walter Zeiler, the last of the red-hot bootleggers. Talk about colourful. This guy made every room he was in seem small.

I have made this final selection to reflect the range of stories. The dates show when each story appeared in the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Where necessary, I have added an update at the end.

I hope you enjoy the book as much as I've enjoyed the last decade writing it.

Bill Redekop, July 2011