How to Evaporate Water, How to Think Inside the Box, And Other Things You Ought to Know

THE 2006 KNIGHT FAMILY CALENDAR

The 2006 Knight Family Calendar is about me.
If you happen to be included, it's because I'm picking on you.
Please read it to find out, and thank you for this opportunity to indulge myself.
Oh, by the way, I can get away with this, because we're family, and for that I'm very happy.

Dennis Knight, December 25, 2005

CHAPTER ONE: HOW TO EVAPORATE WATER:

Pour a glass of water.
Set it on the table.
Forget about it.

CHAPTER TWO: HOW TO THINK INSIDE THE BOX:

Read the manual.
Don't ask questions.

CHAPTERS THREE THROUGH FIFTEEN: OTHER THINGS YOU OUGHT TO KNOW:

See attached.

DAD'S CANARY

Dad liked birds.

While he would never qualify as a bird watcher, skulking through the underbrush with binoculars and bird book, he liked to wake up to birds chirping, and he liked to watch them through the breakfast window as he drank his morning coffee and read the paper. He took pains to make the yard inviting to birds, and I don't remember a time when he didn't have a bird bath or at least a bird feeder in the yard.

On the other hand Pixie, our cocker spaniel, was an aspiring bird catcher. She probably never snared one, but in her youth she had an amazing vertical leap that discouraged birds from using the facilities in our yard, which must have had the reputation in bird circles of a 5-star hotel with an alligator.

With that understanding of his nature, it was no surprise to any of us when Dad brought home the canary. And though it couldn't have been a shock to her, I'm sure Mom had to have secretly resented this imposition into a household of 7 kids who were barely newspaper trained themselves.

Dad, of course, saw his role with the canary as that of coach and mentor, and Mom's as nurse and maid. He bought it for its music, and he had a duty to bring out its best. In his view, it was Mom's role to provide the creature comforts, his the aesthetics.

The first day of residence yielded only silence from the bird, which was really to be expected. After all, the canary was only hours removed from its flock of friends at the dime store. The cage was new, the environment was new, and 18 eager eyes and 18 cocked ears hovered, anticipating the first warble. Who could sing under those conditions?

After the second and third day of silence, though, Dad began actively coaching. Moving his chair next to the bird cage, he sat and whistled for a day or two, until his throat constricted and his repertoire expired. He then alternated the whistling by playing his records of Viennese waltzes.

By the fifth day of silence, there was a sort of pathetic disillusionment. The bird was obviously defective. Typical dime store junk. Who knows where they get those *(&@! birds? But, appropriate to this bird tale, Dad rose from defeat as a phoenix. He had resolve and he had ingenuity. Who could believe that in all of America there would be recordings of canary music, and to find such a record right in the town of Laramie was incredible. The record probably cost more than the bird, but by this point, at yet another of the many crossroads Dad encountered, who could care?

Dad rearranged the furniture again, placed the bird cage closer to the Zenith Cobramatic hi-fi, put the record on, adjusted the volume, and sat back!

A human can only wonder what bird mood the record actually delivered, but, based on the way the canary came to life, I'd venture it was some sort of mating call. From the opening stanza, the bird expanded its chest, and delivered a responsive sonata that vindicated, finally, Dad's investment.

As long as the record played, the bird sang. Its melodic chirp mixed with the greater volume of the record and wafted sonorously through the neighborhood. The people of Laramie must have thought our house had been totally taken by canaries. Flocks of curious sparrows and robins circled as close as they dared, given Pixie's reputation. I even saw a hawk perched on a telephone pole, hoping for dessert.

When the phonograph was quiet, however, so was the canary. The bird's problem turned out not be a matter of its ability to sing, but of its need for someone yellow to sing with. If Dad had put any stock in the power of positive thinking, he would have seen the up side to this, for the canary could be turned on and off at his own fancy; he had only to play the record.

Time passed. Phonograph and canary were turned on with diminishing frequency. By fall, its career as an entertainer having waned, the canary served mostly as a newspaper recycler (or perhaps newspaper critic, if you get my drift).

I will ask you now to serve as juror, and consider the evidence that demonstrates our mother may have thought less of the bird than Dad and her seven kids. Mom, always a modern woman, ran her household with the best tools of the time, which then included some pretty powerful chemical warfare. In present days we can acquire a bazooka more easily than we can buy bug spray with the killing power of the stuff she used that day, but she still claims she was only trying to combat the flies that attack a home in the fall.

The sign of intent is not in her words, but in her expression, when she tells the story of the canary. Even some forty years later, her eyes sparkle with secret glee when she speaks tragically of spraying the house for flies, going to the grocery, and returning to find Dad's canary, on the newspaper at the bottom of the cage, with legs pointing in the rabbit ears position, stiff as a board.

If you, the jury, do not detect the twinkle in her eye while she testifies to her remorse, then you should conclude that, if the canary could have been taught to catch flies, it would still be warbling.

-1992

A LITTLE HAM ON THE SIDE

There is something about being the center of attention. I'm the sort of fellow who is generally shy and doesn't court center stage. I like it when I've got it, but as a rule, I restrain myself from wearing clown hats or otherwise embarrassing my loved ones.

The addiction actually peaked in my childhood. Mrs. Coe, my second grade teacher at Lincoln school, assigned me the task of reading *Pinocchio* aloud to the class over a period of several days. This was not a beginner's version that would be read by a child of my age, but a fairly complex edition designed for a 5th or 6th grader. In retrospect, I hope she picked me for my reading skills, but at the time I assumed it was for my thespian talents.

Each day for several weeks, I would stand before the class and read a chapter. I remember being nearly tongue tied the first day, but the teacher encouraged me by promising that the children really wanted to hear the story. The book and I started out calmly enough for the first few days, but by the time the puppet became lunch for a whale, I was quite in a frenzy of histrionics. (Cross my heart and hope to die... and my nose hasn't grown any at all, hardly.)

My career progressed when I was in the fifth grade at St. Lawrence School, and became an altar boys. In those days, we had several important tasks besides making the Latin responses to the celebrant's liturgy. We would bring the wine and water to the priest, ring the bells, and help Father serve communion by holding the paten, as a guard against the Host falling to the floor as it was offered to the lips of the faithful. This was a serious challenge on those days when the aging Monsignor had quivering hands. The experienced boys could hold the thin golden plate steady, but the novices would try to keep pace with the shaking fingers, and the communicant was often struck sharply in the adam's apple.

A few of the boys served mass for the glory of God; they are the ones who are now in the priesthood, and I salute them. The rest of us, however, tended to be more complex in our inspiration. I don't mean to say we weren't properly devout, it's just that we also had worldly stimuli. For some, it was the fear of Sister Mary Thomas, who supervised the altar boys, or Monsignor's ire when we mixed up some procedure or other. The serious among us were motivated to do well by fear of fouling up in public view, while others were hoping a pretty girl was watching from the pews. But for me, it was the performance itself: partly for the glory of God, partly for the glory of me.

While the old Latin mass offered opportunities for grandness only to the celebrant, there were a few nice flourishes reserved for the altar boys. For instance, most boys would bow a little when passing the center of the altar. We true performers took the time to execute a deep, symbolic genuflection, and squared our corners smartly as we continued to the next task. When serving, I usually maneuvered for the kneeling station on the left, facing the altar, so I could ring the bells. This was especially satisfying, for, when rung with musicianship and artistic flair, the bells added mightily to the mood of the offering. It also served to revive those in the congregation who had nodded off (including at times the other altar boy.)

Serving mass, to a freckle-faced, curly haired Irish kid in a cassock, could be a heady experience. I have heard the sermons about the sin of pride, and if I so transgressed, I am heartily sorry.

The zenith of my career, however, was not on the altar but on the stage. It came in the 8th grade at St. Lawrence. Sister Mary Sarah had written for the annual school play a new melodrama, "The Desperate Deed". It was replete with villain, hero, damsel in distress, musical numbers, and a "flora dora" dance with boys in the chorus line, dressed up in gaudy (and curvy) Mae West-like costumes. We were a co-ed school with plenty of perfectly qualified girls in the class, so her casting decision was either rakish humor or a deviant act. I vote the for rakish humor.

I had dual parts in the drama. I was a flora dora dancer, but I was redeemed with a principal role as the "boy detecative" who brought the villain to justice.

The villain was played by Roger Morgan, one of the most straight up, nice fellows in the class, and a pretty good actor. I had all admiration for him.

The climactic moment of the entire drama was when, having caught Roger up in his evil ways, I would feint a stomp to his toe, and then run. He would howl in mock pain, and a spirited chase to the wings would ensue. We rehearsed many times, and perfected the stomp and chase routine. But I had a secret plan.

The play went off nicely that evening. The dancing was spirited, the music was uplifting, the jokes were funny, and the audience was caught up in the drama. The suspense built accordingly to Sister's script right up to the instance of the stomp, when CRUNCH! I smashed Roger Morgan's foot straight on, with all the force I could muster. Roger howled with dramatic intensity, startling our cohorts on stage and Sister Mary Sarah in the wings, and greatly pleasing the audience.

Roger grabbed for my shoulder, and I ducked and ran off stage, with him hopping in pursuit – a new twist, as he hadn't hopped in rehearsal.

The audience loved our performance. Roger Morgan should have taken an award for his howl, and a purple heart for his purple toe. I delivered the night's worst acting job when he finally caught me in the school kitchen, and I vainly affected remorse, while doubled over in laughter.

In retrospect, Roger was lucky. Sister might have given me a gun.

–1992

Life as Shorty

I think some careless ancestor along the way deleted an important part of the genetic instructions for my legs, and inserted the missing inches into my waist line. I may be vertically challenged, but I'm horizontally gifted.

There are disadvantages to being short, including the task of buying trousers. Walk into just about any store and you'll find pants in waist sizes from the ridiculously narrow 30 inches to the more realistic 56, accommodating a span of more than two feet. Lengths, however, are limited to two or three choices, the shortest being 30 inches. If I stand on tip topes, I'm a 28. I've learned to use that iron-on hemming stuff pretty well.

When I was in Army boot camp at Fort Carson in Colorado Springs back in 1961, our commanding officer experimented with a new way of organizing his company into platoons according to their height, and the platoons into squads, again by height. On every march, the first platoon, the tall one, walked off first, with the fourth platoon, mine, going last. I'm sure this was aesthetically pleasing.

During our next-to-last week of boot camp, our newly forged fitness was put to the test with a ten mile hike, in full battle gear, on a generally up-hill route climaxing at the top of a little mound introduced to us as "Agony Hill". The tall platoon set off first, in a rank of two, followed closely by each of the other groups, with mine sucking air behind. As we struggled up the hill, the spacing of the troops expanded greatly, as did the impatient berating of the thirsty drill sergeants. I have no idea how quickly the tall platoon made it to the top, but they were given a nice, long smoke break and time to nap under the trees.

By the time I straggled to the top with my short buddies, it was time to go again. We were given five merciful minutes to rest, all of which I used frantically looking for my M-1 rifle which, it turned out, was still slung on my back. God, was I tired.

Another small tragedy happened to me at boot camp, one I directly blame on my shortness. We were "in the field" during a rainstorm, each of us with full packs and rifles slung on our backs, and wearing our official U.S. Army hooded ponchos over the top. The ponchos were a one-size-fits-all variety. Mine was floor length, of course.

At the muddy height of the rain, we were ordered to run as a group, across a road, and up a bank. I don't know why, except to get to the other side. As soon as we reached the embankment, the land rose up to meet my poncho, which I duly ran up the inside of. In doing so, I pulled myself to the ground in a ball, causing a great chain reaction which felled the rest of my platoon, at the bottom of which was I. I would say my pride was broken, but they take that away at the front gate in boot camp, so all I broke that day was my glasses.

Later that day, our riflemanship was tested on the firing range, and, with my busted glasses, I had to squint at the targets. It turned out the best day of shooting I ever had, before or since. That was because I consistently aimed so far below the pop-up targets I was kicking up rocks large enough to topple them as if they were a direct hit. The sergeant thought it was funny, and gave me the full score on every one.

On reflection, I can think of many disadvantages to being under tall. On the other hand, there are a few advantages to shortness, the chief of which is dancing with tall girls. Right now, I can't think of the others.

Writing Writ Right

It was downright disconcerting,
the day that I wrote Write,
If I had written Writ instead,
it would have been just right.

The IBM computer is usually very bright,
but did not notice that my Write
Was wrong, and only Writ was right.

The discriminating lawyer, though,
With all his legal might,
Was able to detect the wrong,
and moved to right the Write.

The object of my little song,
the solution to my plight:
That a writer's right to right a wrong
is the "Writ to Right the Write"

POLITICS INHERITED

It strikes me that, when it comes to politics, I take after Dad, but then again like our maternal Grandfather. The two men respected each other but couldn't have been more different in many ways, but especially their political outlooks.

Grandpa was a Methodist preacher, gentle in his demeanor, articulate in his conversation, and a Republican in the mold of Abe Lincoln and Dwight Eisenhower. A Republican with a sense of justice who in an earlier generation would have fought with Lincoln, not just to save the Union, but to put an end to slavery. A Republican with moral integrity who, in a later generation, would have a hard time understanding the low jinx of the Nixon administration, but would not have been judgmental about Richard Nixon himself.

Dad was a resolute and absolute Democrat, a New Dealer who worshiped the Roosevelts, Eleanor as much as FDR. An Irish Democrat, he had low regard for intellectuals but great respect for Adlai Stevenson, the leading political intellectual of the era. A railroad union man who celebrated Truman's unlikely victory over Tom Dewey, but was then furious with Truman for threatening to use the national guard to prevent a railroad strike. A Northern Dem who hated the Democrats of the deep South for what they stood for (segregation), but was glad they were Democrats because they kept the party in power. Dad was judgmental about every politician, especially Republicans. Ironically, when the first George Bush was campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in 1980, against Ronald Reagan, Dad heard Bush speak and later told me Bush was one Republican he might be able to vote for. Emphasis on "might be", but it was the closest I ever heard him come to complimenting a Republican. I have no question where Dad would have stood regarding W.

Dad was just as committed to the Catholic church as he was to the Democratic party. That alignment of values was quite normal in the middle of the 20th century, but I sometimes have to ponder where he would find himself today, when it's not so much distinguishing right from wrong, but right from right.

(A side note: Dad's unyielding Catholicism didn't keep him from enjoying the television sermons of the evangelist Billy Graham. I think it was a sign of the respect he had for Grandpa.)

Despite their different affiliations, Grandpa and Dad were very much together when it came to human and civil rights. I remember both of them at different times would talk about the wrongness of segregation and discrimination. Dad would speak often about the hidden meaning of signs you would find in even Northern restaurants, "reserving the right to serve anyone." He would talk about the color barriers that existed then in athletics. A prize fighter as a young man, he was not disparaging Negro boxers when he called them "smoked Irishmen". He took the side of the black football players in a controversy at the University of Wyoming in 1968.

Having come to the end of this rambling essay, I guess my point is simply to express my appreciation for the subtleties of Grandpa's quiet political viewpoints and Dad's vocal, duke-it-out opinions, and my satisfaction in having inherited my share of each. *-2005*

THE BANE OF OLD GLORY

The Stars and Stripes fly as the standard
of liberty and justice for all.

You are fools who set torch to the flag
in the exercise of freedom,
For as long as we are free,
it is impervious to mere flame.

You are greater fools who would make a law
to shield the banner
from the exercise of freedom,
For you will make the flag burners
freedom's champions.

-1993

DAD AND THE BUICK WOODY

As often as I reflect on that particular day, I'll never resolve what it was that made Dad decide to paint the old car copper. Over the years I've chosen to believe it was spring's gentle wakening of a winter daydream, but it may well have sprung from an Irishman's encounter with a wee drop of Old Crow.

It must have been about 1955. I was eleven, then, and third in our family of seven kids growing up in Laramie, Wyoming. In a brood that large, there isn't often an opportunity for a boy to spend a day of man-to-man time with his dad, so that alone made the day an event.

Our venerable 1941 Buick Woody station wagon had by then fallen from status as the Family Car. Her fenders and hood, originally a deep maroon, had faded in a decade and a half under the unfiltered sun of our high plains to a nondescript and irregular pink. The varnish was virtually gone from her wooden sides. But, despite being withered and demoted, she ran fine and still held valuable utility for our big family.

It was early afternoon when Dad took me with him to Laramie Basin Hardware. He wasn't sure how much it would take, but after consulting with the proprietor, we bought the store's entire inventory of copper spray paint, four cans, with the promise that he could return what he didn't need.

We parked in a shady spot south of the house, and took turns shaking the first can well, pursuant to directions, until we heard the metal ball rattle. Everyone knows about aerosol paint now, of course, but in 1955 this was high technology.

Imagine our excitement as Dad aligned the nozzle with the red dot on the rim, approached the car, took aim at a distance of 12 to 15 inches, and pushed the button, creating on the swell of the left front fender a large coppery blob, surrounded by an oily blotch, going nowhere in particular, but not staying in one place either.

Dad said nothing—not to me, not to the car, and not to the paint—but I knew he was at one of life's crossroads.

Would he try to wipe off the mess, take the remaining cans back to the store, and tell me to shut up? Or would he spray on? Would another press of the nozzle repair the damage or merely embellish it? Would invoking the help of the Archangels save him from the wrath of Mom?

Courageously, apprehensively, he squeezed the nozzle again, and then again, using increasingly broader strokes, until the can ran empty, and he had resurfaced an area of about four square feet.

Soon we had used all four cans of paint, but only on one fender. So we returned to the hardware store, hoping they might have, within the last 90 minutes, received a fresh shipment of copper spray paint. But Laramie Basin Hardware had no more copper spray paint, had none on order, and was about the sorriest damned outfit Dad had ever dealt with.

We visited every other hardware store, paint store, and dime store in town, and acquired a few cans of each of about six brands of copper spray paint. It was a shopping experience that serves me to this day when I encounter issues of dye lots and color matching.

By the time we arrived home with the assorted bags of assorted paint, Dad's enthusiastic vision of a shining copper Buick was dimmed to hope of damage control. He could visualize the shifts in color from rust to orange to gold, and now and then true copper. Now his goal was to subtly blend the variegations as he went, so they might not be noticeable, especially to Mom. I could also sense his desperation to be done with the awful job before she came home.

I've forgotten the count of cans of paint we applied that day, but I won't forget the result– a coppery 1941 Buick station wagon that shimmered in the bright Wyoming sun. It shimmered when it was cloudy. It shimmered in the moonlight. Lord, how it shimmered.

And I'll always remember the reactions of Mom, who refused ever again to be seen in the station wagon, and my big sister, Maureen, who gagged and ran to the bathroom.

The rest of us kind of liked the old car, especially after Dad, a few days later, highlighted his work by painting the wooden trim pieces in a sort of jade green. His intent was to give the car a more professional finish, but Maureen gagged again. I took a personal and proprietary pride in the automobile, as a product of Dad's genius and my excellent assistantship.

Eventually, Dad and one of his cronies converted the Buick into a fishing car. They removed the back seat and installed a trap door, making a cache for over-limit fish, safe from the game warden. But that's a different story.

-1992

THE KIDDY SHOW

At the age of 16 I took my first real job. I was hired as an usher at the Fox Theater, in Laramie.

I remember the day I got the job. An announcement was broadcast over the high school P.A. system that applications for the position of usher would be taken that evening. I was chosen from among a host (may 30) of applicants who lined up after school to fill out the application.

I would like to think I was chosen for my potential as a future leader of the Fox Intermountain Theaters system, that my personality and charisma were recognized, and that I was the best man for the job. The real reasons, though, were that my sister Maureen worked at the Fox for several years through high school, the assistant manager was the younger brother of Maureen's best friend, and I met the primary qualification – I could fit into the usher's uniform.

In the late fifties, the station of Usher was a humble one. We were required to wear heavy uniforms, sometimes a lime green with gold piping, but usually a dirty gold with gold piping. I started at 65 cents an hour, plus a free pass to the movies.

I took my job seriously, faithfully attending the weekly Saturday morning staff meetings, efficiently escorting patrons to seats, keeping an eye out for illicit smoking and other activities, and generally maintaining a nice bustle of activity so as to prove my value to the company and demonstrate my professionalism to the theater goers, who I was sure were watching me instead of the feature.

I looked forward most to those moments when the doorman would be on a break, and I could serve at his station. That was when you could put the flashlight away, assume a stately posture at the door with an officious but friendly demeanor, and be cool. And meet girls.

Gradually, over the first few months, I was made the doorman more and more often, until I finally came to think maybe I had received a promotion and nobody told me. I could also man the cashier's booth, help at the concession stand, change the marquee, and do just about anything at the movies but run the projector.

Our manager, who hated kids but loved profits, scheduled a series of kiddy shows for Wednesday afternoons in the summer, and made me the official master of ceremonies. Ads were placed in the Laramie Daily Boomerang, "Uncle Dennis On Stage!"

I prepared for my debut with enthusiasm. I purchased from petty cash nearly $15 worth of prizes (paddle-balls and board games) for the first show. We had scheduled a pretty fair movie with lots of cartoons, with a fifteen minute break in the screen action for the stage appearance. I was a little disappointed when I learned I would be wearing my doorman's uniform, but I did look like a teenage Captain Kangaroo, so it was actually a pretty fair get-up for the occasion.

I wrote a theme song:

On Wednesday, we kids all know

That the place to go is the Kiddy Show!
So we cut the coupon from the daily paper
And we all set out for the Fox Theater.
We give the girl a nickel and a dime,
Then we go on in 'cause its cartoon time.
When the music comes on we're all in our seats
'Cause it'll be a movie that you can't beat.

Laramie High, like every high school in every state, has an Athletic Club. Ours was the L Club, and you had to be a jock to belong, although they may have had a cheerleader auxiliary. My high school interests leaned to journalism, and I wasn't in the L Club, but I envied the social standing of the athletes, respected their abilities, and hoped for their respect as well.

It so happened that, unannounced to me, the date of my stage debut as Uncle Dennis was the day the L Club, and each and every member thereof, were treating the kids from the Cathedral Home Orphanage to an afternoon at the movies.

The theater opened, and I was only slightly nervous about my debut when I took my regular ticket-taking station at the door greeting each and every kid as if he or she was the most important person in town. Then the Whole Football Team, orphans in tow, arrived. As they came through the door two by two, tickets in hand, my smile flattened, and the minor butterflies escalated into a sense of pending embarrassment and certain doom for the remainder of my high school career. The first group of cartoons and previews and the first movie ran, and I was soaking in perspiration despite the refrigerated theater climate.

Finally, I took the stage. I had to take the stage. There wasn't a choice. What I hoped would be the blinding lights of the stage were only a dim sparkle, and I was met with the anticipating eyes and ears of 500 kids plus a defensive line, offensive line, assorted backfields and the star quarterback. I still didn't know whether to sing or not, but I did it. Badly, but I did it. We played games of some sort, awarded some prizes, and had a good time in general. I did have the wisdom to drop my second number (a sing-along to the do-re-mi bit from The Sound of Music).

The rest of the summer passed, with Uncle Dennis on stage, with contests, cartoons and merriment. I abandoned the theme song after that first week, and the manager decided to continue the stage performances year-round by moving them to Saturdays.

September came, our senior year began, and I got exactly the response I wanted from the L Club – nobody said a word. *-1992*

THAT CHAMPIONSHIP SEASON

I was born to a reasonably athletic family. Dad was a professional boxer as a young man in Southern Colorado. My older brother, Jerry, competed in several sports, including football, wrestling and boxing. My younger brothers all seemed to do well in sports, and I'm sure my two sisters would have done fine if women had been encouraged to play sports in those years.

Among the boys, I am sandwiched between Jerry, the oldest, who became known in high school as "Chub", and Jim, who became known as "Cub". Drop either name in Laramie today, and someone will recognize it. I don't know who gave them the monickers, or what they mean, but I'm certain they are respectful and speak of athletic competence. I myself was never honored with a sports-derived nickname (except I heard "butter-fingers" more than once.)

My first disqualification from being a jock is that I throw like a girl. Now, frankly, a girl merely looks silly when she pitches that way, when a boy does it, he looks to have failed to reach an expected stage of development, but when a grown man is still doing it, it's pathetic.

The problem of achieving a respectable throwing motion is further exacerbated by big ears. (It interferes with throwing, to the point of possible bloodshed. I have more than once beaned myself in the back of the head when under demand to make a good throw quickly.)

A third problem for me is the lack of depth perception. I don't know when to swing bat, or how high to hold mitt, or when ball and bat or mitt can reasonably be expected to meet, or nearly meet. When a ball pops into the air, I run in circles, wave wildly with both hands, and ultimately fall into a crouch, shielding my head with my glove.

When I go with my sons to a ball game, they bring a glove and pray for foul balls. If I bring a glove, I wear it like a hat for extra protection.

I recall countless childhood summer mornings when Jerry, being six years my elder, would attempt to make an athlete out of me, but give up within about 15 minutes, frustrated with one or another of my shortcomings.

You can imagine Jerry's disbelief when I became the only kid in the family to play on a championship ball team, especially after he had tried and been denied the opportunity. It was the summer of 1953. I've forgotten what impulse led me to go out for softball that year, perhaps I misunderstood the softness of softballs.

You went out for softball in those days simply by showing up at the high school gym on a designated date and time. All the aspiring players would sit on one side of the gym, and the coaches of each prospective team would stand at designated points along the opposite side. Each, in turn, would pick a player, until everyone was divied up.

Johnny Deti was one of the coaches picking. He and Jerry were the same age, friends, and often competitors for the same position, being similar in weight and height. I'm sure it was Johnny's respect for Jerry that led him to make me a high draft choice, and I've never been sure whether he somehow held Jerry responsible for the wasted pick.

I certainly was pleased to be chosen so soon, but I didn't appreciate the significance of the event. I had no concept Johnny was looking at me as a 'franchise player. It didn't take long, of course, for him to figure out I was a bust. To his credit, though, he was able to make me part of the team, and figured out various roles for me to play.

One of the things John taught me to was how to walk; that is, he taught me how to scrunch my body up in such a way it was impossible to throw strikes to me, Picture this: I would come to the plate, spread my feet, and get into a stance with my rear end nearly on the ground and my knees level with my ears. At first I would crane my neck to see around my knee to the pitcher, which I soon learned was quite unnecessary. I could simply wait for four pitches to flutter benignly past, and the umpire would tell me to take my base.

You can imagine and I'm sure appreciate Jerry's intolerance when he would ask how the game went, and would I would proudly proclaim I had managed four runs on no hits.

Johnny always put me in the field in the least risky part of the ball park, always usually in the outfield, and usually just inside the first base line. He then expanded the other players' areas of responsibility so that I only had to be concerned with about 100 square feet. Sounds like a lot, but that's five feet in any direction if you stand in the middle of it.

Fortunately, the rest of Johnny's draft was a success, and he put together a team with talent and the ability to follow his coaching. We were a team that always jumped ahead of the opponent, and our ball games would be called early when we got some twenty points ahead.

The game I remember most was the closest we played all year. We were a run down, bottom of the ninth, two outs. Coach Deti was obliged to follow the "everyone gets to play" rule and his own philosophy of fair play, so he put me in, reasonably confident in my ability to draw a walk.

I stepped up to the plate, took my stance, and waited. Ball one, ball two, ball three. The fourth pitch was a beautiful, fat thing that just floated toward me and the powerful bat resting on my shoulder, itching to get in the action. The ball demanded, begged, to be clobbered into oblivion.

I heard a shout, "HIT IT!" This was my chance! Jerry would be so proud! Adrenaline surged! I smashed the ball! It was outa' there! It was never coming down!

The opposing first baseman had a different idea, reached up, and caught the ball on the rise. Game over.

Our team lost only the one game, and ended up taking the league championship. I've heard Johnny, after a career in coaching, still has that trophy on his desk.

I don't know who yelled "hit it", but I suspect it was the opposing coach. I know it wasn't Johnny.

-1993

FEAR AND LOATHING IN WOODY CREEK

Fly on the canvas wall. It's a chance that comes along rarely, to be a fly on the wall at the unfolding of an historical event. To be there perfectly legitimately, but with nothing really to do but watch it all go down. Or in this case, all go up.

I knew the name of Hunter S. Thompson and something of his reputation. A journalist who jumped in the middle of and often became part of world and national events, politics, social change... Called his brand of reporting "gonzo journalism", where the reporter is part of the story. Among other things wrote Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, the journal of a drug and alcohol binge to end them all. And Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail, an amazing chronicle of the Nixon–McGovern campaign of 1972. Managed to make every story he covered as much about him as the story itself. An unabashed liberal with an unabashed love affair with guns, all kinds of guns. Two movies were based on his books. Johnny Depp played him in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, Bill Murray in Where the Buffalo Roam. On February 20th, 2005, facing health problems, seated alone in the kitchen of his house at Woody Creek, near Aspen, he took his own life. With a gun.

It was written in his will that his ashes were to be fired from a cannon in a tower to be built on his Woody Creek ranch. The blast-off was set for Saturday, August 20th, 2005, exactly six months after his death. You probably know the story at least as well as I, because I never paid a whole lot of attention. Until my sons Thomas and Robert happened to mention in a casual moment in April that their Japanese drumming group, Denver Taiko, was asked to perform at a memorial service of some guy in Aspen. I knew who it was, and told them what little I knew about the guy. I was impressed with this opportunity for them, and told them so, but "fat chance" is what I told myself.

I read in the papers that Johnny Depp was footing the bill for the blasting of the ashes, that the event was costing him millions, and the Thompson family secured whatever permits were needed.

July approached and Denver Taiko was in fact in full preparation to help Hunter blast off, but a minor misunderstanding about the expectations caused the group attempt to cancel its appearance. Hunter's wife Anita, son Juan, and other family members met with the group at their practice facility in Denver, and ironed it out. The meeting ended with a run-through of the planned performance, then the Thompson family joined in a dance the group was just learning themselves.

Joanne and I, as well as two other parents were asked to come to Aspen with them as their roadies, and we arrived at Woody Creek at about noon the Saturday of the funeral. We could see the tower for several miles as we approached the ranch. The tower was shrouded pending the evening's event. There was an amazing amount of security, sheriff's deputies and deputies-for-a-day, all the way from the principal highway to the gate. There were tow trucks parked periodically along the way, ready to hook up anyone who dared park anyplace. As we reached the last half mile, we saw a beautiful mansion which we learned was the residence of Don Johnson, the next door neighbor.

We spent the afternoon watching the build-up to the event, with little lot to do but some time with the production people and a film crew. It was interesting to see the high level of production all over the grounds, but especially every drum with a microphone, and additional mikes scattered to pick up the shouts or *kiai* (pronounced key-eye). Taiko is not often performed with microphones.

Early in the afternoon, we noticed three men had arrived wearing dark blue suits and white shirts. One posted himself near the stage. He stood watching the ridges around the farm for the rest of the day. Once or twice we exchanged a few words with the Secret Service agent, and he was pleasant but not to be distracted.

We were amused by workmen at the base of the tower, arranging and re-arranging massive boulders, often tossing them to each other. Hunter left something in the kitchen besides Wheaties.

The grounds were arranged like this: slightly uphill was the tower, with the aforementioned boulders at the base. Near the base, to the right of the tower, was the vintage Pontiac convertible Hunter made famous. A wide pathway had been laid out from the tower some 100 yards slightly downhill to a large, open-fronted tent, about 100 feet wide and 100 feet deep. A circular bar, large enough to accommodate a half dozen bartenders, was set up in the middle of this large tent, and there were groupings of sofas, easy chairs, lamps and tables and memorabilia of all sorts set up for the comfort of the guests. Photos decorated the canvas walls. Apparently the whole scene was made to feel like Hunter's living room.

As you looked from the living room toward the tower, the performance stage was 40 or 50 feet off to the right, angled so the performers would be playing to the crowd in the tent. The stage was wide and deep, large enough to accommodate the drummers.

Denver Taiko was scheduled to take the stage at 6:00 p.m., and drum for a continuous hour as the guests arrived. This was an unusual assignment and would be difficult with the group's all-out style of playing, but they put together a medley of pieces that would take 12 minutes to get through, when they would simply loop to the beginning– a total of five times to make an hour. At about 5:40, one of the production people asked them to extend the performance, so they added one more loop. They took the stage at 5:48 and played continuously for 72 minutes (at altitude!.) They should have paced for a marathon, but they played it as a sprint. Amazingly, they were still standing at 7 o'clock, and even had enough for a bow. I spent most of those 72 minutes observing the arriving guests, trying to figure out who might be famous. I didn't spot anyone who looked particularly important, but as the evening progressed I learned there were many celebrities there.

A little past seven, the session of 'background' drumming completed, the guests massed into a standing circle to hear an hour or more remembrances. The first celebrity I recognized in the line-up of speakers was Bill Bradley, of CBS News and Sixty Minutes, a good friend of Hunter's who told very funny stories of their comradeship. There were talks by the publisher of Rolling Stone Magazine and several others. Senator George McGovern, Nixon's opponent in the '72 presidential election spoke of his personal relationship with Hunter and, like the others, he had several really funny personal memories, and delivered what struck me as the best line of the evening, saying that Hunter did not always get the facts right, but always got the truth.

It was from McGovern's speech I learned Senator John Kerry was also at the event, although I never spotted him. That explained the Secret Service and the elevated security.

After the speeches, the audience turned towards the tower and the shroud was slowly lifted off by a crane while "Spirit in the Sky" was played at a very commanding volume. It is one of my favorite songs from the sixties and apparently one of Hunter's. Finally, something we had in common.

Revealed at the top of the tower was the Hunter S. Thompson 'logo', a two thumbed fist holding some pills (I understand it's peyote). The logo was illuminated from within and by powerful spotlights from about the grounds.

As soon as the shroud was lifted a speaker who was a friend of Hunter's and expert on Tibetan Buddhism, took the stage and explained that Thompson had become interested in Buddhism. He spoke with some phrases in Tibetan, segueing to a reference to the the place of drums in Buddhist philosophy, and ending with the words, "now we have the Drum". Denver Taiko instantly hit their stride.

With Thomas and Robert at opposite ends of the *odaiko* (the biggest drum) the group launched into a condensed version of a powerful piece that started loud and fast, and increased in cadence and volume over two minutes to an incredible crescendo, culminating in the explosion of the final beat and a loud *kiai* from the entire group. At that instant fireworks blasted from the ground on both sides of the tower.

Then a drum roll of 10 seconds and POW!, more fireworks, a second drum roll, faster and louder, and POW!, more fireworks, then the third, at an unbelievable pace and voume and POW! POW! POW! Fireworks bearing the remains of Hunter S. Thompson EXPLODED from the top of the tower, just as the guru of the sensational had envisioned. A party ensued. *-2005*

STRAWBERRIES

The growing season in Laramie never comports to the man-made calendar, failing to abide by rules akin to King Arthur's decree in *Camelot*, "by Order, summer lingers through September..." The city's altitude keeps summers enticingly lovely, but very short, and bookended by killing frosts.

Wyomingites are not easily denied, though, even by the elements. They know dirt is dirt, and 12 weeks ought to be plenty of time to grow any reasonably sized vegetable and at least some kind of fruit. The availability of bedding plants and chemicals today might even make gardening a practical venture now. But in 1953 you started with seed and fertilizer (the real stuff), and not much else.

Despite the odds, with seven kids grazing, it made economic sense for Mom and Dad to try to raise at least a few things to eat. Having actually witnessed radishes growing in Laramie, I can see how they had a reasonable basis for optimism.

So, along about Memorial Day, when he was sure the last spring frost was indeed the last, Dad assigned a couple of us boys to turn the soil in the area we optimistically called "the garden".

In the early afternoon, when the bed was plowed, raked, cleaned of rocks, and ready, Mom came into the picture bearing well organized packets of seeds: carrots, radishes, green onions, leaf lettuce, beets, spinach – mostly junk grownups like. By evening, the crops were planted, and the seed packages, mounted on popsicle sticks, stood erect at the upper end of each row, to announce to the world what was to come. Within a week, however, the signage would be scattered afar by the Wyoming winds.

On the Fourth of July, when farmers throughout the rest of the country stood in knee-high corn, Mom and Dad stood looking over their garden, which wasbeginning to show signs of green, and tried to remember what and where they had planted.

Labor Day's frost warning signaled the deadline for the harvest, which, at our house, should have been called the "radish festival." If anything but radishes ever grew in our garden, I didn't get any. We ate radishes for lunch and dinner for at least two months, and none of us had the courage to complain.

I mention all of this not to disparage Laramie, nor my parents as tillers of the soil, but to give you a picture of agricultural life on those high plains, and to create a sense of amazement when I tell about the day my dad planted the strawberries.

Dad came home from work on the railroad one June morning, and talked expansively about how the engineer on that trip had bragged about his incredible strawberry patch. The fact he was growing strawberries in Laramie was newsworthy, but the amazing part was the plants were shooting off little runners, making new strawberry plants, and creating a general congestion in his garden. It may have been Laramie's first strawberry jam.

Together, Dad and Mr. Joy had arrived at a solution. Dad, and some of his cronies, would thin the runners out of the strawberry patch, and plant them in their own yards.

Off they set, Dad, Lawrence Beman and O.V. Johnson, garden tools in hand. They removed 96 plants, and Mr. Joy was so pleased he invited the men into the kitchen, where they had a belt. A general discussion of agronomy in the high plans ensued, and Mr. Joy poured another round, and then the three set off for O.V. Johnson's house to plant his strawberries, leaving Mr. Joy behind to admire his.

O.V. already had a spot prepared, so they placed 32 plants in neat rows, and Mr. Johnson was pleased, and invited Lawrence and Dad in to the kitchen, where they had another belt. After further discussion of Western agriculture led to a debate on United States farm policy, they had another belt, and then Beman and Dad went to Lawrence's house to plant his strawberries, leaving O.V. behind to admire his.

Lawrence's soil was also ready, so it was a simple matter for them to plant 32 more strawberries, although neatness no longer counted. Beman was pleased, and invited Dad in to the kitchen where they passed the bottle, and discussed the Republican administration, with references to fertilizer and Ezra Taft Benson, the secretary of agriculture. Lawrence poured another belt, and maybe a third, before Dad decided he had to get home before dark to plant his strawberries, and left Lawrence behind to admire his.

The sun was only a dim memory that evening when, alone, Dad planted his strawberries, in the little patch which one of us kids had carefully tilled much earlier in the day. The next morning the sun was stark, raving reality when Mom went to the back yard to inspect Dad's work, and found, sticking uniformly out of the ground, in surprisingly neat rows, the roots of 32 strawberry plants, all upside down.

We didn't have strawberries that year, and I believe that was the last time our family ever attempted to cultivate edible plants. Mom changed her devotion from leaf lettuce to snapdragons, and from turnips to tulips. We all lived happily ever after, as did our local green grocer.

-1992

FOOTBALL, AUTUMN LEAVES AND CINDERS

Memories of Laramie, 1953

In writing of growing up in Laramie, I think of autumn, and an incredible mix of aromas and other sensations flood my memory and bring me back to a time that will never be again, and perhaps shouldn't, and should never be missed, but will.

Walk home with me today. It's a Saturday in early October, 1953. We're ten years old, you and I, and we've spent the morning at the big red library at 4th and Grand. It's an old building, and a kingdom of magic lurks in its dusty stacks, amidst an aroma of steam pipes, leather bindings and mildew. I met Robin Hood there, and I'm satisfied to this day that Sherwood Forest smells like the Carnegie Public Library.

Feel the wind, not quite cold but requiring a light jacket, swirling through the business district. This morning, downtown Laramie bustled with a thousand shoppers, but it's empty now on a Saturday afternoon. There's a football game today at the university, and the stores, all of them, closed at noon.

You hear the sounds of the big game all over town: a cannon booms, the marching band plays "Cowboy Joe", and a crowd larger than the whole population of Laramie roars so loud you can hear it even over the Union Pacific locomotives chugging a few blocks away.

Crossing the street West from the library, we walk first past our church, St. Lawrence O'Toole's, and our conversation lapses as we nod our heads briefly to acknowledge God's presence, as Monsignor taught us. But, I wonder, why do we always quicken our pace when we walk by?

We amble down Grand to Second, then South to Gamble's store, where we admire the bicycles in the window. Schwinn "Roadmasters" they are, and they're all built like Buicks--a modern fifties version of streamlining, with a tank in the cross bars, a horn button on the tank, fat tires, bullet shaped headlights, coaster brakes, andchain guards. They're beauties of many colors, some boys', some girls', but they have one thing in common–they're all 1-speed bikes.

We're getting close to the tracks, now, as we turn West again on Garfield towards the footbridge. The sound of the trains is getting to be so loud, you nearly have to plug your ears. Man!

Can you smell the soot? There must be something about the altitude around here that makes a train put out black smoke. Does the reduced oxygen mess up the combustion? (Heavy science for ten-year-olds, but we've just left the library, and our brains are still working pretty good.) Soot smells, and it sticks. All of downtowns has it, but the closer you get to the tracks, the dirtier the architecture.

The "Treagle Train" is in town for the game today. That's a train that's sponsored by the Cheyenne Tribune and Eagle newspapers (get it? "Treagle"?). All the politicians and the other codgers over in the state capital ride it, and by the time the train gets to Laramie, they're fall-down drunk. It would be fun to hang around this afternoon and watch them get poured back onto the cars, but we gotta get on home.

From the top of the footbridge, at the East end, we can see miles down the main line where a single bright head lamp looms larger than the engine it leads, putting the dot on the exclamation point formed by black smoke rising from her fire box.

I feel the pin-prick pain of a cinder in my eye from one of the big locomotives down below us, spewing dirty, oily smoke that could choke a steel worker. Cinders won't wash out by your own tears; they have to be carefully and gently removed by your mom or maybe your sister. Don't ever, <u>ever</u> let your brother do it!

The footbridge crosses the wide railroad yards. Some days it really gets to shaking with all the activity down on the tracks. Did you notice how the grownups only walk in the middle of the bridge? They don't like to get too close to the edge, I guess. Weird.

I saw U.P. on a railroad car....Ha, ha! Hey...No slugging!

Look down there at the roundhouse. See, it isn't really round. It's an arc shaped building, with a turntable in the center. Let's stop here a minute. I think they're about to run an engine out of the shops. What an amazing thing, railroad turntables. Boy! If I ever get to work on the railroad, I hope they give me the turntable job.

The West side. This is the working man's part of town. Houses on the East side have brick and stucco. The houses in our part of town are apt to be covered with tar paper. It's the melting pot of Laramie, but this is where we live, and this is where we learn to get along with a lot of different people. Maybe some day we'll move across the tracks into a house that's actually big enough for our family, but, gosh, I hope not too soon.

Can you smell the piles of cottonwood leaves? After last week's snow melted, they're getting kind of dank smelling underneath, but on top they're fresh, crisp and just right for wrasslin'.

A few more blocks South on Cedar, and we'll cut over to Spruce Street (wonder if they'll ever pave it?) and then down to our place. Does your dad work on the railroad? My dad's "out" on his turn today, but I think he'll get in this afternoon. He'll want me to help rake the yard. Maybe we can walk down to the river before he gets home. It's right behind the house, but all you can see from the yard is willow bushes.

Mom'll have some stuff for us to eat first. Do you like sloppy joe's?

-1992

THE CHRISTMAS TREE MAN

The tree was fine, stout, and tall,
Its branches tempered by years' snowfall,
Its aroma sweet, a fresh pine scent,
Its needles soft, its trunk unbent.

But the picture I recall, when I can,
Is not of a tree, but the Christmas Tree Man.

His truck was black, a Model T,
I climbed the side and stretched to see
Inside the bed: a sharpened axe, a ragged throw,
And tire chains for the forest snow.

And like its owner, up in years,
But for mulish persistence had no peers.

His red plaid hat, his gnarled fists,
A union suit cuffed his neck and wrists,
His ruddy, wintered, grizzled face,
His lyric speech, from a far off place.

A holly, Swedish elf was he,
The jolly man with the Christmas Tree.

The image of the old Swede and his black model-T truck is indelible; no Christmas passes that I don't ponder who he was, and from where he came.

Did he travel the world, delivering trees as an advance man for St. Nicholas? No, the Wyoming tags on his truck disconnected him from the North Pole. Then was he a hermit who emerged from the cold forest only at Christmas time? Were the Knights the only family he visited?

Each December he would come to our house to ask Mom "what corner will it be in this year?". Then, a day or two later, he would deliver a beautiful, freshly cut tree that fit just right into that spot. There was never a bill of sale, receipt, or money discussed or exchanged in front of us kids, which left us to believe the tree was bestowed, not bought.

I've talked to Mom about it and she recalls the man, but not his name. He apparently owned some forested property and made a little money by selling Christmas trees. She remembers she or Dad would come across him downtown after the tree was delivered, and pay him then. The deliveries continued until about 1950. She isn't sure whether he passed away then, or simply retired from what must have been hard work.

That he has been exposed as a merchant is neither surprising nor distressing. The little boy within me still remembers the Christmas Tree Man as a personification of the season, mor real, and perhaps more significant than any modern image of Santa Claus.

-1993
-1993

A Mousekin's Christmas

Robert E. Mouse, at age 7, wasn't a mousekin who thought of himself as studious, but he read a lot of books, and he knew a lot of cool stuff. He could explain black holes in space, the meanderings of marsupials, and why his favorite movie should have been named Cretaceous Park because its dinosaurs were mostly from that era, not Jurassic!

But as much as he read and paid attention in school and to things in his world, he couldn't come up with a scientific explanation for Santa Claus. I mean, he wanted to believe, but nobody could be expected to think any of those characters hanging around the department stores were Santa. And how could one man go to about a hundred thousand million houses in one night?

His big brother was no help. Teenagers are so dumb, they don't believe in Santa Claus but they think money grows on trees. When Robert E. asked his mom to explain these strange things, especially that bit about Santa and the chimney, she said, like usual when he tossed her a hard ball question, "maybe you'd better ask your dad." All dad could offer was, "there's more than one way to skin a cat." Gross! Parents are weird, too. They tell you there *is* a Santa but money *doesn't* grow on trees.

Most mice can sleep just about anywhere they want, anytime they want. But Robert's curiosity kept him from sleeping this Christmas eve. It wasn't that he was worried, because he'd really been pretty good, and he hadn't fought with his brother much, since the big pain spent every night lately talking to his girl friend. But if curiosity can kill a cat, but keeps a mouse awake!

So it was that Robert E. Mouse was skittering behind the sofa, up and over the big TV set, and in and out of the packages and envelopes under the tree. He had paused a moment to poke around the nut bowl, when he heard not the clatter of reindeer on the roof, but from the fireplace an oomph!, a grunt, a thrashing of leather boots, a shoop!, and a resounding TA DA!

He peaked around a walnut, and there stood Santa Claus himself, slapping at his garments to dislodge the soot. He could see the merry twinkle in the gent's eyes, though his glasses were fogged, and he could sense the mighty energy of the man though he now gasped for air. Then from his sack Santa drew packages of all sorts, brightly wrapped the way human's like, and placed them under the tree. For a rodent, things to gnaw on, but not much else.

Most people would believe Santa's work at this house was now done, and Robert, too, feared it was so as the elf bounded back to the fireplace. But Santa then flung his big red sack on the hearth, and drew from his deep pocket another, smaller red bag labeled "for the mice". He hopped about, depositing behind the couch a handful of raisins, by the table a variety of tasty seeds, and around the tree a trail of cookie crumbs.

But he saved for last Robert's favorite, when he opened a brand new package of shiny, chocolate covered morsels and lined them in a row across the mantel, to spell out "m m m m m m m m".

Then Santa sucked in his great belly 'til he turned nearly blue, and, with a solid ooomph!, a grunt, a thrashing of leather boots, a shoop! and another TA DA!, he was gone.

Robert E. Mouse no longer needed scientific proof, for he had seen Santa Claus and how he loved and remembered all of God's creatures at Christmas.

The mousekin selected the shiniest, reddest "m" from the row, skittered to his favorite sleeping place behind the refrigerator, made a pillow of his candy, and slept soundly through the rest of the night.

Based loosely on the personality of a certain individual who's identity I shall not disclose. He gave me permission to print the story again, but I'm keeping it a secret anyway. He's in college now, and I want him to have his dignity. Dignity is something a university freshman should value. If you're driving through Boulder, and you happen to see Robert Knight moving smartly across the campus, it isn't him.

Merry Christmas to All the Good Knights!

A PLACE FOR THE ANGEL

"Remember, set a place for the angel" was a silly reminder as he helped Ida with preparations for Christmas dinner that day in 1922. No dinner table was set in their parsonage that didn't include the extra place in contemplation that it might be needed, and it often was. The ‘angel' usually appeared as a member of their church who ‘happened to be' in the neighborhood, but now and then would come a stranger down on his luck. Judgment was God's work, in the eyes of Ida and Byrd Payton, and they welcomed any who came to their door.

Wealth can be measured in a variety of ways. A preacher and his family on those prairies of Eastern Colorado were rich not in dollars or real property, but in the love and largesse of the communities and congregations they served. These were farming and ranching towns, so there was always a bounty of food in the Payton household to share with their dozen or more guests at Christmas.

And so he set out eighteen plates, three for his small family, and fourteen for the invited mélange of an elderly widow, a childless middle aged couple, hired men from the farms, and a young school teacher far from home. The eighteenth place, for the angel, was inconspicuous at a corner of the crowded table, not so likely to be taken today because they had already invited their regular ‘angels'.

The Reverend Julius Byrd Payton (known by many as "J.B.") offered his annual Christmas blessing, a rousing, glorious, Methodist production. Then, after a momentary clash of elbows and pottery, Ida laughed and delivered her own belated proclamation that all dishes should be passed to the left. The din ebbed to murmurs of ‘please', ‘thank you' and ‘oh my' as the turkey and bowl after bowl of fixings worked their way around the table.

"Now who might that be?!" exclaimed Ida. The knock didn't come from the wide oak front door this time, but rattled the screen on the back porch. Geraldine, her daughter of eight and self-appointed family receptionist, sprung noisily through the kitchen, through the aromas and warmth still radiating from the iron cook stove, and through the open back door to the screened porch. Her dad followed in steady but less strenuous pursuit.

A big Scotsman, he was, judging from the red beard and his "Aye, lass!" greeting. His burly arm rested on a crooked staff, while at his feet the collie shyly wagged his tail. "Would you mind if we tarried a bit? Shep and I don't mean to be no bother, lass, but we've been on the road awhile, and we're bone weary."

"Can't he come in, Daddy? Please?"

The brief pause, as always when a stranger came to Payton's door, was to allow debate between two of his prominent virtues, common sense and Christian charity. It was a routine polemic which the Christians perpetually won, but never by default.

"Name's McKinley, sir. Jebediah. Jeb, to my friends."

"Byrd Payton," he replied, opening the door in invitation. "Let your coat and sack and your stick rest on the porch. Jerri, maybe you'll fix up a bowl for Shep, while I introduce Jeb around."

The Reverend led the Scot to the festive table and, with a hand on his shoulder, introduced him around to everyone seated, ending with "our daughter, Geraldine, who you've met" and who had just reclaimed her chair next to the empty one. "It seems we've been expecting you for our Christmas dinner, Jeb. Won't you join us?". Ida tittered a bit in her own manifestation of the Christians vs. common sense debate, then smiled and said "Oh, yes! Mr. McKinley, please do. We've more than enough!"

The conversation was varied and pleasant and they learned that McKinley had tended sheep in Wyoming until a few weeks ago when his charges had been auctioned to settle the estate of his late employer. Being near sixty and down a bit in the back, it seemed to him a good time to migrate to a more generous climate. He'd already noticed improvement as he and Shep ambled on foot through Colorado, but he was thinking of something still further south.

Jeb's Scottish burr was mixed with the rough language of the high plains, which he consciously toned down when he came to realize his hosts were a preacher and a temperance worker. Even then, he let slip "it's looking like one ‘ell of a winter up there", but offered "sorry, ma'am" in respect to Ida. Jerri was enthralled.

Shep, meanwhile, had found his way to a place at the feet of his master, next to Jerri. No one at the table acknowledged her surreptitious feeding of the dog, but she neither deceived nor displeased anyone in doing it.

It was pie time at the end of the feast when the peace was invaded by the Bell telephone in the passageway to the kitchen. Two short rings and a long, their code on the party line. Jerri was quick to answer the phone.

"It's Mr. Iverson, Daddy. It's about Juney." June Iverson was Jerri's friend and third grade classmate. The Iversons weren't Methodist, but the families had developed a friendship through their daughters.

"She's been up all night, J.B., and we're not sure what to do. The Doc's gone to visit relatives and won't be back for a couple weeks. I'm sure sorry to be bothering you on Christmas, but...."

"It's all right, Carl, we've finished our dinner. Maybe I could run out....we'll be there as soon as we can." J.B. Payton's touring car was still one of the few automobiles in town, but a necessity for a preacher who's flock was flung over the nearly 2,000 square miles of Kit Carson county.

Byrd apologized to his guests and explained his mission to Ida. June had been suffering from a chest cold, but overnight she had developed a fever, and now she seemed to be burning up.

The reverend said "I'll take you along, Jerri. You’ll help me with the gates."

Jeb spoke up. "Perhaps I can be 've some help, Rev'rnd. I've a little experience."

"Well, come along then, both of you.”

Jerri and Shep rode in the back, now fast friends, as the automobile bounced and lurched over the rough roads. J.B. Payton was a gentle soul, but his demeanor as a motorist in those jaunty days was to attack the road. He liked to create new ruts, not bog down in the old. Snow drifts were to break through, not go around.

Before the invention of cattle guards, time could be saved if there was someone along to help with the gates; otherwise, the driver had to alight, open the gate, climb in the car, drive it through, get out, close the gate, get back in, and continue for perhaps only another mile to do it all again. The handling of the cumbersome barbed wire gates on that

trip fell thankfully to Jeb who had the burly physique to made it easy work. The route to the Iverson's home place required the negotiation of four gates, and having Jeb along saved them several minutes off the nine mile trip that usually took more than half an hour.

The scene at the Iverson's was of Christmas, but the mood was sedate. The air was fragrant with pine, a few wrappings still scattered about the tree. Ellen Iverson had managed to prepare a Christmas dinner, but Carl and their three sons of 15, 17 and 20 had eaten of it sparsely and at different times during the afternoon. June slept, breathing heavily and ineffectively, in the Iverson's big downstairs bedroom, where she could be looked after. The house was warm, almost too warm, because no one was sure what else could be done. The boys found chores around their big dairy farm to keep them busy. Carl and Carl Jr. went to the barn to smoke because they didn't want to bother Juney with it.

When the car rattled and bounded into the yard Carl and Ellen were there to greet them. Jeb was introduced and they all went inside. J.B. went to June's bedside, heard her rasping breath and felt her fevered forehead. He wasn't trained in medicine but his job brought him to more sick beds than any profession next to doctor or nurse. Jeb watched from the door, but kept a distance appropriate for a stranger. Jerri lingered at Jeb's side, in her own private terror.

J.B. came back to the front room and smiled to Carl and Ellen. "Pneumonia," he said, not saying but knowing she was near death, and that the Iversons knew it. Pneumonia, in those days before the development of sulphur and then the miracle of penicillin, was an illness that too often brought a slow and difficult death, effectively smothering its victim.

"We'll need to pray," he said. They all reflected as Byrd said the words of prayer, and offered a quiet "amen" in conclusion.

Jeb's eyes brightened. "Remember, Rev'rnd, I told you I've a bit of experience" he said. Byrd had thought the experience Jeb cited earlier was in opening gates.

"Turn of the century my dear mother had a spate with pneumonia. No doctor about. Hotter'n hell she was...sorry, Rev...do you have bran in your granary, Mr. Iverson?" Jeb continued, "Missus, we'll need your empty flour sacks!"

Recognition dawned in Byrd's eyes, and he explained to the couple what Jeb and he were thinking. "It will take some time, but it's worth the try", he said. "I'll need your telephone to call Ida." Ida said the guests had stayed to help her clean up, but most had left.

"We need you here, Ida. Pack a bag for the three of us. Jeb and I will come for you in an hour". Then to Jerri, "You stay and help Ellen find flour sacks."

It was after six that evening when the tin lizzie bounced back into the yard. The women commenced to cut and sew the flour sacks into smaller bags, about six by ten inches. The men brought bran from the dairy barn and helped pack it tightly into the sacks. The ladies stitched the bags closed, laid them out on baking sheets, and put them in the oven. The bran formed a density that would heat consistently and would hold warmth for a generous time.

The bundles were removed from the oven just as they took on a toasty aroma and before they became too warm to handle. Ellen packed the warm bags over June's chest. Her breathing eased.

It would be necessary to change the packs regularly throughout the day and night, so the couples agreed to take shifts. The Iversons, being dairy farmers, were already accustomed to rising early in the morning, so it was decided they would rest first. There was an extra room upstairs for Ida and Byrd to share with their daughter. Jeb was shown a place in a back room where he could put out his bedroll.

Everyone was on hand for the first changing of the packs, and the cool ones were returned to the oven. By 9:00 p.m. Jerri was asleep in the Payton's room, the Iversons and their boys had retired, and Jeb had enjoyed a bath and was nestled down with Shep in his first warm sleeping place in weeks. Ida and Byrd had a little time to chat and read, but mostly they spent their first shift changing and warming the bran sacks, and keeping June comfortable.

During the night the nursing shift changed, but Jerri and Jeb slept undisturbed until about 7:00 as the morning sun peered into their sleeping places. They wandered at the same time to the kitchen which served as the center of operations for the family and farm. Mrs. Iverson was visibly more cheerful that morning, and Carl was relaxed and enjoying his coffee. The boys were busy as usual with chores, the milking completed more than two hours earlier.

Jerri and Jeb found June resting still more comfortably, but yet not breathing easily. Jeb said she would take some lookin' after but he thought she'd be fine one day soon.

After a typical farmer's breakfast of eggs and bacon, and as Jerri petted Shep, Jeb donned his winter coat and retrieved his sack and his staff. Jerri walked them to the first gate, and they were off, warmed, fed and invigorated in their quest for a benevolent climate. "Merry Christmas, Lass," he turned and waved again from a distance. Shep ran half way back to the gate, barked twice, and rejoined his master as they vanished around the bend in the road.

The Paytons stayed with the Iversons all week, taking their regular turn as the treatment continued. J.B. drove back and forth from town for his regular duties, to write his sermon, and to conduct Sunday services. Jerri was out of school for Christmas vacation and delighting in the experience of a dairy farm, getting under foot while the boys did their chores, and generally being an even bigger pest than their little sister. The boys taught Jerri to ride, and allowed her to come along as they checked the fences together on horseback. These were working excursions, but the youngsters always came back laughing and hungry.

June improved daily, but some days' progress seemed terribly slow, and yes, she did take some lookin' after.

On New Year's day, Jerri Payton rose with the sun and, for the first time in better than a week, so did little June. The girls played in the kitchen as if she had never been ill; a noisy game of tag that came so close to the hot stove that Mrs. Iverson scolded them loudly. "Heavens, you girls! You'll be burned!"

Carl and the boys had finished their morning chores, and were at the back porch. Ida and Byrd were just drawing into wakefulness, when they heard the commotion and scolding, and hurried down to find Carl, Jr. hugging his little sister, the rest of the Iversons laughing merrily and dancing around the kitchen.

Ida and Ellen made breakfast as June, Jerri and the men found their usual places at the table. Mrs. Iverson, without even a thought, set out ten plates that morning: six for her brood, three for the Paytons, and a place for the angel.

This story is based on some of mom's childhood experiences. It's true that our grandparents always set a 'place for the angel' and that it was often taken. It's also true grandma and grandpa helped save the little girl's life by using the bran-filled bags. The Scotsman is entirely my invention. -1997