



The Meanderings  
of Uncle Dennis

*The Knight Family Calendar 2026*

Maureen and Kathi suggested I use some of my writings for the 2026 Calendar. I selected pieces that reflect our family and things we treasure from hundreds of pieces of prose and verse I have compiled over the years.

I hope you enjoy what I picked and thank you for indulging me.

Dennis



## Did Your Mother Have a Wringer Washer?

Did your mother have a wringer washer? And later, with improvements in inventions and finances, a machine with one tub for agitating and another for spinning?

Did your parents, by dint of their own childhood memories, still call your refrigerator the icebox? Do you remember when milk came with the cream on top and skim on the bottom? Do you suppose cows dispensed the two parts from separate spigots? Remember when milk was delivered in glass bottles topped with paper lids that popped off if the milk froze before you woke up and got it inside? Remember what a good science lesson that was?

Do you remember when the best ice cream came from a machine cranked by hand? Did the whole family participate in the cranking, starting with your littlest brother, and progressing up through the family, finishing with your dad, as the ice cream got solid, the cranking got harder and the dad got crankier?

Did you learn to carve a whistle out of a willow branch? Remember making a slingshot with rubber from an old innertube on a fork whittled from a willow tree? Do you even remember inner tubes, or patching them?

Did you ever roll down the street clinging to the inside of a tire? Did you ever go for a walk on stilts built of discarded 2-by-4's? Did you have to climb on the fence to mount the stilts? How often did you fall? Were you initiated into the Boy Scouts with a snipe hunt? Did you catch one? Did one catch you? Or did you finally just catch on.

Did you talk long-distance with your brother into a tin can tied on a string? Did the reception improve as you stretched the line? Did you sign off your tin can conference with "Roger, Wilco," and "over 'n out?"

Do you remember the pain of a scraped knee? Do you remember the pain of getting it fixed, your mom dabbing it clean, the sting of iodine, and later the agony of getting the bandage removed?

Did refusing to eat your carrots come with a lecture from your dad about eyesight and another from your mother about children starving in China? Did you ever dig a hole to China? How deep did you get before your mom called you in to lunch?

Do you remember telephone booths? Checking each as you passed for treasure in the change return slot? Did your sister keep a dime in her penny loafers to call home in case of an emergency, or worse, an unruly boyfriend?

I hope you can say yes to a few of these questions, and if you have some of your own, let's get together. I hear the snipes will be out tonight at Washington Park. (2023)

## Soul Food for Little White Knights

There is nothing so enticing and soul satisfying for a little boy coming home from a hard day in the salt mines of parochial school as the aroma of ham and beans radiating from Mom's kitchen, maybe with the sweet undertone of cornbread in the oven. Sometimes they would be green beans, other times they were navy beans, but it didn't matter, because the perfume was supplied to either by a ham hock simmering in the pot.

Mom often said that if she ever knew in advance her next meal would be her last, she would make it ham and beans. We didn't call it "comfort food" in those days, and we didn't know it as "soul food" either, because neither expression would arrive in our family until well after we had already been grown and fattened. It was just home cooking, but, yes, it was food for the soul, and, oh, was it comforting.



Entire restaurant concepts are built around comfort food or soul food, and they are often the same. If soul food is collard greens, they will not enrich the soul until they have been simmered with bacon, and if comfort food is a pot roast, it won't comfort the weary without carrots and potatoes. And gravy.

I don't know about other cultures of the world, but I think a little girl in Sweden would be as taken by meatballs and lingonberry as a child in Germany would love schnitzel with spaetzle or a boy in Japan would be taken by yakitori and rice.

In short, soul food is comfort food, comfort food is good for the soul, and it all represents the home cooking you grew up with.

Our mom was an accomplished cook with a college degree in home economics and nutrition. She had a wide repertoire in the kitchen, but she focused mostly on traditional family cooking. We loved it all regardless of what it was called.

There were seven of us kids spread in age over seventeen years, and depending on what grade we were in, or whether one of us was running late because of football practice or a marble session, we would straggle home at different times in the afternoon. The only constant is that we would each be hungry, and unless it was ham and beans, or liver and onions, which is another dish that announces itself by aroma, Mom would be quizzed on each burst through the door, "What's for supper?!"

One of the family's favorite meals, and especially Dad's, was pork chops and hominy fried to a golden perfection. On those days, Dad would field the "What's for supper?" question himself with grin and twinkle in his eye. "Pig's ass 'n hominy!" (2015)

## Clickity-Clack and Other Memories

Do you remember your earliest years? Do you remember how huge the dining room table was, especially when gazing up from underneath? The world is much different, isn't it, from an altitude of six feet as opposed to three? Memories like those are some of our most cherished because they were established when we were learning so fast.

I remember the long, rumbly noontime whistle from the smokestack in Laramie's railyards and how it gave me one of my earliest impressions of time. I remember the puffing and hissing of passenger trains pulling into the station, sonorous, steam-driven whistles announcing arrivals and departures, mixing their clamors with those of much longer freight trains rumbling through town, slowing and rising speeds measured in rhythms, clickity-clack, clickity-clickity-clack.

I remember falling asleep at Grandma and Grandpa's in Loveland to the cooing of turtle doves. I remember a leaky potted plant hanging on Grandma's porch, and her permitting me to chew an otherwise forbidden stick of gum to make a plug to fix it. I remember her ruffled aprons. I remember her teaching me to tie my shoes, and her sweet praise when I finally got it.

I remember asking Grandpa what his 'job' was and he told me he was a fisherman; then he glanced to a plaque on the wall certifying not the numbers and sizes of fish he caught, but his license to brag about them.

I remember Jerry and Maureen pointing out our back door to a frog on the bridge that was blocks away, and my disappointment that I couldn't make it out. I believe now they saw a puff of fog rising from the river, but I am still jealous they could see a frog that far away.

I remember the rhythmic starts and stops of Mom's sewing machine as she created beautiful things for my sisters and herself. I remember hand cranking the ice cream churn. It was a challenge of hours that the whole family met in turns based progressively on each member's muscle mass. And, boy, do I remember that ice cream!

I remember the times one of my brothers, but certainly never me, would decapitate our little sister Kathi's doll, and her tears, the furious scolding, and then joy when Mom magically reconnected the head using a crochet hook. I remember wrestling with my brothers, kicking cans, hiding and seeking, tagging, getting tagged, and bulldozing roads with trucks in the sandbox. And I remember idling alone on the limb of my favorite tree quietly engaged in assessing life as a kid. (2024)

## Making Their Way Without College

*Benjamin Franklin's* classroom schooling ended when he was 10. When he was 12 he apprenticed with his brother James, a printer. Yet he had a lifetime of learning and became a noted polymath as well as a contributor to science, literature and, notably politics.

*Abraham Lincoln* had only 18 months of formal learning in frontier schools. Still a boy, he worked as a rail-splitter and storekeeper and by voraciously reading law books he taught himself enough to hang his shingle as an attorney at law in Illinois.

*Thomas Edison* was taught reading, writing and arithmetic by his mother but had only a few months of formal schooling. He was an intellectually curious kid stimulated by a book his mother gave him on natural and experimental philosophy, and a Thomas Paine book that inspired him all of his life. At 14 he saved a child from a runaway train, and the happy father gave him a job as a telegraph operator. It was Edison's education by tinkering that led to a lifetime of famous inventions.

*Samuel Clemens* attended school sporadically until his father passed away when he was 12. After that he became a printer's apprentice, contributing articles to the *Hannibal Journal*. He became a cub pilot on Mississippi steamboats where he learned to read the river, and it was where he took his pen name, Mark Twain.

*Ernest Hemingway* after high school worked as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star* before enlisting in the Red Cross where he served as an ambulance driver on the Italian Front in World War I. *Walt Disney* had only one year of high school before leaving during that same war, like Hemingway, to serve in the Red Cross as an ambulance driver. He returned to Kansas City to work as an apprentice commercial artist.

*Charles Dickens* attended school briefly at age 9 before his father's imprisonment for debt forced him to work in a factory. He eventually became a clerk for a solicitor, then a shorthand reporter, then a parliamentary and newspaper reporter.

*Henry Ford* attended a one-room schoolhouse in Dearborn but wasn't particularly interested in things like math and reading. He took a liking to the firsthand learning of taking apart and reassembling things like motors and watches. At 16 he became an apprentice machinist in Detroit.

*Harry Truman* graduated from High School in Independence, then took bookkeeping, shorthand and typing in a business school but stopped after a year. He farmed and owned a haberdashery before getting chosen as a judge in Kansas City.

You know their stories, each of them of lifetime achievement; people who placed a high value on education but by different circumstances got theirs not in classrooms but in the university of higher learning called Life. And from that honorable institution they all earned their PhD's. (2025)

## Living in an Irishman's Skin

An Irishman's face is never a mask. We can't help it. We burn, we freckle, and we blush. It gives us away when we spend too much time in the sun, it gives us away when we've had a drop too many, and it gives us away when our thoughts become, well, maybe a bit too Irish.

An article in The Irish Post by Aidan Lonergan in April of 2018 blames it on a genetic mutation. He reported research at Penn State University that identified SLC24A5 as the gene that controls skin pigmentation, and mutation number A111T as the culprit that makes the Irish so infernally white. It started with a man who lived in India or the Middle East some ten thousand years ago, before his descendants carried the mutation to Ireland via the Iberian Peninsula.

Over time, those charming Irish freckles fade away or become subsumed into the wrinkles and discolorations of aging. For that we wear sun-blocking lotions and hats and/or hope the dermatologist has a little something for the damage.

Blushing is the true and unmanageable betrayal of an Irishman. It is involuntary, coming from the system that activates fight-or-flight responses, a matter of adrenaline. Our blood vessels dilate to improve the blood flow and oxygen delivery, and our cheeks respond accordingly.

There are countless things that make us blush. Or I should say countless things that make *me* blush, because I don't know what it is that makes you blush. Maybe it's me and you're just playing along in sympathy.

A psychologist would say it is social anxiety that makes me blush. Or is it a guilty conscience? The reddening of my cheeks may be a simple reflection of discomfort at being the center of attention, or it may be an activation of the same system that sends lie-detector machines spewing ink off the charts.

But I was an altar boy, after all, and so it must be the center-of-attention alternative that reddens my cheeks. Well, pretty girls make me blush, too, but that's a whole different story, and I blush to think about it.

I hesitate to tell you other things that make me blush for fear I will in the telling fall into such radiant blushes storm clouds will form, and then it will get worse because I can feel the blush, and I redden even deeper.

Mark Twain had in him no small amount of the blood and blarney of the Irish and must have more than a few times himself felt the reddening flush. He explained all we need to know about the misery in one very quotable remark, "Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to." (2019)

## Sure, a Little Bit of Blarney

I had the good fortune of getting born into family of mostly Irish descent. Mom and Dad passed to my brothers and sisters their good looks and brains, and what I got was the gift of blarney. Not the sort of smooth blarney that woos the ladies, I regret, but the kind that compels me to wax fantastic at every fancy.

Blarney, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is talk that aims to charm, pleasantly flatter, or persuade. But blarney is way more than sweet talk. It is the magic that makes leprechauns dance, rainbows deposit gold, banshees cry and pookas roam at night.

An Irish travel consultant, Bernard Biege uses blarney of his own to explain the source of the expression. During the Reformation, Queen Elizabeth the First was trying to negotiate a deal with Cormac MacCarthy, the lord of Blarney Castle, to put his domain under her reign.

Determined to keep his independence, Cormac spoke flattering words to the Queen but met her royal demands without deeds. Instead, he elaborated on why certain things could not be done, or not soon enough, or not without some modification. MacCarthy became such a pain in the royal posterior that Queen Bess one day cracked and screamed, "This is all Blarney, what he says he never means!"

MacCarthy's descendants still tell stories about the Blarney Stone and its magic powers, connecting it with the biblical Jacob who is said to have used the stone for his pillow, and it is also said to be the rock Moses struck with his staff for water as the Israelites fled slavery in Egypt.

The Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen held sway on American television with informative but entertaining lectures in the nineteen-fifties, including his own take on blarney, distinguishing it from lunch meat, saying, "Baloney is flattery laid on so thick it cannot be true, and blarney is flattery so thin we love it."

I am a natural practitioner of blarney, so if you are hunting for treasure or plotting your route to heaven, use me as your travel agent, I will happily send you on your way, and get you there by way of Albuquerque, Jersey City, and Missoula, and you will thank me for the scenery. If you have a boat, I'll even toss Havana into the itinerary. And if ye fancy all that, I've a fair lovely bridge on the Auld Sod I'd be tickled to sell ye. (2017)

## No Mulligans

If at first you don't succeed, try and try some more.  
That's the mantra I have heard, and I take no mulligans.  
If my drive off the tee is measured in feet, not yards,  
I count the stroke, address the ball, and swing again.

That's the way it's always been,  
To roll for a strike and down but a pin,  
To drive the ball a dozen feet,  
To hope for an ace and draw a ten.

But things do go well now and then,  
I roll a strike, putt for a par,  
Make a bucket, win a pot,  
And bat that baby out of the park.

I'm getting one life and no do-overs,  
The mistakes I make are my lessons learned,  
If the first stroke is in feet, not yards, I hit it again  
Count each stroke and take no mulligans.  
(2019)

## Becoming Becomingly Becoming

For a simple word, "becoming" has grown.

In meanings and forms, and it's well overblown.  
"Becoming" makes fun of itself like few words can do,  
To "become becoming" makes me grumpy and blue.  
"Never will I becoming becoming!" I cry,  
It's both a verb and a noun, then to multiply,  
It's adjective and adverb, a tangled-up fright,  
"I am becoming becomingly becoming." It just isn't right.  
And yes, I will admit, as I ponder this tune,  
Becoming becomingly crazy is becoming too soon.  
(2024)

## Science is Bunk

Science is wrong, and to prove it, I say.  
Check adjoining walls and check out the way,  
They measure alike, top, bottom and middle,  
Proving our world is as flat as a griddle.

As to curvature of the earth? Hogwash I say, hooey,  
hokum, twaddle, and, for good measure, it's baloney.  
Sputnik, Gemini, Apollo, Spacewalk,  
Moon walks, journeys to Mars? Jabberwock.  
Balderdash to Latitude, longitude and hemisphere.  
That there are North Poles and South Poles, it is sheer  
Figments of scientists going wild, it is clear.

So, if ever again you think you are bound,  
To the myth of Mother Earth being round,  
Remember this, if we were clung to a ball,  
It would roll this way, then that, and to hell we would fall.

Scientists say that is this just to prove this is that,  
But their science is wrong. And the earth? She is flat.  
(2025)



## Martinique or Bust

On vacation was my agent,  
So, I asked the agency adjacent,  
Right next door and in the basement.  
To book my flight to Martinique.

She suggested I spend my week instead  
In Caldonia, California or Estonia,  
Down the river in Mississippi,  
The Isle of Capris, or in Hawaii on Waikiki.

I was interested not in Bavaria or Bulgaria,  
Nor Astoria, Peoria, Pretoria or Victoria.  
Martinique, I swore and swore some more,  
Martinique or bust, I said, and only Martinique.

Don't book me into Austin, Boston,  
New York, old York, County Cork,  
Aruba, Cuba, Greece or Nice.  
Kalamazoo, Timbuktu or Tijuana will never do.

I turned down Versailles, Dubai, Shanghai and Mumbai,  
Saratoga, Sarasota, Minnesota and both Dakotas,  
Pomona, Daytona, Ramona, Verona,  
Sonoma, Tacoma and then Oklahoma.

With that, she sold me a ticket to Martinique.  
So why did I just land in Mozambique?  
(2019)

## A Character Study in Two

This is about our grandmother, Ida May Nash Payton, born in Missouri in 1877, a good woman, and our grandfather, the Reverend Julius Byrd Payton, born in Indiana in 1875, known in equal measure as Byrd or J.B., a good man. Both schoolteachers, they were married in Larned, Kansas in 1898. In 1903 Grandpa entered the Methodist ministry, and together they served churches for 50 years, starting in Kansas and then, in 1922, the eastern plains of Colorado, retiring in 1940.

When the Payton family lived at Kit Carson they were once called to spend days at a farm caring for a big family all suffering from a severe bronchial ailment. The three of them, including Mom, still a young child, sewed sackcloth filled with barley, then heated them as acidity bags to treat the family.

In the early 1930's with the correspondingly crushing tragedies of 1929's stock market collapse and the Dust Bowl literally blowing away the prairie from underneath them, the Paytons helped many families endure. They were often called to resurrect pastorates in starving communities for little more stipend than the barter of an undernourished chicken.

Grandpa was the more political of the two, and he was furious with the rise of the Klu Klux Klan in Colorado in the early twentieth century. He recalled for us how he once suffered burns putting out the raging fire of a cross burning on a neighbor's lawn.

Grandma had a political edge, too, as a suffragist active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union fighting the scourge of alcohol and its consequential damage to families. While it may have been quixotic folly, I identify with the cause and passionate human spirit of the movement.

A story from early in their retirement is about a family living next door in Loveland, with the husband being an abusive drunkard. Grandma worked out a system with the battered wife whereby, when there was trouble, she would hang a handkerchief in the window, signaling Grandma to call the police.

They were what we think of today as Lincoln Republicans, conservatives of the staunchest order, but, just as staunchly, kind and understanding people who treated everyone equally with love, respect, and patience. A wonderful tradition of the family was to always set a place at the table for the angel, who might be anyone stopping by unexpectedly, or even a hungry person at the door.

At every meal Grandpa would say the blessing, "Father, we thank you for this day, for its sunshine and showers, for its breezes and its serenity. Our hopes go out to

You for our continued well-being, but most of all, for the love You have given us so freely and so generously. May this love be just as free and as generously shared with our family, our neighbors, our friends and even our enemies, so in the not-too-distant future, we may all know a peaceful world. Amen"

(2024)

### The Morning Grandpa Cursed

Our grandfather served in the Methodist ministry.  
Never a curse was heard to part his lips,  
Although he and Grandma tempted themselves playfully  
Whenever a road took them by a dam.

It was an example set for their grandchildren,  
And we observe it still, not so much because we lack  
A fully developed four letter vocabulary,  
But we like to allocate our cussing for its best effect.

And even for Grandpa, irritation would finally rise  
To fit some cursing when only cursing would do.

It was our brother Jerry who heard it that morning  
As they settled into the front seat, and fishing tackle in the back,  
The car, sitting expectantly overnight, would not start,  
The battery drained, likely the trunk lid left open.

It was spontaneous, profound, satisfying,  
Delivered firmly by hand to the dashboard,  
And adequately profane to fill his need.  
He said it but once, and that was enough,  
Damn!

(2025)

## School's Out - the Education of Doing Nothing

The bell announcing summer vacation rang over Saint Laurence School and all little saints within were liberated. I put the three R's behind me, ran home and took three months off. There is nothing like untethered freedom that lets you impulsively tether a string, hook, bobber and worm on the end of a willow stick, fritter away untethered time by a sunny stream, and return home, a little wet perhaps, untethered by anything caught, but happy and a little more educated in the trying.

In those days kids weren't bothered by things that had been sold to our parents as educational or helping us develop as athletes or world leaders, but we had a lot of free things at our disposal that did the trick anyway. Pieces of lumber, leaky innertubes, cans, string, rags, rocks, sticks, and discarded kraft wrapping paper sturdy enough to stretch into kites.

Comic books read and handled to the point of falling apart, traded in, sewn back together at the Army Surplus Store and sold again, were inspirations to our imaginations. We bought them with coins gotten from found pop bottles, devoured, then traded them as currency. It was a neighborhood economy that educated us nearly as well as library books that were more to Mom's approval.

It wasn't that we didn't do things in those do-nothing days, it's just that we did things freely without consideration of reward, which we didn't get, or consequence, which we often got. Consequences trump rewards as educational tools anyway, and I'm sure they were created for that purpose.

I remember when the town fathers took a rocky, pessimistic plot of dirt at the other end of our short street, dedicated it as Optimist Park, and put a teeter-totter on it, which I once mischievously exited from backwards with a bigger kid pivoted high on the fulcrum. The jolt I mischievously intended for Donny Shaner hit me instead when the long beam, driven downward under his heft, seesawed up, gashed my chin, and flipped me on my smart, optimistic, deserving ass.

The consequence was a lesson in gravity and leverage, and Mom kindly didn't rub it in with lectures as she stitched my chin, tossed my bloody tee-shirt in her basket of other consequences called the washing, and sent me back outside for further education. I still wear the scar in the folds of my chins, but I've never forgotten the lesson of getting it.

I hope, dear readers, this little excursion among my recollections of getting educated by doing nothing has inspired you. And now that I am retired, I am back for more of the same and getting even smarter. (2023)

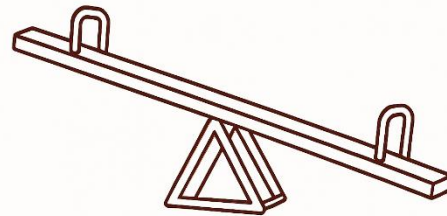
## Half-Baked Poetry

Half a loaf is better than none, they say,  
And it's still not cheap at half the price,  
Whether it's six of one, half a dozen of the other,  
Half full or half empty, it still comes out to half as much.

The other half, the better half would say,  
I'm being too clever by half. Half crazy? Perhaps. Half cocked? For sure.  
Half here, half there, either way it's half the battle.  
I'm a glass half-full kind of a guy,  
And getting there is half the fun.

My half pint now being half drunk and me with it,  
In another half hour and another half pint,  
Given half a notion and half a chance,  
I'll be up for putting the whole joint in a half nelson.

Half-heartedly you warn, too slow by half,  
And half a bubble out of plumb,  
But I say not no, but hell no, my friend,  
I can assure you I am as half fast as they come.  
(2022)



## Pardon the Intrusion

Pardon me for this intrusion,  
If mere allusion, but with inclusion and  
And an infusion of elusion, protrusion,  
And scant occlusion, it is my conclusion,  
In seclusion, under no delusion,  
Illusion or preclusion,  
There is extrusion, contusion,  
Collusion, diffusion, transfusion,  
And way too much profusion,  
So I can understand your refusion  
In the fusion of this confusion.  
(2025)

## I Knew it was Summer

The summers of our youth on the high plains of Laramie were short, bracketed at one end by a spring loathe to relinquish winter, and at the other by an autumn too quick to reclaim it. But when the desks were emptied and the school bell dismissed us, going silent for the season, we skipped home to the chant of no more pencils, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks, and I knew it was summer.

*I knew it was summer:*

When leaves were full on the willow bushes and the high thicket that formed the boundary between our house on Spruce Street and the Laramie River.

When butterflies hurtled about the yard and busy bees tended to Mom's sweet peas climbing on the white picket fence. When I heard the whirl of the blade as I pushed the mower and felt it respond to the power it drew from my growing arms and legs, and I absorbed the aroma of bluegrass newly cut. When my brothers and I slept under the stars in our backyard, and our cocker spaniel, Pixie, picked that night to have puppies at the foot of my bedroll.

When dad fired up his home-built barbecue pit in the back yard, put a roast on the spit, now and then basting it, and himself, from a jug of rich Virginia Dare wine. When the Snowy Range Road was cleared for the season and Mom spontaneously gathered fixings for a picnic at Mirror Lake.

When we ascended from the Laramie Plains and negotiated Pumpkin Vine Road, and the lush green vistas of Colorado emerged before us on our way to Loveland. And there, when Grandpa brought out ladders and buckets and assembled us to pick from his Frankenstein of a cherry tree with branches of different varieties he had grafted to it.

When we heard our parents annually discuss whether to take Washington or Federal into Denver, meaning they were deciding whether we would go to Elitch's first, or to the zoo. When the sticks we fashioned into stilts, first to give me and my brothers elevated dominion over our world, then to lay strewn in the yard because we had been called to breakfast.

When our games of hide-and-seek went past dusk and into a nightfall that didn't come until after nine. When I could kick a can from one end of Spruce to the other, and back, and not have another thing to do all day.

Then the winds came up, the first snow fell, the school bell rang, and I knew it was... Have I ever told you about Indian Summers in Laramie?

(2019)

## I Got Here Anyway

The road suggested was straight and wide,  
No rain, no ice, no cops, no limits to abide,  
No wildlife, no city life, no tractors to follow, no hairpins to make.  
But that was the road I didn't take.

The road I took went stop and go, up and down,  
Mudslides, snow slides, roundabouts going round and around.  
There were mountains to mount, passes to pass, crossings to cross.  
There were school zones, construction zones and no-passing zones.  
The way I went had dangerous curves and freezing bridges,  
Washboards on the surfaces, no guardrails on the ridges,  
Wide loads, narrow lanes, and foggy conditions.  
Corners were too blind, police were too sighted,  
Traffic built up, rest stops were stopped up and red lights too lighted.  
There were deer crossings, elk crossings, turtle crossings,  
Bear crossings and way too many jackass crossings.  
Tempers shortened, the miles grew, and fingers flew.  
And thank you for asking, but I got here anyway.  
(2020)

## How I Got to Denver

I missed my bus to Albuquerque, so, I caught the one to Bowling Green,  
But it went by way of Chattanooga, then it turned back up to Dubuque,  
And cut across to Escondido. There was no room on the bus to Fresno, so  
They put me on the one to Gulfport that instead went to Hackensack,  
Issaquah then Jackson. I got the bus to Kennesaw, and it broke down in Laredo.  
My Greyhound bound for Murfreesboro went straight to New York City, then  
Ossining, Providence and Quincy. When they asked which Rochester I wanted,  
I told them the one back east, if ever you should please,  
And so, it took me to Saint Louis.  
The Tallahassee train landed me in Utica,  
And the Valparaiso in Walla Walla,  
Xenia, Ypsilanti and Zanesville.  
And that is how I got to Denver.  
So, where the hell did they send my luggage?  
(2018)

## Thomas Conquers Arty the Smarty

"This is the story of a little fish. His name was Arty, and he was a smarty." It was a brand-new book, just home from the store and Thomas was barely four years old. He was a smarty too, so he drew closer to see the pictures and hear the words.

I had been lying beside and reading to Thomas at bedtime since the day we promoted him from the crib. It was more than a parental duty, it was fun for us equally. I would follow the text with my finger as I read, hoping there might be some value in doing it.

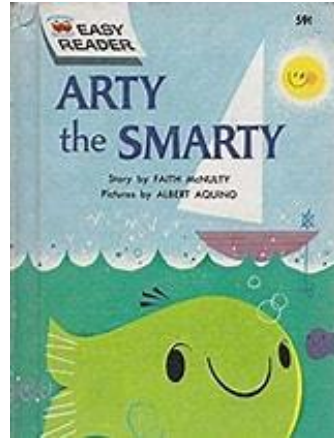
There were many books on his shelf, we read them together several times, and Thomas began to learn them by heart. I knew so because sometimes I would, as a test, change the words. It was our regular game, and he would happily scold and correct me. But sometimes as I got drowsy and in something of a dream state the story would depart bizarrely from my lips. It wasn't one bit amusing to him, and Thomas would complain, nudge, or kick get me back on track.

*Arty the Smarty*, written by Faith McNulty and illustrated by Albert Aquino, was published in 1962 by Wonder Books. As I said, we had opened it together for the first time that evening, so when the words I mouthed teasingly strayed from the lines on the page, I was happily smug when Thomas strenuously protested. "Dad! That is *not* what it says!"

I read the line again correctly and continued for a couple of more pages, and then did it again, to the same protest. "Well, then, you read it," I said and put *Arty the Smarty* in his big little hands. Thomas took over with a superior air and read on. "One day Arty saw some little fish crying. Mean old crab made them cry. The little fish were afraid of mean old crab. Not Arty. Arty swam right up to the old crab. Mean old crab was eating his dinner. Arty took ahold of the crab's dinner, and he pulled."

Thomas took a breath and continued, "Old crab wanted his dinner, and so he did not let go. Arty pulled and pulled old crab around and around. Mean old crab was so dizzy he had to let go. He was so dizzy, he went around and around until he was far away. 'Arty is a smarty,' cried the little fish. 'He made the mean old crab go away.'"

He read his brand-new book through to the climax when Arty un-smartly got himself swallowed by a whale, tickled himself out of the predicament, and made "a whale of a splash." And Thomas finished with an extra flourish, "The End". (2017)



## The Pleasure of Words

There is nothing that matches the pleasure I get in stringing words together. It's a matter of connecting useful nouns and busy verbs, colorful adjectives and, only if necessary, adverbs.

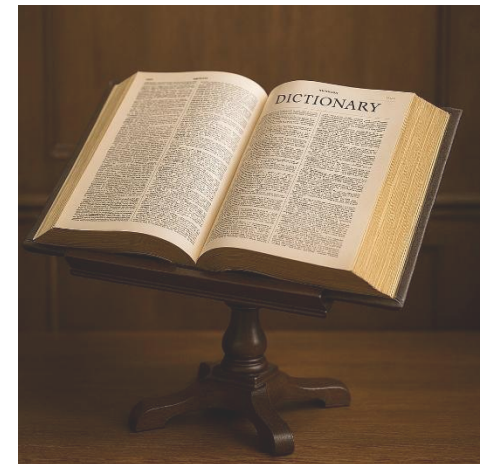
There are now about 470,000 words in our dictionary which is remarkable when our earliest predecessors probably communicated in little more than grunts. The later Neanderthals seemed to have the necessary facial structure and it's possible they developed something of a language. We have evolved those monosyllabic snorts into complex words and sentences, but to be honest, much of our communication today is still done in grunts, so we still have evolving to do.

Words are the product of perspiration and have the power of inspiration. Words can make the meek into goliaths and make goliaths meek. They bring us joy and they bring us tears. There is logic in words, argument, analysis, consideration, perspective, judgment, persuasion and conclusion.

How can we plan anything, or make anything, without words? How can we travel, how can we grow? How can we protest? How can we celebrate without words? How can we grieve? In words there is reflection, meditation and prayer. Words have the power to connect and disconnect, to wage war and to make peace.

There is something harmonic about words, a resonance, a rhythm that paints mere thought into poetry and song. There is motion and movement in words. There is adventure and romance. There is exhilaration and there is calm. And most vital of all, there is laughter.

Stringing words together is like stringing beads on a necklace. The art is in selection and sequence. When my strings of words get long and dangly, and they always do, I think of what Mark Twain once said, "Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words." For that, and shiny for its heavy use, I've got the delete key. (2025)



## A Visit to Tandy's Handy Dandy Candy Store

The small neighborhood grocer we kids called Tandy's Handy Dandy Candy Store was a block from our grandparents' house in Loveland, and we appreciated it for its big showcase of penny candy. We could venture there alone, and I was just old enough to appreciate the nuances of the penny economy. A nickel would buy a pack of Necco Wafers, but there were plenty to share, so Jimmy, Kathi, Mickey Don and I often pooled our pennies to buy a package together.

If we were each working from our own treasury, my first pick was often Nik-L-Nips wax bottles of colored syrup. I could suck down a single Nik-L-Nip in a single gulp and chew the wax until my jaw got sore or just bored. Somewhere in Loveland's landfills there are still waxy globules that can be identified as mine if they can find the dental records. Or if I was feeling bon vivant, I'd opt for a bubble gum cigar, or a package of candy cigarettes.

Prizes inside Cracker Jacks boxes back then were things like plastic soldiers, and dinosaurs, nothing much, but a nice addition to the collection of junk already in my pocket. Over time, Cracker Jack's have diminished to a riddle printed on a slip of paper.

The inventory in Tandy's Handy Dandy store was vast, and in addition to those I've mentioned, it included treats like Charleston Chews, Dum Dum Pops, Turkish Taffy in banana, strawberry and chocolate, Neapolitan coconut and Zagnut bars. There were wax lips, wax moustaches, Big Hunks, Bazooka and Double-Bubble bubble gum, Blackjack gum, Tootsie Rolls, Sugar Daddies, Sugar Babies, Dots, Jujubes, Fireballs, Firesticks, Chuckles, jawbreakers and, for a real good pucker, there were ultra-sour Pixie Stix. There are dozens more I could list but never forget Oh Henry! (2023)

## I Dug Up a Whopper

My shiny new shovel is way out of sight!  
It struck not silver, gold, or diamonds bright,  
It found no treasure, oil or shiny pyrite,  
But it dug up this worm in the moonlight bright  
So set up the table. There's a fish fry tonight!  
(2018)

## My Train of Thought is Oft Derailed

My train of thought is oft derailed.  
I'm sure it's not that I have failed,  
Or that I've got an absent mind,  
And too much stuff gets left behind.

My mental cars are loosely tethered  
To what who knows, but not togethered.  
My brain tracks go in scattered ways,  
To curious places in a curious haze.  
My loose caboose finds a destination,  
Before my engine leaves the station.  
(2018)

## We Did Have a Key, Someplace

Our house on Spruce Street in Laramie in the nineteen-forties and fifties had a lock on the front door, and someplace around we had an old-fashioned skeleton key to operate it. I know that as a fact, because I played with it many times, and I might even have been the one who lost it. But, in fact, it was never known to be lost because it was never needed.

I don't know if the Knight household was unique in our neighborhood in that regard, but I suspect not. Likewise, car doors were seldom locked, and keys were often kept in their logical place, easy to find, hanging in the ignition switch.

It may have been foolish for a family of nine to live without locking their doors, but our parents never sensed a need to, and us kids never did either. That was some seven decades back, or if you measure time in a different way about four generations ago.

It was an innocent time, to be sure, but, pondering the memory, I don't know what kind of search of drawers and pockets we might have encountered if one day Mom and Dad felt a risk and decided they needed to find that old iron skeleton key. They never did, and as far as I know, the new owners didn't get a key in 1960 when we moved to Steele Street. (2018)

## The Great Philanthropists, You and Me

Philanthropy is a word we typically associate with deep pocketed people and tax breaks. But that is a narrow lens, because you, too, are a philanthropist and so am I. Philanthropy is the love of humanity, coming from the Greek words “philos” for love, and “anthropos” for man or humanity.

The word gives elegance to the generosity of the rich, even if it may be based on a quid pro quo. You get my charity, with some strings attached, and I get the tax benefits and an opportunity to add “Foundation” after my name. I am not diminishing philanthropy on that level at all. Indeed, the word connects me to the Carnegie Library in my hometown and some three thousand like it in places, big and small, around the world, all built and endowed by the philanthropy of a wealthy steel baron, Andrew Carnegie.

But this essay is to celebrate you and me as people who are philanthropists at its core, the love of humanity. It is in just being a good guy. You are a philanthropist to sit and chat with me over coffee, or to open the door ahead of me, or to thank me for a courtesy I did without thinking. It is the kindness of observing the limit in the grocery express lane. It is being a safe driver or a courteous pedestrian.

Philanthropy is sending a few bucks to the March of Dimes even if you do not make enough money to claim it on your taxes. It is contributing to your community by being on boards and committees. It is organizing a community event, setting up tables, or donating a cake. It is serving lunch at a funeral for someone who often did the same for others before her.

Philanthropy is at the root of our daily living. It all takes place in ordinary gestures, being together, working together, playing together, grieving together, worshipping together, laughing together. You and I may not have foundations and libraries with our names etched in stone, but the Greeks got it right. We are philanthropists. (2025)

## A Gandy Dancer on the D&RG

The Denver & Rio Grande Railway was incorporated by General William Jackson Palmer, and construction started out of Denver in 1871. It was a narrow-gage railroad with tracks only 3 feet apart.

Palmer originally planned it to go all the way to El Paso, but it had only made it to Santa Fe, New Mexico after Jay Gould acquired and changed the mission of the railroad. Under his management, the D&RG connected with Salt Lake City in 1883, but the narrow gage configuration was a serious drawback at its main terminuses,

including Denver, Santa Fe, and Salt Lake where it had to interconnect with standard gage lines.

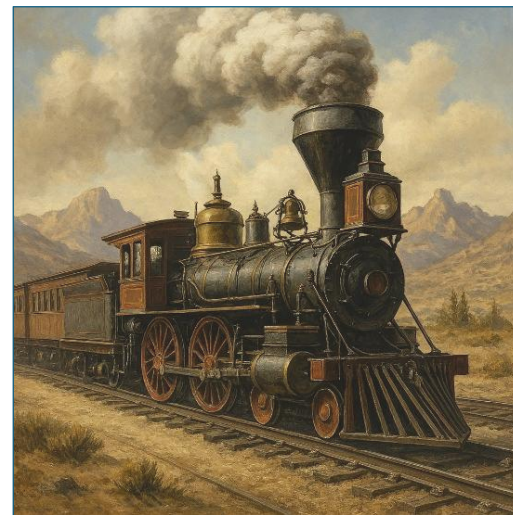
The railroad upgraded most of its routes to standard gage, and by 1890 it was in high demand as an efficient means of getting goods over the Rockies. Its fortunes grew when the Western Pacific railroad connecting Oakland to points east fell into bankruptcy in 1921. A new railroad would emerge from the rubble called the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad.

In 1949, the D&RGW and the Burlington railroads collaborated to create the California Zephyr to take passengers through some of the most stunning scenery in the world. The Zephyr became so popular Amtrak kept it in service, not when the nations’ railroads got out of the passenger business.

Will Knight, our grandfather, was born in 1853 and already a young man from Missouri when the D&RG began to take form. He had been a successful bar owner in Missouri when, in 1888, he and Grandma Kate moved in a covered wagon with their first three children to Colorado. Will, through a brother, had gotten a job on the D&RG as a gandy dancer to maintain track.

“Gandy Dancing” describes the work of using a bar called a gandy to keep tracks in alignment. Over twenty years, Will rose to be a section foreman, and the couple bore another eight children, ending with Dad’s birth in 1907.

Grandpa Knight ended up managing a section on what is now perhaps the most famous piece of the original D&RG. It remains in service today still as a narrow-gage



railway taking thousands of tourists from Durango twisting 45 treacherous, scenic miles up the hill to Silverton, Colorado. The Knight siblings and Kemp cousins have heard many stories of living in the D&RG section house from Dad’s generation. They said the snow would get so deep in winter they had to go in and out of the section house from a second-floor window. There were many other tales, and from them we became very used to the expression, “It’s a hell of a way to run a railroad.” (2017)

## Coonskin Caps, DA Haircuts and Red Skelton

My four brothers and I were big shots in 1952 wearing our Davey Crockett coonskin caps, and all of us, especially our sisters, could spin a hula hoop. Both sisters wore bobby socks and poodle skirts and Maureen, wearing glasses, looked and felt like a star in her cat eye frames. The brothers got crewcuts from Dad while some neighborhood boys had hair slicked back in greasy DA's. And if you ask what a DA was, just picture a haircut resembling the north end of a duck going south.

TV came to our home and soon we were getting an enormous selection of five stations. Remember Lucile Ball and I Love Lucy? Ricky, Fred and Ethel? Remember when Lucy got in the family way? How about the Honeymooners with Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton getting each other into trouble every week?

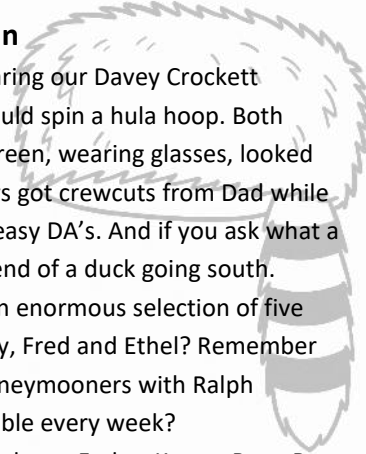
Leave It to Beaver taught us lessons and we always knew Father Knows Best. Ben Cartwrights and his boys in Bonanza had great yarns on the Ponderosa and the best western of them all was Gunsmoke, featuring Marshall Matt Dillon and his battle-limbed deputy Chester Goode.

Alfred Hitchcock's hefty shadow filled the screen as the opening credits rolled for his enchantingly creepy and quirky stories. The Twilight Zone gave us improbable things to think about in that hazy space between being awake and asleep. Mission Impossible was always impossible and always satisfying.

Ed Sullivan's show was the best in its field of variety shows, and he advanced the careers of many talented entertainers including Nat King Cole, Barbra Streisand, Buddy Holly, The Temptations, The Supremes, Elvis Presley and The Beatles.

Red Skelton had us on the floor laughing over his characters, the country-bumpkin Klem Kadiddlehopper, crooked Sheriff Deadeye, the punch-drunk boxer Cauliflower McPugg, henpecked husband George Appleby, the politician San Fernando Red, and Junior, the Mean Widdle Kid. Freddy the Freeloader, his generous, optimistic hobo character lived in the dumps but was never down in the dumps, and through him we learned to appreciate the daunting, daily survival of being homeless.

Red Skelton's characters were funny stereotypes who made us laugh and yet we understood and related ourselves to them. He made those connections through his unique soul, and it wasn't unusual for Red Skelton to close a show with a tear in his eye. Maybe he could still teach us something. (2020)



## My Paradise of Daydreams

I was born one but the first time I learned the affliction had a name was when my folks returned from a parent teacher conference at Saint Laurence School. "Sister says you're a daydreamer," my mother reported. My father simply figured I had been gazing out the windows, "God knows what at."

The report back from the conference fulfilled their parental duties, but if it included a lecture, it was only implied, because neither of them offered a cure, and they didn't say the sisters had one either. They probably all suffered some of it in their youth. What are windows for after all?

It has been a lifelong affliction for me, daydreaming. A luxurious, comfortable, state of addiction, and I am glad nobody has tried an intervention. Daydreaming is contemplation. Thinking about stuff. Happy stuff, serious stuff. It doesn't matter. I am daydreaming on this zero-degree March morning about the first crocus of spring. I know it is waiting there, in a state of suspended animation, poised for the thaw, ready to pop through the icy snow covering the Highline Canal trail beyond my window. It's daydreaming that lets me see it now.

Daydreams were fodder for Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, Rowling's Harry Potter. Farmers, fishermen, bird watchers, cowgirls, poets, teachers and probably educated fleas do it.

Doctor Seuss daydreamed of green eggs and putting hats on cats. It was in daydreams that Einstein hatched his theories about the physical universe. Daydreaming inspired the pictures of van Gogh and Picasso. Daydreaming wrote the lyrics for Paul Simon and Cole Porter.

Daydreaming is a fleeting diversion, without expectations and seldom with endings. It is not so much a lack of concentration as it is a concentrated absence of concentration. It is the art of focusing on nothing while absorbing everything, seeing the forest and not the trees, and pondering that, but for the trees, there would not be a forest. Think about it.

You don't have daydreams so much as daydreams have you. They come naturally, like the bald spot that once was your cowlick or the fuzz in your belly button. There are no clocks in daydreaming, no alarms ordering you to start, and no timers telling you to stop. There are no how-to manuals. If the nuns say you are a daydreamer, thank God for the gift. You didn't get it from the devil.

I have never wanted a cure for my daydreams. They are the mountains on the horizon for my ideas to climb, the oceans for my mind to surf, the winds to carry my thoughts nowhere and yet everywhere. Daydreams are the firmament of my paradise, and I'm glad we can share them together. (2019)

## The Adventures of Cinder

Cinder came into our family about the time I was born. Jerry remembers him as a Labrador, and Maureen as a Springer Spaniel, but it's enough to say his name matched the color of his coat. And if you don't know the color of cinder, you didn't live in a railroad town eighty years ago.

From my toddler's height he seemed like a giant, but Cinder was a sweet, gentle dog whose bark was reserved for greetings. Like most dogs of his era, he enjoyed a passport to go where he wanted and when, and associate with whom he wanted, two legged or four, or with groups in any combination thereof. His address was on Spruce, but the world was his realm.

Maureen recalls Cinder once being boarded at a kennel in West Laramie during a family trip. He seemed to have made friends there, perhaps even a girlfriend, because soon after we returned and reclaimed him from the kennel, we learned Cinder had paid them a return visit and had to be shooed home.

One Fourth of July Jerry was out bike riding and heard a commotion below a bridge on the river. Some boys with powerful firecrackers had found a nest of baby skunks and were literally blowing them up, one by one. When Jerry arrived, they abandoned the macabre amusement and scattered. Jerry rescued the one remaining live kit and brought it home. Mom let him keep it in a cage in the back yard and showed him how to feed it. They say baby skunks can spray in their second week of life, so it must have been very young.

Cinder befriended the kit but eventually it had to be released to the wilds of the Laramie River behind our house. Later that summer Jerry went into the backyard and saw Cinder playing with a skunk, apparently the same one, friendship renewed. The now adult skunk kept its tail peacefully un-cocked, and they both minded their manners, playing until other distractions finally ended the visit.

The many interactions Cinder had with nature weren't always so benign, and he often wore the evidence, sometimes in porcupine quills piercing his nose, other times in the acrid aroma of other skunks not so familiar with him.

In his later years Cinder once was gone for weeks. Eventually Jerry heard scratching at the door and found Cinder there, tail wagging. He had been shot in the rear leg. Dad had a good idea who the culprit was, ironically a law enforcement officer, and promptly delivered to him a colorfully composed piece of his mind.

Our beloved Cinder, with nursing, recovered his full health, living out the rest of his life and, with maybe that one exception, still friendly with his world. (2021)

## Fearless on the Spruce Street Straightaway

There is nothing like tires rumbling up the street  
The adrenaline, the dominance, the power at our command,  
The turning heads, the awe, the neighborhood buzzing.



That fine June morning we became daredevils and  
Bicycles became Harleys, fueled to capacity with  
Boundless imagination, clothes pins and playing cards.

Y'know what? After lunch, let's put SIX cards in the spokes.  
But we're gonna need more clothes pins.  
Now pass me the peanut butter, Jimmy.  
(2021)

## Frog Legs on a Sunday

We were all dressed in our Sunday best and headed for Loveland that morning, but we only made it to Tie Siding before the car broke down. Soon, Oren Johnson came to our rescue and returned us to Laramie while the car waited for a tow back to town.

Oren and Pat were close friends of Mom and Dad, and family to all of us kids. He was a railroader like Dad, and Pat worked in our school's cafeteria. She was a wonderful soul who lived to be more than 100 years old, and like an aunt to us, so we didn't blame her, or at least not very much, for dishing up lima beans and soggy carrots. She had to, they came from the federal school lunch program.

Oren, observing that we were all dressed up that morning with no place to go, invited us to spend the afternoon with him and Pat for a feast of frog legs. It wasn't frogging season in Wyoming, and how they had enough frog legs in their larder and large enough to serve our big Knight family on a Sunday afternoon, I don't know, but we were never surprised by anything Oren might have around. I have read since that frog legs, which are prepared in many different cultures, tend to twitch when frying in hot oil, but, fortunately, he didn't invite us to watch.

"They're good for you," Oren said, and he is backed by modern nutritionists recommending them for their omega-3 fatty acids, protein, potassium and Vitamin A. He promised they would taste just like rabbit, or maybe chicken, depending, I suppose, on how they met our inexperienced palates, and I guess they did, because we all ate them and none of us croaked. (2021)