

Memories of Elkader by Patricia Coffie

Seems in those days we conspired with ritual and ceremony to make the El Kadar weekend always so much more than the sum of its parts. The irony that the crescent flag flew high over the town and over our conference was just one of the many images that I remember — images which I think gave us a larger view of storytelling in the world. Certainly, Marcie's midwifery brought a grounding and expanded our horizons, both at the same time. Then there was the keystone bridge, the spring green hills (filled with turkey hunters), the opera house (that we filled to the brim once for our Sat night concert), the feeling that we were in this tiny mid west river town (Turkey River?) whose roots were so deep they went down through to the other side of the world, to the Arab world and beyond — so that if we listened to each other just right, and noticed the Spring that was easing up all around us, and said just the right incantations and stories, then the planet would nod in recognition and bless itself and us.

I don't know if I was an officer or board member but I remember saying I would stay home —“this town ain't big enough for Playboy and me” if Hefners' stooges showed — still something I'm proud of.

And yes, it took service on the Northlands Board and as president to teach me that “Yes, you do have to look a gift horse in the mouth” from time to time. It is right up there with “be careful what you wish for,” “what goes around comes (gallops) around.” Jim May

I could probably write volumes on Elkader; it was that meaningful to me: discovering a new world - storytelling! The tellers, the location on the Turkey River, the stories. And spring, by God. Despite the one snowfall, it was always spring in Elkader, as if the good citizens had timed the blooming of their tulips and hyacinths with the coming of the storytellers.

Coming to Elkader in late April every spring, felt something akin to what I'd always imagined about large families and their annual reunions. Although I was often the shy, quiet, storyteller-type, more comfortable observing rather than participating, I never wanted to miss the opening olio on Friday nights. There was an inherent excitement about seeing people I hadn't seen for a year or more and the anticipation of hearing what they had heard, seen, or experienced in the interim. It was the weekend's roll call; “another country heard from.” We kept an eye on the door to see who the next arrival would be. We thought we'd be miserable if so-and-so or so-and-so wasn't there, but by the closing circle on Sunday, awash in new stories and acquaintances, friendships renewed, we'd forgotten our initial misgivings.

Place is nearly always prime with me. Elkader was a magical far-away city for me, from the first glimpse from the bluff above it, the anticipation built as I wended my way downhill and then onward to the main street, passing the historic house where ghost stories were told, the keystone bridge arching over the river where redhorse run, the turrets of El-kader; at last, the Opera House, fitting center for a congregation of storytellers. How the townspeople welcomed us! It didn't matter where we went: Miller Dairy (?) for ice cream, the drugstore, the pizza place, the Mitt Wagon for burgers with lots of fried onions, and Patrick's Bar, we were welcomed like the long lost. It seemed like the townspeople saw something in me, that I was just beginning to recognize, “You must be one of the storytellers!”

Patrick's Bar was a gem of a place. When I walked through the door, I felt like I had discovered the treasure of the Turkey River. High ceilings covered with pressed tin, booths, round oak tables, a blackboard menu that featured tuna hotdish on Friday made by Mrs. Patrick, a bar and its keep, Mr. Patrick, who dispensed pitchers of beer or frosty-cold soda pop in 12-ounce, glass bottles. It was a place for inexpensive meals, vital to the fledgling storyteller on a budget. It was refuge for butts and backs, fatigued by hours on the Sunday School kiddie chairs at the Lutheran church where many of the workshops were held. It was cracker barrel and stage for sages by day and comedienness on Saturday night. It was a meeting place perched on the bank of the river. If you used the lavatory at the back and took a wrong turn coming out, you'd end up on a small landing with the river beneath. As far as I know, no storytellers, befuddled with brandy or bawdy tales, took a dive. Nevertheless, the danger, as in all magical places, was real.

So there you have some of my memories, Pat, and of course you figure in nearly every scene. I could have gone on about the campground, waking to the sound of bawling cattle penned for auction - the genesis of my first personal story told, the tornado scare, that old building where at least once we gathered, Dale Whiteside, early one morning in his brown bathrobe, gabbing and gesticulating with the morel-hunting canoeists, looking for all the world like Fr.

Hennepin or some Franciscan preaching to the Natives.

I hope to see you in the future. Greet all the old bunch for me. Tell them I'm well and at peace with myself, and that I can still wield a splitting maul for a couple hours at a time. Occasionally, I tell stories. Terry O'Brien

The Prosperity Ritual was an annual event and I remember Larry Johnson, Elaine Wynne, Marcie Telander, Mark Schweischoff and me at least. One year, Marcie led us as we used earth, air, fire and water in the campgrounds to think positively for our futures. One year, we climbed down the bank to the river behind the restaurant. We skipped stones and expressed what we were envisioning with each skip. My stone sank like a stone and so I ad-libbed and envisioned a good thing for each ring spreading from the place the stone sank. Many hints and stories built up around the ritual but those who were there understood it to be a time of focused positive visioning. This line of thinking, envisioning was presented as "The Power of Positive Thinking" by Norman Vincent Peale very long ago and may be known as "The Secret" today. Patricia Coffie

This house was built in 1897. Dr. McGrath from Alaska bought it in 1988. The place which had been a witch's hat had become a flat roof. The McGrath's had the flat roof replaced with this onion dome in the style of Russian Orthodox Churches because they liked it. Ed Olson

One year, there was a starry-eyed newcomer at registration, and he said this seemed like a close group. I said we only invited 5 new people each year because we did not want all those strangers coming in and diluting the experience. I watched everyone make this young man's experience one of inclusion throughout the conference. Then I enjoyed the moment at the end of the conference when he came to me and asked if he could invite two new people to the next year's conference! He thought they would really fit in and wondered if that would be too many newcomers. (The Chamber of Commerce in Waverly had already forbidden me to continue to say that about newcomers to Iowa. Guess I do sincere way too well.) Patricia Coffie

You storytellers helped us through the challenging times during the rural crisis and brightened our lives. You also proved to we Elkaderites that we have something special here with the Opera House and you set the standards for quality. Please come back (if even for a visit). We miss you all! Who knows, I might even join you again with a story. Ed Olson, Elkader (mayor during the Elkader/Northlands Era and continuing active community volunteer and international goodwill ambassador)

It began well. Over the arc of years as we aged and the chemistry of relationships changed, both individually and collectively, it entered an awkward phase. Try as we might to hold on to the spontaneous and ribald expression of the Dionysian spirit, for me (at least) it was time to let go—something else was called forth and I believe it is to our collective credit that we answered that call. Loren Niemi

I would run around gathering the sacks of coins from the schools, registration money, concert money, etc. and dump it all in my car trunk and try to sort it when I got home and hope it all added up to the amount, I thought it should. I never got concerned about being off a few cents. When I inherited the job of Treasurer (which was the same day that I joined NorthlandsSN) I was sent the books and they didn't match the amount in the bank. I didn't worry too much because the amount in the bank was more than the books said we had, and I continued to keep us moving forward. Eventually, we had more money than I wanted to count, had done it for 4 years and had a chance to go to Vegas. That was when they asked someone to replace me. Mary Ann Shetterly

Great times, great stories, great lodgings. Elkader was the first of many meetings and reunions with tellers who have been my dearest friends for many years. What nice times we had. Maureen Korte

The "2 Mitt" sandwich wagon still serves sandwiches and now you can sit down and enjoy. The name came from Ed Olson and Harold Doepke who overheard an order in German-accented English for "2 Mitt and 2 Mittoudt" referring to the cooked onions generously slathered on if you wanted your sandwich "with." They began to use that name and it caught on for all. I attended Elkader with teen-age boys, and they needed food about once a block so we discovered the "2 Mitt." Patricia Coffie

We told stories in the schools and asked 25 cents each to reinforce the fact that
Art is worth money.

“That wasn’t worth a quarter!” said one of the fifth-grade boys about his ticket
to hear Pat Coffie’s gruesome stories. “That was worth a dollar!”

I remember:

Doris dressed in toga,
And Jimmy in his kilt!
Dale playin’ breakfast,
Table legs ‘a tilt.

Turkey River runnin’
Prosperity for all!
Stories on the street corners,
Abd al-Qādir still calls.

But soon we did outgrow it,
Manifesto on the wall!
Sent us ever skyward,
With stars’ and moon’s resolve.

We search, we roam; we wander,
In caressing arms, we shine!
With love and tears and laughter,
Elkader, Northlands, mine.

Ben Rosenfield

One year, Playboy asked if they could come to Elkader when the conference was held. They wanted to film storytellers telling “Farmer’s Daughter” stories near the keystone arch bridge. Patricia Coffie was president and she polled the Northlands board. There were three positions:

1. NO!
2. Maybe since the firm was under Hugh Hefner’s daughter’s control to some extent and she might try to make up for his errors...
3. And this by August Ruprecht: “Storytelling is neither a sacred nor a profane calling.”

And “NO!” prevailed.

Rule #1 to always remember when at a Northlands Conference: Never go to the restroom when your state is having a caucus because you WILL be nominated for something if you are not there. It will be all legal and binding by the time you return.

The first time I experienced the finale of the "snake dance," I wondered what sort of cult I was joining. Song and bonding with so many new friends certainly changed my perspective on some wonderful traditions. Julie Bull

I remember the accommodations... or lack thereof. There was only one little motel on the outskirts of town (who remembers the exotic wedding suite?). Other motels were available at some distance, in other villages. The first year I slept on the floor in the kitchen. Sure, there was floor space in the Opera House basement (ala the throw-down-your-sleeping-bag dorms of the Mineral Point years); but I wasn’t a night owl so I opted for quiet in the kitchen and managed to sleep in spite of the parade of ants! The city park campground was an improvement... of sorts. The second year I shared a tent with Maggie Melvin and Judy Farrow Busack. That and years of traveling all those miles together to get to Elkader made for lasting friendships and storytelling pals that inspire me to this day. We did graduate to drive-a-distance motels. The most memorable was the year Judy locked her keys in the car and we discovered how down-home friendly and go-the-extra-mile helpful Iowans are. Jean-Andrew

I was only at the Elkader conference a couple of times, but I was so impressed with the relationships, the close friendships there, and the enjoyment of the common bond of storytelling and listening. And I never dreamed how important storytelling would become in my life. Elkader really broadened my perspective of the art. Bev Jackson Cotter

I was very pregnant in April 1985, that first year in Elkader. I slept on the basement floor of the Opera House. The floor was hard. Worse, the toilets flooded the floor and were not very useable. It was difficult for a very pregnant woman to sleep on a hard floor without easy access to a working toilet. I got to know Beth Horner in a different way that year. She was staying in a room with a shower, and, after sleeping on the floor and wading through toilet water, I needed a shower. Beth kindly shared her shower facilities with my pregnant body. I brought Tyler with me the following year and thank Susan Cook for taking care of him when I was committed to a workshop.

I remember the El Kadir Inn. The same people reserved the same rooms each year, and my group generally got the last room available, the one no one else wanted, the one that had the waterbed with the mirror on the ceiling. One year we must have packed six or eight people into that little room. Cassie Wagler was a little girl then. She kicked all night between Susan Cook and me in the waterbed and I practically got seasick. Didn't get much sleep. Susan Gilchrist

I remember "banquets" of baked beans, coleslaw, and hotdogs. There were hot cups of tea at the registration table. I remember walking along the street between the church and the Opera House. There was usually a parking spot right where I wanted to park, and I didn't have to feed a meter. I remember the Mayor's welcoming story at the beginning of the conference and how impressed I was by the international achievements of this tiny Iowa town. Susan Gilchrist

I remember bar stories and the argument about what was offensive versus acceptable for the venue. I remember Mark Wagler telling us that his mother told him not to leave the house without his rubbers. I remember half-clandestine giggles about the "fertility ritual." In one story, Marcie Tellander used the phrase "hipped open the door" as she moved her hip in demonstration, and I thought what a fine, descriptive phrase that was. I told a story in the evening concert on the big stage, an "Hassidic Tale of the Holocaust" and I had trouble getting my "H"es out. Susan Gilchrist

I remember conversations about the in-crowd and the out-crowd and thinking Northlands was like one big donut – everybody thinking they wanted to be on the inside and not seeing that there is no one inside the donut, just a big hole; and the place to be is really part of the ring that defines the center. Not wanting to miss anything, I talked way, way into the wee hours. Bonding by shared sleep deprivation, I call it. We outgrew one large circle for the Sunday swap; one had to be very assertive to get to tell a story in the large swap.

The closing spiral was outdoors, amidst blossoming trees. How important that last embrace of the group always felt to me! Susan Gilchrist

It was an once-a-year renewal of relationships started at Mineral Point, an update on life changes, and for me, it was a spring tonic. Storytelling friendships are deeper, more special, than most other friendships. The conference gave me an artistic surge before I went back to the reality of life and spring planting. I enjoyed watching the new and growing performers with the idea of maybe inviting them to our festival. Michael Cotter

I told Elkader Area Ghost Stories to a sell out crowd at the renovated Elkader Opera House in September 2006 and the place looks and sounds absolutely wonderful. What a great stage. I remember telling the story of the "Screaming Ghost Above Lanesboro" there at a Northlands concert the year I did the all-day workshop on telling ghost stories, probably a dozen years ago, and then the opera house was dark even with the lights on, a perfect place for ghosts to hang out. Now the place is polished up and well lit and it doesn't seem like the same stage I told on in the past. The seats are so comfortable now (padded) that my crowd demanded more stories so my one-hour program which started about 7 lasted well past 9 p.m. If a few of us wanted to do some telling there, that might be of interest to the Elkader people... Duke Addicks

I remember...

....driving for hours through nowhere to get there.

....exchanging puns with Jimmy Young while standing scrunched in line for the Saturday dinner.

...sitting on the stage of the Opera House for workshops with the Wild Women, August Rubrecht, and so many more.

....jamming with Tony Wentesdorf, Duffy DeFrance, Donna Dettman, and others in an impromptu gathering that got shanghaied into playing for one of the events.

....the Saturday night concert at the Opera House, where Jean-Andrew was the emcee for the evening. And how she burst into glorious song at the end of the concert.

....lighting a candle in a circle of warmth with my long-lost clan.

....driving the dark highway back to the little motel. Along a deserted stretch of road, a ghostly herd of horses appeared, and ran with us on silent hoofbeats, then veered off into the dark countryside.

Leanne Johnson

About the campground--waking to the sound of bawling cattle penned for auction - the genesis of my first personal story told, the tornado scare, that old building where at least once we gathered, Dale Whiteside, early one morning in his brown bathrobe, gabbing and gesticulating with the morel-hunting canoeists, looking for all the world like Fr. Hennepin or some Franciscan preaching to the Natives. Terry O'Brien

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A storyteller in period dress told the stories of the French-Canadian fur trade. He traveled with Terry O'Brien and her husband, John. One year he included the hatchet throw in his story in the park. Patricia Coffie