

Where's The Pony?

While driving out to Mankato, Minnesota in late March, 2006, my travel companion and fellow bibliophile and author, Frank Wydra, started to tell me the story about the little boy who wanted a pony for his birthday.

We were on our way to pick up a collection of 4,000 books that my antiquarian bookstore, Birchwood Books, had “won” five months earlier. It's not that unusual for us to buy up entire estates, but my policy for any books sight unseen in never pay more than a few pennies per volume. In this case, I added the condition of having until the spring to remove them. I had only a vague idea of what was in this collection. I knew most of the books dated from the 1950's and 60's and dealt with western fiction and lore, I knew that from the list of 30-odd sample titles we'd based our bid on. That list had been enticing with authors like O'Keefe, Dobbie, McMurtry and L'Amour – most in dust jackets – so we took a chance and, damn, if we didn't win the lot! The collection included an era and genre that Frank knew and collected, so I was thrilled when he agreed to tag along with his reference books on points of issue for first editions. This collection had once belonged to Bevington Deere of Austin, Texas. He and his wife were both Poet Laureates and Texan socialites. Upon his death, the collection went to his son, Joel Deere, who lives in Mankato, and there the books sat in storage for the next 12 or 13 years. The acorn hadn't fallen far from the oak as Joel himself was a published author like his parents, so I had high hopes for this lot.

We were driving my eight passenger van from Detroit when, somewhere around Chicago, Frank did the math. “That's at least a ton of books; probably two,” he said.

“Yeah; a ton of books,” I agreed.

“It reminds me of the story about the boy who nagged his father relentlessly for a pony,” Frank said, “I ever tell you that story?”

“Not yet,” I said through a smile, but only half paying attention to him. We had been clipping along about 80 since Ann Arbor, but now I was seeing signs for construction ahead. We were on I-294 headed towards Milwaukee late this

Sunday afternoon, and the signs were saying our side of the interstate was about to commandeer half of the Eastbound lanes. So, with that, and the sun right in my eyes, the other half of my attention was on the fact that no one was slowing down.

Frank told, "Seems this boy woke up on his birthday to find a big box in the living room. He ran into his father's bedroom and shook him awake, 'Dad! Dad!' the boy said. 'that big box downstairs; is that my pony?'"

"His father – ..."

"Whoa!" I shouted. "Somebody brake up there!"

Frank stopped and squinted out the sun-streaked windshield.

Less than 100 yards ahead of me, three cars were racing side-by-side into a two-lane chokepoint with no shoulder on either side. No one was giving an inch. I didn't see how they were going to make it and so cried *Whoa* and braked as hard as I dared without collecting the cabbie who was right on my tail. Frank's fedora flew off his lap.

Three sets of brake lights came on simultaneously at what seemed too late and too close together to all make it. I leaned on the brakes even harder and slowed to 40; the construction speed limit. The cabbie shot around me on the right and somehow the other three managed to stitch themselves into two lanes at the last second. They and the cabbie sped off into the sunset like a pack of hungry wasps. Two or three more cars passed me on the right as I crept along in the left lane, blinded by the sun, stomping on unfamiliar turf.

I looked over to see my passenger white-knuckling the armrests. "Sorry, Frank; didn't think they were going to make it! Did you?" He just sat back and exhaled. I asked him, "What were you saying? About this kid who wanted a pony?"

He reaches down for his hat. "I'll tell ya later. When you're not driving."

When we stopped for dinner about an hour later, Frank called Thomas "Sully" Sullivan who lives on the outskirts of Minneapolis. We would be staying the night at Sully's and driving the last 125 miles to Mankato in the morning.

Sully is the Author of "Water Wolf" among other terrifying tales featuring nature's untamed. He stands about six-foot tall and is just as bald as the eagles he writes about. He's good, so good he's established a nationwide following since the 1990's. He moved to Maple Grove, MN from the Detroit area several years ago for winter seclusion and for the betterment his writing career. I was meeting Sully for the first time on this trip, although I had known of him for a couple of years. That evening, he and Frank went on like a couple of war-scared sargents. I was thoroughly entertained just listening to these two master storytellers apply just the right spice to such simple stories as a winter storm and a runaway cat. I finally went off to bed about midnight, but Frank and Sully talked and drank and traded tales into the wee hours.

Brisk and bright the following morning, Sully fed us a hearty breakfast of poached eggs, cheese and tomatoes, raisin toast and coffee, and a dazzling, sparkling view of a frozen lake that is his backyard. "That's just the surface," he said. "After breakfast, I'll show you winter at her very best." Sully lives on the edge of the great white north, where he can leave his townhouse by automobile out the front door, or just as easily, by canoe or skis out the back door. We took the car, drove only a short distance to a nature area and spent the new morning following Sully along a secret trail that only existed when the swamp was frozen. Breathtaking understates the complex beauty of a swamp in winter if one knows where to look; a quarter inch below the ice. Down here, smaller is safer and shelter is paramount to survival. Out there, nature is naked, skeletal and translucent. In winter, Minnesota's wildlife is devoid of colorful hues. and more critters can be found under rocks than on branches. It reminded me that masterful fiction doesn't need to be colorized to be breathtakingly believable, just clear and concise, black and white, thank you very much. Great fiction lifts a few rocks in winter, peers into a character's instincts in such unique ways that the reader learns something – about themselves. It was to be, as it turned out, a small vision of hope before the harsh realities to come later that afternoon.

We left Maple Grove under menacing skies, but Sully assured us it was just another beautiful day in paradise as we said our goodbyes.

In an effort to maximize our daylight, it was agreed that I would drop off Frank at the books first, then go get the trailer which was yet another 55 miles West of Mankato. Frank would use these hours to separating all first editions in good condition, regardless of author or genre. Wheat from the chafe. I called Joel and let him know to expect us about Noon and he gave me directions to the storage locker.

Joel was a husky man with rosy cheeks and salt & pepper graying hair. He wore a fishing-type vest over a plaid wool shirt and seemed not to notice that it was freezing. I introduced him to Frank Wydra as Author of The Cure. I gave Joel a signed copy of my novel, The Freya Project. "This is for you," I said.

"Thanks, and this is for you." Joel handed me a copy of his suspense novel, Children of Dust; one of five he self-published. He apologized to Frank for not having a copy for him and then told us to follow him to the storage space. I looked for an inscription as I fell last in line. I thumbed to an early chapter and dropped in on the page. It read something like, "*The bright, hot sun stood at its zenith at high noon as the scorching heat began to takes it toll on another day in the desert...*"

"You'll have to sign this for me," I said as I followed Joel and Frank.

Joel nodded. "I was trying to get the door open earlier, but its frozen stuck. Got some salt working on it now. It should open right up," he assured us.

Only, it didn't. The ice was over an inch thick. "When was the last time you were in here?" I asked.

"Gosh, been years," he sounded surprised by my question. I didn't say any more and he elaborated, "I just kept paying the storage, but now I can't afford it anymore, now that my wife is getting worse."

"Sorry to hear that," I replied. Over the winter, we had exchanged a few emails and I knew his wife was battling cancer.

We picked at the ice for 15 minutes with the only available tools at hand; more salt, Joel's pocket knife and a tire iron from my van. No luck, but I couldn't

stay. If we were going to get the books loaded before dark, I needed to leave now to go get the trailer. "I'll call ya as soon as we get it open," Frank promised and I headed for route 60 West and St. James, MN.

Still hadn't heard from Frank by the time I got to the U-Haul place, a lonely looking single-story building wedged between a half-dozen grain silos and the railroad tracks. I put Frank's no-call more down to the poor cell coverage out here on the prairie than him not being able to get the door open.

When I got there, the U-Haul guy told me I was his last customer. He said that after today, he was officially no longer with, "Them sunnnns-ah bitches." He wanted me to ask him what he meant, I could tell, but he didn't look like he could work and talk at the same time, so I excused myself to make a phone call.

I got Frank's voicemail, but he called me back a few minutes later. "You pick up the trailer yet?" he asked.

"Hitching it up now. You get the door open?"

"Yeah, we got it open. You can forget the trailer. We're not going to need it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there ain't enough good books here to fill your van let alone a trailer. They're all crap."

"Why? Are they all ex-library or something?"

"No, I mean crap. As in shit. Spoiled; ruined, rotten fruit, my friend, rotten fruit."

"Water damage?"

"And then some. Unbelievable, just unbelievable" he said.

I hung up and tried to tell the guy I didn't need the trailer after all.

"Well, tell that to a dealer," he said. "It's hitched up now and signed for it and you was my last customer, so therefore I ain't a dealer anymore."

"Oh come on," I said. "You can just rip up the paperwork."

He wasn't budging. "If you don't want it, take it back to a dealer, and that ain't me."

"Where?"

"There's one in North Mankato."

"In North ..." I could feel my face turning red and I wanted to strangle this little *sunnnn of ah bitch*, but I couldn't afford to lose anymore daylight.

I thought about just dropping the trailer right there, but this guy had a chip on his shoulder as big one of them silos out back, so trailer in tow, I drove back to the lockup trying to image what "unbelievable" meant to some who wrote such remarkably believable unbelievable stuff. It really worried me.

"Boxes fell against the door years ago," Frank told me when I got back shortly before 4:00. "Guy hasn't been in here in twelve years." Joel wasn't there. "We managed to pry it open enough for me to crawl under and I move the shit out of the way," Frank went on. "Soon as we got the door open your friend split, said to give him a call about having dinner later on. Most of what I took out is over there." He pointed to a big, brown dumpster with its two lids thrown back, brimming with cardboard boxes full of books. "The good stuff is over there." He pointed this time to a half dozen banker's boxes with varying amounts of books. "I started sorting them by genre, but gave up after three or four box. They all look like this." He opened one box of old western kid's books; all Zane Gray and Louis L'Amour, two dozen of them. He reached in with one hand and pulled them all out together. I mean, *together*, as in inseparable.

The corrugated steel walls and un-insulated ceiling had combined with the cement floor to created a seasonal sauna in the summer and ice box in the winter. The cardboard boxes had been no match for the weight they held and never should have been stacked more than three high, let alone to the ceiling. All the lower boxes buckled and collapsed years ago, cascading the boxes on top and, like the dead tree that falls in the forest, nobody heard.

We overflowed an industrial size dumpster that day, Frank and I did. Couldn't even close the lids. Fistfuls of Frank Dobbie, armfuls of Larry McMurtry, ten volumes of Texas Under Many Flags. By sunset, snow was falling on 50's beat poetry and turn-of-the century American history books that hadn't seen daylight since a Kennedy last visited Dallas. All these books exposed like they were to the death beat of summer heat and winter cold now had all their dust jackets glued together, like a box of crayons fresh from the microwave, joined at the ink after a dozen years of sweating and freezing, sweating and freezing. The result was the literary equivalent of Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie trying to save the Alamo. We tossed dead volume after dead volume into that dumpster. Authors we'd never heard of, titles we'd never seen before. We had driven 700 miles to save these unknown soldiers, these forgotten losers of yesteryear's literary wars, and save them we did, Frank and I, only to toss them into a pitiless grave. It was a bone-chilling reminder of how many writers had failed before me.

"I need to laugh, Frank. Tell me that story about the boy who wanted a pony."

I wanted to cry. This collection had belonged to Bevington Deere, an educational administrator with the university systems in Texas; he proofed and approved text books for academia. He was a nobody on the walk of fame, but he was more than just a poet junky. He had been a man who mixed and mingled with the literary elite and those who wrote and re-wrote history, southwestern style. His collection had included hundreds of modern westerns all categorized by author, thousand of volumes on the early history of Texas and Mexico, all boxed by their battle, and cowboy poetry with some volumes bound in calfskin, rawhide and pearly leather. Had they been stored properly, they would have fetched thousands on the biblio trail, but they had been stored in perhaps the most tortuous conditions paper & ink can endure this side of the Three F's; - Fire, Flood and Fungus. I wanted to cry not over the money we'd spent; that was only a few hundred dollars, but over the loss of something once so precious and proud to one generation, now had been ruined through sheer neglect and laziness of the next. Understandably, Joel's wife's needs came first; it was her

cancer that caused them to move to Minnesota 20 years ago, but I wanted to cry for I knew Bevington never meant to write this ending for his collection of 40 years. How could he know? Swamps never freeze in Texas.

Frank leaped against the dumpster and told me, "Seems this boy woke up on his birthday to find a big box in the living room." Frank's fedora was cocked to one side and he wore half a grin on his lips, and he was in his prime. "The boy ran back upstairs, ran into his father's bedroom and shook him awake, 'Dad! Dad!' the boy said. 'Is that my pony?'

"Open it and find out' His father said.

"The boy ran back downstairs without waiting for his father or mother and started tarring the top off the box."

Insert pregnant pause here, to the beat of Frank.

"It was full of horseshit.

"The boy looked at his father puzzled, but his father just handed him a shovel and said, 'You wanted a pony; well, this is what you get with a pony.'

"So the boy started shoveling through the shit, throwing it all over the other presents with total disregard, all over his parent's living room walls and paintings and furniture. He put increasing ferocity into each shovelful, all the while promising himself, *'There has to be a pony in here somewhere!'*"

I laughed, when I wanted to cry. Thank you, Frank. That was wonderful!

In the end, looking back from this lofty perch of 30-months later, only 500-odd volumes were ever rescued from that paper & ink prison. And of those, half wound up being donated to various Michigan libraries and to the John Dengel VA Hospital in time to write off the trip on our taxes. Hundreds of good reading copies who's only crime was they were just not collectable, but they did find a second shelf in Detroit thanks to Frank and I. Sixty-two salvageable volumes turned out to be warmly inscribed to Bevington by their respective authors, but only a few had gone on to any notoriety. Perhaps another 40 or 50 titles *were* first editions *and* were in good enough condition to be displayed, and thus

salable. So, no ponies in Mankato – which is to say, nothing Maureen and I wanted for to *our* shelves. Birchwood Books did manage to rescue a few mustangs, so to speak, and we've already sold or horse traded enough of Bevington's books to make the lot a good purchase. In the end, only one or two percent of the original lot held any collectable appeal. That's a little under the average for most estate-size lots, but not disappointingly so.

The real value was the trip itself; with Frank riding shotgun, befriending Sully, meeting both sides of the writing struggle. But most of all it was an eye-opener to see up close and personal just how fragile, and short-lived, the written word can be, when you don't take care of it.

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