

Cool, Clear Water

by Fred Stenson

Today's subject is the cool, clear water that the Sons of the Pioneers sang about so sweetly in my youth. I hope those of you who have been serenaded by my childhood exposés before can stand another, because that is where my values on water come from: back on the southern Alberta farm I still call home—back in its bathroom, to be more precise.

The shallow wood-cribbed water well in our yard could not be trusted to stay wet year-round, especially during a three-year drought in the early 1960s. To conserve the resource, various indignities were forced upon us. We were not allowed to flush the toilet for just any old reason, which made me reluctant to entertain overnight visitors, especially “townies.” It was just plain hard to explain to them that unless there was something spectacular in the bowl, you couldn't reach for the chrome lever. It was easier to restrict my circle of friends to other water-challenged rural types who would understand.

When my sisters and I were very small children, our mother would bathe us all in the same three inches of water *at the same time*. When we got too old for that, we were bathed separately, *but still in the same water!* Up until the time I left the farm for the city, I had never bathed in more than three inches of water. I had experienced showers, though, after basketball practice at school. Maybe that was why I played basketball.

Once we had a television (in 1958), it was just a matter of time



until I saw my first woman up to her neck in bubble bath. In my fevered imagination, what I saw below her neck was three inches of water surmounted by two feet of bubbles.

(To this day, I take the fastest showers in Christendom and am overwhelmed with guilt if the bathwater goes above three inches.)

Getting back to the farm, despite all the aqua-frugality just described, we still ran out of water. A turn of the tap produced nothing: air, a little sandy belch followed by a mocking dribble. What that meant was everything else had to stop, all tools downed, while several consecutive pilgrimages were made with our half-ton truck (steel water tank in the back) to the Ed Schmidt farm. What existed there, more significant to me than Lourdes, was an artesian well. I can say truthfully that nothing in my childhood filled me with more awe, veneration, well-being and effortless happiness

than to stand beside the ice-cold gushing stream (as big as your arm!) that was filling our water tank and saving us from, if not death, then moving. Never did I stop asking my father questions about this amazing well. Does the water stop at night? Is there really no tap? Where does it go after it heads down that slope? Where exactly does it come from under the ground? Why doesn't it run out? Will it someday?

The other thing that hauling water from the Ed Schmidt artesian well made me steadfastly believe was that the Ed Schmidts were wealthier than we were. I made my measurement with reference to no other fund or chattel than water. Four decades later, I not only agree with my younger self but understand that the articles of that agreement are my values as regards water. Water wealth is absolute wealth. Water poverty is absolute poverty. Water carelessness is absolute carelessness.

NOW LET'S CONTRAST my childhood and its resulting values and complexes to the experience and values of a great many modern Albertans. Water for them is what happens when you turn a tap. Sufficient volumes of water, at sufficient pressure, will wash your automobile without your having to touch it. A shower is something that ends when the hot water tank is empty or when it's time to go to work or school. A lawn must be green, and it is better that water should run down the street for hours than that the shade of green should become

dull or dusty. While you're at it, give the garage pad a good daily rinse. In winter, water is what you transform into artificial snow and spray on a hill or mountain if the heavens have failed to produce a quantity sufficient to ski on.

Water is plentiful in Calgary because it comes from glaciers, which are ice sheets of apparent inexhaustible vastness and unplumbable depth. Where are they? Somewhere to the west. Somewhere in the mountains. You might have seen one once.

Water shortage is when some killjoy down at City Hall, some lawn- and flower-hater, tells you that you can't water. Then the guy next door sneaks out at night and waters on the sly, thus getting the edge on you and making your flowers look wilted and your lawn brown by comparison.

A water stoppage happened once several years ago when a water main broke, and it *lasted for three bloody hours!* There was a warning, thank goodness, and someone had the presence of mind to put extra jugs in the fridge. We soldiered through somehow. It was hell but, hey, the tough get going.

Water is also something we could export for profit, if the environmentalists would just lighten up. Canada's got nothing but water. We've seen the NFB films to prove it. Ask Arizona if Canada doesn't have water. (And, just between you and me, water is something you can use in a pipeline to get sticky petroleum down to the United States, thus cleverly exporting water without seeming to. That is, if you export *dirty water*, people get all confused and think there's no harm in it, even if massive quantities do still wind up in U.S. rivers and reservoirs. This is even better than putting it in millions of 750 ml plastic bottles. Less overhead, you see.)

And, hey! Why isn't the dishwasher on? I know it's only a third full, but what do you want, bacteria growing? Next thing you'll be asking me to do it with my hands. This isn't

the Great Depression, you know.

I wonder sometimes if there could be a happy medium between my own guilt/fear/paranoia/prudery approach to water and the water-is-plentiful-and-for-wasting philosophy I so commonly observe around me. I'm not sure there is. Maybe the Road to Damascus experience of seeing air, sand and dribble come out of a household tap is essential.

Mind you, if I was a mighty political leader, I think I could force a bridge between the two points of view. First, there would be compulsory field trips to the Columbia Icefields. While the tourists embarked on massive all-terrain vehicles and left for the ice sheet, our group would be facing the other way. With binoculars, we'd be studying the dry valley of moraine and all the little signs showing where the glacier's toe was in the 1930s, 50s, 70s. We would note the acceleration of the glacier's retreat as the date signs approach the present.

If people were still not impressed, we'd pile back on the bus and head for Mt. Edith Cavell and Angel Glacier. With before and after images, we'd observe that the angel-like piece of ice hanging up there didn't used to look so horror-movie-ish, so anorexic. The angel was quite plump and shapely not so very long ago.

If they were still unimpressed with tap water, still unafraid of global warming and drought, there would be no avoiding the ultimate solution. There would have to be a provincial Water Off Day:

Oh, gross, man. How am I going to brush my teeth? How am I going to shower? I'll get all greasy. Like, not even in the toilet? This is evil. This is torture. But I could still go out to the "Y" and swim and shower there, right? This is an outrage. That was my last clean pair of underwear. I don't know how much longer I can hold out. Wait a minute! What's that terrible feeling? Oh my goodness! I'm thirsty!!

Fred Stenson's new book is *Thing Feigned or Imagined: The Craft of Fiction*.