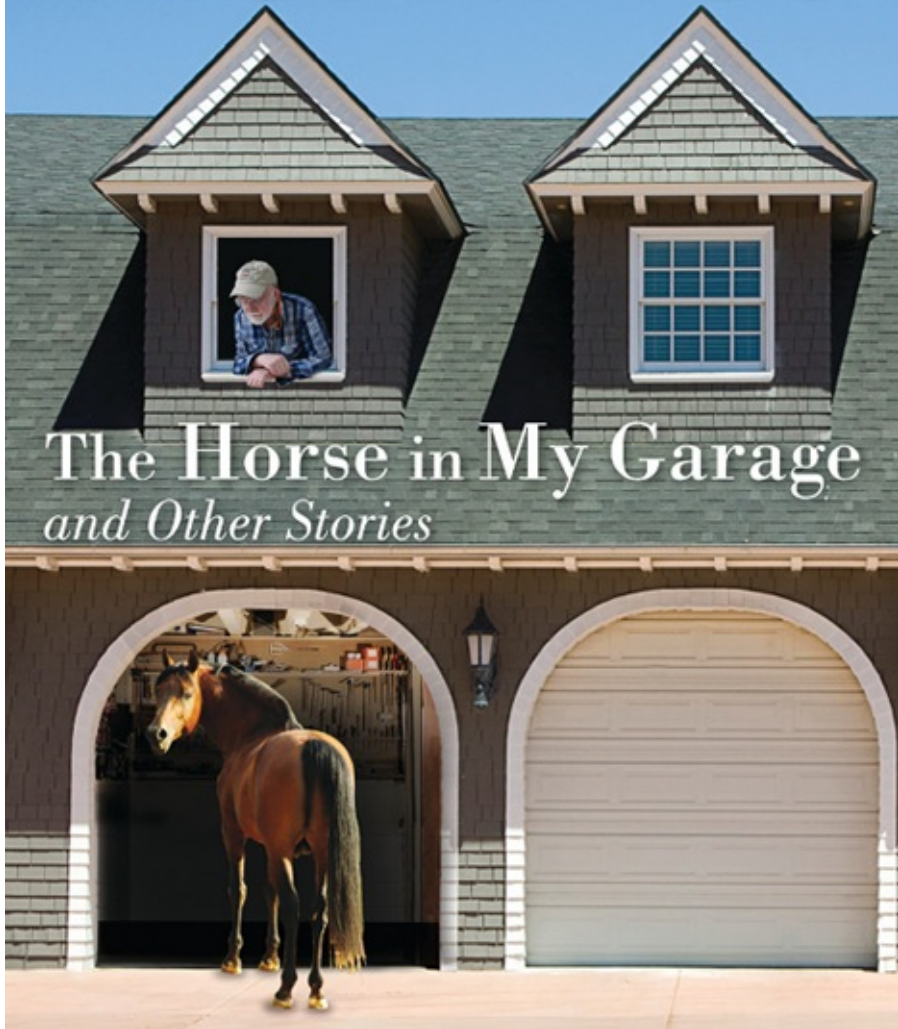


PATRICK F. McMANUS

The Horse in My Garage *and Other Stories*



The Horse
in My Garage
A

The Horse in My Garage

A

by
Patrick F. McManus



Skyhorse Publishing

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Preface

One day, as a freshman at Washington State College (now University), I was browsing through the magazine section of Holland Library and came across two magazines aimed at writers and would-be writers. It was at that moment I discovered there was such a thing as freelance writing. That's for me, I thought. I couldn't imagine an employer dumb enough to hire me, and I wouldn't want to work for somebody that dumb anyway. But here was a form of work where one could be his own boss. It never occurred to me that I would still be working for someone pretty dumb.

From then on I began writing features for magazines and newspapers. By the time I graduated from college, I had sold dozens of features. Typically, I was paid \$25 for a piece, but there were lots of cheap publications around, too. Still, I loved the work, regardless of the rate of pay. Eventually, I was hired by Eastern Washington State College of Education (now Eastern Washington University) as an instructor in journalism. I had summers off to devote my time entirely to freelancing.

All of the stories I wrote in those early years were factual. Two of the factual articles are included in this collection and pretty much represent the high point of my article writing. Even though both are factual, I think the one thing that distinguishes them is that each has a touch of humor. One is "Wild Life in a Room with a View," originally published by *Sports Illustrated* and later abridged by *Reader's Digest*. The other is "\$7,000 Television Extravaganza," published by *TV Guide*.

During this period, I wrote every night for two hours, seven nights a week, and I tried never to miss a writing session or to cut one short. One night, in the first hour of my two-hour session, I finished an article on the use of telemetry in the study of wildlife, whereby wild animals are hooked up with radio transmitters so scientists can follow their travels at night. I finished writing the article in the first hour of my session and still had an hour to go. So I decided to write a piece of nonsense to fill up my last hour. The idea for the piece was that eventually all animals will be equipped with radios, and this will simplify hunting a great deal. As was my practice at the time, anything I wrote I sent off to a magazine. This piece went to *Field & Stream*, because it touched on hunting. One day I went out to the mailbox, and there was a small envelope from *Field & Stream*. Freelance writers tend to get excited over small envelopes as opposed to large envelopes. Large envelopes contain the rejected manuscripts and small envelopes contain checks. I ripped open the small envelope and it contained a check for \$350! Now I had just sold a factual article for \$750, but it had taken me a month to research and write. This piece of nonsense had taken me an hour! At that instant, I became a humor writer.

Also included in this collection is my very first published fiction, "The Lady Who Kept Things." I wrote it in a creative writing class, and it was later published in *SPARK*, the student literary magazine at WSU. The instructor never thought much of my writing and refused to give me a grade higher than a B. We often had to read a story aloud to the class, and one day I read one of my humor pieces. The class laughed themselves sick. Even the instructor had to take off his glasses and wipe away tears of mirth. Back came the paper, with a grade of B! I stormed into the professor's office and cried, "How could you give me a grade of B on this story when the class loved it and even you had to wipe away tears?" He said, "Yes, McManus, it was a very funny story, but this is a class in the writing of serious

literature, and you have to admit that story wasn't serious."

~~I offer this as a word of warning to anyone interested in a career as a humor writer. Indeed, once received a letter from an editor, asking me to write for his magazine. "But not humor," he said. "It's too dangerous." Yeah, well, he should try writing it.~~

A final note: You may come across in reading this collection of stories and essays a few repetitions of subjects, ideas and experiences. Let me explain how they and this book came about.

In the corner of one of the closets in our business office, I came across a high stack of file folders with a sign on top that said "Stories not collected in books." Well, I said to myself, it would be a shame not to put these stories into their own book. I did not realize the complexities involved in the undertaking. The stories had been written over a period of fifty years, say from when I was twenty-nine to my present age of seventy-nine. None of my other collections contained stories written over such a span of time. Most were reprinted from *Outdoor Life* and *Field & Stream*, each collection covering stories from a period of no more than two or three years. In this book, however, two stories could be separated by as many as fifty years. In writing the second story I probably had forgotten the first story, and somehow managed to repeat some material. I think the editors and I have managed to catch the most grievous repetitions, but, if you should come across one, perhaps you would be kind enough to view it as an archaeological find, in other words a gold nugget, in the drifting sands of failing memory. P. M.

A Scholar of Worms

My wife brought a neat little metal box into my office the other day and asked, “Wouldn’t this be good for worms?”

I looked at the box. It would fit nicely in a shirt or vest pocket. The latch on it opened easily. You could hold it out toward a fishing partner, snap it open, and ask, “Worm?” I figured it was about big enough for four worms at a time. It would work well if your fishing buddy carried a big can of worms and you could meet him from time to time for a refill, kind of like fighter planes meeting a tanker mid-flight to get a refill.

“Perfect!” I said.

Actually, I couldn’t remember the last time I had fished with worms. Maggots, yes—worms, no. Worms were starting to become a distant memory. The thought saddened me, because I’d once been a scholar of worms.

My very first worm scared me half to death. I was four or five years old and digging in the dirt in the corner of our ancient log cabin. Dirt, at the time, was my favorite toy, possibly my only toy. I forget what I used for a digging tool, perhaps an old spoon my mother had given me. I was so busy working on a major excavation. That is how you play with dirt; you move it from one place to another. Suddenly, I unearthed a huge night crawler. It had never occurred to me that a worm could be so large. I thought it was a snake.

I went into the cabin to report my find, something I by then viewed as a scientific discovery.

“Don’t rip the door off its hinges!” Mom shouted. “Stop that screeching and shaking dirt all over the floor.” (My mother had very little experience with scientists.)

I pulled her outside to show her the snake and was pleased to learn my discovery was only a worm. Still, for several years, I was not particularly fond of night crawlers. They kind of ruined dirt for me. Afterward, I only dug in the dirt tentatively, always expecting the next spoonful to turn up another monster. I preferred worms with fewer pretensions, something a bit more modest.

As mentioned, I have in recent years used mostly maggots for bait. True, they lack the worm’s personality and character, but on the other hand they are rather tidy, not counting the wood shavings vendors typically use as fillers in their plastic containers. I suppose maggots, technically speaking, are worms of a sort. If you have gathered maggots from their natural medium, you will think their plastic containers one of the great inventions of mankind. You will not mind in the least vacuuming up from the floor of your boat the wood shavings and the little brown corpses of escaped maggots. (What were they thinking, anyway? That they could make a run for it?) Another thing I like about fishing with maggots is that if left alone they turn into flies. What kind of future is that for them? You have saved them from that particular horror, for which they should thank you copiously. At least a worm has the self-respect to remain a worm. Kind of reminds me of a couple of kids I knew in high school, not that I’m promoting any shortcomings of self-respect.

A couple of years after the discovery of my first night crawler, we moved back to our farm in Idaho. We raised mostly stumps on our farm. They tended to mind their own business and didn’t cause much

trouble, such as whining to be harvested. Then my parents lapsed into insanity and started populating the farm with cows, pigs, chickens, rabbits, and other irritants. Our former tranquil life in the woods was suddenly transformed into endless emergencies, perpetrated by these useless and irresponsible new residents.

On its plus side, the farm came with a creek. The creek was a mess. It had high walls of brush hugging its banks, logs crisscrossing it, beaver dams backing up the water, and huge cedar stumps disrupting the current. It was lovely. Sometimes during runoff, ice would catch on the logs and form huge dams. Once, the water rose so high behind one dam that it almost took out the barn and its livestock. But no such luck.

The creek, or “crick,” as we referred to it in those days, was wild and unpredictable, much like my own character at the time. Even though the creek harbored mostly chaos, it also contained in its deeper dark holes an abundance of hungry trout. Those trout changed my life. Had I not discovered them, I might have grown up to become . . . well, I might have grown up.

In my pre-creek years, I thought of worms as primarily useless, if occasionally entertaining, in the way only worms can be. Once I realized worms could be used to catch fish, I began to study them more closely and soon became a scholar of worms. I read everything I could find written about worms. Oh, I’ll admit it, not all that much was written about worms.

In the spring of the year, before fishing season opened, worms were plentiful. They lay around on the top of the ground sunning themselves or, often, drowning in puddles, getting themselves squished under vehicle tires, and otherwise acting stupidly. Those wisely remaining underground could be quite clever, inventing numerous escapes from my flailing shovel. Sometimes I would notice the rear tip of one disappearing into the bottom of my excavation. Despite my making the dirt fly, I could never seem to catch up with the worm. It was as if it knew of secret worm speedways routed through the dirt.

Sensing the arrival of fishing season, all worms, even the dumb ones, began burrowing deep in the earth. Usually, the best place to dig worms was in what we laughingly called “the garden.” Each spring we would spade up the ground and plant numerous seeds, with visions of squash, pumpkins, lettuce, onions, and potatoes dancing in our heads. I vaguely recall some of the plants actually reaching a height of two inches or more before drying up and dying. It was that garden that first taught me the futility of hope. Nevertheless, the garden soil had been loosened, and that made it fairly easy to turn up a dozen or so worms in a fairly short time, at least in the months of May and June. One spring, having experienced a dearth of midsummer worms in previous years, I dug up several dozen worms and saved them in a large box of dirt. I had been told that worms like coffee grounds, so I dumped in a bunch of grounds to provide them with nourishment. Come July, when other worms had dug themselves halfway to China, I went out to the box, smugly anticipating great wiggly handfuls of invertebrate contents. Apparently high on caffeine, the worms had gone over the walls en masse. (“The next moonless night—*hic*—we make our break. Pass it along.”) No matter the cause of the invertebrate disappearance, I blamed the coffee grounds. Never again did I try to store up worms.

Fortunately, we had a huge pile of cow manure out behind our barn, and worms could be found there any time of the year. They were pale, skinny fellows, as you might expect of anyone who lived in a manure pile. The fish in the creek, however, did not seem to care much for manure pile worms, although I doubt they actually knew where their next meal was coming from.

My study of worms has produced some interesting facts. I bet you didn’t know that a worm has five hearts, or that there are 2,700 different kinds of earthworms. My source also says, “It’s hard to imagine something more interesting to watch than an earthworm giving birth.” I’ll have to put that one on my list of Fun Things to Do in My Free Time.

In another publication I learned you can go out to the typical golf course putting green, drive a couple of metal stakes into the ground, connect wires between the stakes and the terminal to a c

battery, and watch about 10,000 night crawlers come flying up out of the ground. Well, I'm not exactly sure of the number, but a lot of big worms, enough to keep you in bait for years, as long as you don't feed them coffee grounds. It is my impression that some industrious people actually gather worms in this manner and then sell them. If you're thinking of taking up the practice, however, I suggest you do it in the middle of the night. I don't know what the laws are in regard to the collection of worms from putting greens, so you're on your own. I think it might be embarrassing to be arrested for worm theft. If it turns out your jail mate is a bank robber and he asks, "What are you in for?" don't tell him.

Just recently I read a report in which researchers claimed that worms don't feel pain. In all my years of baiting hooks, I have felt twinges of guilt every time I threaded a worm on a hook. Now I find out they don't feel pain—*they've been faking it!*—just to play on my sense of guilt!

If you can't trust a worm, whom can you trust?

The very best worms for fishing, I determined years ago, are those that have been power-tilled in gardens. They're tough, angry, and belligerent, and perfect for catching wily fish of all kinds, particularly walleye and other arrogant species. Power tillers are expensive, of course, but well worth the price for tough, street-wise worms: "You wanna piece of me?" they growl at the fish. "You want to rumble? Let's see what you got!"

The worms you buy at gas stations and other places of business are mostly raised on worm farms. They have grown up pampered and coddled and simply don't have the menacing personality of your power-tilled or even your manure-pile worms. One word of caution, though, should you ever buy commercial worms. If you go into a backwoods gas station and find a large, rough-looking woman behind the cash register, don't ask, "Do you have worms?" My friend Retch Sweeney did that a while back. He should get out of his full-body cast any day now. I'm exaggerating. The cast covers only part of his body. I won't mention which part.

I took the metal box from Bun and dropped it in my vest pocket.

"Perfect," I said. I guess she must be aware she's married to a scholar of worms. How great can that be!

Shaping Up for the Hunt

The exercise fad in this country is reaching epidemic proportions. You can't have a simple business meeting anymore without your associates comparing their tennis elbows, shin splints, charley horses, and athlete's feet. It's downright disgusting. Even my boss walked up to me the other day and asked if I would like to see his Adidas. I said, "What do you think I am, a pervert or something?" It turned out he was talking about his new pair of tennis shoes!

Exercise addicts are bad enough, but the pushers are worse. Everywhere I turn, somebody is trying to get me to take up jogging, bodybuilding, isometrics, yoga, kung fu, karate, or some other form of premeditated self-destruction. I tell them I'm an outdoorsman and just *being* an outdoorsman is adequate exercise.

Take, for example, my experience of loading a canoe on my car rack the other day. Knowing how even the slightest breeze can foil the success of this maneuver, I sacrificed one of my few remaining hairs to a test of wind velocity. The hair drifted quietly to the ground. Thus assured, I grabbed the canoe and, with a movement so smooth and graceful the vessel scarcely grazed my protruding eyeballs, snapped it straight up over my head.

At that instant, there arrived on the scene the strongest gust of wind recorded in our state in over half a century. The canoe sailed over the top of my wife's rose garden, mowed down a picket fence, ricocheted off a telephone pole, and turned end over end twice before starting to skitter across the street. At that point, and none too soon, I managed to release my grip on the thing and narrowly avoided being run over by the Avon lady.

My injuries were confined to an imaginative but tasteful reordering of my skeletal structure and a bad bruise on my leg where an unsuccessful attempt had been made to substitute a canoe thwart for my left femur. In those thirty seconds, I had enough exercise to last the average person for five years, but I can't seem to convince anyone of the fact. If you don't spend two hours a day running around in a sweatshirt, health addicts think you're either courting thrombosis or deliberately trying to antagonize the deodorant companies.

A while back I was slumped over the breakfast table performing my usual morning ritual of gluing my psyche back into some semblance of a human consciousness with caffeine, nicotine, cholesterol, and the headlines of the morning paper, when I happened to glance out the kitchen window and catch sight of my neighbor running down the alley in what appeared to be his pajamas. Now, Al Finley, a rather portly chap, is a member of the city council but is otherwise of good reputation. He usually conducts himself in a dignified and rational manner, so it was natural for me to assume that he was being pursued by someone, probably one or more of his dissatisfied constituents. While I was still pondering the vagaries of the political life, he ran by again, this time in the opposite direction.

By gosh, I said to myself, there must be more than one after him, because somebody obviously headed him off at the end of the alley and drove him back this way. After he made a couple more passes up and down the alley and was beginning to show signs of exhaustion, I decided to do what I could to save him from the mob. I stepped out on the back porch and yelled, "Jump the fence, Finley!"

and I'll hide you in the coal bin! I don't care what it is you've done." He gestured weakly at me in a manner I can describe only as unappreciative and kept on running.

"All right!" I shouted after him. "Let them get you. It'll serve you right!"

As I was walking by his house on my way to work an hour later, he emerged unscathed from his front door. He said he hoped he hadn't offended me by rejecting my offer of sanctuary. I said that was all right, and you couldn't expect a person to be civil when he was running for his life.

"I wasn't running for my life," Finley replied. "I was jogging."

"Jogging? What on earth for?"

"I've already lost two inches around my waist," he said.

"I see," I said, deciding not to pursue the subject. It was clear the strain of fleecing taxpayers over the years had undermined his sanity, and I had no wish to nudge him further into the abyss. Nevertheless, he chose to explain.

"Have you forgotten hunting season is coming up in less than two months?" He gave me a look having made everything clear. "You ought to do some jogging yourself."

"Look, Finley," I said gently. "I've hunted deer since I was twelve years old, and not once in all that time has a situation arisen requiring me to jog after them. Besides, the deer don't like it, and it makes the other hunters nervous."

He stared at me vacantly, then got in his car and drove off shaking his head. It was a sad spectacle to witness, even in a politician.

As if I hadn't had enough trouble already for one day, when I arrived at the office somewhat later than usual, my secretary was a picture of torment: legs and hands clamped together, teeth clenched, eyes bulging, face the color of an overripe pomegranate.

"Uh, sorry I'm so late, Midge," I said. "If you need to step out for a moment, I'll answer the phone."

"Whew!" she said, sagging into her chair. "I was just doing my daily isometrics."

"That was my impression," I said, "but I'd prefer you not do one in the office."

"Isometrics are an exercise for toning up the muscles!" she snapped.

Actually, I knew all about isometrics. I told Midge about the time my friend Retch Sweeney caught the exercise bug, and how, before he recovered his senses, it cost him a good deal of embarrassment and nearly his life. Once, when returning from a fishing trip, Retch stopped at a little roadside diner conspicuous for its total lack of other patrons. The steak he ordered and the price of it aroused Retch the suspicion that the place was run by a combination of highwaymen and horse thieves.

After the main course and while waiting for his dessert, Retch decided to pass the time profitably by performing isometrics, an exercise he hoped would convey the impression that he was a physically fit buff and could turn deadly should the gang attempt to rob him. As it turned out, the cook and the waitress had never heard of isometrics but were well practiced in the latest first-aid procedure for saving a person strangling on his dinner. The cook caught Retch in a crushing bear hug from behind, driving all the wind out of him with sufficient force to blow all the flies off a mound of hamburger ten feet away.

"Say your name!" the cook shouted, driving his balled fist into Retch's solar plexus. "Say your name!"

As soon as Retch recovered enough to speak, he blurted out, "Retch! Retch!"

"It ain't working," shouted the waitress. "He's still retching!"

By this time, the cook was using Retch's rib cage as an accordion, squeezing out, among other things, a tune Retch thought he recognized as either "Turkey in the Straw" or "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Just before the waitress made a last-ditch effort to reach down Retch's throat with a pair of

spaghetti tongs, Retch managed to clear up the misunderstanding. The cook and the waitress had themselves a good laugh and as a gesture of goodwill allowed Retch to leave the premises without committing further assault on his person.

Although I generally question the veracity of Retch's stories, I told Midge that I thought this one was true. She said she didn't believe a word of it and that Retch and I had probably made it up, simply to poke fun at the new health fads. As a card-carrying health sadist herself, she took the opportunity to express her opinion that I could use a bit of exercise myself.

"Ha!" I said. "Hunting season is coming up. That is all the exercise I need."

"Yeah, right," she said. "Listen, you spend a lot of time running around in the woods all by yourself. Have you ever stopped to think what would happen if you suffered a fatal infarction way off in some wild place?"

Up until that point, I hadn't even realized infarctions could be serious, let alone fatal. Since Midge reads health magazines all the time, though, I figured she must know what she's talking about. With the acumen of a life-insurance salesman, she had succeeded in igniting in me some doubt about the length of my longevity. I sat around the rest of the morning, enveloped in a heavy gloom relieved by occasional twinges of fear. I thought about suffering a fatal infarction on my next hunting trip, and how my companions would grieve, sitting around the campfire talking about what a great guy I had been, and how out of respect to my remains perhaps they should cut the hunting trip short by a day or two, depending on the weather and if anyone had turned up some really fresh signs.

OK, I thought. So maybe it wouldn't hurt to do a bit of exercising to get ready for the hunt, even though it was a couple months away.

During my lunch hour, I slipped down to the public library and checked out an armload of books on various kinds of exercise. I asked the librarian if she had a book titled *The Drinking Man's Exercise*. She vaguely recalled having heard of such a book, and supposed that it would deal with such things as elbow bending, bellying up to the bar, and tossing down shots. She said she had never heard of it and wouldn't order it if she had. She did suggest an alternative, but I told her I was interested in improving my physique, not my character. I immediately discovered that reading exercise books can be dangerous to your health. Plowing through the first one, *Let's Put the Fit Back into Fitness*, I narrowly escaped being bored to death, and as it was, went about four days afterward with the distinct sensation of having my brain submerged in a tuna casserole. The one sound bit of information I managed to extract from the book was some advice to the effect of this: Before undertaking any program of strenuous exercise, one should obtain a physical from a medical doctor. I was in complete agreement with this suggestion. Doctors are by far the best people to get a physical from, if for no other reason than they don't laugh and poke fun at you when you take your clothes off. This is not to say that they are not above cracking a joke or two at your expense. While I was explaining to my own doctor that I was planning to undertake some serious exercise, I happened to mention that I thought I had lost quite a bit of weight since my last physical.

"You didn't lose it," he said. "It just slipped around to your rear where you can't see it." Personally, I think it is particularly bad for doctors to laugh at their own jokes and even more so in front of the naked patients. It tends to undermine one's confidence in the medical profession.

A physical from my doctor, old Fred, is such an ordeal that you need to get a physical to prepare you for the physical. He tops it all off by hooking you up to an electrocardiograph machine and making you run on the treadmill. After a few minutes on the treadmill, I was dripping with sweat, gasping for breath, and buckling at the knees. I knew I couldn't last much longer.

"How am I doing?" I asked Fred.

"Not bad," he said. "Now let's try it with the treadmill turned on."

He revved up the machine to about thirty miles an hour. My legs instantly dissolved into molten

lead, but I had to keep running to avoid being slurped down into the treadmill innards. All the while old Doc Fred stood there munching on a doughnut and drinking a cup of coffee.

"I don't think you understand, Doc," I finally croaked. "I'm going to shoot a deer with a rifle, not run him down on foot and strangle him with my bare hands."

"Stop whining," he said kindly. "You're nearly finished."

"You're telling me," I gasped.

When the physical was completed, he fed all the information into a computer, which spewed out a stream of paper filled with a mass of graphs. Then he sat down to interpret the results for me.

"Oh, oh," he said frowning. "A&P Iron has dropped thirty points. I'd better schedule you for a couple of operations."

"What? What!" I exclaimed. "Does that mean I'm done for?"

"No, it means I am. This is a report from my stockbroker. Now let's take a look at *your* printout. Ah, I see you have some squiggles here in the cardiovascular section."

"Uh, are squiggles serious, Doc?"

"I've never had anyone die from squiggles, but we'd better keep an eye on them to make sure they don't develop into doodles. Actually, I have to say you are in excellent condition, even for a man twice your age."

"Great!" I said.

"Of course that doesn't mean you couldn't drop dead stepping over the cat."

"But I wanted to run up and down mountains, camp, hunt, fish!"

"That's all right," he said. "Just don't step over any cats."

After receiving a clean bill of health and another bill I interpreted as an attempt to recoup his stock market losses in one fell swoop, I immediately started shaping up for the impending hunting season.

The first exercise program I tried was from a book called, simply, *Yoga*. I chose it because yoga could be performed in the privacy of one's own home and didn't require making a public spectacle of one's self, as did, for example, jogging. Somehow Finley heard I had taken up exercising and kept glued to the window hoping to catch me in the act.

In my first yoga posture, I attempted something called the Lotus, from which posture I was finally able to extricate myself by snagging a cane from a corner next to the door and prying my legs apart. It was then that I perceived yoga would be an absolutely useless exercise when it came to shaping up for the hunt. No, there had to be something else. I quickly reviewed all my hunting experiences and immediately came up with the perfect exercise for hunters: standing still!

People who are not outdoor sportsmen don't realize how much time is spent standing still while hunting. Very often, a hunter will stand still behind a tree, while a mile away a deer also will choose to stand still. The first one to move loses. Brilliant! I immediately got up off the floor and stood still in front of the television for thirty minutes straight. It was exhausting, but one must do what one must do in order to shape up for the hunt.

A Bit about My Writing Life

I have just taken the measure of Mark Twain's autobiography, the edition published in 2010. Despite small type, it is two and three-quarter inches thick. My own autobiography, which I am starting this moment, twenty minutes after two, the ninth of January, 2011, a snowy afternoon, will not be so thick. Its main advantage over Twain's is that it can be read in a matter of minutes as opposed to years. As with Twain, I will not let facts stand in the way of a good story, but for the most part will stick to the truth as I know it. In regard to pertinent events that occurred before I was born, all that would be hearsay. I cannot vouch for any of it. Much to my disappointment, my family apparently contained no known bandits, murderers, pirates, bank robbers, or even any common criminals.

Counting my own father, we did have a couple of war heroes. The other one was my great-grandfather, Archibald Hall, who fought for the North during the Civil War. One of the interesting things about him is that he was wounded during one of the many battles in which he was a participant. I was perhaps only six or seven when my grandmother told me about her father's getting wounded during the Civil War. Needless to say, I instantly became enormously proud of my great-grandfather. Later, however, Gram told me the wound consisted of getting one of his big toes shot off! This struck me right away as a suspicious wound. Think about it. There are the big toes, tramping along in the dirt and mud, and one Confederate soldier says to another, "Bart, I bet you can't shoot off one of that Yankee's big toes." Well, it would be an impossible shot. Also, had I been in my great-grandfather's shoes at that moment, with a whole army shooting at me, I can tell you my two big toes would have been moving very fast. They wouldn't be standing around just waiting to get shot off. Then there was the possibility that if you got a big toe shot off, you would be sent to the rear, to a hospital, or even all the way home. Getting a big toe shot off would be like having one of the Rebs do you a favor. Big toes aren't of that much use anyway. All my pride in that wound evaporated. A big toe! Years later, when I was doing some research on my ancestors, I discovered that my great-grandfather wasn't in the infantry but the cavalry! His big toe was way up there on the side of a horse and easy to pick off. Furthermore, I learned that Archibald Hall fought in nearly every major battle of the Civil War from beginning to end. He apparently wasn't someone to be bothered much by the loss of a big toe. Anybody named Archibald, of course, learns to be a fearless fighter early on.

My grandmother told these stories sitting in the dark by our old wood-burning stove whenever the electricity went off and the lights out, her rocking chair squeaking away as she created magical pictures in the dark.

During World War I, my father, Frank McManus, received a commendation from his commanding officer, Major Douglas MacArthur, chief of staff of the Rainbow Division during the war. The commendation was for defending a particular hill. When I was six, he died of cancer, which I believe was the result of his having inhaled a dose of mustard gas during the war.

My mother, Mabel, was a country school teacher. She earned \$75 a month teaching all eight grades, putting on plays for parents, Christmas parties for the pupils, cooking the hot lunch at noon and serving it, getting our drinking water out of a creek, hauling in the firewood, and keeping the o

barrel stove going, its sides eaten through by heat and rust, but the holes putting on a wonderful light show across the ceiling during the dark of night.

This was at the old log school house far back in the woods near Priest Lake, Idaho. The two years we spent at that school pretty well shaped my approach to life. I ran free for two whole years, when I should have been in first and second grade. Mom never paid much attention to my education, her time and energy used up on the pupils she was paid to teach, so I was allowed to run wild along Goose Creek and in the surrounding woods and mountains whenever I wanted, which was most of the time. During winter, I went to sleep every night listening to wolves howl as they made their nightly hunt along the ridge above the school. "Send Pat out!" they seemed to be howling. "Send Pat out!"

Mom flunked me in second grade. I once heard her tell friends that her daughter, Patricia, six years my senior, was very smart, but Pat was "slow." Many years later, we came across my second grade report card in her papers. Under the part that said "Reason for Failure," she had written, "Too many absences." When you think about it, that is a remarkable achievement, for someone who lives at the school. As I say, those two years at the little log cabin school shaped all of my future life. From then on, my major goal was to achieve as much freedom as possible. Rich was OK, but I could live without it, as long as I was free.

Patricia eventually became widely known as "the Troll," one of the most popular characters in my humor pieces. I am happy to report she was immensely proud of the title, and sometimes received letters addressed only to "Troll."

At age seven, I taught myself to read. I pulled a third-grade reader off the shelf, climbed up on my bed, opened it to the first story, and told myself, "I'm not leaving this bed until I can read this story perfectly." I already knew phonics, from having been raised in country schoolrooms practically from the time I was born. I sounded my way through that story a dozen times. Eventually, I perceived that the story was about peanuts, mainly about how they were grown. It was the stupidest story I've ever read. The only interesting thing I learned from it was that peanuts are grown under the ground, not on top of it, as I had assumed. But from then on, I knew how to read.

At supper that evening, I told my mother, "I learned to read today."

She said, "That's nice. Pass the potatoes."

When we moved back to our little farm three miles north of Sandpoint, Idaho, I frequented the county library at least once a week. The librarian back then remains one of my heroes. Her name was Mary McKinnon. Mary directed me to all kinds of books over the years, including my days as a graduate student in college. She had put together a wonderful library on the second floor of Sandpoint's City Hall. For some unknown reason, I became fascinated with the Bobbsey Twins books when I was in third grade. Even now I can recall their names—Flossie and Freddie. (Or maybe Fanny and Fred? My memory isn't that good anymore.) No doubt Mary tried to direct me to more advanced reading, but I doubt she succeeded until I had read every last one of the Twins series, at least those about Flossie and Freddie. Looking back, I have not the slightest idea what so fascinated me about those two chubby little characters.

Early on in life, I decided to be an artist. In my mind, painting would give me the greatest degree of freedom. I would paint pictures and sell them, and then be free to do whatever else I wanted. When I reached college age, my high school art teacher told me that the art department at Washington State College was the best around. So I decided to go there, even though it was out of state and my tuition would be much higher than at the University of Idaho. Fortunately, I had made and saved quite a lot of money working for farmers the summer after my high school sophomore year, and construction the summers after my junior and senior years. One of my best jobs was as a high-scaler, where my crew of four hung by ropes over sheer cliffs and cleared them of loose rock. It was dangerous work—but the advantage was that if the foreman wanted to yell at you, he had to come down the side of a cliff on

rope to do it. Then one day a high-scaler on one of the crews got killed, and the superintendent decided that from then on no one under eighteen could work as a high-scaler. I was seventeen, and so lost the best job I've ever had. There is a great sense of freedom that comes from dangling over a cliff on a rope.

The following year, I enrolled at Washington State College as an art major, with the intent of becoming another Norman Rockwell. Alas, the WSC art faculty hated Norman Rockwell and his art, particularly his *Saturday Evening Post* covers. As a result, I was totally lost in regard to what direction I might pursue in terms of a future career. At the same time, I was not doing well in Freshman Composition. My instructor, one Milton Pederson, was tough! Every week, we comp students had to write a composition. After five or six weeks, I had received nothing but Ds and Fs.

Then one day, Milt said, "Look for the telling detail," and it was as if a bomb went off in my head. Suddenly I knew what writing was all about. My grades began to improve. Right away I had a major breakthrough: a D-plus! Then came a C-minus, followed by a whole C, and so on to the end of the quarter. On my last essay, Milt awarded me an A-plus and a recommendation for Honors English. My last essay, by the way, was about Norman Rockwell. Scarcely had I learned what an irony was than I had committed one.

Many years later, I was at a dinner for a large number of people and Milt happened to be there, so I told the story about receiving an A-plus in his class. Milt roared out, "I never gave an A-plus in my entire life!" But he had. And he had singlehandedly turned me into a writer.

By my sophomore year I was selling features to the *Lewiston Morning Tribune*. Although I would not have a series of actual jobs for the next twenty-five years, my major drive was finally to make a living at freelance writing. This happened in the 1960s, although I would continue with actual employment for a few more years.

My stories in those early years were based on facts, requiring research and photography, but it was all exciting and wonderful. I wrote for two hours a night, seven nights a week. Perhaps the most distinguishing element in my factual stories is that I tried to include humor in each of them. Two of those stories are included in this collection: "Wild Life in a Room with a View," first published in *Sports Illustrated*, later abridged in *Reader's Digest*, and "There Goes the Indian with the Digital Wristwatch," published in *TV Guide*. Those two stories formed the pinnacle of my career as a factual freelance writer. I probably could have continued as a factual writer from then on, but a peculiar thing happened.

One night I finished an article in the first hour of my two-hour writing schedule. It was about the use of telemetry in the study of wildlife, hooking up assorted wild creatures with radio transmitters so scientists could study their movements at night. Because I stuck fiercely to my two-hour writing schedule, I decided to write a piece of nonsense to fill up my second hour. My head was already crammed with factual information about telemetry, so I decided to write a piece of nonsense about the comic idea being that eventually all wildlife would be hooked up with radio transmitters, which would simplify hunting immensely. I knocked off the piece of nonsense in an hour, stuck it in an envelope, sent it to *Field & Stream*, and forgot about it. I had a rule in those days that everything I wrote, no matter how bad I thought it was, I sent off to a magazine (a confession some critics have picked up on). Weeks passed. And then one day I went out to our mailbox and there was a small envelope from *Field & Stream*. My heart leaped. Writers place major importance on the size of envelopes they receive from publishers. Large envelopes contain the rejected manuscript; small envelopes contain checks. This small envelope contained a check for \$350. That may not seem like a lot of money, but it transformed me. Writing factual articles is hard, time-consuming work requiring much travel and research. A factual article I had just published had paid me \$750, but I had spent weeks researching and writing it. Now here was a check for \$350, payment for a piece of nonsense that

had taken me an hour to write. I did some rapid calculations and was instantly transformed into humor writer. Within a year, I had more markets than I could keep up with, and the rates of payment grew with every sale. Suddenly I had achieved the goal I had set for myself at that little log cabin school in the backwoods of Idaho—freedom! That freedom required that I work all the time, of course, but it was still freedom, and that freedom eventually took me all over the world, beyond anything I had ever imagined as a seven-year-old.

Along the way, I acquired a wife, Darlene, also known in my stories as “Bun.” There is an essay in this collection that tells of my pursuit of her. I was still in high school when I met her, and she was already in college with a boyfriend in the service. The odds were heavily against me, but I’ve never been good at math and couldn’t calculate them. Along the way, we accumulated a huge family: four daughters, five grandsons, four granddaughters, one great-grandson, and three great-granddaughters. The cost of college tuitions has curtailed my freedom considerably, but what’s so great about freedom anyway? The family is terrific.

In the mid-1970s I packaged up thirty or so of my published humor pieces and started sending them around to book publishers. As usual, rejection letters started flowing in. Sometimes I would send the package to one publisher and get it back from another. Eventually, I would find out that the editor at the first publisher had really liked the stories and wanted to do a book, but the marketing department had turned it down. The marketing department! And here I thought editors were in charge. The first editor would then send the manuscript to a friend of his at another publisher and that editor would return the manuscript to me, usually with a note saying he really liked it but the marketing department . . .

After several months of rejections, I was offered a teaching job at a university in Guadalajara, Mexico. We packed up the kids and left. The very day after we had a phone installed in our Guadalajara apartment, I got a phone call from two different publishers wanting the book. I took the first one to call, naturally. An hour after the second call, I got a call from an agent wanting to represent me. Someone at the publishers had called him about me. Publishers prefer to work with agents rather than writers, I don’t know why. So you see, everything works backward in the publishing world. I think the two books I’m working on now will bring my total to twenty-five, but I’m too old and tired to get up and count them.

And that, in a nutshell, is how I became a writer.

Big

Perhaps the most overused word in the vocabulary of out-doorsmen is *big*. For example, when you ask how a fishing trip went, the angler replies, “Oh, I caught several small ones, but mostly they were big.” The listener must evaluate this information. “Big,” in this context, depends on the size of the small ones. If the small ones were six-inchers, the *big* ones may only have been ten-incher fish, scarcely what we would normally refer to as *big* fish. I point this out not in the way of criticism but in the interest of precision. On the other hand, I would not wish to deprive any fisherman of his use of the vague. A reputation often depends on it, and I certainly don’t intend to put the reputation of an outdoorsman in jeopardy. What else do we have?

The use of *big* in reference to any outdoor activity—other than fishing, of course—can actually be dangerous. I remember as a youngster camping out with friends one time on Schweitzer Creek. It was a tiny stream tumbling out of a narrow mountain canyon a couple miles from where we lived. A half-hour’s hike up the canyon took us to one of the world’s greatest camping spots. Any kid who grows up without knowing such a campsite is seriously deprived. If I had time, I would get a certain congressman I know to pass a law against such an occurrence. (He no doubt would undertake the chore for me, but I don’t know if he has been released yet.)

The unique feature of this campsite was that it required no tent. Sometimes we took a tent anyway but only because we wanted to. (What’s the point of having a tent if you don’t use it?) The reason a tent wasn’t required was because a high cliff rose up from the ground and slanted out over half more of the rocky beach on which we camped. If it rained—there was something about our camping trips that triggered rain—we could build our campfire under the cliff, cook and eat our meals there, and spread out our sleeping bags to sleep while staying dry.

The little stream tumbled by the edge of the beach, and for a while at least, we could catch our breakfast right out of the pool that had been formed and stocked with fish perhaps a thousand years ago just for our benefit. An endless supply of firewood lay right at the edge of our camp. It was not quite under the cliff, so sometimes we had to put up with the discomfort of getting damp in the rain while we chopped a day’s supply of firewood from a *big* cedar tree that had fallen across the creek. In the ten years or so that we camped at the site, our gathering of firewood did not make a dent in the tree. The last time I saw it, the cedar looked as if it had been gnawed on by a discriminating beaver and then abandoned.

Now, what was I writing about? Oh, yes, *big*. I did mention a *big* cedar, but, of course, you have no idea how *big* the big cedar was. If I said the cedar was as wide as a sidewalk and that you could cross to the other side of the creek on it without being scared of falling in, you would perhaps grasp the concept of “*big*”—in this case, at least. So here we had not only an infinite supply of firewood, but easy access to the other side of the creek provided by a single tree. What more could you ask of *big*?

One extremely dark night—actually, because of the depth and narrowness of the canyon, all of the nights were extremely dark—my friends and I suddenly heard an enormous racket over by the *big* cedar.

“What is it?” I whispered to Norm.

“I don’t know,” he whispered back. “But it’s *big!*”

Vern nudged me in the back. “Can Norm see what’s making that racket?”

“I think so,” I whispered to him. “He says it’s *big!*”

Kenny nudged Vern. “What’s making that racket?”

“Norm says it’s *big!*”

“*Big?* It’s gotta be a bear!”

Vern nudged me. “Kenny says it’s a bear!”

“Cripes,” I said. I nudged Norm. “It’s a bear!”

“Oh, no!” he hissed, which is an expression that is hard to hiss—unless, of course, you have a bear ten feet away from you.

It was a matter of considerable comfort to me that I had Norm between me and the bear. Norm, the time, was a little fat kid and, I suspected, would provide the bear with a rather tasty hors d’oeuvre. By the time the bear was done snacking on Norm, I could be at the tiptop of the nearest pine.

Suddenly, the racket stopped. This could be a bad sign! Fortunately, for the rest of the night, not a single sound came from the *big* cedar. All four of us could attest to that, because none of us got any more sleep.

The next morning, we discovered that the racket had been made by a chipmunk gnawing his way into and through a bag of potato chips. Not only did one of the smallest of woodland creatures deprive us of a night’s sleep, but he also ate one of our basic camp foods! You lose your potato chips on an outing, and you’re as good as done for. It was a lucky thing for that chipmunk that he didn’t show his smug face around our camp again. He would have been in *big* trouble!

I went to elementary and high school in a tough little logging town. Although it has been some time since I was in first or second grade, I can still recall the dreaded cry issued by one of my smaller compatriots: “Watch out! Here come the *big* kids!” This warning probably referred only to those larger pupils in the fourth or fifth grades, who themselves were probably not all that *big*. Well, some of them were *big*. In those years, you didn’t get past fourth grade until you could read, spell, and do fractions. I remember one kid—I’ll call him Jethrow—who had been in fourth grade for at least three years. There were rumors that he was already shaving and perhaps dating the teacher, but I doubt they were true. He wasn’t her type. But occasionally there was a really *big* kid in fourth or fifth grade. In any case, whenever the “*big* kid” alarm was sounded, we would take off, running for our lives. It was scary. Looking back, I don’t recall any of us little kids ever being caught and tormented by a *big* kid. They were simply satisfied to take over the swings, slides, and merry-go-rounds we had so summarily abandoned. Nevertheless, such was the effect on me that the shout, “Here come the *big* kids!” still makes me cast sharp looks in all directions. You never know.

A conservative friend of mine was outraged recently—actually, he is more or less in a continuous state of outrage—by government laws that protect the wimps from the strong. He quoted Winston Churchill as saying, “If we have laws protecting the wimps from bullies, we will end up a nation of wimps!” When I was six or seven years old, I certainly would have supported any law that stated: “Bigger kids are no longer allowed to torment little kids.” But when my conservative friend raised his objection to such a law, I myself, now an adult, was outraged. I’m a big fan of Churchill and can’t imagine him ever using the word “wimps.”

I asked my friend if, during his early years in school, he had ever been alarmed by the cry “Here come the *big* kids!”

“Of course not,” he said. “I was one of the *big* kids!”

I can still recall one of my four daughters, as a child, hopping about and yelling, “You took the *big* half!” As a college English professor at the time, I had worked tirelessly to correct the girls’ errors of

speech. “There is no such thing as a *big* half,” I’d point out. “A half is a half. You might, for example, have said, ‘You took the bigger piece.’”

“OK, then, you took the bigger piece! How about that?”

“That’s much better,” I’d say. “But I deserve the bigger piece because I’m so much bigger.”

\$7,000 TV Historical Extravaganza

As any TV executive will tell you, \$7,000 doesn't go very far toward producing a historical extravaganza. Take, for example, the experience of the special events people at KHQ-TV in Spokane, Washington, who produced *Trailblazers*, a bicentennial series based on regional history.

After they had rounded up their actors and 150 extras; provided horses, costumes, and authentic weapons; built sets; and put on a couple of full-scale battles, there was scarcely enough money left over to buy beer for the cast.

Producer Ivan Munk, known among the cast as "Cecil B. De Munk," admits that some of the money probably wasn't spent to the best advantage. "That's one of the problems with inexperience," he says. "But with what we know now, we could probably put on *Gone with the Wind* for a couple thousand."

The six-part series dramatizes the building of the Mullan Road over the Rocky Mountains; a Jesuit missionary's work with the Indians in the early 1800s; the struggles of a crippled grandmother and her 77-year-old brother-in-law making their way alone to Oregon in the winter of 1846; the defeat of a company of U.S. cavalry by the allied Indian tribes of the Spokane area; the founding and colorful history of Spokane (done as a monologue); and the last major battle between the Indians and the Army in Washington Territory. The actors were mostly from amateur theatrical groups, chiefly volunteers. Extras included businessmen, ranchers, teachers, students, housewives, children, old people, and, for all anyone knows, maybe a few actual Indians.

So far, *Trailblazers* has been shown only on KHQ, but other stations around the country have expressed an interest in seeing the series, possibly with the idea of using it as a model for their own low-budget historical productions.

When word was put out that KHQ would be producing *Trailblazers*, a Spokane utilities company put up \$7,000 for production costs, and many people donated services, skills, and props. Horse owners supplied horses, including feed and transportation. Gun clubs provided muzzleloaders. Women from the nearby town of Rosalia sewed costumes, and the men built a workable cannon, using wagon wheels and a length of sewer pipe. A church and a rancher each donated a covered wagon, and the Eastern Washington State Historical Society came through with a couple of tepees.

The KHQ staff was flabbergasted by the response. "I couldn't believe it," says Munk. "We had horses worth more than our whole budget for the series!"

The enthusiasm of the volunteer performers provided a few problems. In one scene, 100 wagon wheels painted "Indians" were mixing it up with the cavalry. Leading the attack, through rifle and cannon fire, through billowing clouds of dust and gun smoke, was a beautiful Indian princess.

"Cut! Cut!" screamed director Jim Johns. "What's the beautiful Indian princess doing leading the attack?" Upon learning she had merely been carried away by the excitement of it all, Johns turned philosophical. "Oh, what the hell," he said.

According to Johns, one of the secrets of producing shoestring historical extravaganzas for TV is to say, "Oh, what the hell," almost as often as "Cut! Cut!"

Whenever possible, the re-enactments were staged at the original sites. With the help of volunteer

historians, museum curators, and archivists, great care was taken to make each show accurate historical detail. But the twentieth century kept showing up in cameo appearances. Shooting was constantly interrupted by jets, helicopters, and other aircraft. The Indian chief would show up wearing a digital wristwatch. The brave slithering through the grass with a knife in his teeth would be wearing sunglasses. When the Indians ran out to taunt the soldiers, there would be a strange kid in jeans and white T-shirt hurling insults of his own. And every so often the camera would pan past a barbed-wire fence. "Oh, what the hell," Johns would say.

For authenticity, it had been decided to darken the white actors with body paint when they were to play the part of Indians. Producer Munk (who prefers the title "Chief Instigator") came up with the idea of applying the body paint with a spray gun. He envisioned walking down a row of extras and painting them like a picket fence. But the paint kept clogging the gun, and the idea had to be scrapped in favor of white Indians.

Aside from white Indians wearing wristwatches, sunglasses, and T-shirts, the extras turned in some remarkable performances. In one scene, a young man was so delighted with his part as a trooper that he grinned continuously, even when he was in deadly hand-to-hand combat with an Indian brave. As for the brave, he had fallen wounded, blood streaming from his side.

"Hey, where did you get the ketchup?" a fellow actor asked, envious of the realism.

"Get out of here!" the brave muttered. "You're ruining my best scene!"

It turned out that the red stuff wasn't ketchup at all. The brave had somehow stabbed himself with his own lance.

Another bit of nice realism was added by the chilling yells of an "Indian," as he and a trooper slid down a pine-clad slope, the Indian on the bottom. Upon being complimented on his performance, the Indian explained, "Performance nothing! Sliding over pine cones in your naked skin is murder."

Even the production crew could be counted on to mess up a few shots. At one point, Chief Instigator Munk got in KHQ's pickup truck and drove down the road to keep sightseers out of the scene. As the wagon train struggled past the camera, there, bouncing along in the background in pursuit of some relatively unobtrusive spectators, was the pickup, with the station's call letters emblazoned on its side.

Experienced production companies use only "empty" horses for westerns, but the *Trailblazer* gang did not. There wasn't enough time and, according to Munk, besides "nobody knew how to empty them." The frequent indiscretions of horses ruined many a take, but leading actress Joan Welch managed to save one shot. She blocked the offending part of the horse from view with an ad-lib sweep of her cloak.

"Now that is what I call an improvisation," said Johns.

Mrs. Welch, a professor at a Spokane college, is not fond of horses. When her part required that she ride one, she overcame her fear sufficiently to sit on one with the understanding that the horse was to remain stationary. But someone had forgotten to tell that to the horse, which galloped off over the horizon, taking Mrs. Welch with him. Her "Whoas!" over her remote mic gradually faded into ominous silence.

"We were terribly worried," Johns recalls, "about whether she would make it back in time for us to finish shooting the scene. Luckily, it took her only half an hour to walk back."

To economize, the series was shot with only one camera. As a result, many scenes had to be performed repeatedly to achieve a variety of camera angles. The Indian encampment and the wagon train provided their own special camera problems, Johns says. "When your Indian encampment has only two teepees and your wagon train only two wagons, you have to choose your shots pretty carefully. And they're all close-ups."

To create the impression of a long wagon train, Johns would have a pioneer man and woman drive a wagon by in front of a teepee. Once the wagon had passed out of the frame, the camera would be shifted

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