

LATE-NIGHT RAMBLES

DR. PAUL WESSNER INTRODUCES HIMSELF AND HIS JOURNAL

ONCE THERE WAS AN EXTRAORDINARY group of friends who walked right into history over a few beer at BJ's Bar and Cue Club. I call them the Tuesday Club, and, if truth be told, it was not the beer that conjured that exit to history. There was a doorway, however, stage-right of the bar, which normally led to some pool, pinball, and extra tables. That, at least, was the case on regular days, but some Tuesday nights, for a few precious years in the late 90s, it was like Railway Platform 9^{3/4}; this doorway was an unlikely portal, not to Hogwarts, but definitely to the Great Depression, circa 1935, with some intriguing connections along the way. Through that doorway, the Tuesday Club had their own private corner of BJ's that no one else used during the slow times, like Tuesday nights.

I am a veteran history professor at the local college here in Grande Prairie, Alberta, but I may not be the typical BJ's patron if one judges by appearance or age or speech idiom; as Cam, an astute friend, once said, "BJ's is not a pub; it's a bar," in the middle of Northern Alberta's oil-patch. My reasons for choosing this bar over a pub like the Crown and Anchor are a bit complicated, but, if I'm a misfit at BJ's, there are other misfits there, like my good friend Charles Quamina, age seventy-eight, Trinidad-born ex-gospel preacher and ex-alcoholic who likes the atmosphere — maybe the fumes. Then there's Daniella, an ordained United Church minister. On Tuesday nights when things are a bit quieter, the three of us have an occasional round at BJ's. As well, rounding out the Tuesday Club with more than the occasional round, are Tom and Cam, two of the local heroes in the music scene who don't seem to think Charles, Daniella and I are out of place at BJ's; that is, because they are unusually intelligent and cultured "for way the hell'n gone," as they say, and past forty themselves.

Then there's Sammy, an adopted club member, sometimes called a rig pig by the less tolerant among us, but, hey, that's why he's at BJ's rather than the Crown and Anchor. He is a recovered crack abuser, rehabilitated (so to speak) by the oil company's program and their ultimatums. Unfortunately, he's a little more regular at the bar than the other regulars like Tom and Cam. After all, Sammy and the oil company (and any student of the local geography) all understand that alcohol abuse is apparently not classified as

a drug problem north of latitude 55. So Sammy was the wildcard sixth, sort of like the turn in Texas Hold 'em when the stakes rise and the odds simplify. Don't ask me what that means, not yet anyway.

You see, a few years ago I started telling Charles and Daniella, and sometimes Cam and Tom, about these veterans of the 1935 On-to-Ottawa Trek that I had been interviewing. I live and breathe that kind of research. Sixty years earlier these men were the young single unemployed victims of the economic crash that changed the world. Thousands of them were herded into work camps — slave camps, where they organized, walked out on strike in B.C., and protested for two months in Vancouver, before riding the rails in mass to take their grievances to Ottawa.

When I share their stories with Daniella and Charles, it often leads to some heavy economic and social philosophy, which occasionally prompts a debate on our Canadian duty to positive social engagement, as opposed to the American right to the pursuit of happiness. This, in turn, often inspires some serious soul-searching for the three of us, depending on how many beer we've had. However, Charles and I are notorious for stretching one or two beer into a marathon philosophic discourse, while Daniella sometimes drinks lemonade. Sammy gets a kick out of this, so he often listens in, when he has worn out his welcome at other tables. Well, Charles and I can wax a bit rhetorical at times, and Sammy is often there to shoot down the flights of rhetoric in a bid to keep truth simple. Of course, “keeping *truth* simple” is the sad story of this province's politics for the last seventy odd years.

I remember my first real conversation along the bar with Sammy before there even was a Tuesday Club. One night Charles and I were mixing our personal history with Great Depression history, waxing more eloquent with the second beer, when I self-consciously started misquoting my namesake, an ex-acquaintance of ours, the Apostle Paul.

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I saw as a child, I reasoned as a child.” I was speaking slowly, in confessional mode. “When I became a man, I *thought* I had put away the things of the child. Now... I see through a glass darkly... but then...?”

“Alright already! Is this poetry we're hearing or is this the goddamn Bible? I heard this somewhere before, and if it's the goddamn Bible like I suspect it is, you can't expect us to sit here listening to your bloody scripture reading for the rest of the night.” That was Sammy, a high-school drop-out who at thirty-five years of age was earning more than I was as a tenured professor, but every now and then he could surprise you with his breadth of reading.

“Hey, could we get some more beer down here? Or are we cut off or something just 'cause some poet, smoking funny tobacco, quotes the goddamn Bible.”

“Keep your voice down, Sammy, will you. Besides, I wasn't talking to you.”

“So, you weren’t talking to me. So who exactly you talking to in this bar, and who don’t qualify? Maybe we should get that straight before the sermon, if that’s coming next.”

“Okay Sammy. Maybe... maybe I was talking to everyone, or anyone who happens to be listening. I thought I was talking to Charles here, but since we’re all at the same bar, I suppose I’m talking to anyone who doesn’t get bent out of shape just because they’re subjected to a bit of poetry accidentally in the course of discourse.”

“Course a discourse! Jesus H. Christ! He sounds like a bloody professor. Or preacher, ain’t quite decided which is worse.”

Sammy chug-a-lugged his beer, while we all laughed because everyone knew that he had nailed my identity faster than my psychologist. Well what could we do? We started telling him about the Ottawa Trek and the Regina Riot and my research. After that, he would often follow us to our private corner in the room off the bar or sit nearby if we didn’t invite him to the table right away. Of late though, we finally credit Sammy for recognizing a world beyond the Patch and his beer, so he too, I admit, was a part of the birth of the Tuesday Club.

Anyway, when I fail to adequately communicate to my friends at BJ’s the relevance of oral history from these veterans of the Great Depression, I come home to write down the stories, along with my tangential rambles. It is usually late at night, like tonight, when I furtively meet with you, my imaginary readers of this journal. And what can I say? Of course, I hope that someday the readers are not just imaginary.

Then again, why should anyone want to read someone else’s journal entries? Fragmented sentences, fragmented stories. I suspect that a typical journal is often a sort of secret offer to posterity of some precious bit of history, precious to the writer, but not necessarily to anyone else. After all, the journal keeper is just one thin voice, such a small part of the really interesting story — that larger symphony. What attempt at writing history has ever managed to deliver the entire tragicomic symphony? The readers of history rarely get to experience how those singular voices can come together, sometimes in harmony, more often in a kind of counterpoint.

I think the lone journal writers, the amateurish raconteurs, these volunteer keepers of the lore, have often been privileged to hear a few of those voices come together. They’ve heard fragments of the greater score. They’ve become thirsty for the entire orchestral libation, not just to drink, but also to pour, to contribute to the symphony.

So although the great stories of our culture surround us in abundance, most people, like Sammy, for instance, have little tolerance for some pilgrim’s late-night rambles, especially if the pilgrim speaks as if he were uttering undiscovered truth, as opposed to just a good story.

But that's the difference between Saint Paul and me. His truth was about that certain future, that certain resurrection, of which he was so confident. My truth at the moment has more to do with the resurrection of one small corner of Canada's past, a past that changes the more I listen to it, and that changes me too, I think. Saint Paul's truth included all of his people converting their truths to his truth, to think as he did. "One God, one faith, one baptism," one voice. I mean how many voices does one need if there is only one truth or one story line? So Saint Paul's story has become part of the dominant narrative of our culture, so much so that it seems to affect every story that I dig up here on the Canadian prairies, including this one. At least Saint Paul once admitted to merely seeing "through a glass darkly," but compare that modest admission to the certainties of "Bible Bill" Aberhart or Ernest Manning, two of Alberta's many colourful and dogmatic premiers.

I teach history for a living, but in my spare time, I've been digging up written and spoken relics from the Great Depression in western Canada, discovering the occasional phantom hero, though we all know heroes have been banned in serious history, and in serious literature. But there they are, shadowy wraiths from beyond the grave, resurrected from obscure pages in the Saskatchewan Archives or some such place. Sometimes the ghosts blend their voices with the quivering narrative of some still-living veteran, some skeletal ancient mariner, who holds me with his glittering eyes to tell his story one more time.

My fascination with these particular narratives developed accidentally, rather than through any well-planned research. I mean, it did not start as an academic plan. It was more of a series of eyes, ears, nose and throat experiences: voices from aging bodies, mingled with smells and tastes of human fear, the tactile sensations on my left palm of a mangled 38-calibre bullet dug out of a Regina citizen's shoulder blade late at night, on the night of the Regina Riot, 1935.

The voices? My wife's grandmother's was one of the first. She was about eighty-five years old in the mid 1990s. Her voice triggered my own trek. She and my wife and I were having our regular Sunday lunch in the same old café, the Trumpeter Hotel coffee shop, downtown Grande Prairie, when I mentioned something I read about the Regina Riot. That's what her generation called the infamous police action against the citizens of Regina, and against the "On-to-Ottawa" Trekkers in the middle of the Great Depression. In her laconic prairie voice she began to speak of "that evening," at first without a hint that her knowledge of it was of a different order than my knowledge, gleaned from cursory historical references. The night she spoke of was July 1, 1935, Market Square, Regina, Saskatchewan, Capital of the Canadian Dust Bowl.

Doreen Rust (my wife still called her Nanny) sipped her tea and began this story.

“I remember that evening, you know. We were at a movie theatre downtown 11th Avenue. I don’t recall which theatre. There were several in that area. We were just going to leave after the movie finished. I don’t recall what was playing, but I had Joyce with me. Your mother was only about five, I think. We were just getting out of the movie and getting ready to walk home. Anyway, this young man came bursting through the doors from the street and sort of huddled in a corner near us. He was kind of agitated you know and his nervous eyes caught me staring at him, and I just froze there. He looked at me and then at Joyce and back at me and said, ‘Don’t go out there, lady. They’re shooting at people; they’re trying to kill us.’”

“You were there? You were downtown Regina, the night of the riot?” I was amazed.

“Yes,” she drew out the word. “And Joyce was there. At that age she loved those westerns. But there’s this young man shaking in the corner, talking of real guns and real bullets. Then we noticed people staring out the windows of the theatre doors, pointing. But the young man’s voice alone was enough to convince me. ‘Well, if someone’s shooting, let’s call the police,’ I said to him. I’m sure I sounded a bit doubtful. He shook his head, kind of annoyed maybe, but patient, you know, and he says, ‘Ma’am! It’s the *police* doing the shooting! First, they fired warning shots over the heads of the crowd, ma’am. Now they’re firing right at us. Some of them that’s hit went down in the middle of the street. Can’t even get to them. The bloody cops arrested a couple of guys going out to help them.’

“I remember his off-colour language with Joyce there, not that I blamed him, but I’m sure my face reflected my shock, so he continued more forcefully, you know.

“‘Aiming right at us now!’ he said. ‘There’s a bloody war out there, lady — you and the girl wouldn’t be safe. There’s bullets bouncing off the bricks all over the street. They don’t seem to give a damn who gets hit, ma’am. They’re trying to kill us.’

“I was getting the message. I mean who do you call when you need protection from the police? By then some people who had left the theatre had come back inside. They didn’t say anything, but I could see the confusion on their faces too. I told Joyce to stay beside me and I used the pay phone to call my husband. He borrowed a bread delivery wagon from his friend and drove the thing right up to the doorstep there on 11th Avenue. I can’t imagine which direction he came from, because I remember looking back and seeing some sort of barricade of cars and men blocking the avenue behind us. It was dusk, but not completely dark yet, you know, that time of year, just about 11 p.m., I think, and still quite warm out.”

She sipped her cold tea.

“It’s so hard to imagine that you were actually there. You witnessed it.”

“Yes,” (that slow drawl again), “but I’ll never forget that young man’s face. We all knew about the Trekkers. Strikers, we called them. But that is the first one I remember meeting close up. I imagine he might be alive somewhere yet. He was younger than I was, I think.”

Doreen has passed on now, but her voice is fresh in my mind. Mid-nineties, sixty years after the event, yet her voice still excites a sense of place. When Wallace Stegner writes of a sense of place that marks western Canadian writing, I think of the voices of fiction and poetry, sensual with landscape, but a history book rarely does the trick for me. However, the oral stories, the voices of the Great Depression veterans, the Trekkers, the unemployed, with their anger, their memory of empowerment, the healing that comes from the speaking, especially when someone is listening... now that is something different. And that is a history not yet chronicled. Together those multiple voices create something authentic — closer to Tom Thompson’s sense of place, or Emily Carr showering light on a landscape in some inspired way that would never let you see that actual scene, those tangible trees, in the same old way again.

That is the way I see Market Square now, in Regina behind the old Fire Hall. Today, a modest parking lot shares the Square with the Regina City Police Building, a ponderous edifice with an embarrassingly small monument at the entrance that offers a few cryptic lines about this being the site of that July First evening. A riot is mentioned, but only the police death emphasized, and no real explanation of how it could happen. Yet when I walk through those parking lots, behind the old Fire Hall that witnessed it all, the people today look at me as if I’m lost, as I stare right through the asphalt at some ghostly cinder-covered Market Square beneath. I’m seeing it in grainy black and white like the old newspaper photos. I’m smelling the tear gas rising all over the north end. I’m seeing the clubs, and billies, and black-jacks, and riding crops doing their dance. And leather jackboots — the sound of nearly one-thousand jackboots. And shod horses trotting. The cavalry of the Royal Canadian Mounties in one of their darkest actions.

After that Sunday lunch with Doreen, I began listening... and taping those other voices — the voices of surviving Trekkers still living across western Canada: Regina, Saskatoon, Rocky Mountain House, Vancouver, Powell River, Quesnel. Finding them was my profession; it is the kind of research I’m trained to do, and I love it as much as teaching. Their voices recall the barricades, the Mounties, the ricocheting bullets whining overhead. And many recall the square-jawed face, the walk, and the words of a man they remember as Arthur, or Art, or just Slim.

Arthur (Slim) Evans, leader of the On-to-Ottawa Trek, was a carpenter, coal miner, and a union organizer for the One Big Union. But to Prime Minister R.B. Bennett and company — just a “communist agitator.” Evans



Arthur Evans, 1911, organizing in the northern states with an IWW union card, learning his activism from the Wobblies. Glenbow Museum Archives, Calgary. NA-3634-1

was a Canadian Robin Hood, or perhaps Canada's own anti-Arthurian hero, suckled on the creed of the legendary turn-of-the-century Wobblies like Joe Hill and Big Bill Hayward and union activists like Ginger Goodwin. He joined their fight against the bare-knuckled exploitation that ruled the western lumber camps and mining towns. This was long before Alberta big oil supposedly liberated us all from the need for unions.

I first heard of Slim Evans in Drumheller, Alberta, in 1975. A First Nations counsellor named Wilf Cunningham in the Drumheller Federal Penitentiary told me of this union organizer in the mining heydays of Drumheller in the 1920s and '30s, when dinosaur bones were still being

raided regularly from mines and coulees along the Red Deer River, and where Mary Roper's brothel was a major institution of worship on Saturday nights. Slim Evans led a couple of the legendary strikes in the Drumheller Valley that made the Safeway strike or the Brooks meat-packers' strike look like Sunday-school picnic scuffles.

I never knew at the time that the story of Slim Evans was larger than just a character of local miners' lore. I would never have thought it possible that a child of the Sixties Revolution, like me, could ride the rails of that Thirties Revolution, the On-to-Ottawa Trek with Arthur Evans. Still, I have made that box-car pilgrimage, not exactly riding the rods, but through the voices — some alive, some dead — voices of Doc Savage, Matt Shaw, Steve Brodie, Ronnie Liversedge, Red Walsh and scores of others of the 2500 young unemployed Trekkers. They were all refugees from the military-run relief camps where the Tory powerbrokers tried to hide our national shame of unemployment in the middle of the Great Depression — 2500 young men, and swelling at every railway stop, all bound to visit the Honourable Prime Minister Bennett in Ottawa to ask for “work and wages” instead of “bullshit speeches.”

I don't mean to make it sound like some adventure story. Riding the rods is not romantic. Many of the young single men of the thirties rode the rails now and then to look for work, or to get away from the Depression of their particular small-town world. But the regular users, the uninvited guests of the mighty CPR and CNR, were desperate men. Lost men. Only men. Almost never women. So when a youth hopped a freight for his first time, the initial feeling was fear — fear that the harness bulls (the privately hired railroad police) would catch them. Or worse for some, that someone who knew their family would see them.

But the fear came in many exotic flavours: fear that your grip on the rusty iron ladder might not hold when the CPR security bull suddenly appeared above you with a club meant for your fingers; fear that you'd be dragged under the wheels; fear of guillotined limbs; or if you were lucky, fear of a quick but messy death for which your relatives should not expect an inquest.

And then there was the fear that your grip on the dream of a cash-paying job would fail somewhere — that the train wouldn't slow down for some particular jerkwater stop near a community rumoured to have farmers hiring or construction looming. Fear that your food would run out and you'd have to steal to eat, or that the freight car door wouldn't roll open enough to let you inside during the dust storm, or the thunder storm. Fear that it *would* open, only to let you into the den of a wine-sodden gang of tramps that had boarded from some hobo jungle up the line, closer to the core of hell — the hell of men who needed your pennies worse than you did. Or maybe these men had other more sinister needs concerning your body, from which your pennies could not buy exemption.

Then there was the fear that if you slept through one of the stops, some CPR hand would lock the freight car door, disdaining to check inside, preventing your chance to make an escape. Then under the summer prairie sun, the 95 degrees Fahrenheit heat outside would trap the prisoners inside the car in a suffocating gas chamber at 130 degrees and rising, on a siding out of the earshot of men, and out of the sight of God; a god who left the railroad freight of the Great Depression to Lucifer's fallen, to the domain of the unredeemable.

Only in gilded retrospect, after a few beers with the boys at the Legion could nostalgia gloss over the fears and realities of riding the rods. So it is difficult to imagine convincing 2500 young men — and hundreds and thousands more, eager to join all along the line to the east — to hop a freight with an army of unemployed, with the unlikely mission of visiting the Prime Minister in Ottawa to discuss work and wages, unemployment, and the western winters of our discontent.

And just like that, alone in my den, making speeches to my journal, I almost think that I can smell his beer breath as Sammy bushwhacks me.

“Western winters of our discontent? Lucifer's fallen? Jesus H. Christ, you gonna wreck a good story with those fucking literary allusions. Worse than the Bible verses! I mean, *Pulp Fiction* survived the Bible verses... but this ain't *Pulp Fiction*, you know what I'm saying?”

It is a bit infuriating — that voice, like some self-appointed sentimentality sensor from my subconscious. I just want to fire back: “Thank you, Sammy. I'll take that as a compliment. But kindly back off now, if you please. I wasn't talking to you.” And then I continue talking to myself, more determined than ever to keep my ear to the narrative voices rising from those decades past.

Of course Slim Evans didn't exactly have to talk these men into riding the rails to Ottawa. Their frustration with the two-month strike in Vancouver and their increasing sense of solidarity was all it took to turn a brash challenge, from his confident voice in a general meeting of the relief-camp strikers, into a project that couldn't be brushed aside. But if anyone could organize such a Trek, keep it together and focused, forge it into a movement that could harness the dialectics of history, that person was Slim Evans.

“‘Harness the dialectics of history’? Jesus Murphy man, you sound like a Marxist-Leninist professor from the sixties at that hippy-faggot Simon Fraser University. Nobody's going listen to that crap in the twenty-first century. You want us to listen? Then stick to the story line and forget the Fidel Castro bullshit.”

See what I mean? That voice of Sammy will sandbag me just when I'm rolling, he and his bloody bigoted tongue. What the hell does he know about narrative voice? He should have no say here when I'm alone at home with the journal. Actually he's often a good deal more polite in person than when

his apparition accosts me from my subterranean levels.

So I catch myself talking out loud to a bloody phantom? I tell him that I'm not talking to him. But... then who the hell *am* I talking to? There were many guys like Sammy that climbed on top of those CPR freight cars in June of 1935 in Vancouver, B.C., all bound to visit "Iron Heels" Bennett in Ottawa, to tell him what they thought of his fiction so far.

Okay, Sammy, wherever you are tonight. Maybe I *am* talking to you, but you've got to know that one has got to tell his story with his own voice, his own way, so cut me some slack here. I can't give you the legendary voice of Slim Evans. He died on the mean streets of Vancouver before I was born. I can only deliver on the voices of his compatriots: Robert "Doc" Savage, Matt Shaw, Andy Miller, Rudy Fedorowich. Guys who poured out their stories for me like a long-sealed bottle of aged whiskey, sixty some years after they put their youthful bodies and souls on the line against fascism, right there in the province of my birth and nurture. Okay, so you don't like my rhetorical flourishes, Sammy. But hell, I'm in this story too, whether we like it or not, because, for better or worse, I'm the one recording their voices, drinking their coffee and beer.

Some of them I met only once. Most have died since we talked. Some talked with an idiom more colourful than Sammy's. The profanity of the thirties was a bit different from ours. Some talked with a composed dignity, as if history professors and textbooks might be recording them. The few still living do not have a whole lot of years left to tell their story, and there isn't a long line-up of people now begging to hear them.

So now it is me, Sammy. Me, trying to put this all together, trying to resurrect the ghost voices of hundreds of Trekkers, many of whom wrapped up their Ottawa Trek only to start a new quixotic trek to Spain a few months later to join the Mac Paps. The Mackenzie-Papineau Division, Canadian youth fighting for the Spanish people and their elected government, fighting Franco and his mercenaries in the Spanish Civil War. Spain was the first breaker in that riptide of fascism. Imagine hundreds of young Canadian rag-tag veterans of the Ottawa Trek, clutching outdated rifles, "the *Internationale* wrapped around their shoulders," as Al Purdy once wrote. Even so, half of them found that lofty mantle no protection against Franco's Stutka bombers, borrowed from Hitler, and mortar and machine guns contributed by Mussolini, as the Mac Paps simply became part of the warm-up, merely target practice for the machinery of the greater wars, for the greater good, of the greater reichs that were to follow, just a few months later.

So, this is about more than the Ottawa Trek. It is about those voices that hold the clues to what happened to this country, to my neighbours, in the seventy or so years since Regina's Market Square. I wonder how these twin virgin provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta conceived and nurtured,

in their identical twin wombs, such divergent world views, nurturing both Bible Bill Aberhart and Tommy Douglas, like Cain and Abel, from the same parched prairie.

Think of Tommy Douglas! Recently voted “Most Famous Canadian,” the first CCF premier in Canada, who initiated, incubated, and mid-wived medicare in North America, thirty years before President Clinton impotently aborted his promise of public health care in the U.S. — aborted for fear of the same powerful interest groups that Premier Douglas chose to ignore.

And what about Bible Bill Aberhart? He, on the other hand, was the first Social Credit premier in Canada, father of funny money, and *Back-to-the-Bible Hour*, surrogate father of Ernest and Preston Manning, of Ralph Klein, and of the photogenic, meteoric Stockwell Day, one time western Pretender to the Canadian throne, not to mention their latest heir, Stephen Harper.

Late some nights, when only my journal and my quirky speculations entertain me, I wonder whether Tommy Douglas and Bible Bill both read the same newspapers the day following the Regina Riot? Did they both vote against Prime Minister R.B. Bennett three months later? Did Cain and Abel both participate in that moment of collective common sense when Canadians booted out a wealth-blinded demagogue who was plunging us further into the Great Depression, like Archie Bunker’s favourite president, Herbie Hoover? Or would a Calgary Aberhart right-wing nut secretly vote for a Calgary Bennett right-wing nut, when push came to shove?

“From religion, to poetry, to politics! You gonna piss off every reader in the entire country before you even get this bloody story in gear, before you finally decide to pop the fucking clutch and let her roll.”

Sammy again. Just when I thought I might include his voice in this story, he pipes up again like an ignorant rounder with a month’s pay and one night to spend it.

“What did I say, man? There you go insulting the salt-of-the-earth working man again, Paul. Not one of whom will listen to your screwed-up story, if you mention another fucking politician. Like we should care about how the dickheads voted, you know what I’m saying?”

Sorry, folks. But I do hear what he is saying. I also know that he is occasionally good at smelling dead end tangents, so I owe him sometimes. I just wish he would shut up while I try to explain why I can’t just “pop the clutch” on the story of Arthur (Slim) Evans without including people like Sammy and people like me from the dawn of the twenty-first century. Not to mention some from the last five decades of the twentieth century. It’s like Ondaatje said, sometimes you have to meander to find the best route to town.

“All right, Numb Nuts, but I’m telling you straight. No one wants to hear your dick-head explanations. Who the hell’s Ondaatje anyway?”

Forgive me for allowing this guerrilla voice to ambush me in the middle of my writing. It only happens late at night when I've had one too many beer. But you see, before I was a history professor, I worked in a federal penitentiary in Drumheller. That is the town where Slim Evans first walks into Canadian history and into my story too. I first heard his story in the slammer. Slim spent time in the slammer. And the slammer provides a whole other layer of literary consciousness and language, which surfaces late at night when I begin to doubt the orthodoxy of our realist tradition in literature. A kind of Garcia Marquez rye whisky seeps into my blood, and W.O. Mitchell's Saint Sammy loosens my tongue. Never mind. You'll like Sammy better when you meet him in person. I used to think he was just another red-neck Albertan in the audience, too ignorant to recognize his own best interest, too much in the moment to even guess that he and I might be a part of this history.

For now I see through a glass darkly that Sammy and I, for better or for worse, are in this story together.