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University of Calgary Press

Dempsey, Hugh A. "Always an adventure: an autobiography". The West Series, No. 3, University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, 2011.

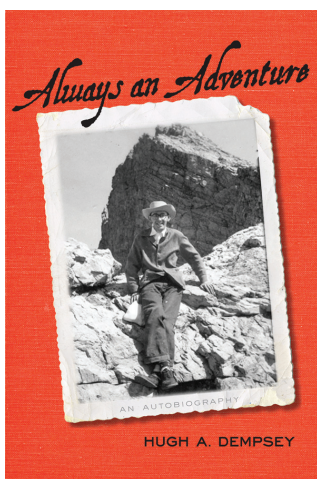
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ALWAYS AN ADVENTURE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by Hugh A. Dempsey
ISBN 978-1-55238-568-5

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The Indian Association of Alberta

A simple action or event can change the whole direction of a person's life. That's what happened to me on February 4, 1950. The previous day, city editor Ken Liddell had called me over to his desk and handed me a piece of paper.

"The Indian Association of Alberta is having an executive meeting at the Bissell Institute tomorrow," he said. "I want you to cover it." Glancing at the paper, I saw the message had been sent by a man named John Laurie, secretary of the organization. Thinking that I might save myself the trouble of actually attending the Saturday meeting, I looked in the Edmonton telephone book for John Laurie's number to see if I could interview him over the phone; it wasn't there. I also checked for the Indian Association of Alberta, and had no luck. I phoned the Bissell Institute but they knew nothing about the organization, other than that its members were from out of town. Reluctantly, I concluded that I had no option but to actually go.

When I got to the meeting on Saturday afternoon, I was immediately impressed by two things. One was a group of Indians conducting a meeting along strictly business lines and following all the parliamentary forms of procedure. The other was a beautiful girl sitting in the front row. The Indians were dressed in a variety of garb. Most had business suits with vests; others wore jeans, woollen shirts, and mackinaw coats. Some of the women had kerchiefs and wore moccasins. At the front of the room was a table where a white man was busy writing, while beside him was a tall, distinguished man who was conducting the meeting. Later, I learned that these were secretary John Laurie, a Calgary schoolteacher, and president James Gladstone, a Blood Indian farmer.

I was told that the Indian Association of Alberta (IAA) had been formed some years earlier but had been reorganized in 1944 to make it a province-wide political organization. Its purpose was to address many of the problems

facing Indian people as a result of policies of the federal Department of Indian Affairs and the Alberta government. The executive meeting had been called in Edmonton to discuss changes to the Indian Act which were being contemplated in Ottawa. The revisions were being made without consultation with the Indians and fears were expressed that the new legislation would be even more repressive than the old, and that Native concerns would not be considered.

As the day wore on, I became a convert to the Indian rights movement. I heard stories about traditional hunting rights being violated, fishing nets seized, and the failure of the federal government to listen to Indian concerns about education and health. During a break, I interviewed George McLean, a Stoney Indian who was better known to tourists as Walking Buffalo. He told me how he had gone to the Methodist orphanage at Morley in 1880, and then went away to learn the trade of carriage maker before returning to his reserve to become its chief. He told me, "The Indian has been taken away from the things that are familiar to him – the forests, steams, and life on the plains. He is taken into a world of trains, automobiles, airplanes and television, and must learn to live in this new life."⁸

The meeting was conducted in English but translated into Cree, Blackfoot, and Stoney for the benefit of the older members. I watched as people such as Dave and Daisy Crowchild, Joe Bull Shield, Peter Burnstick, Mark Steinhauer, and Frank Cardinal rose to address the meeting, little realizing that they would later become my good friends. At the same time, I kept an eye on the gorgeous girl in the front row and, while it may not have been love at first sight, I was certainly attracted to her.

When the meeting was over, I introduced myself to John Laurie, who greeted me with warmth and enthusiasm. He was fully aware of the importance of the press in the association's battle with the government and was pleased when I offered to help in any way that I could. While we were talking, he introduced me to the president, who in turn took me over to meet his wife and his daughter, Pauline. She was the lovely girl in the front row. I had only a few moments with her to learn that she worked for the Edmonton Indian Agency, then I was called away by John Laurie and introduced to other delegates. The next time I looked, she was gone.

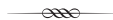
I left that meeting full of enthusiasm, and even today I cannot explain why. My association with Indians until that time had been virtually nil. When I was about nine, my father had been a clerk at the Edmonton Indian Agency at Winterburn for a few weeks and came to know a few of the people there. In later years, they sometimes came to our house to sell firewood or fish, but

I never took any particular notice. And during the months I had been writing the children's column, I had included some Indian legends, but these seemed no more important than my columns on sea serpents and Japanese flowers.

The possible explanations are twofold. First, as I sat in the meeting, I saw people with limited education and limited finances who were utterly devoted to their cause. Yet in spite of their years of mistreatment, they weren't a bunch of wild-eyed radicals, but men and women who followed all the rules and procedures of Canadian justice. But not only were they not receiving Canadian justice, they weren't even getting a hearing. This seemed grossly unfair. Also, I was drawn to the president's daughter, and one way to get to know her would be through the Indian association.

For the next several weeks, it was business as usual for me, providing daily reports of Edmonton's weather conditions and writing news stories on everything from blind bowlers to Boy Scout awards. Then, early in May, I read that a Blood Indian artist named Gerald Tailfeathers was having an exhibition at the Edmonton Museum of Arts. I thought there was a chance that Pauline Gladstone might attend so I went to the opening and, sure enough, there she was. I found out later that she had gone to St. Paul's Indian residential school with both Gerald and his wife Irene, and they were close friends.

I introduced myself to the Tailfeathers but monopolized the attention of Pauline. And the more I talked to her, the more I liked her. I was just getting up enough nerve to ask her for a date when she suddenly saw that Irene and Gerald were leaving. Without even a goodbye she scurried away like a scared rabbit. She told me in later years that she was terrified that her friends were going to leave her with "that white man."



Early in June, I received a letter from John Laurie, inviting me to attend the annual meeting of the Indian Association on the Blood Reserve. I already had made plans to take a week's holiday about that time so that Ed Jackson and I could hunt for the Lost Lemon gold mine. We had read all the available literature on the subject, and after scanning a number of maps, we decided to search in the Mist Mountain region, west of High River. So I made arrangements with Ed to meet me in Waterton Park after the two-day meeting was over.

On the morning of June 8th, I caught the slow train to Calgary, stopping at every small town and milk run along the way. I was armed with my trusty duffle bag, pencil, pocketful of copy paper, and Laurie's letter giving directions to the Blood community hall. I transferred to another train at Calgary and by

the time I arrived in Macleod, it was already late in the evening. The railway station was about a half mile from town so I took a room in a dingy hotel close to the station. And dingy it was. The door to my room had been smashed so many times that it could barely close and for some reason, the bottom had been cut off almost a foot from the floor. To add to the decor, it had been painted orange. I heard a few drunks during the night but I had a good sleep and next morning I began to search for a way to get to the Blood Reserve. I had expected some form of bus service to be running between Macleod and Cardston, but there was none. While I was pondering my next move, I noticed that a large truck filled with Indians had stopped at a restaurant. When I enquired, I learned they were a delegation of Crees from Hobbema who were on their way to the meeting and were glad to give me a lift.

I climbed into the box with the others and found a handy corner where I could stretch my legs. Beside me was a man named Soosay who was suffering from a severe toothache. The only way he could get relief was to jam the point of a safety pin into the cavity and hold it there. He was in agony every time the truck hit a bump on the gravelled road but once he got to the Blood Reserve, a local dentist extracted the rotten molar.

I couldn't see much as we travelled, as clouds of dust swirled up into the dry summer air. I felt us bump across a couple of bridges and sensed we were on the reserve, but the landmarks would have meant nothing to me, even if I could have seen them. At last the truck rolled quietly onto a grassy field and the dust disappeared. As I struggled to my feet, I saw that we were parked beside an old World War II army building which had been converted into a community hall. But that wasn't what impressed me. The image which became indelibly imprinted on my mind was that of a dozen or more young men playing softball in front of the hall. I would swear that every one of them seemed six feet tall, slim, muscular, and built like Apollo. Heretofore, my impression of Indians had been based on the few I had seen on the streets of Edmonton – mostly short, nondescript, and dissipated. These ballplayers were handsome, cleared-eyed men who personified the James Fenimore Cooper image of the "noble savage." Some had braids and wore cowboy boots or running shoes. They were laughing and calling out to each other in Blackfoot as the game progressed.

The hall was in the bottom of Bullhorn Coulee and around it were scattered the white tents of delegates who would be camping there for two days. A whole row of saddle horses were tethered beside the hall, while farther away

were wagons, buckboards, hay racks, trucks, and cars. Obviously every kind of transportation available was pressed into service.

Inside the hall, I renewed acquaintances with John Laurie and Mr. and Mrs. Gladstone. Unknown to me, Pauline and the postal service had kept her family up to date on what was happening with “that *Bulletin* reporter,” so they took a special interest in me. I think they suspected that my interest in their daughter was more than just a passing fancy. Anyway, they took me in tow and when they learned I had no place to stay, they invited me to their farm for the night. As I was living out of my duffle bag and had made absolutely no plans beyond the moment, I was glad to accept.

John Laurie had hoped to have a draft of the new Indian Act in hand before the meeting, but as it had not yet been tabled in the House of Commons, this was not possible. Instead, the association passed three major resolutions in anticipation of what the legislation might contain. It came out strongly against the right to vote, individual land allotment, and involuntary withdrawal of Indian status. At first, opposition to the right to vote puzzled me, until Laurie explained that Indians viewed it as the thin edge of the wedge. If they were given the vote, the next step of the government would be to introduce taxation and to take away their legal rights as Indians.

Other resolutions came from individual reserves, sometimes dealing with local problems but often broaching broader issues such as hunting and fishing rights, and the need for Indian-controlled traplines. An angry outburst came from one delegate who had been told that old age pensions for Indians would be limited to eight dollars a month because they weren't taxpayers. “We Indians were the owners of Canada before the white man came,” he explained. “Even the mineral rights were ours, but we got nothing for them. So, in that sense, we have already paid our taxes.”⁹

I wrote a long article and a number of sidebars on the meeting which Laurie later praised as being “a piece of fine factual reporting.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, I struck up friendships with Dave Crowchild, Percy Creighton, Peter Burnstick, and a number of other delegates. At the end of the first day, the Gladstones invited me to stay over and attend church services at the Indian residential school.

That proved to be another interesting experience. As we left the farm, I could see the residential school tucked into the rolling foothills a couple of miles away, while behind it was the rugged range of the Canadian Rockies. And dominating the skyline was the distinctive mass of Chief Mountain. As we approached the school we passed under a wooden archway and parked near

the huge three-storey brick structure. Around it were well-kept lawns, flower gardens, and pathways. A short distance to the north was the white wooden church, its steeple projecting into the blue summer sky. Quite a number of the parishioners had been at the IAA meeting so I didn't feel like a stranger. All the students had to attend church, and again I was impressed by the handsome boys and attractive girls from the Blood tribe. After services, the principal, Canon Samuel Middleton, showed me around and introduced me to the staff. And when I met an attractive teacher named Jenny Fraser, I must confess that I monopolized her during most of the teatime. I found out later that Pauline learned all about "the reporter and the teacher" long before I got back to Edmonton. On the tour, I saw the classrooms, play rooms, kitchens, and rectory; the whole place impressed me as spotlessly clean, institutional, and drab.

After church, the Gladstones drove me to Waterton, where they were going for a picnic, and there I met *Bulletin* engraver Ed Jackson. We toured along the foothills for a couple of days and then made a futile attempt to look for the Lost Lemon mine. We got past the Sentinel ranger station and followed a trail up the Highwood River, but we soon realized that we would have to walk a greater distance than we had anticipated. We cached the car and plodded westward, panning in the various streams that ran into the Highwood. In the evening, we pitched our war surplus tent and had a good feast of bacon and beans before settling down for the night. We had been told there were plenty of bears in the area so I took the precaution of stashing our food high up in a nearby tree. As I was doing this, Jackson was doing the dishes. When I came back to the camp, the aroma of bacon was heavy in the air.

"Where's that smell coming from?" I asked.

"Oh," said Jackson, "I dumped the bacon fat on the fire."

"On the fire?! The smell will attract every bear within ten miles!"

I had a restless night as the bacon odour seemed to hang heavy in the mountain air, but no bears visited us. Next morning, with Mist Mountain shrouded in the distance, we did some more panning and found absolutely nothing. We discussed going deeper into the mountains, but somehow we knew that if the Lost Lemon mine really existed, it wasn't anywhere near Mist Mountain. So we abandoned the search and simply enjoyed camping until it was time to go back to work.

That summer was one of the most enjoyable I ever experienced. I now had several good friends at the *Bulletin* and spent most of my spare time with them. Often it was nothing more than an extended coffee break at Fawn's, but at other times we haunted Chinatown or took in the local sights. One

memorable evening consisted of visiting a small carnival to play games and go on the rides while drinking Cointreau and using beer as a chaser. With that mixture, I had enough sense to stay off the Ferris wheel. On another occasion, I went with Stan Burke, John McLean, Jim Sherbaniuk, Brud Delaney, and several others to spend the weekend in Jasper. It was late in the season and most of the camps were closed, so we ended up in tents near Pyramid Mountain. That was the time when McLean taught me a lesson in gambling. He had just finished a bottle of rye, holding it upside down until the last drop was drained.

“Do you think this bottle is empty?” he asked me.

“Sure.”

“Is there any more whisky in it?” he asked, handing me the bottle. I looked at it. The whisky had been drained.

“It’s empty,” I said.

“Would you give me a dollar for every drop I got out of the bottle if I promised to give you five dollars if it’s empty?”

“Sure,” I said confidently, “that’s easy money.”

All this time the bottle had been sitting in an upright position. “Then you’d lose,” he said. Tipping the bottle, several drops came quickly and then slowed down, but I counted ten of them.

“I guess I owe you ten bucks,” I said.

“No,” he said. “I was just trying to show you something. If someone wants to make a bet with you, ask yourself why. It could be a sucker bet, like this one.” It was a lesson I never forgot.



Back at the *Bulletin*, the city editor asked me in July if I wanted to cover a religious pilgrimage to Lac Ste. Anne. I still had no car of my own, but the photographer assigned to accompany me had wheels so I was glad to go. I hoped I might meet some of the Indians I had visited at the association meeting. However, the pilgrims turned out to be a completely different bunch, strong Catholics with little or no interest in politics. Almost all were Cree speakers and the majority were Metis, rather than treaty Indians. I interviewed a family that had travelled three days by wagon to attend the services, but other than that, the pervasiveness of Catholicism was so overwhelming that I felt completely out of place.

Upon my return to Edmonton, I was sent to cover a fair in St. Paul and to write feature stories on Camrose and Stony Plain. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was being tested to see if a city boy could effectively cover the rural beat.

I must have succeeded, for in the first week of August 1950, I was promoted to the position of Provincial Editor. This gave me the sole responsibility for a daily page of rural news, an occasional bylined column entitled “Country Club,” and a retinue of correspondents to keep happy. And this pleased me, if for no other reason than my salary increased to \$200 a month, a far cry from the \$85 I had received twenty months earlier as a copy boy. Also, I was flattered when the managing editor told me that at the age of twenty I was the youngest editor on a daily newspaper in Canada.

One of my first tasks was to review the list of correspondents from various parts of our marketing area. There were about fifty, but when I examined their accounts, I found that some of them were virtually dormant, having submitted nothing during the previous six months. Also, when I checked the list against the towns and villages of area, I discovered there were many important centres which were unrepresented.

Correspondents were local teachers, administrators, housewives, and others who were prepared to gather news for the *Bulletin* and be paid by the inch for whatever we published. Some had a real eye for the news while others couldn't see beyond social teas and Boy Scout meetings. Over the next few weeks, I began a letter-writing campaign, asking the dormant correspondents if they wanted to continue, and seeking new representatives in towns not currently covered. One undertaking which ultimately had dramatic results was my attempt to gain correspondents in the far north. When I took over, we had only two northern representatives, a clergyman in Aklavik and an office worker in Yellowknife. Considering Edmonton to be the “gateway to the north,” I added such places as Upper Hay River, Lower Hay River, Fort Norman, Fort Smith, Fort Resolution, Atikameg, and Fort Chipewyan.

I still have a few letters from the correspondents, as they opened a strange new world for me. For example, Joseph Hyde wrote from Fort Resolution that mink were selling for \$50 a pelt and that “this wave of prosperity saved many a hard trek by dog team to attend Midnight Mass here on Xmas, and chartered airplane flights were not uncommon from Snowdrift, Roche River, etc.”¹¹ Jennie Wright wrote from Atikameg, “We are really an isolated community, 60 miles from the railway. Our only link with the outside world is a very bad trail through muskeg country.”¹² She went on to describe the problems in trying to travel over corduroy roads and through virtually impassable mudholes.

But by far the most interesting correspondence came from Mrs. Alicia Humphries, a teacher at Fort Chipewyan. She admitted that she wanted to be a writer and sent graphic descriptions of life in the north. In a 4,000-word diary

essay – impossible to publish in a newspaper – she told about the people and conditions that she had encountered during her first two months at the village. This included the arrival of the caribou herds, which she described as follows:

November 1 – The caribou came to-day, hundreds of them. Small bunches from the big herd **ran right through the village**. My students went almost wild when about twenty of these animals ran right in front of the school. I could not have kept them in if I had wanted to....

November 4 – The caribou are still “running” but not quite so close to the village now. They say now there are thousands, but people are not supposed to kill more than they need and not to feed caribou meat to the dogs...

November 6 – The Mountie’s wife was out with her binoculars to get a good look at those marching on the lake when, to her utter surprise, about thirty came in sight over a little rise and **raced directly** for her, the village dogs after them. The small herd was thoroughly frightened. The Mountie’s wife turned and ran screaming toward her home which was no great distance away. Her husband and his aide ran out when they heard the screams and then the caribou swerved sufficiently to miss the terror-stricken woman.¹³

These northern contacts really paid off during the autumn and winter. In fact, during the month of September I seemed to be writing as much for the front page as for the rural page. It started when the correspondent at Rycroft, in the Peace River area, wired me that a tornado had struck the town. With that information and telephone interviews, my writing was on the front page of the *Bulletin* for the first time, under a banner headline “Tornado Hits North District of Rycroft.” A week later, our correspondent at Elk Point told us that Francis Moocheweines, a Cree Indian from Frog Lake, had murdered his sister-in-law and was the subject of a manhunt. I was quickly on the phone to the RCMP and local people to find out what was happening. Luckily I was already becoming acquainted with Native life and questioned people in the community when they kept referring to Moocheweines as a “breed,” and to all the people at Frog Lake as “breeds.” When I pressed them, they admitted these people lived on an Indian reserve, but from their own discriminatory viewpoint, they were still “breeds.” I kept track of the story but it ended tragically when the heavily armed fugitive committed suicide.

A week after that, I received a call from Newbrook, a town a hundred miles north of Edmonton, that their town was being threatened by a forest fire. We determined that our rival, the *Edmonton Journal*, knew nothing about the occurrence, so the newspaper went all out. I was assigned to accompany Stan Burke in a light aircraft which the *Bulletin* chartered for the trip. As we approached the town from the south, we could see flames surrounding it on three sides, the closest not more than a few dozen yards away. There was no airstrip so the pilot set the plane down in an open field on the south side of town.

For the next three or four hours, Burke took photographs of the fire and the work of local volunteers, while both of us interviewed the locals. Burke decided that I should fly back with the photographs and notes while he would stay overnight to be on hand in case the town had to be evacuated.

That's when I became an item of news on the front page of the *Bulletin*. The story began, "*Bulletin* provincial editor Hugh Dempsey and pilot Jim Radford escaped injury yesterday when their plane crashed in an attempted takeoff."¹⁴ I had climbed into the single-wing aircraft and relaxed as it taxied down the bumpy field. Then the pilot revved the engine, roared ahead, and had just barely cleared the ground when one wheel hit a clump of earth. It spiralled the plane around, snapped the undercarriage, then damaged a wing and the propeller before coming to rest. Neither of us was hurt and the only thought that went through my head as the plane was spinning around was how was I going to get back to the *Bulletin*? The solution was simple. I had been an able hitchhiker in my teens, so now was the time to test my skills. On the edge of town I was picked up by a salesman who had come to look at the fire. Two other rides brought me into Edmonton just after midnight and in plenty of time for the morning edition.

As a result of that little adventure, I concluded that the average person never experiences more than one plane crash in their lifetime, and I already had mine. In succeeding years I travelled by jet, large and small propeller craft, and helicopter, and seldom worried. And my philosophy came sharply back to me many years later in Newfoundland when I had a chance to enter any one of three aircraft waiting on the tarmac. I chose the first one and it took off safely. The second one crashed and all aboard were killed.



The rest of September was taken up with other news, including a suspected arson north of High Prairie, a new gas well at Meeting Creek, and the announcement of construction of the Valleyview highway. But probably my

most “creative” story came in December when I received a 55-word radiotelegram from a new correspondent at Hay River, at the south end of Great Slave Lake. It simply stated that four fishermen in a Bombardier had gone through the ice at Caribou Point and two had drowned. On the basis of this, I wrote a 200-word “news” story for the first edition, my imagination taking over where the facts left off. I also wired the correspondent to interview the survivors. He responded with an excellent first person account which we tacked onto my story for the second edition. Later, I learned that my expanded version of his telegram had been right on the mark. So much for creative journalism.

My interest in Indians, and a certain Indian girl, had not abated during the summer and fall. Just about the time the IAA was meeting on the Blood Reserve, Ottawa was introducing Bill 267 as a revision to the Indian Act. When the IAA received copies, Laurie, Gladstone, and the others were shocked at its contents. It permitted the government to expel Indians from reserves if their status was in doubt, dispose of a band’s capital or revenue funds without the consent of the Indians, enfranchise entire Indian bands, and arrest persons engaged in pressing claims against the government on behalf of an Indian band. At the same time, the legislation failed to respond to Native requests for gradual self-government, protection of hunting and fishing rights, and honouring the intent of the treaties.

Laurie immediately sent a note to me, stating, “You should see the terms of the proposed new Act. Its only equal is the miscegenation laws of the deepest south.”¹⁵ He also contacted other newspapers, Native groups, politicians, and interested people. The result was that the Bill did not get beyond its first reading before summer recess. In August 1950, the IAA met in Calgary to discuss details of the legislation and I wrote an article for the *Bulletin* based on a wire service story. Then, in September, Laurie wrote to me again enclosing a copy of a letter the IAA had sent to the Minister of Indian Affairs, detailing criticisms of the proposed changes. Copies also went to every Member of Parliament. I responded with an article in the *Bulletin* entitled, “Indians Send Protest to Federal Minister,”¹⁶ As a result of the IAA campaign, Bill 264 was scrapped and the Minister announced that Indians would be consulted before any changes were made to the original Act. When a meeting was held with federal bureaucrats a few months later, Gladstone was one of the leading delegates.

While all this was happening, I decided to try again to see if I could make a date with the president’s daughter. After a bit of planning, I “accidentally” met her on Jasper Avenue during a noon hour and asked her if she would

go with me to a wrestling match. Her response was quick, unequivocal, and explicit. “I hate wrestling,” she said and stomped off, leaving me standing on the sidewalk like an idiot. Then in October, I was assigned to cover a variety program featuring George Formby, an English comedian and banjo player. I thought to myself, if she doesn’t like wrestling, maybe she likes music, so with tickets in hand, I resolutely marched to the Edmonton Indian Agency office to try again. I was still extremely shy but I was not to be dissuaded. With office workers looking on with some amusement, I asked her for the date and – oh joy! – she accepted!

On that first date, we found we had a lot to talk about. By now we had mutual friends, mutual interests, and seemed to like each other’s company. She was a nice, friendly, and beautiful girl whom I loved to be with. In fact, for a long time after we were dating, I could never quite accept the fact that such an attractive girl could love someone as gawky and introverted as me. But she did, and so began a courtship. At the time of our first date, Pauline roomed with two Cree girls, Eleanor Seenum and Rose Schott, not far from the Royal Alex hospital. Over the next few months, I became part of their world, visiting Indian patients at the Charles Camsell Indian Hospital on weekends and socializing with Irene and Gerald Tailfeathers and other Indians living in the city.

The Camsell was an interesting place. I was told that during the war it had been used by the American Army to house people who were building the Alaska Highway. The Canadian Army had it for a while and in 1945 it was turned over to Indian Health Services to be used as a hospital for Native tubercular patients. At that time the disease was rampant on many Alberta reserves and during the early years with Pauline and at the Camsell I had to take precautions, including T.B. tests. I was very impressed with the hospital. Some patients had been involuntarily admitted but most soon accepted the fact they were there for their own good. Everyone we knew survived their treatment there and in a few years, the incidence of tuberculosis was dramatically reduced in Alberta.



As the world moved into the year 1951, my future seemed bright. I was an editor on a lively newspaper, courting a gorgeous girl, and discovering an increasing interest in Indians and history. My usual working routine was to put in a six-day week – as did most of the staff – taking Saturdays off and working Sundays to get my provincial page ready for the Monday morning edition. On

Saturday, January 20th, I was still lazing around the house when I received a phone call from one of the reporters.

“Hugh,” he said, “were you planning to come to work tomorrow?”

“Of course,” I replied.

“Don’t bother,” he said with a bitter laugh, “the paper just folded.”

“Wha-at?!”

I hurried down to the *Bulletin* office and when I arrived, there was confusion everywhere. A security guard refused to let me in until I showed him my press card. Inside, people were standing around in small groups while a couple of women in the social department were quietly crying. As I joined the others, I learned how the announcement had been made.

Apparently when the morning edition was being prepared, publisher Hal Straight ordered that a two-column space be saved on the front page, and that the banner headline be left open. When everything else had been plated and on the presses, Straight went directly to one of the linotype operators. The man gulped as he read the announcement, then set it in lead type as the publisher stood over him.

“Don’t move from your seat until the paper is out,” Straight told the man. Undoubtedly the publisher was afraid that if the composing room or press room heard the news ahead of time, the paper might never make it to the press. He then picked up the type, placed it in the font himself, added the lead type bearing the banner headline, and sent the whole thing off to be cast. The first people to read the front page were the pressmen and, except for Straight and the linotype operator, they were the first to know the paper had folded.

“The *Bulletin* Ends Publication Today,” read the banner headline. In the announcement, Straight indicated that the rising costs of materials and labour had made it impossible for the *Bulletin* to continue, in spite of the fact that it had made “the largest percentage gain in circulation and advertising of any paper in Canada. Restricted newsprint supply, building and mechanical expansion limitation, forbid *The Bulletin* to handle this extraordinary growth, so we have to discontinue publication.”¹⁷

According to the story I was told, the *Bulletin* presses were capable of handing a run of 16,000 newspapers, but because of the oil boom and resulting prosperity, the circulation had expanded to 32,000 for its Saturday edition. In order to increase the output, it would be necessary to add another level to the existing presses, but as they were already up to the ceiling, this was impossible. This forced owner Max Bell to choose between two options. He could pay approximately a million dollars to construct a new and enlarged

building and press, or he could close the newspaper and invest the money in the burgeoning oil industry. It was “no contest” for the *Bulletin*. The Leduc and Redwater fields had been discovered only three years earlier and fortunes were being made overnight in the oil industry. On the other hand, the *Bulletin* was the second-place competitor to the Southam-controlled *Edmonton Journal*, so an investor could expect meagre profits on his investment in the face of rising costs. Max Bell had a family tradition in the newspaper field and still controlled the *Calgary Albertan*, but business is business, and so Alberta’s oldest newspaper went down the drain.

As the day wore on, a number of interesting events occurred. From the streets, we learned that many paper boys had dumped the last edition into the garbage, rather than delivering it, so there was a steady stream of people knocking on the *Bulletin*’s doors, trying to pick up one of the last editions. We also were told that some of the *Bulletin* delivery trucks were simply abandoned with their boxes still full of papers. In the newsroom, a few reporters tried to make long distance calls at the expense of the *Bulletin*, either looking for jobs or phoning relatives, but the phone company wouldn’t accept any out-of-town calls. And at one point during the afternoon, I saw a reporter lowering one of the *Bulletin*’s typewriters by a rope out a back window while a compatriot waited below.

Most people’s terminations were effective immediately, but I was given an extra week to clean up the rural accounts. Meanwhile, reporters were allowed to come and go as long as they took nothing except their personal belongings. My only souvenir during that time was my editor’s shears, a brass and steel instrument that dated back to the early years of the newspaper.

As I tallied up the accounts, I began receiving letters from my correspondents. Some were quite bitter. A man from Rocky Mountain House suspected a deal had been made with the *Edmonton Journal*. “You know,” he wrote, “that Journal hasn’t had a correspondent here for months. They just swipe the articles from the *Bulletin*... I suppose that is the way to save money and become the only paper in Edmonton.”¹⁸ From Stettler came some flattering comments after I suggested to the correspondent that she contact the *Journal*. “Frankly, Mr. Dempsey,” she wrote, “I’m a bit spoiled for working with anyone else now. I can’t see just anyone being so patient with my foibles and my notes. I enjoyed writing for your page too. It seems to me so many of the other papers print local items that are so cut and dried. It must be your sense of drama.”¹⁹ In Vegreville, the correspondent was Jim Sherbaniuk, a former *Bulletin* reporter. He commented, “It’ll sure seem funny going to Edmonton now and

not stopping off at the *Bulletin*. It was sort of a home to me for the past year and a half. All those times you and I had this last summer are sure going to mean an awful lot to me now.”²⁰



A few days after the closure, we were visited by a public relations officer from Canadian National Railways, offering reporters and editors a free one-way pass anywhere on their line. It was a nice gesture, and one which was very much appreciated. A few staff had already found work and made good use of the tickets, while about half a dozen of us thought this was a good way to have a holiday before settling down to job hunting. Sitting in Fawn's Cafe for the last time, we decided to go to Vancouver. We tumbled into a day coach late in January and set out through the wintry landscape, bound for Lotus Land. I sat with Barney McKinley, who already had a job lined up on the West Coast. That night I had a terrible time trying to sleep on the tiny seat, and next morning I became vaguely conscious that the train wasn't moving. I pulled on a pair of moccasins and trudged through some snowdrifts to the front of the train. We were near Boston Bar in the Fraser Canyon and our progress had been halted by an avalanche. I picked up a shovel and pitched in to help the CNR employees who were trying to clear the line. After about an hour's work, the line was open and I happily relaxed in my seat as we got moving again. It turned out that I was the only passenger who had tried to help, so I got some nice words from the train crew. Seeing that I was travelling for free, I thought it was the least I could do.

Once in Vancouver, I dutifully left job applications with the *Sun* and the *Province*. Interestingly, I was offered a reporter's job in Trail, but I wasn't interested. I told my pal Garth Hopkins about it and he went after it instead. While in Vancouver, I took time out to visit Masie Armytage-Moore, redoubtable publisher of the *Native Voice*. I had been writing freelance articles for her ever since the first IAA meeting and we had become good friends. I soon found there was no prospect of a job, but she did give me a press card and also a pass to the Arctic Club, a private club. One day I took a couple of *Bulletin* pals with me and, as the liquor laws in the province were quite restrictive, they were very impressed. We were all in our twenties, and I recall one of the reporters looking at a woman who was drinking alone. She was clearly in her thirties. "I'm going to try and pick her up," he told us. "When they get that old they think that every lay will be their last." I can't remember if he tried or if he succeeded with the "old" woman.

I also promised Pauline that I would visit her sister Nora, who was a nurse in Victoria. My plan was to take the midnight ferry, spend the afternoon with Nora, and then return later in the day. That evening, a bunch of us went to a speakeasy called The Penthouse, run by someone called Philliponi, whom I was told was a rather unsavoury character. Our crowd were all *Bulletin* types – Hugh Watson, Brud Delaney, Garth Hopkins, Danny Scott, and me – and we were collectively in an alcoholic fog when somebody called out, “Hey, Hugh has to catch the midnight ferry and it’s already 11:30!”

There was a mad rush for the door as everyone took it as their solemn duty to get me on the boat. By the time we reached the dock, the ferry was just about ready to leave, but amid shouts and well wishes, the *Bulletin* bunch poured me on board. That was the last time I ever saw most of them; they were a great bunch. The combination of whisky and turmoil, plus my inability to handle liquor, made the bathroom my first port of call. Once on the toilet seat I passed out, but sometime later I was startled into wakefulness by a sixth sense which warned me of danger. Opening a bloodshot eye, I saw the blade of a knife being inserted between the door and the frame, and the latch slowly being raised. Instinctively I slammed the latch down and moments later I heard someone running away. Obviously I was about to be robbed.

Staggering to my feet, I decided to see the purser and get a room for the night, but when I reached his office, everything was in darkness and no amount of knocking had any effect. By this time the ferry was well out to sea and everyone had gone to bed. Concerned that my attacker might still be around, I went into the salon, pulled three chairs together and made a sort of bed for myself. There I spent a most uncomfortable night, and when the boat docked at Victoria in the early morning, I was tired, sick, and hungover. I left the ferry immediately, walked along the dock and found a Salvation Army hostel where I thankfully got a room. Up at noon, I wandered into their thrift shop and saw a nice silver pin I thought Pauline would like. A few years later, a North-West Coast specialist looked at it and said it had been made from a Mexican silver dollar by Charlie Edenshaw. So I guess the 50 cents were well spent.

I was in no condition to meet Pauline’s sister, so I moved over to the YMCA and arranged to meet her the following day. I don’t know what Nora thought when she met her younger sister’s bedraggled boyfriend, but we had a nice visit and before long I was back on the ferry, then on the train (at my own expense), and was welcomed home with open arms by Pauline and my

parents. It seemed strange to be in Edmonton without the *Bulletin*, and even more unsettling to be without a job.



Over the next few weeks, I papered the city with applications. At one point I thought about going east, but already the spectre of an inadequate education was rearing its ugly head. When I went to the CBC offices in the Macdonald Hotel, I was told that they would not consider anyone without a university degree, while one of the other radio stations said that college courses in journalism were a prerequisite to employment. And I was a high school dropout.

Each day I scanned the want ads and put in my applications, no matter how inappropriate. I applied to the city police, fire department, provincial government, city hall, and the CNR. And when a job opening at Canadian Western Natural Gas was advertised, I was quick to submit my application, complete with resume. A few days later, I got a call from their personnel officer to come in for an interview. However, any hopes I held of getting the job were dashed when the officer said, “The reason I asked you to come in, was to tell you why I’m not hiring you.” That was a twist. He went on, “Look at the work you’ve done – sign painter, rare stamp dealer, and reporter. Those are all creative jobs. You’d be just wasting your time if you took a nine to five office job here.” In later years, I appreciated his kindness, for he was perfectly right. He went on to suggest that I go to the Alberta Department of Education and take an aptitude test. I did, and it showed that I should go into a creative field, like art or journalism. Great.

In the middle of April, after being out of work for two and a half months, I got a call saying that I had been accepted as a trainee by the Edmonton Fire Department. I hardly remembered applying for the job, but now I was thrilled that at last someone wanted me. I showed up with the other new recruits and was told we would get two weeks of classroom and practical training before we were assigned to fire halls. We were issued rubber boots, a slicker, and other paraphernalia, and I settled down to learn the skills of being a fireman. The classroom stuff was fine, but the practical training was hard. I was just too weak and skinny to be a good fireman. I could jump off a moving fire truck with the best of them, and wrap the nozzle around a hydrant as the hose was unfolded. But when the water was turned on, the hose was like a savage snake beyond my control as it twisted and turned under the strong water pressure. I had no trouble entering a burning building, but when it came to chopping a hole in the floor, I just wasn’t up to it.

But I stuck with it. Our final test was the use of a safety net. We were to be taught how to catch people jumping out of windows, and then each of us was to jump off the top of the Edmonton Gardens into a waiting net. We knocked off early on the day before the test and as I went home, I didn't relish the thought of what tomorrow would bring. As I went into the house, my mother told me there had been a call from the Publicity Bureau of the Alberta government, asking if I was still interested in a job. Was I! I got right on the phone to Ed Bryant, the director, and had an interview that afternoon. Before advertising the job, Bryant had checked for any existing applications and found mine. I was the only candidate and he hired me on the spot.

Next morning, I showed up at the fire department's training station and told the instructor I had another job. I don't think he believed me, and thought that I had chickened out, but it was the truth. On May 1, 1951, I became a publicity writer for the Alberta government.