

Hey Jude

By Jim Nowlan

After driving for hours this past week across U.S. Route 2 on the Hi-Line of Montana, I came upon a billboard that invited me to visit the Blaine County Museum in the upcoming town of Chinook (pop. 1,300). What the heck, I thought, I needed to stretch my legs, and this wouldn't take long.

I drove down Chinook's one-street downtown, which was struggling mightily, as are most rural towns, to stay above forlorn. At the end of the short string of businesses, I entered the historical museum to be greeted by the striking, smiling, 60-ish museum chief cook and bottle washer, Jude Sheppard.

Jude said my first stop should be the museum theater's film, which recounts the Battle of Bears Paw Mountains. The video tells of the grueling flight of Chief Joseph and his Nez Perce band in 1877 across the Rockies and into northern Montana, toward Canada, pursued by Colonel Nelson Miles and his cavalry.

Scores on each side died in battles. Chief Joseph finally surrendered. "I am tired, and my children are freezing," the imposing chief told Miles. In return, the U.S. Government committed to good treatment for the Chief and his band, which promise it almost immediately broke.

The museum is impressive, would be even in a much bigger city.

And so was the museum director, I thought, her affection for the varied collections about the people of her county infectious. Her stately presence, buckeye-black, glistening eyes, and short grey-blond hair only added to the allure. We talked about Montana, ranching, even my Illinois.

Later that afternoon, I called Jude to see if we might continue the conversation over lunch the next day, when we talked some more. Everybody who came into the diner near the museum knew Jude and wanted to chat with her as well, which I resented a bit, selfishly.

After lunch, Jude took me to the Blaine County Wildlife Museum, next door to her museum. The exhibits, from black bears and bobcats to ferrets and other underground critters and more, is also well done, by real pros. It also became clear that Jude was a leading force in the development of both attractions, important to Chinook.

I pumped up my nerve even further and invited Jude to join me for supper the next evening in the larger town of Havre (say “hav’-er”) where I was staying, my last day in town.

We met, at her suggestion, at the Triple Dog Saloon, which brews its own and has the weathered-wood look of a real 19th Century saloon, popular after work with the locals.

We sat on a wood slab bench just outside the saloon door, so as to avoid the noise inside, sipping our big IPAs, and talked more.

Jude was from a big family that booted its young’uns out the door at 18. College was not in the cards for Jude, but marrying a popular Havre boy not long out of high school was. Terry became a rancher south of Chinook on the unforgiving grasslands where it takes 40 acres to support one cow.

Terry and Jude reared three youngsters, all now making their way nicely. An attorney daughter of theirs is, for example, chief of staff to Big Sky governor Steve Bullock.

Along the way, Jude has served as a leader of, maybe the head of, the state association of museums. Every town of 300-plus has its own museum, I swear; Montanans take their heritage seriously.

She is also on the board of the Montana Historical Society, a big deal state agency. And has been on many other boards, I sense, and wonder not at all.

This past year, Terry, for 47 years the love of Jude's life, lost his battle with ALS, possibly the cruelest of maladies. Jude is still grieving, and always will be, I could tell.

As we continued sipping, now into our second pints, almost everybody who came and went from the busy saloon flashed big grins at Jude, and then came over. From a plumber to a fellow in a shiny Corvette, they hugged, sometimes shedding a tear, reminisced about fly fishing escapades or whatever. All were delighted to see Jude, who probably "hasn't been out among 'em" much in the wake of Terry's passing.

All these Westerners who paid court on Jude also glanced sideways, quizzically, at me. I was in my standard issue uniform: navy blazer, khakis, penny loafers and wool tweed Irish cap. "What planet is he from?" I know they were thinking. But like Jude, they were all friendly, open, salty, outgoing in a way that shouted "Montana!"

Classy in an understated way, in neat jeans over Tony Lama boots, Jude captivated me by the way she and her friends shared their warmth. When I slipped away to the men's room, a young lady at the bar, seeing I was with Jude, hooked her thumb toward the slab bench, declaring simply, "She's awesome, you know!" I knew.

When Jude dropped me off at my motel after pizza and another beer, I reached over and pecked her on the cheek to express, all too insufficiently, my huge appreciation for her immensely enjoyable company.

I invited Jude—pleaded with her—to be my guest in Chicago, where she could feast on the world-famed museums along the lakefront. But as these things go, I will likely never see Jude again.

Yet what a warm, endearing encounter over three days along the northern tier of America with an obviously terrific lady. A memory for a lifetime.

Hey Jude.