

Dean Madsen

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Drunk for 40 Years

I just got a letter for my 50-year class reunion. Didn't recognize any of the names. It really made me feel old not even remembering any of these people. But we never really had that much in common. I just didn't seem to fit in with guys my own age and the girls. Primarily I think it was because I was drinking a lot and most of them didn't drink.

I was born in Meeker, Colorado in 1933. My Dad raised sheep. He had about 9000 acres over there; it was grazing land, good sheep country up north of Meeker there. He homesteaded it in 1916. But we lived in town most of the time. We had a house, it was on main street there, it was a three-story rig, full basement, two stories, and great big huge pine trees out in front and a big brick porch and it had a big porch out in the back of it. There was a great big barn back there and an old chicken coop and a great big plot for gardens. We never really had much money, but we never knew the difference, you know everybody else was in the same boat. Didn't take very much to be rich in those days.

When we were kids we'd go out to the homestead in the summer. Originally my dad spent a lot of time out at the homestead. It was hard to get things going. Me and my younger brother we'd go out there during the summer and spend some time, camp out in our little 'ole homestead cabin. It was about 7 kids and the folks - look like Ma and Pa Kettle out there. It was fun.

My Dad sold his lambs in Denver. He brought them in the fall, usually in September; I know cause it was just before school started. They'd haul the sheep over to Craig by truck and then take them by train into Denver. I was with my dad several times when he brought 'em out. They used to have one passenger car on the back of the train. You'd leave Craig about 6 o'clock in the evening; it'd be about 8 o'clock in the morning when you got to Denver. Stopped at every little place along the line. Picked up some more cars, either cattle or sheep. It was quite an experience going with the steam engines, going through the Moffat Tunnel with the cinders a flying and the dirt and the dust. Man you could hardly breathe by the time you got through that thing. When we come out of the mountains and start down the hill out by Golden you could see, good lord, clear into Kansas just clear as a bell and there must have been thousands of ponds all around in there, just nothing out there.

Denver was just a small city pretty much then. We usually stayed at the Standish Hotel, it's over on California Street, it's still there. I can remember going out to the stockyards on the streetcar. They started at about six o'clock in the morning and you could hear the clang, clang of the bell. Out on 48th, where the stockyards was, it was like a big long trip out in the country going out there. It was very exciting stuff, boy.

I had an operation on my eye in 1939. It was crossed when I was born and they straightened it, but it drifted anyway over the years. I remember Denver and I remember a guy while I was in the hospital - he was a representative for one of these livestock commission companies out at the stockyards -- him and his wife brought me a bag of goodies, I can remember that. I can remember going up the May D&F tower.

It was the Depression, but we didn't know. In a small town we lived off the land anyway. We ate mutton and buckskin most of the time. Raised a big vegetable garden in the summer - all kinds of canned vegetables, right behind the house: corn, peas, potatoes, leafy vegetables, carrots all kinds of vegetables. What was left over we canned. We canned lots of fruit too. We could go down to Grand Junction and get a bushel of peaches for 50 cents, if you picked them yourself right off the trees.

Nobody had much of anything. I'd never really seen any real money. My dad'd get an old ewe that wasn't good for anything any more and drag the old thing home. We'd take the thing out in the back yard and me and my younger brother'd sit on it while he'd cut its throat. And we'd dress it out. My mother'd fix all kinds of things with it. She was a great cook. We'd definitely never waste anything. One a year we'd trade some lambs for a hog and we used everything but the squeal as they used to say.

Lots of buckskin, too. My Dad's place out there north of Meeker was a deer migration trail. You didn't really have to hunt a buckskin, you'd just sit on the side of the hill and pick out the one you wanted. We ate buckskin quite a bit. Even the game warden would come and eat with you. As long as you didn't waste anything nothing was ever said about it because a lot of people did it. It wasn't any big deal. Lord there was thousands and thousands of deer.

We had all kinds of things to do. The river was right behind the house there, the White River. We'd wander up in the hills. In Meeker there used to be an Indian agency there in the late 1800s - and you'd go up and you'd find all kinds of arrowheads and relics and stuff. We'd get a fishing pole and go down to the river and catch fish. In the winter we'd go ice-skating on the river. In the summer we'd go skinny dipping in the river. We'd go to Harp Transportation and get some big ole truck inner tubes and we'd have the one guy's mother haul us about three miles up the river and we'd get in the inner tubes and float down the river. We always had things to do.

First time I had a drink was Christmas Eve just before I was 16. For the holidays my dad used to get wine, jugs of it - we had some with the meal and there was some left over in the refrigerator so I kept going out there and tasting a little bit more. It just so happened I was supposed to go with a friend of mine to the movie that night and lord I drank so much of that stuff I was so dizzy I couldn't see the movie. This guy really got disgusted with me because I was drinking. He could smell it. That was the first time I ever drank anything and I thought "well that was kind of fun." After that I drank whenever I got the chance, you know on the weekends and stuff. It just was enjoyable. I thought it was great.

I ran around mostly with the people older than I was. The older guys they had a lot more fun. They were drinking, carousing around. I thought that was great fun. Go to a pool hall and get drunk -- and the dances on the weekends. Of course in Meeker every weekend you had a dance back in those days. We weren't old enough to drink but nobody said anything as long as you didn't cause any problems. Even then if you got too drunk the marshal'd haul you home. Don't get caught smoking, because that's a no-no. But you could get drunker'n a hoot owl and fall down and nobody said a word about it. That's just the way it was.

In high school I worked two different summers for White River Electric

building power lines, by hand. You dug the holes eight foot deep. You had a ten-foot shovel and a ten-foot bar and it was mighty heavy. You'd dig the holes, then you'd set the poles by hand. We'd set the pole with a pike pole. You'd poke it into the wood and just lift it up. Those poles were about 40 foot long. You'd just put the bottom of the pole against the hole and then you'd start lifting. As you lift up, the pole drops down in the hole. Tamp it down and set the thing. Put in anchors if you need them. And then string the wire. My boss did that. I did just the groundwork. There was usually just two of us.

My dad retired, what in 1945. Sold the sheep. He sold the land in, what, 1954. I left Meeker just after that. If you didn't have any ranch or a small business, once you got out of school you had to leave town because there wasn't any work.

In January 1955 I went into the army. I was at Fort Meade Maryland for almost two years, Second Army headquarters. I was at an IBM unit, mostly keypunching and verifying. I'd never even seen an IBM machine before. I drank in the army, but not much. It's kind of hard to do a whole lot on 65 dollars a month. That's what you got paid.

After the army, I came to Denver. I went to college at DU for one year on a scholarship in 1951, but I didn't like that. It was boring. I wasn't learning a thing I didn't already know. That's rich kids - all they do is fool around. I wanted to learn something, so I gave that up.

I did accounting for about 17 years. Bookkeeping primarily, you know, just small companies. I drank while I was a bookkeeper, oh yeah every night. The first job I ever had in Denver was for a wholesale auto parts company. That was a good experience. I learned a lot. Oh, I was drinking. Always. Seven days a week, every night, all day and half the night on the weekends. I'd put 300 miles on my car on a weekend just driving from bar to bar.

Sleeping rooms, that's primarily all I've lived in since 1957. You could get one cheap, ten bucks a week, you know. It was usually just people that owned the homes and they just rented out the rooms in them for roomers. There used to be quite a lot of those places up on Capitol Hill. There isn't anymore. They've all been made into fancy offices or condos or something, you know how that is.

I worked in the stockyards in 1963 for about six or seven months for one of those commission companies: Colorado Livestock Commission Company. I was a bookkeeper. Let's see, the last job I worked was for an electrical company starting in 1963. I worked there altogether about seven years, but it took ten years to get that done because I kept quitting the whole time, drinking and missin' time. It didn't bother them so much, but it was bothering me. I didn't think it was right to be working steady for someone, you know, then not show up half the time. Besides I just didn't want to do that anymore.

I was bored to death with debits and credits. So I went into day labor for 15 years. Kind of enjoyed it. Different job everyday. You know, just physical labor. That was probably the best thing that ever happened to me because if I'd been able to maintain a job and drink too I'd have never been around this long. But then working day labor I hardly ever missed a day. Couldn't afford not to work, you know. If you wanted a place to sleep, something to eat, you didn't make enough. But I still managed to

have enough to get drunk on the weekends, even if I'd have to borrow money to get to work on Monday. And that's just kind of the life I lived. I was used to it. I didn't mind it. I never married because I can't hardly take care of myself. How was I going to take care of somebody else? I was drunk most of the time.

I always drank. Never really thought about stopping. It was just a way of life with me. It was a social thing, more than anything else, you know. It wasn't like I had to drink or anything like that; it was a social thing. You know I used to go to bars up on East Colfax -- little neighborhood places. You knew the same people, all the time. You could tell everyday who was going to be there. They had good music on the jukebox, you know, and I was lonely, pretty lonely. I didn't like living in the big city by myself. And I didn't have a whole lot of friends, you know, outside the people you knew in the bars. So that's where I went. Satire Lounge - I used to go there. I just lived around the corner. I could crawl home if I had to. Another was on Franklin, the Squire. I was a regular there for nine years. It was just a neighborhood bar. Everybody knew everybody. It took a while to get in the crowd there because they were really kind of funny there because the regular old customers'd been there for years.

Every day drinking, I probably gave that up quite a while ago. So it was just either weekends or binges, you know, once in a while it'd last three or four days -- if I'd get a little ahead, which was very, very seldom. When you work day labor you don't get ahead very fast. Once in a while I'd get lucky. I inherited twelve hundred dollars one year, it was from my mother, and I went on a binge for about two weeks and it about did me in. Get up in the morning, go to the bar and get feelin' halfway decent, and we would sit all day and half the night, then go home and go to bed. But after about two weeks it starts getting to you. I'd start hallucinating and really feeling bad.

Whenever the money ran out I'd go off to detox and start over again. They'd tell me just what they tell everybody, you know: "stay sober." You either do or you don't, it's that simple. It's a matter of if you want to, that's all. I never thought about giving up alcohol, not for a long, long time. It was just a way of life. I've been to about every program they've got, including three of them with the VA. I've been to thousands of AA meetings. It just never really lasted. I'd stay sober for a few months, then it was boredom I think more than anything else, you know, cause I was so used to that socializing in a bar I didn't know quite what else to do. So that's what you go back to. I drank for over 40 years and it never really seemed to do me that much harm, except it was getting to the point it would have if I'd stayed at it

Started day labor in 1973. I did day labor for 15 years. Then I went to work down at the Windsor for about four and a half years. It's expensive condominiums. I did maintenance, just light maintenance, housekeeping, keep the place clean.

I stopped drinking when I was 57 because it just didn't interest me anymore. I was a bar drinker. I never was one to sit around at home and get drunk. That made no sense to me at all. It was a social thing and bars were changing so much. There's so many goofy people. It just doesn't interest me anymore. I was getting sick and tired of feeling bad all the time. It wasn't fun anymore, so why do it.

I quit the Windsor when I turned 60 because I couldn't handle it anymore. Up and down those stairs - they got 23 floors in there. And it just got

by noon I'd be so crippled up I couldn't hardly get around, so I had to quit. I heard about step13 at a detox program. I worked just here at step for a few years, then finally I started working part time over at this storage company where I work now. Then I took over as manager and I've been there ever since.

Step 13 is more like a home than anything I've ever had. And, you know, it's being around people. It makes up for the bars. You feel like you're a part of things. It just kind of makes up for never having had a real home, you know, for a long, long time. It's just nice to know there's people around. Just by being here step13 helps me stay sober. And taking antabuse. I'm not dumb enough to drink on antabuse. Step 13 maintains my sobriety. It keeps me settled and content, I guess you'd say. So I don't have to go out to bars. It's like having a home, that's what it is to me.