

Celebrity

Richard Denner
with Bouvard Pécuchet



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D Press 2021 Ellensburg

Here are three stories, *Deadman Finds Happy Trails*, *Notable for Not Being Notable*, and *A Bit of Notoriety*. Two of the stories are played out on the national level, the first through the American press and the second through the press and the internet. A tragedy and a comedy. The third story is something of a burlesque.

Richard realizes he was caught up in events that originated outside of himself, and although he appears to be a hero in one story and in another a cause célèbre figure, he was, for the most part, swept along—not that he didn't enjoy himself.

DEAD MAN FINDS HAPPY TRAILS

Retailing at Christmas time gets hectic. I was in my bookstore, taking a short break, drinking an espresso with my friend, Webster Hood, when the phone rang.

"Four Winds. Richard, here. How can I help you?"

"Hello, my name is Sally Macdonald. I'm a reporter for the Seattle Times, and I'm trying to find a Roy Rogers lunchbox. I've been told you have such an item in your store. Is this true?"

"Yes, I've got a Roy Rogers lunchbox. It's a Roy Rogers/Dale Evens Chow Wagon. Why do you ask?"

"Is it for sale?"

"No, not really. I have been asked several times if I would sell it, but I have told people it is not for sale. Everything in the store is for sale, but the buck stops there. Are you scouting for a certain antique dealer who persists in asking me to name a price?"

She laughed. "Goodness, no. My situation is entirely different. May I explain?"

"By all means, go ahead."

"A couple of weeks ago, the Times ran a feature article on Roy Rogers. The story was a reminiscence of growing up with Roy Rogers and the gang at the Double R Bar Ranch. It was a full page spread with pictures, and soon after the article appeared, a letter arrived from a lady, who asked if anyone might know where she could get a Roy Rogers lunchbox. She said she and her friends had been scouring antique stores without luck, and that she was getting desperate. I asked her why, and she told me it was for her husband's ashes. I said, 'What!?' She told me she wanted the lunchbox because it was her husband's wish that his ashes be stored in a Roy Rogers lunchbox. I was incredulous, at first, and she said she knew it was a strange request, but she had been looking for six months, and she wanted to give her late husband this last gift after twenty-five years of marriage."

I said, "I don't believe a word of this. I bet you are trying to trick me out of the lunchbox by concocting this story."

"Really, Sir, this is the truth. She says she will pay almost anything for an authentic Roy Rogers lunchbox. I asked around the newsroom, and a colleague of mine, Randee Fox, said she had seen one in your bookstore when she was visiting Ellensburg. Believe me, although this story seems farfetched, it's true."

"I think I will have to talk to this woman in person, just to be sure. Can you give me her phone

number?

"Yes, I can give you her number. Really, this is on the up and up. Trust me."

She gave me the lady's name and her number, and I said, "Ok, I'll give her a call, but this sure sounds bizarre."

"I know," she replied, "but you'll see I'm telling the truth."

After she hung up, I said to Webster, "You won't believe what I just heard." I told him the gist of the story and, then, I dialed the number I had been given.

"Is this Mrs. Beverly Gibson?"

"Yes, I am Beverly Gibson. Who is calling?"

"My name is Richard Denner, and I am the owner of the Four Winds Bookstore in Ellensburg. I just received a call from a Sally Macdonald, who says she is a reporter from the Seattle Times, and she told me you were looking for a Roy Rogers lunchbox. Is this true?"

"Oh my, yes. I have been looking everywhere. Do you have one? I need one, ever so bad."

"Yes, I have one. It's been in my store for years. It's sort of like a mast head. I keep pennies in it."

"Did Miss Macdonald tell you what I wanted it for?"

"Yes, she did, but I had a hard time believing the story."

"Mr. Denner, my husband, Bruce, was a great fan of Roy Rogers. As a kid, Roy Rogers was his idol. He always had to be Roy when the neighborhood kids played cowboys. He sang 'Happy Trails' as his own theme song. He told me, 'When I die, skip the funeral urn and just keep my ashes in a Roy Rogers lunchbox.' Is there any chance you would sell me your lunchbox?"

"Excuse me for a minute, Mrs. Gibson. Let me consult with a friend." I looked at Webster, who was listening to my conversation and smiling. "Webster, you teach ethics, if I've told people I won't sell the lunch box under any circumstances, I shouldn't back down, should I?"

"You should stick by your guns, or in this instance, your lunchbox, Roy," he said.

"Mrs. Gibson?"

"Yes?"

"I have made my decision."

"Yes?"

"This lunchbox has sat on a shelf in my store for twenty years. My ex-mother-in-law found it in a secondhand store and gave it to my son, Theo. After he grew up, it wound up in the store. It sits with some Old West books in a little display. Once, a friend was going to a Roy Rogers Show, and he asked if he could take the lunch box with him to get it autographed. I don't think it was actually signed by Roy, probably by his son. It's signed *Roy Rogers and Trigger* in green ink. The signature has faded to where you have to know where to look to see it. An antique dealer offered me \$300. She said in New York, it would fetch more, but I told her, No deal. It's a keepsake. So, I don't think I can change my mind about selling it, now." At the other end of the line, I could hear a sigh of disappointment. I waited a beat, for dramatic effect, and then I told her, "On the other hand, I could give it to you."

"My goodness," she exclaimed, "do you mean it? You would give it to me? Oh, that is marvelous."

"Give me your address. I will wrap it up and mail it to you."

"Mr. Denner, you are just too kind."

"Don't mention it, Mrs. Gibson. It is my pleasure."

I wrote down her address. I dusted off the lunchbox and put the pennies in a jar. I found a cardboard box and some bubble wrap, and I made a tidy package for Beverly Gibson. And for Bruce. I mailed the box that afternoon, and I thought no more about it. A couple of days later, I got another phone call from Sally Macdonald. She was full of enthusiasm about my kind-hearted gesture, and she

asked if she could write a story about what I had done.

I said, "Sure," and I told her pretty much what I had said in my conversation with Beverly. I concluded with, "I'm an old hippie. It seemed sort of cosmic to me. Now, Bruce can rest in peace, and I won't be bothered with people always wanting that lunchbox." That was a week before Christmas. I should have anticipated what the newspapers were going to do with this story. The next day, on the front page of the Seattle Times there was a picture of Beverly holding the Roy Rogers/Dale Evans Chow Wagon and a story by Sally Macdonald entitled, "Roy Rogers Fan gets Last Wish." Then, the phone began to ring.

Associated Press picked up the story, and it was run as a piece to make you feel good in every newspaper in the country. People phoned to thank me for being an angel. A guy phoned wanting to know if I wanted to buy more Roy Rogers paraphernalia. I got cards and letters from everywhere. The tabloids competed. The National Enquirer wanted a story, but World News beat them to it. I reiterated what I had previously told the Seattle Times, and at the checkout counter in Safeway I saw a piece on the back page of World News under the heading "Dead Man Finds Happy Trails" next to a sighting of Elvis. It was surreal. They didn't change a thing. The TV program, *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, contacted Beverly, and they filmed her in her home in Federal Way. She was standing by her mantelpiece. She took down the Chow Wagon with Bruce's remains, and she told the interviewer about how her husband had had several surgeries and painful chemotherapy and that his last wish was to be kept in a lunchbox. It was a brief interview between pictures of the smallest park in the state of Washington and the largest apple. My uncle, Remos, a great storyteller himself, phoned from Albuquerque, to tell me that he was reading a newspaper, and as soon as he saw "bookstore in Ellensburg" he knew it had to be me.

NOTABLE FOR NOT BEING NOTABLE

"Richard, you're famous!"

"I am? How so?"

I was talking to Belle Randall, in Seattle. She had phoned to tell me that I was mentioned in *The New York Review of Books*, in a review by Nicholson Baker of a book entitled *Wikipedia: The Missing Manual* by John Broughton (Pogue Press/O'Reilly, 2008). More than a book review, Baker, who is a respected novelist, had written a very informative and entertaining essay, "The Charms of Wikipedia" (Vol. 55, No. 4, March 20, 2008, www.nybooks.com/articles/21131). It begins: "Wikipedia is just an incredible thing. It's fact-encirclingly huge and it's idiosyncratic, careful, messy, funny, shocking, and full of simmering controversies—and it's free, and it's fast."

He goes on to relate the background of this online encyclopedia, how it evolved, how it's structured, and how for some people it has become a fascinating project. For Baker, it became a mission.

The uniqueness of Wikipedia is that it is a reference work written by strangers who contribute anonymous articles on any subject they wish—or re-write articles or vandalize them. Beginning in 2001, in eight years, Wikipedia amassed over two million articles on diverse subjects, all written without editorial oversight. "It worked and grew," said Baker, "because it tapped into the

heretofore unmarshaled energies of the uncredentialed.” I, too, had been intrigued by this openness, and in a blatant act of self-promotion, I created a page for myself. I did not read the rules or follow the guidelines for creating my page. I designed my page by entering the “edit” area on the page of another, more famous poet and copied the formatting codes. Voilà, I had a profile on Wikipedia.

In his essay, Baker mentions that Broughton’s manual is useful in keeping one from breaking wiki-rules but he notes that the original rule endorsed by the founders was: “Ignore all rules.” In this spirit, I proceeded. It wasn’t long before a notice appeared on my page that tagged my profile as a “stub,” and I realized that there were wiki-elves at work behind the screen. The term “stub” meant that the article was short and needed help.

So, I expanded my profile to include a short bibliography, and Jonathan Penton, my webmaster, added a couple of links. Unbeknownst to me, the halcyon days of just offering information for the sheer joy of adding your two-cents worth were over, and delitionists were on guard. Soon, my profile was tagged “not-notable.”

Baker designates himself as an inclusionist. He makes edits to improve and expand articles, and he is protective of articles which he believes have merit, that are slated for deletion. He tells how he became a crusader:

But the work that really drew me in was trying to save articles from deletion. This became my chosen mission. Here’s how it happened. I read a short article on a post-Beat poet and small press editor named Richard Denner, who had been a student in Berkeley in the Sixties and then, after some lost years, had published many chapbooks on a handpress in the Pacific Northwest. The article was proposed for deletion by a user named Pirate Mink, who claimed that Denner wasn’t a notable figure, whatever that means. (There are quires, reams, bales of controversy over what constitutes notability in Wikipedia: nobody will ever sort it out.) Another user, Stormbaly, agreed with Pirate-Mink: no third-party sources, ergo not notable.

Denner was in serious trouble. I tried to make the article less deletable by incorporating a quote from an interview in the Berkeley Daily Planet—Denner told the reporter that in the Sixties he’d tried to be a street poet, “using magic markers to write on napkins at Café Med for espressos, on girls’ arms and feet.” (If an article bristles with some quotes from external sources these may, like the bushy hairs on a caterpillar, make it harder to kill.) And I voted “keep” on the deletion-discussion page, pointing out that many poets publish only chapbooks: “What harm does it do anyone or anything to keep this entry?”

An administrator named Nakon—one of about a thousand peer-nominated volunteer administrators—took a minute to survey the two “delete” votes and my “keep” vote and then killed the article. Denner was gone.

Notable/not-notable...endless argument. Baker claims, “...a lot of good work-verifiable, informative, brain-leapingly strange—is being cast out of this paperless, indefinitely expandable accordion folder by people who have a narrow, almost grade-schoolish notion of what sort of curiosity an on-line encyclopedia will be able to satisfy in the years to come.”

What led up to my profile’s demise? One doesn’t often get to see the various elements in a sequence of events, from cause to effect, but on-line in virtual reality the record is there. Here is

a bit of the history retrieved from Wikipedia.Org/wiki/User:Balloonman/afd/Richard_Denner:

Note: This debate has been included in the list of Poetry- deletion discussions.----pb<talk>18:24, 18 January 2008 (UTC)

I've been pondering the notability of this person and I can't decide whether there should be a Wikipedia article about this subject or not. There seems to be some claims to notability in the article, but I can't find any reliable third-party sources to back them up (most of the current sources seem to be unreliable or edited by the subject of the article), searching for the two listed books brings up little or nothing, and one them appears to be self-published. --Pirate-Mink 15:04, 17 January 2008 (UTC)

DELETE I agree with the lack of reliable third party sources. I will revisit this discussion if some (any) good sources are posted.---Stormbay (talk) 04:00, 22 January 2008 (UTC)

KEEP The man is a publisher and a poet with an extensive bibliography, part of the sixties Berkeley scene. Many poets publish on chapbooks—there is a long and rich tradition of this. What harm does it do to anyone or anything to keep this entry?---Wageless (talk) 03:51, 23 January 2008 (UTC)

Wikipedia Deletion review/Log/2008February

RICHARD DENNER (edit/talk/history/links/watch/logs)

This article about a poet who was deleted last month based on Wikipedia:Articlesfordeletion/Richard_Denner. The sparse discussion consisted of the nomination, one person who supported deletion (but said they would “revisit this discussion if some (any) good sources are posted”), and one person who wanted the article kept. This last person also added some material to the article, including an additional source—the article already had several sources, but these weren't considered sufficiently “third-party”—but neither of the other two, nor the closing administrator, seems to have noticed this. Based on, I guess, a calculation that this is 2-1 in favor of deletion, the discussion was closed as “delete”. Now in the first place, I disagree and think that at a minimum, the nomination should have been relisted for more discussion. The failure to consider new evidence also means the arguments for deletion need to be re-evaluated. Fortunately, the person trying to save this article happens to be Nicholson Baker, and took time to write about this in *The New York Review of Books*. So, arguably the article could have yet another source now. Poetry often languishes in obscurity, making research challenging for those who don't know their way around, but let's not compound the problem in this case.---Michael Snow (talk) 18:15, 29 February 2008 (UTC)

Standard gripe about no apparent discussion with the deleting admin before bringing it here. Many of these sort of cases should be resolvable with a little discussion.---81.104.39.63 (talk) 18:53, 29 February 2008 (UTC)

Many see us as a scary desk sergeant or whatnot. Regardless, here we are.---Dhartung (talk) 23:26, 29 February 2008 (UTC)

OVERTURN, there was no consensus. The nominator said “I'm not sure if...” the only delete comment was hesitant and said “if sources...” and the keep was fairly confident it should be

kept. There was no elaboration in the closing statement as to how the outcome arrived at delete. Closing as delete was a mistake.---Jerry (talk) 21:32, 29 February 2008 (UTC)

OVERTURN, lack of consensus, this should be relisted and given another chance.---Mbimmler (talk) 17:54, 1 March 2008 (UTC)

OVERTURN, I thought it was a quick delete. I suspect that only marginal notability exists but the article deserves due process.---Stormbay (talk) 21:06, 1 March 2008 (UTC)

> Hi, I know Richard and found his page when people were beginning to assert his lack of notability (I did not participate in the deletion debate). My comments on the talk page, where I disclose my conflict of interest and add a couple of sources, are presumably visible to admins. At that time, it is mentioned that Richard started his own page. If it would be helpful, I can start a page for him from scratch.---JonathanPenton (talk) 03:39, 2 March 2008 (UTC)

OVERTURN, Came here from NYRB as well. Which I suspect now serves as an additional source.---Relatarefero (talk) 09:53, 2 March 2008 (UTC)

OVERTURN, insufficient consensus to delete the article. I would have relisted the debate.--Hut8.5, (talk) 10:37, 2 March 2008 (UTC)

And so, I was back—a cause célèbre figure. I wanted to thank Nicholson Baker. I left a message at his fan club site: “I would like to thank you for coming to my defense in your book review, *The Charms of Wikipedia*. It was very well-written, entertaining and thought-provoking. On a personal note, being a Buddhist monk, I am charmed to be notable for not being notable.” He replied by email: “I wish I had your Buddhist attitude toward literary vicissitudes.”

A BIT OF NOTORIETY

Another bit of notoriety befell Richard near Christmas 1993, in Ellensburg. Earlier that year, he had met Gail walking up Pine Street. It was night, and he could plainly discern her attractive body silhouetted through the thin dress she was wearing by the street light. They walked together and sat on her porch and talked. She kissed him goodnight. The next evening, he gave her a rose and a poem.

The touch of your tongue my lip
My palm on the curve of your hip
A cut rose in a vase—another,
Invisible, rose growing here

Richard came to stay nights with Gail and her son, Alex, in her dilapidated duplex. She wrote short stories. He liked the one where the heroine drops Acid on top of a pyramid in Mexico. He asked her why he hadn't seen her at Four Winds. She said she didn't want to be stigmatized as an “artist.”

In the early hours of the morning, there was a pounding on the outside wall of the house and the cry of “Fire!” Smoke could be smelt in the bedroom. Gail woke Alex, and the three of them hurriedly got dressed and exited through the front door. The cat was the first to flee. Flames could

be seen near the rear of the house where a tenant lived. There wasn't time to rescue the fish in the aquarium.

The house burned quickly. Firemen poured water on the blaze, but it was obvious the house was going to burn. Alex, Gail, and Richard stood wrapped in blankets in the snow-covered street. Someone took their picture.

When the commotion subsided, the three of them and the cat rode to Richard's house, on Capitol Avenue, in Gail's car. Gail was in shock, and as soon as it was light, she returned to her house. She picked through the debris, but there wasn't anything that wasn't ruined. The aquarium was smashed, and the fish lost in the ashes.

There are good Samaritans in Ellensburg. Richard found a fully decorated Christmas tree and many wrapped presents and useful household things on his front porch. It made for a Merry Christmas, of sorts.

After the holiday, Richard was in the Valley Café. As he was walking past a booth, Professor Bob Goedeke stopped him said, "I saw your picture on the front page of the Daily Record. Looks like you have a new girlfriend."



APPENDIX

ASHES REST IN PEACE IN ROY ROGERS LUNCHBOX

By SALLY MACDONALD The Seattle Times

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Dec 24, 1994 at 12:00 am

SEATTLE — Bruce Gibson was admittedly a little Trigger-happy as a kid. Roy Rogers was his idol. Happy Trails was his theme song.

When I die, he told his wife, skip the funeral urn and just keep my ashes in a Roy Rogers lunchbox.

Seven months after Gibson's death, his wish has been fulfilled by an Ellensburg, Wash., bookstore owner he never met.

And Beverly Gibson says her husband is now resting in peace.

Gibson, a Federal Way, Wash., real estate appraiser, was 49 when he died in May after several surgeries and painful chemotherapy. That day, there was an article in The Seattle Times, a reporter's reminiscence of growing up with Roy Rogers and the gang at the Double R Bar Ranch, at the movies and later on TV.

At the funeral, Gibson's friends talked about the article and how he always had to be Roy when the neighborhood kids played cowboys. They told Beverly they would be on the lookout in secondhand stores for a lunchbox.

Then, a couple of weeks ago, Beverly Gibson wrote to The Seattle Times to say how much the article meant to her and that she was still looking for a Roy Rogers lunchbox.

"When we find one," she wrote, "Bruce will get his final wish, and I will be able to give him one last gift after 25 years of marriage."

A Seattle Times artist, Randee Fox, saw the letter and called a friend who knew Richard Denner, owner of the Fourwinds Bookstore and Cafe in the Eastern Washington city of Ellensburg.

THE CHARMS OF WIKIPEDIA

By Nicholson Baker

New York Review of Books

March 20, 2008

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