

I Know...I Was There

By Clancy Strock, Contributing Editor

ONE FINE summer day more than 15 years ago, Roy Reiman, founder and then owner of Reiman Publications, phoned me. We had a nodding ac-quaintanceship from years gone by but hadn't talked in a long time.

Roy said he had heard that I was teaching journalism at Nebraska. Yup. So how was I spending my summer?

Not doing much, aside from a weekly golf date with friends.

Well, he might have something to keep me busy. He said his Country magazine had been receiving so many nostalgic stories from readers that he was starting up a new magazine that would be called Reminisce.

Called what?

Reminisce.

He said he originally wanted to call it Memories, but his wife, Bobbi, nixed it. She pointed out that you can have bad memories as well as good memories. The new magazine needed a more positive title.

Her choice was Reminisce.

Roy wondered if I would like to write an article for each issue.

About what?

Mostly your own personal memories, he said. You know...growing up on an Illinois farm during the Depression years, the stuff your family did, your college memories and time in the military and then starting a family...and anything else you can think of. Birthdays, Christmases, having fun even when you were broke.

We'll call it "I Know...I Was There," he said.

This was going to be a different kind of magazine, Roy explained. It's going to be written mostly by its readers, sharing their true memories, not fiction.

And this new magazine's not going to have any advertising.

And, oh, lots and lots of pictures, mostly the kind that people have in their photo albums. We'll just see how it develops, he said.

We shook hands over the phone. After I hung up, I turned to my wife and said, "You'll never believe the goofy idea Roy has for a new magazine."

So much for my wisdom and foresight.

In 1991, the first issue was mailed free to several thousand homes. The response startled even Roy, the World's Most Enthusiastic Optimist.

Mailbags filled with subscriptions poured in. And many of the

envelopes also contained story material. Roy and the lone editor he had hired were hopelessly swamped. So he added a few more people to the Reminisce staff. But the river of stories and pictures still kept ahead of them.

This Was Incredible

By the end of the first year, there were 1,200,000 subscribers!
By January 1995, it topped the 2,000,000 mark!

Roy asked if I might have time to help out with the deluge of good material coming in from readers. Soon, the local UPS deliveryman was regularly dropping large, heavy cardboard boxes packed with manuscripts on my Nebraska doorstep.

What an experience it was to winnow through those memories—quite possibly some of them from you. Roy had hoped for rain but received a flood. Short stories. Long stories. Sad stories. Poetry. Vacation pictures from the family album. Excerpts from diaries kept long ago. Anecdotes of how people met their spouses. Childhood stories.

A lot of the memories were of the dust bowl and Great Depression days. So many of these came in that they were tossed into a separate box and eventually were published as a hardcover book called “We Had Everything But Money.”

One remarkable thing about this book was that the tales of those tough times were not full of self-pity. Instead, most of them were about how families came together to help each other. They were

about surviving, in the purest sense of the word.

Ernest Hemingway once defined courage as “grace under pressure.” That precisely described the people of that era, too.

That first Reminisce book went through several printings as word of it got around. Alas, it’s now out of print. But if you find a friend who has one, be sure to borrow it and enjoy one of the most inspiring books ever.

Readers and Friends

Having a chance to write my life story piece by piece through this very magazine column, the “I Know...I Was There” series has turned out to be a rare privilege.

But best of all are the readers I have met in the process. A surprising number have been inspired to write to me about their own experiences that related to something in one of my columns.

For example, there’s Edna Kalkbrenner. I first heard from her 10 years ago. I still recall when my wife came in from the mailbox, visibly shaken. She was holding a letter.

“It’s from your mother,” she gasped.

Inasmuch as Mom had passed away a half dozen years before, this was indeed a surprise! But, no, it was just that Edna’s handwriting was precisely like my mom’s. It was that beautiful style called the Palmer method of penmanship, one taught in grade schools generations ago.

It turned out that Edna had grown up on a farm a dozen miles from where I did. She had great memories of going to a park on the Rock River in northern Illinois as a teenager. One major attraction was a hunky lifeguard named Ronald Reagan. (My Aunt Grace went to that park for the same reason.)

Well, over the years, Edna and I have had a lot to talk about. She moved from Duluth to a northern Minnesota town where she could be closer to family.

I called her one night, and during our conversation, she said, “You know, I have a son who is exactly your age.”

Whoa! A son my age?

“If you don’t mind me asking... how old are you, Edna?”

“Ninety-eight,” she said in that firm, clear voice of hers. What a shock. I never would’ve guessed!

A year ago, she hit 100 and was honored on a morning network talk show. A few days later, most of her town turned out for a grand celebration.

I’ve also become acquainted with a score of other readers, and not all are of my generation.

During the past year, I’ve become pen pals with Sarah, a fine young lady of 15 who lives on a farm in Canada. Her special

passion is the music and movies of the '30s and '40s.

We correspond regularly. I'm learning all about farm life in Canada and the usual teen trauma of earning a driver's license and how she and her siblings sell their farm-grown produce weekends at the nearest town.

Then there's the Michigan man who was a professional photographer. But after retiring, he had a story accepted by Reminisce and discovered a new career as a successful freelance writer.

And then there's the man in Ohio who seemingly knows everything about all the Strocks ever born in the U.S., as well as a lot about the original clan back in Germany in the 1600s.

I've also had a long correspondence with a married couple (both Ph.D.'s) who gave up the academic life and all the hubbub of modern civilization to move on to some wooded property in New York state.

No electricity. No phone. The mailbox is 4 miles away, and they carry their water from a spring on the property.

Hobie spends his summer chopping wood to tide them over their brutal winters. He has become the historian for his part of the world, and Lois plays the organ at their church.

They revel in their simple life where the only occasional racket

comes from the blue jays and their most frequent visitor is a raccoon.

Those are just a few of the many who have become mailbox friends. It has been an unexpected reward that has considerably brightened my days.

Now and then one of you says that something I wrote revived a long-forgotten, happy memory. Every issue of Reminisce, filled with memories you readers have generously shared, does that for me, too. Thank you.

And thank you, Roy Reiman, for creating Reminisce.

I know...I was there.