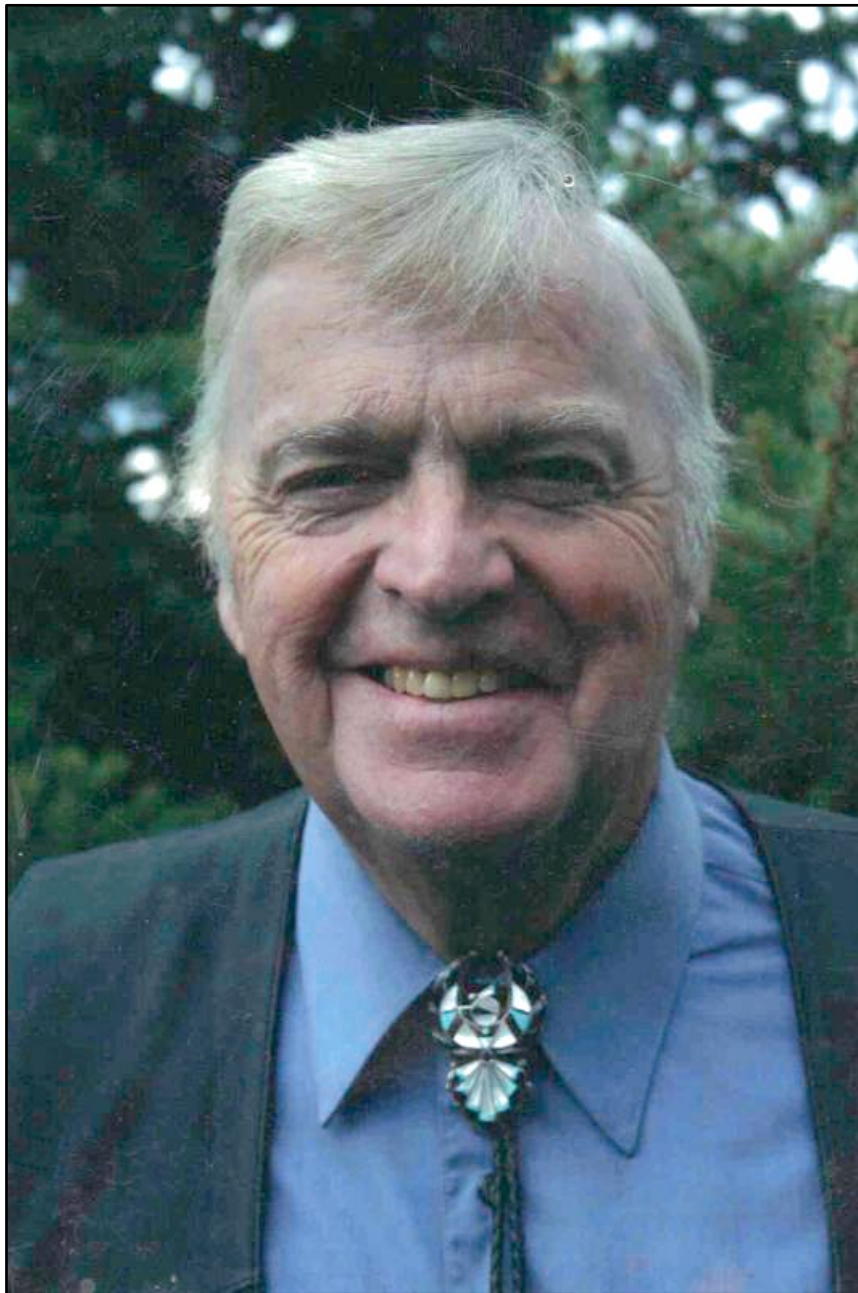


The Story of My Life

by

Ken Thomasma

From September 2, 1930, to November 14, 2023



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Preface

Ken Thomasma was a gifted storyteller. He has told stories to thousands of groups of people ranging from individuals to groups of visitors at National Parks across the country, to classes of school kids throughout the country, to groups at summer camps, to auditoriums packed with eager listeners. Ken told stories to entertain, but more importantly to educate. He wanted to stir up peoples' curiosity, to get elementary students to read and write, to open eyes, hearts, and minds to the lives past and present of Native Americans, and to help everyone who faces adversity. Here in this document, Ken tells his own life story in his own inimitable style of spoken English.

On January 13, 2023, Ken and Bobbi Thomasma suddenly lost their only child, Dan, to a very aggressive cancer. For any parent, losing a child is extremely difficult. Losing your only son is even worse. And losing your only child when you are 93, when you are dealing with health issues as you are making your final transition, and when your son has been lovingly helping you every day is tragic. Ken and Dan were remarkably close. They lived next door to each other for most of their adult lives. They climbed mountains, fished streams, hiked trails, and traveled to Europe numerous times together, often with Bobbi. Plus, Ken was rapidly losing mobility especially with his right leg where he had had two hip replacements.

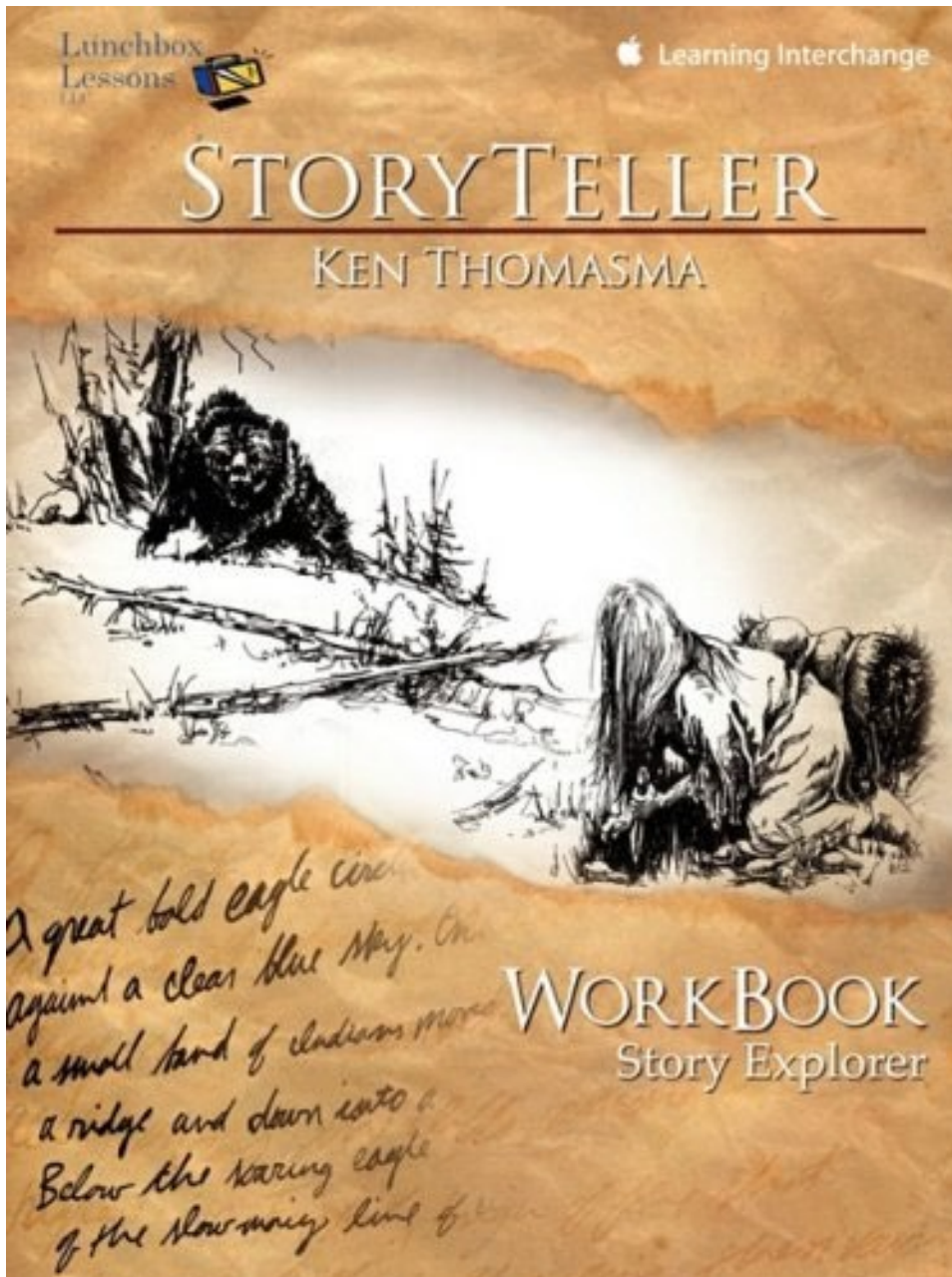
Ken was not a happy camper. As his next-door neighbor for 25 years, I wanted to find a way for him to concentrate on his remarkable life rather than on his recent losses. I said, "Hey Ken, why don't you tell me your life's story. I will record it, transcribe it, and make it available to the world on the Internet." He loved that idea. Every time I showed up with the recorder he was smiling from ear to ear. He was in his element and loved every moment. He was quite lucid. At 93, his memory for facts was a bit confused, as is typical for all of us, but his feelings poured out. There were a handful of tales that he told several times. They were very important to him.

From October 7 to November 6, 2023, we recorded eleven hours of stories. Physically he went downhill rapidly starting around November 9. He died on November 14. When I showed up at the hospital during those last days he wanted to know where my recorder was. Ken died a happier man with Bobbi by his side.

I also recorded Bobbi for several hours as I read Ken's words to her to check the facts and to get her input. There were several things that Ken and I had not discussed before his death. I have included newspaper stories and such, quoting Ken where available and appropriate to fill the gaps. I have edited primarily to provide chronological or logical order for the stories.

Ken was a consummate storyteller, a wonderful neighbor and friend, and a man who enriched and changed the lives of thousands of enraptured listeners. I hope you enjoy his ultimate story.

Peter Ward December 9, 2023



Ken Thomasma sees the wisdom in a raven's eye and feels the power of horses galloping across the plains. Standing on a monumental battlefield, studying the customs of the Blackfoot people, or tracing the footsteps of Lewis and Clark, this children's author knows history and how to imagine it in fresh ways, time and again. Epic stories of child heroes, survival, and wild animals teem with Native American history and timeless human lessons. In this multimedia curriculum, children virtually climb into Ken's Cowboy Cadillac and travel cross-country while the landscapes help him to reveal the secrets of storytelling. Children come to know the meaning of time and place, the power of research, and how to re-create the textures, smells, and sounds of their surroundings. With Ken as their guide, they'll go beyond history books and gems of truth while becoming part of the oral tradition of storytelling. (<https://www.amazon.com/Storyteller-Ken-Thomasma-Explorer-Workbook/dp/1605070289>)

The Beginning

I was born around midnight at [St. Mary Hospital](#) in [Grand Rapids, Michigan](#), on September 2nd, 1930. This was during the [Great Depression](#) that extended from 1929 to 1939, ending when I was nine years old. My mother, Freda, was in a difficult time of life before she went to the hospital for my birth. My father, Peter, was struck down with polio, losing the use of his left arm, hand, and leg. So there my mother was in the hospital giving birth to me. Where was she going to live? She didn't have a job. My father was out of work. He had had a job at [Kelvinator](#) that made stoves and refrigerators, but for my birth he was in bed with polio.

When I was born, I was hospitalized for 30 days. I was fed with tubes. I was allergic to everything. One night the doctor told my mother, "We're going to bring your baby in because we don't think he'll be here tomorrow." They brought me in to my mother and she tried to nurse me. Believe it or not, it worked. I went from a very low birth weight and regained my health.

There was one fortunate thing that made life bearable. A man where my dad worked went to the same church as my dad. He asked the boss at the factory if my mother could have my dad's job so there would be some income. But very little. Now here's my mother with a sick baby and a crippled husband. She had all kinds of challenges. Well, she met all those challenges. She went to work to raise money so we would have some food. My father was bedridden for almost 3 weeks. Then he had to learn to walk again.

Now get this. My dad recovered the best he could and now he wants his job back. But he can't drive a car and we do not have a car. It was two miles to the factory. So, he started walking those two miles to get his job back. He did it. And the struggle went on.

So, there we are. My dad is crippled. My mother has a baby. We had to move in with my grandmother who lived in a second story apartment. She took us in along with Ben Hurst, her second grandson. My uncle Garrett was struck down with some kind of disease. And he moved in and there's my grandmother with two families. We lived mainly on spinach and oatmeal. The cheapest stuff you could buy.

So that's the kind of life I had to start out with. I guess it taught me a lot of lessons.

Picking Tomatoes

There we were living in tough times around 1935. I was five years old. In 1936, my brother Roger was born. My mother recovered after losing a lot of weight and almost dying. My father was walking. Things were looking a lot better.

My dad was able to get a job in a greenhouse picking tomatoes. His left hand was useless, but he could put the handle of the bucket over his paralyzed left arm and put the tomatoes in with his right. I thought if I go with my dad and pick tomatoes, I can help my family. So, one day, I went out to the greenhouse with my dad. The owner, Morris Chadwick, looked at me and he said, "Hey Kenny, do you want to work?" I said, "Sure." He said, "I'll pay you ten

cents an hour.” I said, “That’s really great.” So, I put the bucket handle over my arm and started picking tomatoes. And then one day, after about a week, the guy who owned the greenhouses said, “Kenny, you’re doing great. I’m giving you a raise to 12 ½ cents an hour, 25 cents every two hours.” I liked this.

One day the owner said, “Kenny, the farmers market is open in town. It goes a whole block. Sidewalk all the way down with vendors on each side. We’re going to have one of those spots to sell tomatoes. How about you sell them?” “OK, I can do that.” So here I am, a little boy standing behind a big counter. I thought I needed to attract attention. So, I worked up a song:

Tomatoes. Get your red ripe tomatoes.
Ten cents a pound.
You’ll love these delicious tomatoes.
Nice and red and juicy.

You can imagine this long sidewalk with vendors on both sides and you hear this kid’s voice. A lot of people stopped. The owner of the greenhouse came at the end of the day, and he said, “I can’t believe how many tomatoes you sold. There are a few left over. Do you want them?” I said, “Sure, I’ll take them.” So, I took them home, put them in my wagon, and went up and down the street selling tomatoes. I made pretty good money. I said, oh man, I’m a businessman. And of course, at that time my dad wasn’t making much money. My mother wasn’t either, so I actually went up the street to buy day-old bread. We ate a lot of day-old bread and spinach and cabbage. A lot of cheap stuff, but it was good for us.

So anyway, that’s the way I grew up in that kind of situation. My dad was able to go back to work. He walked on the left leg that had no muscle. His left arm was numb. And he walked two miles to work and two miles back home. And then his ankle built up a big ball of bone. One day the doctor said, “Well, Peter, we need to do something about that. That’s not going to work out. It is getting worse and worse.” So, he said, “Come on in and we’ll fix it.” So, my dad went in. The doctor told him to put his foot up on the table. The guy took a hammer and a chisel and started whacking at the bone and he kept the pieces. He put the foot straight. He packed the bone pieces in and wrapped it. And he said, “OK now pretty soon that will all be fused together, and we can take the bandages off.” My dad limped along on that leg for a long time.

Throughout my school years I found many ways to make money. I was an entrepreneur. I used to haul ashes to the dump. People had coal burning stoves. One day my dad came home from where he was working sitting outside that spray booth, inhaling paint fumes. He came home with the body of a stove. He said, “You could just dump the ashes in here. Park this at our house. Take this to the dump whenever you want to. Then you don’t have to go the same day you pick up the ashes.” So that’s what I did. I had regular customers.

I Fell In Love With School

I was fortunate to be able to live in a very good school district in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They had just built the most beautiful school ever built in Michigan, [Burton Elementary](#). It

was the biggest elementary school built in 20 years. Kindergarten through ninth grade. It was a block and a half long. The Public Library was at one end of the school. There was a walkway along the outside to the library and to the office in the school. You could roller skate, but we weren't supposed to. But we had fun doing it.

I remember well the kindergarten room when I was five years old. There were bay windows over in the corner. Flowers growing up. A flower pot. Water with goldfish in it. And a wonderful mother-like teacher who loved kids. I fell in love with school. I think that marked me to become a schoolteacher later in life. I had a great school experience. And I said to myself, "Someday, maybe I could be a teacher."

On the first day of school, they took us to see the library. So, I'm standing there with these other five-year-olds, all of us, and the librarian had some books to show us. She said, "You see this card. You can have one. And you can take books home to read using this card. Three books at a time. Bring them back when you're done and get three more." I fell in love with reading. I took a lot of books home. One day the librarian said, "Maybe someday you could write a book." I said to myself, "I'm going to do that," even though I could not even write yet.

When I was in school, I was a pretty good student. I had some really good teachers. I still remember some of their names. Our school went from kindergarten all the way through the 9th grade. Then I went to [South High School](#). It was a pretty famous school. It was a school where some pretty famous people had gone. One was [Jerry Ford](#), our representative to Congress. I actually became friends with Jerry Ford when I went to South High School.

In high school, I found out that they had a cross country team. A friend of mine who was Arabic, Rick Bashara, said to me, "Hey Kenny, come on out to practice. We're going to have a cross country team." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, we're going to practice all of September and all the way up till 18 October. And then there's the big city cross country meet and we're going to win the city championship." I said, "Really?" Out I went and ran and ran. It was cold. So, we ran in the third-floor hallway after school. Round and round in the hallway.

Well, it came time for the meet. We had a coach; his name was Pop Term. Pop was a legend. He walked with a straight back. He was a really gruff, senior homeroom teacher. And he said, "If you guys are ready, you got to get out there and win that race no matter what. You can do it and I'm going to be there to make sure you do." Boy, you listened to Pop. Comes the day before the race. And we did something the coach told us not to do because we could jeopardize an injury. My friend Rick Bashara sprained his ankle. I thought, oh no! He's one of our best runners. I wonder what's going to happen now. Wonder what will happen when Pop finds out. That's not going to be good. Rick said, "Don't tell anybody." I said, "I won't."

The next day, here comes the race. Two miles. [Garfield Park](#). A long way around this huge City Park. And you had to go around it, I think, maybe two or three times to get your two miles in. Lots of people standing around, screaming, and hollering. We lined up and the gun went off and the race was on. Believe it or not, I finished fourth. And that's out of the whole

city. Six city high schools. And boy, the coach said, “you're going to the state meet.” Well, South High won the championship, and we all got medals. I thought, boy, this running is for me. And it really was good for me because it took me all the way through college. I even got a scholarship for running at Grand Rapids Junior College. Anyway, I could run. And I went to the state meet and finished fourth, which is pretty darn good.

So, I graduated from high school in 1948. I want to go to college and that's going to cost me some money. It's going to be tight. I need to earn some. So, I got myself a job at a market that paid enough for me to go to [Grand Rapids Junior College](#) for two years at \$60.00 a semester. I'd go downtown Saturday night and fill up orders that rich people had put in by phone. I'd fill up the baskets, sacks, and everything. And then they said, “load them up in the van and deliver them to the people.” I thought, ooh man, I get to drive a van. This is good. And every once in a while, I'd stop at a place, and they'd give me a tip. I said, “Ooh, man, what could be better?” I might even come home with an extra \$0.75. And I got all the groceries that I wanted for free.

Two Years in the Navy

I graduated from junior college in June 1950 just as the [Korean War](#) broke out. They sent out the call. We're at war with Korea. We need soldiers. We will have a draft eventually but we'd rather do it with volunteers. Well, I saw room and board. A little bit of money each month. Might work for me. So I went right down to the county building and enlisted in the Navy. I put on the uniform and did my two years while stashing away as much money as I could.

The Navy opened a lot of doors for me. They wanted to send me to [Officer Candidate School](#). I looked at the deal. If I went, I'd have to come out and serve at least two more years. I decided no. So, I went to [Naval Station Great Lakes](#) just north of Chicago for basic training. When I graduated, they sent me to [Naval Base San Diego](#) in southern California. They gave me quite a bit of money to travel there. I looked at it and thought, man, I'm not going to pay somebody to drive me there. I'll keep the money and hitchhike. My friend said, “Ken, you're crazy.” “Well maybe I am, but all I need to do is put on my Navy uniform and I'll be there.”

So I was down in the suburbs of Chicago, when an 18 wheeler stopped. “Where you going sailor?” I said, “I'm going to a Naval base out in southern California.” He said, “well, I'm not going that far but I'll take you to Chicago. There are a lot of big rigs going all the way.”

I got out of that truck and stood by the highway with my thumb up. I think seven vehicles went by me. The eighth stopped. An 18 wheeler and I climbed up in the cabin. “Where are you going sailor?” “San Diego.” “Well, that's where I'm going.” I rode all the way with him. But I had an incident. We stopped in Saint Louis at a truck stop. He got out and he said, “Come on in. We'll get a bite to eat.” And I said, “OK.” We went in and he said, “Wait right here. I'll be back. They have food in the back, and they owe me. And that woman will give us some good food.” He told me not to talk to anybody. Nobody needs to know what we're doing. So away he goes.

I wasn't there five minutes when up comes three people, obviously drunk. "Where are you going, sailor?" Well, I knew I was in trouble. So what I did is I said, "Well, I'm going to California" and they said, "That's where we're going. We can help you get there." I said, "Well, I have to go see the woman that runs this place. I owe her some money. I'll be right back." But I didn't go back. She said, "You wait here. We'll feed you, and we have a room for you free of charge." She put me up and fed me. Next morning, I got back on that truck. Away we went. Clear to California. We'd stop at rest areas to sleep.

When I got to California, I reported to the naval base and they said, "We'll put you on a destroyer and you could serve on that destroyer for two years and then decide whether you want to be permanent or discharged." I said, "Wait a minute. A destroyer?" "Yeah," they said. "On the destroyer you'll get training." "Where is this destroyer going?" "You will run up and down the coast of Japan on patrol. In case war breaks out."

So there I was in the Navy for two years. I was a two-year wonder during the Korean War. I was on a destroyer. I was down in the hold passing 16-inch ammunition up. Get it from one guy to the next guy. Pass the ammunition. Oh man, I did that for two or three days. And very soon I was sick. I was seasick. I was throwing up everywhere. One morning I could hardly get out of bed. And I had thrown up on the guy in the bunk below me. So, they said, "Well, this isn't for you. We're shipping you back to the Great Lakes. We're shipping you out now." I said, "Thank you. I'm sorry I didn't come through."

When I got to San Diego they said, "We're going to give you enough money to buy transportation to get home. They handed me several hundred dollars. I looked at it and said, "I'm not going to buy a ticket. I have my uniform and my thumb." So, I started hitchhiking. Trouble is, I met some really scary people. First of all, it went fine. Then I got a ride across the desert with some strange people. Somehow I knew they were up to no good. I had to get out of there. But how? Just a two-lane road in the desert. When we stopped in a little town, they said, "We're going to go in and get a sandwich. Let's go." I said, "Yeah. Let's go." We went in there but I had my plan already made. I headed to the back room. Walked right by everybody. Somebody told me to do this if I had trouble. I got in the back room and said to one of the employees "Can I stay here? Those guys out there are evil. And they have me trapped in their car. Help me." "You can go back there and nobody will get you out of there." I think I was there three hours. Finally, these guys got tired and left when the restaurant owner told them this guy is not feeling well. We're going to help him get over his illness. We're going to keep him in our care and give him food to eat, so eventually he can keep going." They were lying through their teeth. Well, that's how I got out of that one.

What happened next was a bonanza. I'm back out on the road. Navy uniform. Along comes a semi, and he pulls over. And I go over there and open the door. He says, "Where are you going?" I said, "Michigan." He said, "That's where I'm going. Climb in." There was a back seat. I could even curl up and sleep. Made it all the way back to Michigan.

When I got back to the Great Lakes Naval Station my two years were almost up. They said, “We're not going to bother with assigning you only for a couple of months. It's not worth our money to train you.” I wasn't going to argue.

Calvin College

After getting out of the Navy in the fall of 1952, I enrolled at [Calvin College](#), a Christian School affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church in North America. It was well known for its high standards of education. I wanted to go to [Hope College](#) in Holland, Michigan, just southwest of Grand Rapids, but could not afford a private college. I didn't really care for the people who sponsored Calvin College, but it all worked out. When I got there, they said, “We're going to have a cross country team.” And this one teacher said, “I know you're a runner. Come on out and try.” Boy, that made my day because from there on, I went to school on scholarships for track.

At [Calvin College](#) I became a student-teacher. The director said, “We have a summer camp here in Middleville that would be a great experience for you. We have other summer camps. Having summer camp on your resume would help you get a good teaching job.” I was hired to work at [Camp Manitou-Lin](#) on beautiful [Lake Barlow](#) in Middleville, Michigan, just south of Grand Rapids. I loved camp. We had swimming pools and hiking. We did lots of crazy things. I liked to tell stories to the campers around the campfire. I was one of their favorite storytellers because I had a wild imagination. I had a flair for the dramatic.

My favorite story was about old man Barlow who lived on the other side of Lake Barlow. Old man Barlow sold firewood to the people in town. He was glad when winter came because he could then go right across on the ice, saving time rather than going all the way around the lake. One winter old man Barlow made a bad mistake. He went out on the ice too soon. He fell into the lake with all of his logs. Do you want to know what happened to him? He couldn't get out. But he knew that right on the surface, between the ice and the water, was a layer of air. So, he put his mouth up just under the ice. That's how he saved himself, breathing that air. But he had to stay there for so long his hair started to grow seaweed.

So, each year near the end of July, I would tell the kids around the campfire the legend of old man Barlow. Then I would ask if they were ready to see if there are any signs of old man Barlow? They were eager. So, we would go down near the lake. I said, “Stay with me and watch me. I will give you signals if we have to run.” Those kids were looking at me intently. Ooh, man. We started walking.

Meanwhile, one of our counselors, our water safety man, went down in the water with all kinds of green twigs. He covered himself with all kinds of weeds, a grass beard, a funny hat. Clothes draped on his body that looked like grass. So, he's out there by the swimming dock. As soon as he saw the kids were in a good place, he went down underwater and walked across into the swimming area and then started to walk up out of the water towards the kids. When he got on the shore, they took off running and screaming. We scared those kids to death. We gave them nightmares.

I said, well, we can't let them go home without letting them know what happened, what really was going on, or they'll tell their parents and their parents will never let any kid come back. So, I said, "You are all special kids. We're going to tell you exactly who old man Barlow is." He starts taking off his stuff. They know the counselor and they all shout his name. Laughing and jumping up and down splashing water. Old man Barlow. Barlow lake. There you are.

I also spent a couple of summers as a counselor at [Camp Blodgett](#) which was committed to serving kids with the greatest financial need.

Meeting Bobbi

After I came out of the military, I was at [Calvin College](#). My friend Ed Malama had become a policeman. He had the uniform and the whole works. He says, "Hey, Ken. Why don't you go on patrol with me? We'll go out to Reese Lake where there is a carnival with rides, game booths, and cotton candy. It's just a park with all kinds of goodies." I said, "OK, let's do it." Out we went.

I saw there was a roller-skating rink. I want to look at that. I remember hearing about [Reeds Lake Roller Rink](#). Ed said, "Ooh, come on, let's go. Lots of good looking girls in there." I said, "OK." He got in free. He got me in free. And there we stood. Around and around, they skated. I said, "Hey, look at that girl. I gotta meet her." Ed said, "I'll fix you up." So, the next time those skaters came around, he stops them. They thought they did something wrong. He said, "No they didn't do anything wrong, but I got a friend who thinks he knows this girl here. He wants to talk to her."

That was Bobbi. We talked a little while. "Would you like to go to a movie?" She said, "Sure." I said, "There's a good one at the four-star theatre in Burton Heights over in our end of town." I got her phone number. And the next day, that phone rang. The rest is history.

We went to the movies. Second thing I did was take her out to dinner to a fancy hotel where we had all kinds of fancy hors d'oeuvres, food, and drinks. First class. That impressed her. So then her family invited me to follow her to a place where her family went in the summer. To a cottage that they rented on [Silver Lake](#) in Michigan. We stayed there with a pool and a lake for swimming. There were sand dunes you could climb and run down the other side. And you could ride in those dune buggies. It was a nice tourist attraction.

Bobbi lived not far from where I lived. I lived in town. She lived just up the same road that was a busy highway. She had a house on 10 acres of land. She said, "My dad owns these 10 acres. If there is anything you need on these 10 acres you can come and get it." I looked down there and I said, "Looks like there's some wild melons of some kind." I can't remember exactly what they were, but I started going out there regularly.

One day Bobbi said, "We have an old canoe in the back. It's got junk in it. It's just a big clumsy old yellow canoe. 13-footer." I said, "Wow." She said, "If you want to, you can have it." I said, "Wow, I'll be out there soon." So, I cleaned the canoe up. I put ropes on it and pulled it out away from where it was. The road going down the bank was really steep. So, I

pulled it all the way over to that bank and inch by inch to the top. Put it on my truck. And away we go. So now we're canoeing on the [Thornapple River](#). We're canoeing on [Lake Michigan](#). That canoe was so much fun. We were having such a great time.

Bobbi and I got married on June 16, 1954, after I graduated from [Calvin College](#), 69 years ago. Our son Dan was born on December 26, 1956.

A Trip to Turkey

I had to complete student teacher training before I could get a job teaching. First they signed me up with a woman as my supervising teacher, but she broke her hip. So then they appointed Ray Boozer to be my supervising teacher. Ray was active in a program called the Council on Community Affairs out of Putney, Vermont, that helped you do your student teaching in Europe. Ray had gone to Germany as a community ambassador and was now on the committee to select teachers to go overseas. Each town in America was invited to select at least one person to go. Grand Rapids selected three people. Ray explained that you go over there for no pay, just experience. And when you get back you are expected to give dozens of public talks based on your experiences. He told me to go down to that committee and put my name in. He said, "You are a sure thing because I am on the selection committee. When you come back, you'll get a teaching job in no time." And so I said, "OK, Ray, I'll do that."

What country would you like to go to? I said, "Israel." One afternoon they called me up and said, "You've been chosen to go to Israel." Ooh, man. I couldn't sleep that night. And of course, I read everything I could about Israel and how they were fighting those Arabs all the time. Well, I was supposed to go in June, but they called me in the middle of May and said, "You can't go to Israel. They're killing each other." They said, "How about Turkey?" I said, "You betcha. Turkey is a biblical land. It's a place people in Grand Rapids would be fascinated by." So they said, "Well, we can't get you a visa, but we know you're a friend of Jerry Ford. Call his office. He'll do the job." I called his office, and he called me back personally. He said, "Hey, Ken, I'll get that visa. Plan on going." So around the middle of May here comes the call. You can pick up your visa at the office in New York. We have an office there.

So I studied up all about Turkey, Islam, and all the trouble they had. I knew a lot about Turkey before I was going to go. I said to Bobbi, "Do you want to go to New York?" She says, "Yep." She said, "My mother wants to go too and my mother will pay the way." So all three of us went to New York City. You talk about excitement.

I was in Turkey for 12 weeks. Most of the summer. The first six weeks I lived in Istanbul with a family: mother, father, and son. Both parents were doctors, which means they were first class people. The second 6 weeks I was traveling with Turkish students to every town of any significant size throughout Turkey.

Six times we ate sheep's heads, a local delicacy. I didn't like that sheep looking up at me as I'm cutting meat off its face. I always had an excuse for not eating mine.

Somehow they found out that I played college basketball. And they said, “We want you to play for our pro basketball team in Istanbul.” I said, “But, I’ll be traveling with the students.” “Listen, that’s OK. Wherever you are, we’ll fly you to Istanbul. There’s an airport there.” So I was in the capital Ankara when they flew me to Istanbul. They flew me in there overnight. Put me up in a motel. Took me to the gymnasium. And I played for the local pro team. We lost 47 to 40, but I made seven of those points.

Flying back was an adventure. I don’t speak the language. I get to the airport. All I could do was say the name of the town. Finally, they caught on and they brought me over to the place where the airplane was. I got on this plane. And I am telling you, that was the bumpiest airplane flight I ever had. But I got back with the students, raring to go.

My First Teaching Jobs Beginning in 1954

So, now I need to find a job. Happened to be a boom in building schools. The Second World War had ended nine years before. The soldiers had gone off to war and had come back and married their girlfriends. They started having children. The schools in Grand Rapids, MI, did an amazing thing. They [put new schools inside parks](#). The Park Service took care of the park, but the kids could use the park during the day. And the public could use parts of the schools on weekends. It was very clever.

One of these new schools that was being built was called [Mulick Park School](#), a large school in a large city park. So, I told Ray Boozer, my supervising teacher, “I would like to teach at [Mulick Park School](#) which is near where I live.” He said, “You will be my student teacher at Fountain Elementary, and then I will recommend you for Mulick Park.” So, I applied, and I got an interview. Then one day, they said, “You’re hired. We’ll give you a job teaching sixth graders.” Can you believe it? There were 35 sixth graders in this new school. Hardly any room for the desks. I taught that year and it was tough. I had to be a stern disciplinarian to keep those 35 eleven-year-olds under control. Next year there were 40 sixth graders and 5 fifth graders. Third year, 45 students. It was tough. But I survived it. How? I don’t know.

A wonderful thing happened after three years. They passed a school [mill levy](#) to support the schools, and they said now you can teach 23 kids. So, I had small classes after that.

I taught at Mulick Park School for five years. During the third year they had a [mill levy](#) going up for vote by the community to raise property taxes for the benefit of the schools. I told the superintendent I can pass that [mill levy](#). Just let me have some freedom to do it. We’re going to have a campaign. We will work during the first week planning it. We will work during the second week getting the money to finance it. We will work during the third week walking the streets, knocking on doors, talking to voters. That campaign was designed by a principal and by a superintendent from Flint, MI. It worked.

The principal at Mulick Park was Desdemona Marks. She was an old maid. Teaching was her life. She essentially lived at that school. We had teachers meetings which the school district said could go to 5:00 PM. Guess what she did. When the meeting was over as far as

business was concerned, she got out a book about teaching and started to read it to us to make us stay until 5:00 PM.

Becoming a Principal

I soon saw that the money was in school administration, not in teaching. So, I said, boy, I got to get to be a principal. I kept my eyes open. I found out there's going to be some openings for principals. There were 2000 women teachers and only 7 men in those elementary schools. I was one of those seven men. So was Ray Boozer, my supervising teacher when I was a student teacher. Ray got a job as principal of Fountain Elementary School. And Ray said to me "You should apply for principalship. You'll get one right away. And your salary will go up."

But then I needed a master's degree so I could be a school administrator. That's going to cost more money. I don't have that money. So anyway, I got brave enough to go to Bobbi's aunt who had quite a bit of money. Aunt Harriet and Uncle Dino loaned me the money. Plus, the [GI Bill](#) helped. While most of the classes were in night school in Grand Rapids, I had to spend the summer of 1958 in Ann Arbor on the University of Michigan Campus to complete my master's degree in education.

So, I taught at [Mulick Park School](#) for five years. Then the principal got sick and had to leave. Ray said they wanted me to be principal, but they had never made a teacher principal of the school where they had been teaching. The parents organized and went to a school board meeting. They stood up there and said we want Thomasma to be the principal. He'll have his master's degree the day school opens. He will be a wonderful principal for those kids who love him. Well, a couple of them said, "No way. We don't make the teacher principal in a school where they are teaching." The other three teachers said we're willing to give it a try. No harm in trying.

Well, they did it. On August 8, 1958, when I came home with my master's degree, my house in Grand Rapids was all decorated with balloons, crape paper, and all kinds of things. There were signs, "Welcome Principal of Mulick Park School." And that's how I found out that I had become principal.

They had a meeting a couple months later and one of the teachers said, "Well, the kids are happier than they've ever been. They love their principal. He stays after school and plays ball with them in the gym. This principal is exactly what we want."

When I became principal of this [Mulick Park Elementary](#), I thought I am going to be a principal like no principal that has ever taught in this town. I'm going to make this a special school. When school's over, the park opens to the kids for recreation. So, I'm out there after school every day playing soccer with the kids. When winter came, I had them inside playing basketball. Across the street was a private Christian School. They saw what I was doing and one guy who was a friend of mine said, "You're going to have that basketball in your little dinky gym. Have it across the street. We have a big one. You can have two courts. I said, "Really?" So, we had sports in the Christian School. And we became a model for the whole

city. Cooperation between public and Christian schools. The word spread. Things have changed. We're cooperating.

[Some [pictures of Grand Rapids](#) around this time.]

One day Ray Boozer told me that they were planning to build a new middle school and that I should apply for a job there. Wow. Middle school. I think that would be interesting. Ray said, "They have it over there in a park called Ridgeview, the Ridgeview Junior High. If you went over there it won't be long before you'd be the principal. Make a lot more money." I went over there. Sure enough, I got the job.

I got a call on Saturday morning from Big Ben Beukema. He said, "I want to meet you at [Bill Knapp's Restaurant](#) at 9:00 am." It was about 8:00 am. So, I said, "OK, I'll be there." The bottom line was he said, "We're starting a new junior high school, Ridgeview Junior High, and I know you're the best one to get us started. There's only going to be 7 junior high schools for 2000 kids. So, we need to have a new junior high. And there's going to be some controversy because we're going to take over a building. And the parents are going to be wondering what's going on in this school district."

So, I tell you what some of the kids did. They were going to revolt. "We're not going to some middle school. We're big kids." I said, "Well if you don't come, you are expelled. Go home and tell your parents why you can't go to school anymore. And when they say why, you tell them what you told me."

Well, I went on to be the principal and enrollment kept growing. Working in that middle school, I decided to make this a role model. We'll have recreation after school. We'll have basketball socks. The whole thing. So, I put out the word to the kids. We're going to have recreation after school, and it was a roaring success. Every day after school, I led recreation. Made some extra money and provided great recreation for the kids.

So, I ended up as principal of Ridgeview Junior High. The first day of school I see something in one of the entryways. It looks like smoke. I went over there. Yeah, it was John Kelsey, a 9th grader, smoking a cigarette. I said, "Well, you better pack up. You're out of here. You're all done. And you won't be back until you come in here with your parents. No smoking in this school building or on school grounds." Well, you should have seen the look on his face. They weren't as defiant then. You should have seen how that word spread throughout that school. This new principal means business.

Then there was a sports controversy. They wanted to have interscholastic sports. There were seven big junior high schools. They were going to have a league and compete. I said, "Bad idea. Kids at this age are so vulnerable. You get them out on that field and some of them are going to be sent home. They're not good enough. You could destroy one of the best players that ever came into our schools. You don't know who they are and what they can do."

That wasn't very popular. Parents weren't happy with that. All these men thought their kid ought to be a superstar at football or basketball. But I held forth, and I won the day. We didn't have any interscholastic sports. I said we're going to have intramural sports. We're

going to play our kids against each other and then to satisfy some of these radicals at the end of the season, we'll have some playoffs among the seven schools. Couple of games.

Boy did that word spread fast. I started getting telephone calls. I would say to everyone that called, "I am glad you called because that means you care about what happens in this school. But I'm holding my ground."

So that was the sports controversy. Well, we had some great intramurals. It became a model for junior high schools. And some of the other principals said, "Man, I want to do that. Intramural kids are right here in our building, no transportation problems. They can play more. More kids can play. You got all that good stuff going." Even old John Brunsman said, "I'll give it a try." He was sort of against everything. That's all they had to do. It was so popular you couldn't believe it.

When I was there, we had the beginning of the Vietnam War. I got all the kids together in our auditorium. We had a basement auditorium under the gym that was big enough to hold all the students. And I got up there and I said, "You know what, kids? You know what wars do? They kill human beings. We got to be against that. If you are in favor of that war, do you want some of our people in this room to be killed?"

One day, they brought a ninth-grade girl into my office on the day she was starting to menstruate. She came into the office and stood by the counter with the kids standing next to her saying you're bleeding on the counter. Nobody had prepared her. I said, "We'll get that taken care of. It's something that happens to every girl. Don't feel bad. Decide you're going to take care of it. And we will get on with our business."

Well, I had a good time being a junior high principal, but I was basically a disciplinarian. Discipline is a common problem in public schools. But I did have a lot of good teachers. It was a great group of people.

Being a principal of a school is not all you think it is. There are a lot of parents who don't like what is happening. And so, you get all of these problems coming into your office. I didn't really care for it. But I did like the money. So, I stuck to it for four years.

We kept getting more students. It was kind of a dilemma. I was getting tired of being a principal. I saw they were going to have some office staff working in the downtown office. The office staff would recruit teachers and do training and all kinds of administrative things. The superintendent said he wanted me in the downtown office. He said you can still work in your summer camp. So I took a look at the finances and I saw summer camp money and administrative money. That's good.

Years later I really wanted to get back to being a principal. So, I told the superintendent "You're building a new school out there in the suburbs called [Ken-O-Sha Park Elementary](#). I would like to be considered for principal. It is another school park project on 30 acres with [Plaster Creek](#) running through it. The kids that were going to be sent there and their parents need to think it was a good idea. I found out that [Plaster Creek](#) is a trout migration stream. I

had a custodian who was a real character. When he heard about it, I think I told him, he comes to school the next day with his fishing pole and his bait. He starts hauling them out.

Well then I wanted to have that 30 acres be a city nature center with a trail going along the creek and through the woods. Everybody could come and enjoy a walk in the forest. I said, "We're going to send out information to schools that want to come and visit our Nature Center Trail." I said, "We're going to have our 6th graders, our oldest kids, be their guides because when you teach something, you learn it. You're not going to teach anything that you haven't learned." So, it was a bonanza. Out came [The Grand Rapids Press](#). They took pictures of the kids on the trail.

I said to our kids at school, "We're going to do something special. We'll make them never forget their visit. After they come back along the trail, we're coming into the school, into the art room, and we're going to have a party. Cookies and candy and cake. Then we can visit with kids from other schools. And when you get into high school, you'll be on teams with those kids. It's a good thing to do." Well, I'll tell you what. We got all kinds of publicity. We were doing something they had never heard of before.

To get that Nature Center, I had to do some politicking. I knew how to do it. I had seven kids: Kindergarten, 1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade, 4th grade, 5th grade, 6th grade. I explained to them that we're going to do a presentation to the Board of Education. You are going to tell them what that trail means to you and what it means to the kids that come. And why we should just protect it. We will get money for it. Make it a permanent thing. So anyway, I rattled a few cages. The Nature Center was adopted by the city of Grand Rapids. They organized parents to run it. They will get their friends to help and it will be perpetual. And it is. It works beautifully.

Earth Day and Cricket

Every year there would be Earth Day when everybody should love the earth. Clean it up. Plant good plants to recycle oxygen. And just love this land we live in. So I decided that our Earth Day would be to go out there and clean up the whole 30 acres of park. There was trash everywhere. We got the plastic bags and started filling them up. We worked all day and another day. We always worked during our lunch time so we wouldn't miss school. The paper did a beautiful story. The kids were picking up the trash. You know how many bags there were? Well, the school was one story high. So it would be about 10 feet up to the roof. And there was a sort of a parking area in the back. One wing of the school here and one here. I said, "We put the bags right there in the middle. And then when we get it all done, we call the Grand Rapids Press." They went bonkers. The photographer said, "You'll see this picture in the paper. No doubt."

One of the kids to me, "Where did you learn all that about reporters. I said, "Experience. When we came back from England I bought a cricket paddle and balls to play. Two of the kids had parents with tons of personality, that had connections with the city paper. So they ran a story that I had a paddle I brought back from England.

I don't know if you know what the paddle looks like for cricket. But it's got a shaft and then it's got blades out on both sides. So, it looks like a big scoop. And you do scoop the ball when you play. When the story came out in the paper, I got two calls. "I am from England. I played cricket. I have some cricket paddles and balls I'm going to give to you. It's wonderful what you're doing." Basically, the other person said the same thing, so I had official bats and balls. Now if you know what a cricket ball looks like, it's a baseball and it's hard. If you get hit by it, it's not a happy thing. I said I'm going to break the rules. We're gonna play using a softball. Heart wrenching. So, there we were playing cricket. We were known as the Cricket School. I got those calls. So many people were from England. They gave me all this equipment. And they said, "You know, if you play with this ball, you're gonna need pads." I said, "I'm not going to. I'm going to play with a softball."

So, we played. And in the summer, I went to a summer camp on Lake Barlow. I thought, oh, let's play cricket at camp. You could not believe how the kids reacted. Their eyes popped out. I showed them the bat. Little stubby handle. We had some unbelievable cricket matches.

Jury Duty for Bobbi

One year I, Bobbi, was called for jury duty on the first day of school. I am happy to serve on jury duty, but not on the very first day of school. I can't do that. The kids should know who their teacher for the year is. The first day is very important for the kids and their teacher. So, I had to go down and report to the judge who was black. And he said, "What's the deal?" I said, "Well, you know, it's the first day of school with children. A substitute is not a problem, but the children really should know and be prepared for who's going to be with them for the year." And he said, "What school is it?" I told him, "[Sigsbee](#)," which is a 98% black school. He said, "Suits me." He used to live in that area before it got pretty rough, you know. So that was a great experience, entirely different from what I expected.

Raising Money for Schools

I wanted to get the Grand Rapids school district to pass a [mill levy](#) to provide support for the students, but nobody would cooperate. I kept trying to help them but they wouldn't listen. The school system was going broke. They tried to pass special bond issues and mill levies three times, but nothing worked. They went on double time. You go to school in the morning and teach one group of students from eight to twelve-thirty and the next group from one to four-thirty. Double time. It was terrible. The same teacher for both groups. One parent said, "I went in to see my kid's teacher and he said, 'What's your child's name?' She said I told him his name and he said he didn't know who he was. His teacher doesn't know who he is. Ooh, man." What a terrible scene, but it went on for two years. There was no help for kids who couldn't learn very well. Go on and put in your time. Don't provide a good education. Is that what we want in Grand Rapids? I don't think so. Boy, that made me mad. I was disgusted with the schools. I said, "Well, this is no good. I'm miserable. What can I do?"

Well, I'll quit. That's what I'm going to do." So, I got a job supervising student teachers at [Grand Valley State College](#). I was gone.

I had barely started working at Grand Valley when the Grand Rapids School System hired a new school superintendent, Phil Runkle. He's from Flint, Michigan, a town about the same size as Grand Rapids. Runkle had an unbelievable record. Never lost a single [mill levy](#). Never had problems in any school. Teachers loved him. When Phil Runkle came to Grand Rapids, my whole life changed. The guy was dynamite. We hit it off. Ooh, yeah.

So, one morning the phone rings really early. It was Phil Runkle. He had heard that I had experience raising money for schools. I had done quite a bit of raising money for the Grand Rapids schools in a variety of ways. He invited me to his office. "How come you're not teaching anymore? How come you're not even in the Grand Rapids schools anymore?" "Well, I got sick and tired of them. Low pay. I was overworked. But the primary reason was because they were not successful in raising money for the schools."

Runkle then explains that he wants me to join him in Grand Rapids. I said, "Ooh, you know what? I've been there and done that." But he said, "Just give me a few years. Come away from [Grand Valley State College](#). You aren't making much money over there. I'll give you almost twice as much as they're paying you." I said, "You got yourself a deal."

So, Runkle talks to the president of [Grand Valley State College](#). The president then calls me in and says, "Phil Runkle wants you for a couple of years to help him with the Grand Rapids schools. I said that will work if you let me have Ken back after that time."

So, Runkle explains that we need 3 mills and that he wants me to pass it. He explained, "You know how to do it. People know you're honest. You're a teacher. You have no big issues. You're not going to gain anything. They won't have any complaints. You're going to raise that money for us. Let's do it." I said, "OK. Let's go for it. But it's going to cost thousands of dollars in newspaper and radio and television ads and we're going to need a big campaign"

So, Runkle and I go to the school board and say, "We want a [mill levy](#) on the ballot to raise money for the schools." The school district said, "You gotta be kidding. We haven't passed one of them in years. You know the opposition we'd have." I said, "Yeah, but we have Phil Runkle. He is going to do it." So, they said, "OK, we'll put it on the ballot, but you're going to have to do all the work."

So, they put the bond issue on the ballot, and they said, "Have at it." We got to work right away. Runkle says, "OK, the first thing we need is a proposal. We want to have a certain percentage of money for the [mill levy](#). We want to tell the public where every cent is going to go. And we're going to tell the public that if there's anything leftover, it goes back into the treasury. We're going to do it for the kids of Grand Rapids." So, I worked on the ballot. I did exactly what Phil Runkle told me to do. We raised the money needed to promote the [mill levy](#). I got the publicity.

So, I developed a slideshow with music. It started off showing kindergarteners. These little children are going to benefit from this [mill levy](#). They're going to have a wonderful kindergarten. They're going to be taught how to read in first grade and do mathematics, and they're going to become great citizens of this town and county. It will pay us big dividends.

So off we went with the campaign. I got meetings in every school that I could get meetings in. When is your next PTA meeting? Let me come just for 5 minutes. And give a little talk. And they asked me what is this about and I said, "Well, it's about money, but it's primarily about the children. Their welfare is at stake."

We planned a campaign and Runkles got all of the elementary school administrators together in a meeting and said, "Well, we're going to have a [mill levy](#). And Ken Thomasma from here wants to talk to you about it." So, I started telling them what our plans would be. A couple of teachers said, "You know what? This is a Dutch community. We have never passed the [mill levy](#). No chance." I said, "Well, there is a first time for everything. We're going to do it." Then Runkle said, "that's right. We're going to do it. And don't tell me to tell him to stop talking. He's going to lay out the campaign. And all of you are going to be working on it."

Runkle knew I made movies as a camp counselor. Camp movies to get kids to come to a camp. He called me into his office and said, "I want you to make a movie. If somebody looks at it, they would be the devil themselves if they voted no for a [mill levy](#)." He said that he would provide the time and money necessary. I told him I needed three weeks. One week to plan it. One week to write the screenplay, and one week to make the movie. Runkle says. "I want a sound movie. I want first class." So I say, "Well, I'm going to shoot this movie and then I will go to Detroit where they have a film processor. And they will put the soundtrack on for all the scenes."

Runkle says "Look, we can't just waste a lot of film. You figure out what scenes you want. Write them down." You should have seen my basement. All the scenes on the wall hanging there. There's an editing machine with two reels for video and one reel for sound. Now you probably never have seen one. But you turn the handle and all three reels move.

Runkle kept checking while he was out of town. "We need that film." I said, "Well I'm going to Detroit. They can put the film together. They can synchronize the soundtrack. And it'll just take one day to do it. So. I'll take my three-year old."

I got up at 6:00 in the morning and headed for the Detroit City Film processor. I had called and scheduled an appointment. The guy said, "Alright, you're going to have your film to take home at ten." The guy was a genius. He started cranking. Hitting all these buttons. At ten he says, "Here you are. This reel is a soundtrack. These two over here are the pictures. And to synchronize use this over here. Oh, there you go." Well, I said, "How about if I listen to a little bit?" Boy, my eyes were popping because I knew all the pictures, I knew all the sound, and it all fit together." So, we left for Grand Rapids at ten. I got on the Interstate headed for Grand Rapids. When I got there, Runkle was excited.

So anyway, we have the film. It's ready to go. The teams were organized. Six films and soundtracks. Take up reel. Runkle said, "OK, guys. We promised noon delivery." That principal couldn't believe it when I handed her the film and the take up reel.

On the day of the election, we had people up at 7:00 AM putting signs on telephone poles: Vote Today. The record shows the higher the voter turnout, the better the chance of passing a public-school issue. Yeah, we passed it. Barely. But we passed it.

Picture the biggest and fanciest hotel in Grand Rapids, the [Pantlind](#). We have had the campaign, we have shown the film. Now we're going to see the results. All of us were there, watching the votes come in. There were 28 precincts. With 27 precincts reporting, we're down 28 votes. And I thought ooh, no. This is going to be sad. We got down to the last few minutes. Still behind in votes. During the last 8 minutes, all of a sudden, a rush of yes votes came. And it passed by 28 votes out of maybe 41,000 or 42,000 votes cast.

My black friend, Tony Smith, who was a principal and counselor of black kids in the inner city, was standing next to me. He helped me with the campaign. He suddenly runs across the ballroom at the [Pantlind Hotel](#) and with one leap jumped up on top of the piano, which had the top down. He started dancing and singing "Hallelujah! The school mill has passed, the school mill has passed, the school mill has passed." He got many people dancing. Boy, the drums were beating, and people were screaming and howling. We celebrated afterwards. They brought in some treats. I think it was Graham crackers with butter in between. And we had some sodas and some punch. What a celebration. What a memory. It's a picture that will be in my mind forever.

So anyway. That was just the beginning. Pretty soon three years have passed and we'll need another [mill levy](#). So, I go through all the exact same process. We get the film. We showed it at all of the schools to the parents. I had the kindergarteners first. And I said, if this does not pass these five year olds will not go to school. That thing passed by even more votes. So, one day I said to Runkle, "I'm going to be leaving." He said, "You can't." I said, "I have to. I got a job at [Grand Valley State College](#) training teachers." He said, "OK, one more bond issue. Number three." And it passed by a larger margin than ever. And from then on, there was no financial problem in the Grand Rapids schools.

Here I am again. Ready to go to work. I worked hard on the [mill levy](#). And I said to the teachers, "I can help you with some of the things you do in the classroom if you want me to. I have a method of teaching individuals. You know, not unknown kids, but individuals with real needs. I can help you. I have done it. Let's do it." Some of the teachers would say, "I never knew all of this was going on." I said, "It's all going on, and you can take advantage of this and that and this and that." They said, "We never knew you could do that. We're going to go to work." So, they went to work.

You know this school business is important. I always told the parents, I said, "You know what, the schools are in place of parents. When you send your child to school, the teacher is the child's parent. They take care of all the child's needs. So, we need the best schools we can get. And it's up to us. We have a school board of parents."

So every three years the campaign went on. Now they wanted me to be a school administrator. And I finally did accept a job to be assistant superintendent in charge of finances. Raising money. And they paid me more and more each year. So, I did OK.

Runkle and I were a team. We passed three mill levies in seven years. For nine years, the school district thrived. Lots of good experiences. But I still had things to do. But then I got this call for the Wild West. And decided to take it. At the end of the third [mill levy](#), I said to Runkle, "Well, I'm heading West. I got a U-Haul truck all signed up. He says, "What are you going to do out there." "Actually, I'm going to do the thing I love to do. Teach. That's why I went to school. I don't like mill levies as you know. I know how to do them, but I don't like them." He said, "Ooh, man, we'll get you back." I said, "We'll see."

When I was in the school district, we only needed a [mill levy](#) every three years. The word got out from a superintendent from Flint that I was known for passing mill levies in Grand Rapids. So the superintendent invited me in at 9:00 in the morning. I went into his office. He said we need money and I know you know how to get it. Let's get it. Let's get a [mill levy](#) going.

I had a job in the Media Center downtown, 5th floor. Right near the superintendent so he could call me in his office anytime. And I got the call. We need another [mill levy](#). OK, how much you need? He said, well, this is going to be a tough one because we need one that will raise \$30 million. I said, "What?" He said, "Yeah, we're going to build some schools. We're going to hire more teachers. It has to happen." Well, we passed that baby. And I'll tell you what? I didn't sleep for a month.

Oh man, yeah. Plan the mill. Love it. The first week, the second week. Write the script for the movie. I'm going to make to show all over the town and then do the movie. And they had a guy who was a friend of mine. We had done some hiking and I had a 16 millimeter camera. His name was John Bailey. And John says, "That movie camera is fabulous. Color film 16 millimeter on a projector. 1000 Watt bulb."

The superintendent wants to see you. So, I go and he says, "Yeah, we're really hurting. If we don't get this money, we have to go on halftime. We've got to lay off half our teachers.

So, when I was doing that [mill levy](#), I knew the teachers future was in the mix. I knew that a lot of kids would be hurt if it didn't pass. And beyond halftime. So I worked extra hard on that one. Never lost one. You had to be that involved. Second largest. Along with Flint, MI. In the Grand Rapids, the largest school districts in Michigan. And I had people telling me you are wasting your time. I said, "We'll see. We're not going to leave a stone unturned. Not one." The day before the election I had a meeting with wives of bankers. I had that meeting in the basement of the bank in town. The response was unbelievable. I said this is gonna do it. And it did. We only passed it by like 41 votes. And I got at least that many in that meeting.

You know the public school thing is unique to the United States. I mean, no other country would think of doing such an important mission and group of people like kindergarteners or first graders. We do it. What was interesting was that when they promoted me to the

downtown office in charge of public relations. I decided well, it's downhill all the way to the river. I'm going to ride my bike. I rode that bike. Rain. Snow. People thought I was really crazy. But I say, hey, I'm. I'm going to be an example. Not waste money. Ride the bike. No gasoline, no mileage. Yeah, it was 6 miles down, yeah. 6 miles back. And I went on the back roads. I'd leave about the same time every morning. So people get used to seeing me. I was going one morning when I had a funny feeling. Something is not right. It wasn't. There were kids hiding between the houses with rocks. They were going to come running out and throw rocks at me. I knew what I was going to do. When I saw them coming, I was going to jump off my bike. Grab the handlebars and start swinging. The first one that got near me was just hit in the head by that back wheel of the bike. Well, they didn't do any damage. I rode out of there, leaving them running behind me. It's really strange what you can get yourself into. You know that.

Hudsonville Mill Levy

So, after all my experience raising money, I got a call from [Hudsonville Michigan](#), a community southeast of Grand Rapids. "We want you to pass a bond issue for us." I said, "Really?" They said, "Yep. We heard you did it for Grand Rapids. We're just a little school district. Not that much money. Please come out and do it."

Well, I said, "I'll have to do a slideshow." So, I went to Hudsonville. Maybe 500 to 600 students. Raised a little more money. Got all of the material ready. All the posters made. The date of the vote was set. A bunch of callers ready to call all of the voters. Because I told these people a week before the vote that I want every voter to have a telephone call telling them how important this is and how very little it will cost each voter. We need this money for children. One pessimist said, "Save your breath, nobody passes a bond issue in Hudsonville." I said, "I'm going to." So, the day of the vote came. And we're out at the polls watching the vote come in. It passed!

Lost Trail Camp

My whole life changed unexpectedly in a big way on Saturday morning, October 11, 1958. I was 28 years old. Bobbi and I were living with our two-year old son, Dan, in Grand Rapids Michigan, where we all had grown up. I was outside in my driveway washing my car. A car pulls up by the curb. Out jumps Larry, an old friend. "Hey Larry, great to see you. I haven't seen you in years. What have you been doing?" He starts talking. He goes on and on and he finally says "You won't believe it. I'm going to Montana next summer to be a counsellor at an amazing camp." I said, "Montana? Where is that?" I didn't know much of anything outside of Michigan. Larry said, "I'll show you on a map."

He explained that he had a friend who lived near Detroit in [Bloomfield Hills](#), Michigan. Some people there owned a summer camp named Lost Trail Camp at the south end of the [Bitterroot Valley](#), 72 miles south of [Missoula](#), Montana. Every summer they take 100 kids from Detroit to have a wilderness experience for five weeks. They have a wonderful place to do it where hot spring water comes down the mountain into a large swimming pool. There's horseback riding, ponderosa pines, riflery, archery, backpacking, hiking, camping,

and visits to Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks. “It’s a fabulous place. You won't believe it till you see it.” “That sounds like an adventure,” I said. “Let me know when there's an opening.” He said, “I’ll speak to the camp director. He might need another counselor. I'll tell him that you are interested.”

So the next day, Sunday, I'm sitting at home at 2 pm and the phone rings. It's Larry. “I have the camp director on the phone, Paul Gerhard. He wants to talk to you.” So, I get on the phone. He starts asking me questions, and I start telling him about all the things I have done. Hiking, climbing, camping. Working for several years at summer camps. I can teach handicrafts, archery, and riflery. I have a National Rifle Association certificate and was a rifle order man in the United States Navy. Well he needed somebody to teach the kids riflery. He said, “I want to hire you.” I said, “Really?” He said, “Yep. I will call you tomorrow and offer you a contract. All I have to do is talk to my board of directors.” I said, “OK.”

He called me Monday and said, “You're hired. I want to send you a contract.” I said, “That sounds great. Send me the contract and I'll take a look. Maybe we can get together.” Ooh, my gosh, he hired me for more money than I had ever made in the summer. I was ready to go to Montana. Little did I realize how much this would change the lives of Dan, Bobbi, and me forever. We spent at least 5 weeks every summer for 12 years from 1959 to 1970 at Lost Trail Camp.

Lost Trail Camp was at [Gallogly Hot Springs](#) in [Sula](#), Montana, at the south end of the [Bitterroot Valley](#), 72 miles south of [Missoula](#) Montana. The camp was founded in 1952 by Wes Gallogly, who lived near [Grosse Pointe](#), Michigan, northeast of Detroit. A majority of the 100 campers, ages 9 to 13, were from the well-known [Cranbrook Schools](#), private college preparatory schools in [Bloomfield Hills](#), Michigan, just north of Detroit. All campers came for the same five weeks during the summer.

The owner was a wealthy man named Wes Gallogly. He bought the land in the southern end of the [Bitterroot Valley](#) and lay claim to the hot spring. He called it Gallogly Hot Spring. Then he built the pool, the showers, a dining hall, and places where people could stay. There were big lodges with a center room and all the rooms to rent on the periphery. Counselors got their own cabin. For meals you simply report to the dining hall at the right time. I told Bobbi, “We could live the life of Riley. You won't have to cook anymore during the summer.” We would have a day off every once in a while.

So, in June 1959, we loaded Dan into our tiny little car, a [Simca](#) that had two seats in front. That is all it was. But it had great mileage. You only had to stop a couple of times to go 2000 miles. We piled our baggage on the floor behind the seats and leveled it off for Dan to sleep. He wasn't very old. Maybe two and a half.

I said, well, we're going to take a scenic trip. So, we drove north to the newly opened [Mackinac Bridge](#) and joined [Route 2](#) to head west. I had never been west of Michigan except hitchhiking to and from the Naval Base in San Diego.

In [Williston](#) North Dakota we began to get near to the [Missouri River](#), ultimately driving to [Great Falls](#), [Three Forks](#), and through [Lost Trail Pass](#) to [Sula](#) Montana where the camp was



Map of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Red line shows the route headed west.

Blue line shows the routes headed east. The red dot shows the location of Lost Trail Camp.

(From a map drawn by [Jennifer Thermes](#))

located. This route was very close to the route taken by [Lewis and Clark](#) in 1805 when they came up the [Missouri River](#) searching for a way to the Pacific Ocean. Along the highway we saw many signs explaining the Lewis and Clark Expedition. I had never thought about it. During my first year at Lost Trail Camp, I drove 35 miles to the bookstore in [Hamilton](#) Montana and bought all three [Lewis and Clark Journals](#) that document what they did every day for three years. I skimmed these books at camp and told stories about Lewis and Clark to the kids. But I took these books back to Grand Rapids where I studied them in detail over many years. The Lewis and Clark journals provided all the details about geography, trails, wildlife, food sources, weather, Indians, and other experiences that I used in writing my 12 books about heroic Indian children from 1983 through 2018. It was Lewis and Clark who lost the trail west at [Lost Trail Pass](#). The route went up onto the ridge, but they couldn't find a way down. Where to go? They looked and they looked until they finally found a way. But they got lost on the way down. And had to stop and look more carefully. Ultimately they found the way down into the south end of the [Bitterroot Valley](#). The Bitterroot Valley is 90 miles long. At the northern end they found an Indian trail over the mountains and into the [Columbia River](#) valley leading to the [Pacific Ocean](#).

When I got to camp, I was in charge of the rifle range, 22 rifles. Every day I would get 5 kids at a time. Put out targets. Load them on the right. Load them on the left. Take aim. Fire. Make the scores. All morning long, a different group every half hour or so. And then I kept the best targets. At lunchtime, I gave all of those best targets a candy bar. I'm telling you, a

candy bar was a treasure out there in that wilderness away from home. No money in your pocket and I gave them a candy bar.

When we got to camp, however, I was really disappointed. You know what they were doing? Weaving and making hot pads for their mothers. They were primarily staying in camp. There was swimming and horseback riding. Some of the kids got a trip to Yellowstone. Some of the older kids got a trip to Glacier National Park. The oldest kids got a horseback trip up in, believe it or not, Canada.

The camp was an interesting place because it was run by people who didn't know how to run a camp in the wild west. Paul Gerhard, the director, was afraid of the wilderness. I said this is not what you're supposed to do in the wild west. We can go up into those mountains. Have a wilderness experience. Find wild animals. Climb mountains. Why sit here in a chair doing weaving. You can do that back in Michigan. You do not have to come all the way out here. The camp director was hard to convince. So I said, "Give me a try. Let me climb a mountain with these kids. Let me take them on a hike in the wilderness. Do a few things." Well, reluctantly, they let me take some boys out camping in the wilderness for a weekend.

All the next winter we had camp meetings. I am telling them what a wonderful opportunity to teach these boys how to become men. How to live in that environment. Even how to live off the land. How to know what they could eat if they had to survive. How to make a shelter if they needed one. We can teach them all these things. The camp director wasn't interested. He was afraid of the wilderness. The camp owner couldn't care less. But during the first winter I talked them into one thing: Climbing [Trapper Peak](#), the highest mountain in the [Bitterroots](#) at 10,157 foot elevation. So I said to the camp director, "We're going up that mountain." He said, "Well, I think you're crazy. I don't think you're ever going to make it. But go ahead and try."

The boys came out and sat on a log in front of the lodge. I started telling them about what we were going to do. When I came to the part about climbing [Trapper Peak](#), you should have seen their eyes. I told them how we would start out. And how we would walk seven miles while climbing from an elevation of 4,400 feet to the top of the mountain at 10,157 feet. You will go home and tell everybody that you climbed that mountain. They will wonder how in the world you could ever do that.

So, the long story made short is that we climbed it and I filmed it. All the boys were so happy, standing on top of that mountain. I said these boys were wonderful climbers. They did what probably most boys would never even dream of doing. Every kid had a picture of himself standing alone on the top of that 10,000-foot mountain with a big smile. He had grown up. His life was changed forever.

And you know what happened? When we got back to Michigan the word spread like crazy. Newspapers called me to get the story. You mean you're climbing a mountain with kids from Grand Rapids? I showed parents the film when we did recruitment meetings during the winter. It was spectacular. It was so beautiful up there. You couldn't believe the beauty on top. You could see mountains as far as your eye could see. We learned that summer how

much fun it is to climb a mountain. We conquered [Trapper Peak](#) the highest mountain in the [Bitterroot Mountains](#).

One summer while driving 35 miles to Hamilton, we noted signs for [Gem Mountain Sapphire Mine](#) on Skalkaho Pass Road. Gold digging. We have the pans, the shovels, the spoons, the brushes, and the containers for the gravel. You can strike it rich. I told these guys at camp about it. They just laughed at me. I said well, we'll give it a try. So on our day off, we took a boy from Grand Rapids with us to go up to that mine. His name was Shady Olsberg. That was his nickname. He came into that mine and started digging. He had his pan and he shuffled water in it and poured it out. There in the gravel was a 7½ carat sapphire! Excellent quality. At the gold mine there was a woman in a camping trailer. She was the one that gave the value of what was found. She said \$2,000. Ooh, my gosh. When we go back to Michigan, [The Grand Rapids Press](#) does a big story with his picture and his mother's picture. Half a page. I said, "Hey man, you can't buy that kind of publicity. Right."

One winter, I said. "Well, we're not going to need any rental cars to take us out for a hike. We're hiking right from camp. We're going to cross Hwy. 93. Right there, there's a Shawnee trail up over the mountains into the [Big Hole Valley](#)." So that's the way I changed the camp. Every summer there was a different wilderness experience. Then we would show the slides back in Michigan. People couldn't believe it. This is unbelievable. This is a great program.

One year I had some of the older boys pitch their tent and be alone with nature for 24 hours. There's one kid,

his name was Salzburg, who was scared to death to be alone in the mountains at night. Well, I knew there might be some trouble, so I posted some counselors out there. The Salzburg Kid never left his tent. He cooked his food right by the entrance. He was in the tent the whole time. But he grew a lot that night.

One year I said, "Hey, guys, you know what's right down the highway. It's the Salmon River. Wild whitewater. And they have guides that will take us down that river that they call [The River of No Return](#)." And they're all sitting there. "Oh my gosh," I said, "it would be a fabulous experience that the kids would explain to their friends when they go back to Michigan. The word will spread." Well, there was opposition. I had to sit there, try to sell it. I said, "Well, let's put it this way. If you don't want to do that, I'm not going. So one of the other counselors who had been there for a few years looked at the camp director named Paul Gerhard. He said, "Paul, this guy's got amazing ideas. Let's go with what he wants to do." The next summer the camp was filled up a month earlier than usual. Because those kids who



Dan and Ken on top of Mt. Moran in the Tetons

went back to those private schools, [Brookside and Cranbrook](#) outside of Detroit were so enthusiastic.

We went down the main Salmon, a couple of summers and then the guide said, “Your kids are really good in these boats. They could handle the Middle Fork, which is a more exciting ride. They are going to be soaking wet most of the time.” The kids loved it!

So, over time I talked them into changing that camp completely. We would go down to Detroit, Bloomfield Hills, every single winter for a meeting of the camp to plan the next summer. So after that first summer, boy I went down there and I let him have it. I said, “You're wasting the wilderness. There are mountain lakes up there for fishing. There's mountains to climb and hike in. There's all kinds of things we can do with those kids. We can teach them survival skills. If they were lost, they would know how to survive. Number one is shelter or you freeze to death right away.” Those guys sat there. Ooh, my gosh. This guy means business.

The camp director liked it that I knew a lot of good people for counselors. He said, “get some counselors to apply. And you know you can tell us all about them.” I said, “OK.” So, I told many people to call in and apply. We had a lot of good counselors from Grand Rapids. Since the camp was over 1750 miles away, why don't we all go together. Meet me in June at my house here in Grand Rapids. We will have a couple of station wagons that will be used by the camp. We'll all travel in a caravan out to the camp. It'll take us some time, so we'll stay in campgrounds on the way.

While at camp, I got a chance to learn all about the mountains and trails and fishing. That's when I decided I could make a survival film. I go up to these lakes and show a spinning lure. Bam, you'd have a fish just like that. You could put them on a skillet on the fire. Roasted up golden brown. Pull off the pieces of meat. They tasted good. So I learned a lot about how to survive out there in the wild.

We were recruiting quite a few kids. So that camp went on and, you know, the camp eventually came to an end. But our son Dan had a rich camp experience from a little 2½ year old on up to a teenager.

So out we come each year to work in the summer camp. And then after camp we go out and have our own adventure. I would make travelogs on 16 millimeter film. People would pay me to show the film back in Michigan. Grand Rapids was the travelogue capital of the world during that time. I knew I could show travelogs there. And I did, year after year.

But there's more to my story about working at Lost Trail Camp. After I had been there for several summers, I decided I wanted to change my whole life and move my family west to live on the ocean. Bobbi said, “What? You want to live on the ocean?” I said, “Well we can live in that summer camp first.”

So that's like 15 years of teaching and being a school administrator and working in a camp during the summer. We had a wonderful life.

Bicycling is in our Dutch Heritage

The Netherlands is known as the [bicycle capital of the world](#). [Cycling is a cherished](#) part of the Dutch way of life. Being Dutch, we were very, very comfortable bicycling in the Netherlands during many different trips.

In 1973, Bobbi, Dan, a friend named Carrie, and I made a silent movie *The Netherlands by Bicycle* filling two 45-minute 16-millimeter film reels. When we came home, we showed that film with my live narration. It showed well because Grand Rapids and most of western Michigan is full of Dutch people. The parents loved to see their homeland and loved that their kids could experience the Netherlands. Our church made enough money from all these shows that they could buy a used greyhound bus to help church groups go sightseeing and travel to important gatherings. We didn't charge much, but people just loved that film.

During another summer we did a bicycle barge trip with many friends. Bobbi had read [The Hiding Place](#) by Corrie Ten Boom about Dutch people who were there during the second world war and how they hid people in their home. That book meant more to Bobbi than any other book she'd ever read. So, we went to visit the locations in the book.

One summer I decided to bicycle from Grand Rapids, Michigan, to the Pacific Ocean in Oregon following the Lewis and Clark trail. People thought I was crazy, but I put my bike bag on my bike. I had my lunch in there. I started up route US-131. That's the number of the highway that goes to the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. When I got up to the peninsula, I headed west on route US-2, ultimately headed for Great Falls Montana and then head down to Lost Trail Pass and ultimately to the Columbia River and the Pacific Ocean. That was a long ride. I'd make as many miles as I could. At the end of the day I'd start looking for a hotel. I started looking for somebody coming with a camper that I could latch on to. Well, at first I didn't think I'd ever find anybody. But along comes this car. They had pulled over in a rest area. I was at the other end though. I went over and started striking up a conversation. And they said, "What are you doing out here on this bike?" When I told them, they said, "You're kidding us?" I said, "No. I'm on my way to Montana." They said, "Well, we can give you a ride to the next motel." I said, "Thank you. Thank you." They said, "We got this small pickup. You can stay in the back where you can put your bike. And you can climb back there." So away we went. I stayed overnight and every night thereafter when I was able to get a ride. I kept this up all the way across the country.

But now you get out to Great Falls. Now what? Well, Great Falls is, as it sounds, on the river. So, all I have to do is follow that Missouri River down to Three Forks. And then I just take the left hand fork, Lost Trail Pass, Bitterroot Valley, and then down the Columbia River to the ocean. It was a long, long haul. Day after day. Couple nights I camped out. But I made it all the way down and rode clear across the mountains to the Columbia River. That's where I went. Some of it by car, some of it by boat. But I kept my bike with me and up and away I went.

I was all alone. Yeah. See the thing about having somebody with you is you have to talk to him about where to stop next. He might not want to do it. He might want to stop too soon.

This has to be my ball game. Yeah, I made it to the ocean before winter came, but it was close.

Climbing in the Alps

We took several trips to the Alps to climb Mount Blanc and the Matterhorn and to do some hiking near Chamonix and Grindelwald.

Dan painted his ice ax red, white and blue so people would know that he was a climber from the US. But France has red, white, blue on their flag too, which was so funny because he was so proud of that. Everybody was very friendly, you know. Bonjour for sure.

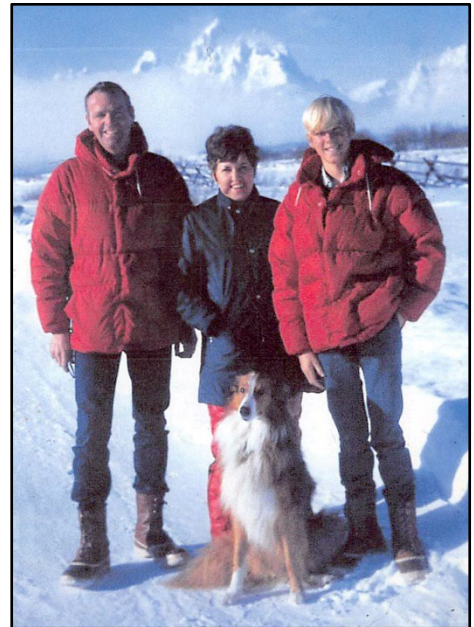
Moving to Jackson, Wyoming

After camp was over that first year, 1959, we decided to go take a look at Yellowstone and then drive south through the Tetons. I said to Bobbi, “This is unbelievable. We're going to live here someday.” So, we took a look around. Bought gas for the outrageous price of forty-nine cents out in Kelly. Forty-nine cents a gallon! Outrageous. So after that first summer in camp in 1959, we realized that we would like to move to Jackson someday but we didn't know how.

We would come out to Jackson every chance we had. We even came out in the wintertime and we stayed up at the lodge. There's a lot of stuff I've lost in memory, but I do remember how much we loved this area and how I told Bobbi, “Let's get a job here.” And she said, “Whoa. What about Michigan?” I said, “Well, we're not in Michigan in the summer anymore. We're moving out west.”

Over the years, I became fascinated with the Lewis and Clark journals and the stories I could tell based on these journals. I began to think about possible books I could write. I realized that I could do all my research back there in Michigan because Lewis and Clark wrote nearly 1500 pages about their journey. What happened to them on their way back would have happened to Naya Nuki for my first book. There were the Blackfeet Indians. There were problems finding food. There were problems with surviving violent weather. They told me how they had to do it, which is how I assume Naya Nuki would have done it. The Lewis and Clark diaries provided excellent details that I used in all my books and for all my storytelling.

I brought the diaries back to Michigan and started writing my book. Then one day, I said to Bobbi, “We are working here all winter and going west during the summer. We're doing it backwards. We should be out there in the winter and visit here in the summer. I need to get out there and write that book. I need to walk the trails. I need to see the rivers, the mountains, the lakes.” So, Bobbi says, “OK, but you have a good job here. The superintendent is hiring you to be his assistant and you're making all that money. Do you



Ken, Bobbi, and Dan in 1970.

plan to dump that?" "Yep," I said. "I've told the superintendent that in three to at most six more years, I'm gone. That's how long it will take us to save up the money." We worked on saving up money. We told everybody that eventually we were moving out to Montana, to the Bitterroot Valley, to write a book about an Indian girl.

Meanwhile, Bobbi was teaching at [Sigsbee School](#) in the black inner city of Grand Rapids in an entirely different setting that was 98% or 99% black students. White teachers would come, stay one year, and leave. It was hard. It was a difficult situation. But Bobbi really liked the parents who would thank her every year for staying. When they'd have a parents dinner night, many white teachers would not eat any of the food that the black parents brought. But their fried chicken and greens were to die for. Those teachers should not have been there. But anyway. That's what happens. Bobbi felt that was a great school. She taught there for five years. She was reluctant to leave it behind.

I was reluctant to leave Grand Rapids too. I felt I had made significant contributions to the Grand Rapids School System. I thought if I stayed there, maybe I could continue to make a difference. But I really wanted to move west.

We began to think seriously about moving west, but I didn't know where or when. I said to Bobbi, "We got to go find a place we could live out there. We need to find work out there. We could have a wonderful time. We could have the camp to raise our son, Dan. He would have a heated pool in the summer. He would have kids to play with. You can't beat this. There's not enough money in the world to pay for that. Let's do it." So, we came. And it worked out beautifully. We became camp counselors and eventually camp directors. We had a wonderful time.

So if we got to move out here, where are we going to live? In 1973, during one of our many trips through Jackson, I saw a sign on the road four miles north of Jackson: Cabins for Rent. I went in and knocked on the door. Out comes the guy who owns the cabins. His wife is inside the cabin. And he said, "We have one lot for sale. It's not the best one. Slopes on a bad angle. But I'll show it to you." So, we hopped into his pickup and drove up to the lot. He walked me out here and up onto the rocks. We sat on the rocks for a while.

I said, "How much you want for this acre here?" He said, "Well, it's not the best one." I said, "I know that." He said, "Well I think we'll take \$18,000." I said, "Well, let's go talk to Marion your wife. I think I'm interested." I figured I could raise the money from mortgages, relatives, whatever, for the down payment to be made in December. Another payment in January, another payment the next January. I had figured out how to do that. Well, we went down and saw Marion. Marion said, "\$20,000." I said, "Oh no, Arthur said we could have it for \$18,000." She gave him a dirty look. She said, "OK. \$19,000." And I said, "You have yourself a deal." So, I had to go back and borrow all that money from everybody I could and pay in December, January, and the next January. We bought that one acre in 1973.

Bobbi's dad was a builder, 70 years old, retired. I said, "Well, you built a house for Bobbi's sister and you promised Bobbi you'd build one for her. I want you to build one for her in Jackson Hole, Wyoming." He said, "Where is that?" I told him and I said, "We'll get a U-

Haul, fill it full of lumber, and we'll head out there someday. We'll build that house. I can help. Dan can help. Dan has a friend, Vic. He'll help build it. We can stay in a house just down the way or in a hotel. You and your wife, grandma and grandpa, Bobbi and I will stay and Vic will stay.”

So, in 1975 we started building the house. At the end of three weeks, we were sleeping in the basement. This was an unfinished room. Sawdust falling down. We covered our beds every day with plastic to keep the sawdust off the sheets. We got everything enclosed during the first summer but not any finished work. We came back two more summers. Bobbi's dad supervised us while we did the finish work. We moved in 1977 while Bobbi's dad finished the room above the garage.

So anyway, we came out with a U-Haul trailer. Why the hell a U-Haul? How are we going to get that U-Haul up your driveway? Do you have any idea? Well, I said to Dan, “The best way to do this is to back it up. You have more traction and more control. And when you get up there, you just back up the driveway as if you own it.” I said, “Hold your breath, everybody.” I started backing up. Here we are. The adventure starts here.

So, in 1977 it was time to move. How are we going to get all our stuff out there. I had a plan. School districts retire school buses. I thought if they retired a school bus and offered it for sale, I could buy it. Whoa, school bus? Put all your belongings in the school bus, you gotta be crazy. No, but you gotta be smart. I was watching every ad in the paper. I finally see the right one. Used school bus for sale in Hudsonville, Michigan. Let's buy it. I think I paid \$6000 or \$7000. We bought the school bus and drove it home. Parked it in front of our house and started loading it up. We started at the front. Filled up all the seats with groceries, clothes and boxes, all the seats in the whole bus. And then on top we put box springs and four mattresses. It's going to be our mobile home on the way west. We put all the stuff in. We jammed it right to the back door. Everything fit! It was unbelievable. Except now we got to climb up on those beds. But there's five of us. And I said, “I'll sit here in the back. There's a place I can stretch out on these boxes. I got some pillows. No problem.”

We drove via Interstate 80. We were exactly 17 miles east of Omaha when the bus stopped running. Won't go anymore. I roll over to the side of the road. I get out. I go lift up the hood as if I knew something about motors. I knew nothing. Bobbi was back telling her mother and dad “Ohh, we'll probably have to call a wrecker. Have this thing towed. It's going to cost some money.” She came over to see me by the motor and I said, “You don't have to call the wrecker. Do you see that wire hanging down there? Do you see that shiny knob? I connected the two. It starts right up.” But it might come off again. So, I get a Band-Aid and tape the wire to the knob. We go the next 15 miles into a town. You couldn't believe what I drove up to. I drove up to an automobile repair garage. And the guy comes out and he says, “Got trouble?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “You came to the right place. I'll take a look.” He looks down, sees that thing hanging down, picks it up, fastens it down and away we went. So you know this whole project has been by the seat of my pants.

Teaching in Jackson

I love teaching. It all started when I was in kindergarten. Through decades of experience, I learned to love the children, to work hard, to focus on what was important in school, and not to waste time and energy on unnecessary stuff that was useless. Just go to work and help each individual child. Don't worry about all of them. Worry about one at a time. It was an amazing success. They had me do workshops. I'm teaching how to teach kids how to read and write and do math. How to do it by example. Not just talking but with concrete examples.

When we were thinking about moving to Jackson, I told Bobbi that I really want to teach in Jackson. They have a school system. I suspect they need teachers. Why don't I try to get a job here? We could move to Jackson Hole, the most beautiful valley in the world. Dan would have a wonderful place to go to school. You will have a wonderful place to be in these mountains. I think Jackson Hole is an undiscovered gem in our country. People don't know about it. Do you remember when we went back to Michigan, and we said something about Jackson Hole, all the questions were where is that? So, I said, let's take a look.

When we moved to Jackson in 1977, I started looking around for a job. I found out that they needed teachers. So, I checked at the superintendent's office and they said, "Yeah, we usually hire about 8 new teachers a year." So, I told Bobbi and she said, "You are not going to make much money here. There is no industry. No business base. There's just the National Park." I said, "Well, I know that we're going to move here because we like it. Forget about the money. We'll make some money in a different way."

I decided that I could probably become a teacher here in these schools and I told the superintendent Cusack that I have a teaching certificate that's good all the way through 8th grade. It's called an elementary school certificate. I'd like to have a job. He said well nothing available right now, but the middle of August we'll see. I went to every board meeting to see if there would be an opening.

I met some people that were connected with the schools, and I asked them about teachers. They said, "We hire teachers every year. It's hard to get teachers to come here. It's so isolated. And the pay is not that good. The cost of living is high. So, it's hard to get teachers." I said, "That's good." So anyway we got a connection with the school district here. They said send us your resume and we'll check you out.

I mailed them my resume and they said, "Well, we want to come and talk to you." I said, "Great." So they sent out their personnel guy. And he talked to me. I told him about all of my teaching experience. I told him about how I raised money for school districts. I told him about all my summer camp work. I told him all kinds of experiences that I had. And I told him I can make your district better. He looked at me and said, "We're going to offer you a contract." I said, "Great. I'm sitting here waiting." So, they offered me a contract. Wasn't all that great, not a whole lot of money. But I put a lot of value on this location. And said, "OK, I'll take the job."

The initial job offered was teacher's aide. A teacher's aide just works in the classroom with the teacher who makes the good money. Well, fortunately for me, they needed a teacher just before school started. I went to the school board meeting, as I did every week waiting for an opening. It was the 17th of August. Stan Clauson, a teacher in the middle school was requesting a transfer to the elementary school. They said, "Well, it looks like you've got the credentials so you can plan on it."

They will need somebody to take his place in the middle school. 6th grade. That's for me. So, I applied, but I found out there were 18 people applying. Oh man, I wrote out a resume you wouldn't believe. And I happen to find out that they wanted to move the 6th graders to the middle school. So I talked to people saying I have taught elementary and middle school. I can do a great job either place. Well, they had the meeting of the board. Eighteen of us were there. They finally said OK. We're going to go and vote. They came out saying we voted for Ken Thomasma. He's our choice for 8th grade. In elementary school I had 6th graders. I did a good job.

Soon, however, I had to point out to the superintendent, who I had trouble with from then on, that the fire department is going to put you in jail. You can't put kids in that basement room. There's only one exit. A fire blocks that exit, those kids are dead. So, they finally found a room in a building they put up for preschool and handicapped. They found one room I could teach in. So I started out teaching 6th grade. The teaching went on. But it wasn't long before they found out a little bit more about me. They wanted me to continue on as a teacher, but to teach in the middle school building, which I ended up doing there in the basement.

Then they said, "You are going to start teaching 7th grade in middle school. We have a spare room in the elementary school and we need another teacher there." I said, "I can teach there. Chalkboard to write on. I can work there." Thing about education is you have to have a certificate or it won't be approved. I had a certificate many of the others did not have. They hired me.

I saw it was in a separate building. I saw that they weren't using any modern materials. I was going to be the English teacher. They wanted me to emphasize reading. I said, "We need to purchase reading materials that emphasize reading. Half of these 7th graders are not even at the 5th grade level. And I'm going to change it. So I stayed there for a couple of years.

We need to improve reading levels. Because the 7th graders are behind in reading, when they go on to 8th grade they can't read it. I can't let that happen. I talked them into letting me set up reading labs. There were SRA readers that emphasized reading. And have a box of exercises and questions and reading materials.

I don't know, I said let's go with the SRA reading program. That will give those younger kids good grounds for advancing. Oh yeah, they didn't know whether that was a good idea or not. A lab with cards in it.

You see how it was a genius that made it. You read what's on the card. And then you answer the question. And every card is at a different grade level. Perfect. So away we went. They really liked it. They liked me doing it. So anyway I had quite a time there at the elementary school. They wanted me to help with Junior high. So, I did.

And then they had an opening in the Middle school teaching 9th grade. I did a good job there but I was not happy. The elementary job came up when teachers were transferred. And I went to a board meeting and I said, "I'm your man for that elementary job."

The school superintendent here in Jackson was named Cusack. He was unbelievably bad. Well, Cusack stayed for 12 terrible years and he didn't like me, but he wanted me to pass the [mill levy](#) every three years. And so, I said, "OK, I will." Every three years I'd have to raise my own funds, organize a team, start the campaign, and then celebrate the victory.

When you are asking for money for schools you have to be credible. You have to show them where every penny goes. And you have to convince them that what's done for children will mark the success of everything in this valley. You have four schools. No business wants to be here. They don't. They can't find good workers because the word is out that the school system is lousy. The property owners won't pay for it.

One day they came and they said, "We are enlarging the district. We're taking in more students. So we're going to move the 6th graders from Kelly, Moran and Alta and put them in the Middle School. We would like to have you teach 6th grade at the Middle School." I ended up there. Eventually they needed me to teach 7th grade. Then 8th grade. I taught all the middle school grades.

I kept getting rehired. I kept getting promoted. 6th grade, 7th grade, 8th grade and then they said, "We'd like to have you be assistant superintendent. I said, "Oh, that wasn't my idea, but I know what the pay is and I need that money, so I'll take it." So I became an assistant superintendent. Getting a big pay raise. And working on bond issues and all kinds of things.

We talked Cusack into putting the bond issue on the ballot. He put it on and said, "OK Thomasma, you wanted it now you get it passed. I say, Ooh man, I gotta pass the bond issue. I know how much work it is. We made a slideshow. We organized the people with the slide projectors and the tape recorders and we send them out to schools all over the town and the county. They showed the slides and played the soundtrack. On the eve before the vote my son Dan came up here. And we both slept outside on the deck so we wouldn't wake my wife up, Bobbi. And we were up at 5:00 AM. We went to every road going into town and posted signs made out of cardboard because we knew the bigger the vote, the more people who voted, the better the chance of it passing.

Well, they voted. We're down at the courthouse. 7:00 pm the polls close. And the results are coming in. 128 persons. And it comes down to 128. And they are only. 40 votes apart. Back and forth. Back and forth. Yes. No. Yes, no is it going to pass? We don't know. Well, it was like right at the end. 11 minutes. We are just ahead by 41 votes. And it passed.

Then I decided I sure love teaching. I'd like to go back. And I told Cusack and he said well, we don't like that. And I said someday I will go there. Well, we finally got rid of him. He got into big trouble. I'll tell you what it was. He married a teacher. They had the wedding at the Wort Hotel. And in the ballroom that had naked dancers for entertaining the guests. I found out about that. I said to somebody, "This school district is in big trouble. You're going to be in front of the sheriff. Naked woman dancing for teachers? That doesn't work here." So anyway he was fired. And they wanted me to take his place. And I said, well, I will work as an assistant. Help with the schools. Help find teachers. But I don't want to be superintendent. So that's the way it is.

Kelly School

But now Bobbi wants a job too. When she tried to get a job at the elementary school, Cliff Shadler said, "I don't want to hire older people. They're set in their ways." Bobbi was only 40 and had considerable experience. But he didn't want to pay for it, I guess.

But then a job opened up at Kelly Elementary School that Bobbi really wanted. Out there in the wilderness. To make a long story short, I followed her. What a time we had at Kelly's school. It became a mother and father's school.

What happened about Kelly school is they wanted me to be a teacher. They said we have a little country school and they said it's only two rooms. Rooms are stacked on each other. So, I took a look. I got out there and was shocked. I had kids going to be in a room in the basement. Kindergarten 1st and 2nd. And my wife had grades 3, 4, 5. No way are those kids going to be put in that room? And I told Cusack I need money. We're going to remodel that school. I



Ken teaching at Kelly School.

I said, "I don't need it right now because my neighbor is getting new carpeting and he's giving me his old carpeting—gold shag and in good shape. And he's giving me some other stuff. I could put it in that classroom and make it usable." I got everything ready to go and worked all summer. The playground area was sagebrush. There was a swing set and a slide. And I said this is not going to work. How are those kids going to play softball and soccer and touch football? So, I spent the summer digging up sagebrush. Yeah, it was a huge playground. All sagebrush. I went out there every day for 40 days. No pay. Just went out there because I believed in having a decent place for children to play. I dug up all the sagebrush. Threw it over the buck rail fence.

Then I looked at that buck rail fence and I said, wait a minute. That fence is no good either. I don't want those kids looking out at that campground. People out there, out of their teepees, urinating. I'm going to build a fence. I can go over into Idaho where they have pickets for sale. Six and a half feet high. Pointed at the top. So, I drove over there with my pickup time after time. I'd load it up every time and come and dump it on the playground. I said to the parents, when you have the next carnival and I said you already had one, and there's some money there, I spent this much money. The carnival will do it. The kids will come with their nickels and dimes. So we got enough money and we built that fence. It was so much fun.

The kids said, " We don't want those pickets on the playground. I said, OK, go get one. You can imagine 30 kids holding up a picket on the buck rail fence. We nailed them on. And when it was over the kids started dancing and cheering and singing:

We got a fence, we got a fence, we got a fence. We're ready to play soccer, softball, volleyball. We got a fence. The kids were so cute.

The fence surrounded the playground. The first pickets were by the walkway of the school. Then they went out about 50 feet and then took a nice turn out to the flagpole. And then over to the black top where it turned and went back to the entrance. About 400 feet.

Now I have all this raking to do. And getting rid of the sage brush. Eventually I had it all done. I looked at it and thought these kids can't play on this loose dirt. So I had to go into the ready mix place where I could rent a roller. I rolled and rolled for five days. I thought my arms were going to come out of the shoulder. I never worked so hard in my life.

And when the kids came, it was all packed down. They said, "Look at this." They get out the soccer ball and the football. We played on it all fall. And all winter we had an ice rink on it. Come spring. Can't leave it like this. Going to be both again. I get a rototiller. And I get to roll and roll it and then I throw out grass seed, scattering a lot of it. You can't use too much. And then start the water. And go out and check it once a week. I finally got it done near the end of July. And spread with a spreader that had a wheel in the bottom and spread seed everywhere. And waited there. Put the



Ken clearing snow from the Kelly School ice rink. Ken swears he flooded and plowed 34 ice rinks when he was teaching and after he retired.

water on and checked it every week and waited. Nothing happened, I thought, oh no. The kids have churned this all up. I think it was about the third week of August, only 10 days left before school begins. There's a little rise that you walk up to get on the playground. I walked up and stopped. I looked out and there was a green tint. Green color all over the playground. Well, another 10 days and I was mowing that grass. Boy, the kids loved it.

That year there were 29 kids, kindergarten through 5th grade. You know half in the lower room and half in the upper room. Bobbi and I were the teachers. We had our teachers meeting on the way to school. No need to stay after school for any meetings. All the parents were really excited. They wanted some improvements made. And Cusack wasn't going to do it. There was a meeting over in Alta. There's a school over there that's Wyoming public school, Teton County. The parents heard that Cusack was going to be over there. So, they got two station wagons full of parents. I don't know 10 or 11 of them. They confronted him in front of all those people. And told him we're going to have a school as good as any in this county. And we're going to have an addition put on. And we're going to start working on it right now. And you're going to help us or else. Well, they passed the bond issue. And I was out there when the backhoe came to start doing the work. And we eventually had a three room school that worked fine.

It was very popular. A lot of kids came who lived west of the airport and around the golf course. And then they changed the boundary so kids came from the north end of East Gros Ventre Butte where we live. We were full. We need another addition. They asked me if I could do it. I said you bet I can. Give me the three weeks. I'll get working on it. I'll just need a little money. I said I have a guy that owns a big business in town. Said he'd give me \$400. I said people are ready for this. Well, anyway we got it done. And we got the addition made. And we had a big celebration.

Every year after that we had parent meetings. People visiting the school board. I said you got to watch out for this guy. You can never tell what he's going to try to do next. One time he was going to send kids up to Moran from Kelly. So anyway, we held fast. And the little school is still going. Approximately 40 students now. Yeah, 20 downstairs and 20 up.

So anyway. I didn't teach out there forever. I ran some bond issues. They offered me several different jobs. I turned them down. Except for that one to organize a fundraising campaign. I said that's what I'll do to help you. Being a teacher was a great thing. But I don't know if that superintendent thought everything I did was great. But it helped him.

I guess I told you we had trouble. We had to fight to keep the Kelly school open. And boy, we had the materials. Slideshow with kids faces. Ads in the paper. You just wonder why education is such a hard job. But it's worth it. Yeah, it was worth it.

In 1993, I camped out on top of Fred's Market as a stunt to attract attention to the district's budget



Ken camped out on the roof of Fred's Market in 1993.

woes, including a plan to make football players buy their own uniforms. An effort to raise \$210,000 had stalled at \$55,000. We finally got it done.

The real joy of living in Jackson is that Dan and I have climbed almost every mountain in sight. Plus, we have spent lots of joyous time fishing the Snake River and others.

Writing Books

When I was going to college, I decided to be a teacher. People told me, “Oh man, there's no money in that. You're too smart to be a teacher.” I said, “No, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to be an elementary school teacher. I love school.”

And I loved books. While I was in high school during the Second World War, we were fighting and taking prisoners. More than 6,000 prisoners were housed in [Prisoner of War Camps within Michigan](#). Most were Germans captured in North Africa. One of these camps was right close to where I lived. Every once in a while, a prisoner would escape, and I thought, oh, that could make a great story. Searching for a prisoner of war. That would be a cliffhanger. So, I wrote the book with seven chapters. What do you do with a high-school kid writing a book? Nobody was interested.

But I started examining what was available, learning how to become an author, learning how to get published, and how much money you can plan on making. I studied that whole thing.

During the summer of 1959, while driving to work as a counselor at Lost Trail Camp in southwestern Montana for the first time, I read many road signs describing the [Lewis and Clark Expedition](#) looking for a route to the Pacific Ocean. I was driving very close to their route up the Missouri River to Great Falls Montana, to Three Forks, to Lost Trail Pass near Lost Trail Camp, up the Bitterroot Valley, and then west to the Columbia River valley and finally the Pacific Ocean. I bought a copy of their journals that explain what they saw and what they did every single day in 1804 and 1805. I became fascinated and started to read all of this Lewis and Clark stuff. I used it to tell stories at camp and when I was teaching.

After we moved to Jackson in 1977, I bought a spiral notebook. The way I write is chapter by chapter. I write notes about what that chapter is going to be about. When I get it done, I have detailed notes for 10, 12, 15 chapters all in this spiral notebook. Now I'm ready to write. And when you write, it's like my friend said, you got to start out with a cliffhanger. You got to start out without dilly dallying. Kids don't want to hear all that junk. They want to hear the story. So, I wrote. It went along really well.

And when I would finish the chapter, I would rewrite it because everything you write, you've got to rewrite. So, I get another notebook and rewrote the first chapter, trying to make every word better, every sentence more meaningful. And when I get that done, I get the third notebook and start again. So when I get it done, it's in good shape.

When I get the book written, I need to find a publisher. Well, Betty Devries, a good friend of mine, worked for [Baker Book House](#), a publishing company in Ada, Michigan just west of Grand Rapids. She was in charge of their children's books. So one time when we were back

in Michigan, I went into the Baker Book House and talked to Betty. She was enthralled. I could see it on her face. “This is going to be the best children's book we have ever had. But there is a problem. The men on the publication committee don't pick out anything to publish unless they're going to make money. So we've got to be careful. Most of the things are turned down. Maybe one in seven is accepted. We'll do the best we can.”

She started working with these guys. She had me come when we were in Grand Rapids to a meeting, and they all sat there on their cushion chairs. I told the background of the Shoshone and how they were captured. And how some of them tried to make it home. And many died trying. And I said my idea for kids is to make it even more amazing by having the story be about a girl. And the girl would be Naya Nuki, the girl who ran.

Well, they sat there. You could see I had them hooked. So finally they left the room and went out to take a vote. When they came back in, they said we have accepted your good looking book. We will pay you up front, a retainer of \$1,000. I was barely making that much money in a year!

So anyway, I'm off and running. I'm writing about a line of people. I knew everything that had happened to Lewis and Clark and could happen to her. The buffalos, the lions, the Indian trouble, escaping the horrendous weather, everything. And I handed it in to them. And they loved it.

I wrote my books for 11 year olds, 10 or 11. In Michigan, they tell you teach American history in the 5th and 6th grade. I said, what's more American history than this? This is really basic.

And then some teachers in the 3rd and 4th grades would read the book to the class. I had kids read it. I also read it to the kids at my school. I would read a chapter and they would applaud. And I'd say you won't be happy until you read what happens next. Read some more. Read some more.

I would ask my class to write down names for each chapter. We would vote on it.

With all my books, I would go to a school anywhere in the U.S. and tell them, “Look, I'll come to your school. Get all the kids together in an assembly, and I'll do storytelling. After your assembly, I'll start visiting classrooms. And for the kids that you want me to do, I'll do writing workshops. Teach them how to write. And then, if you want me to, I'll take some of those kids and do a writing workshop with them. Then they will produce a paper of writing to take home. I said that I will change the way you teach. Make it more effective. Even better than you're doing now.” They said, “OK.”



Ken with his Indian bedroll telling stories to a class.

So, a lot of schools hired me for the whole day. One school district in Colorado said we want you for a week. Different school every day for five days. I was making good money. I wasn't doing it for nothing. So anyway, that's the way that went. I did this at more than 30 schools. I didn't turn anybody down. I always worked it out so I could come when they had an opening.

My Twelve Books

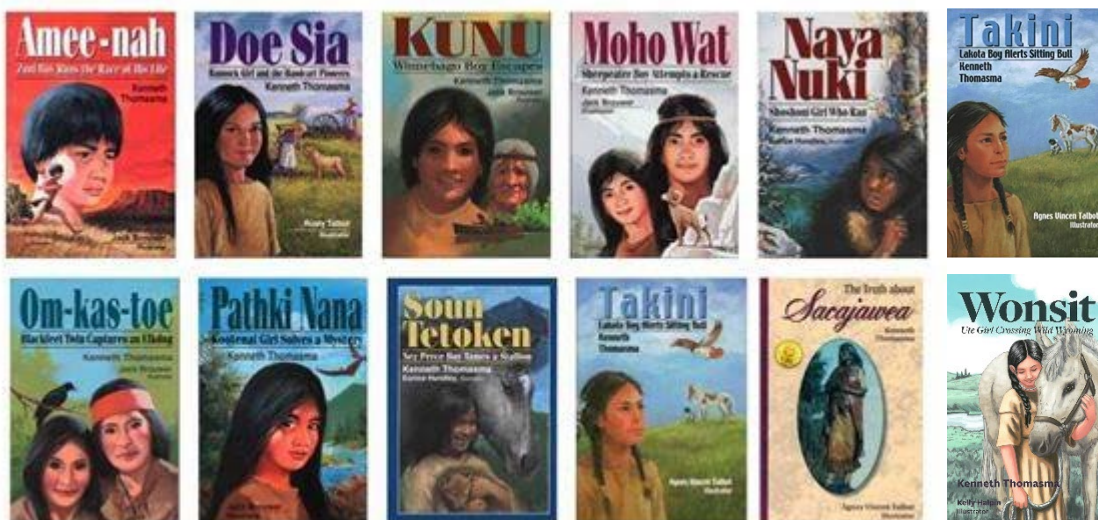
[Naya Nuki: Shoshoni Girl Who Ran](#) (1983) A classic tale of bravery, determination, and courage, *Naya Nuki* is Ken's first and most popular book. This gripping novel follows a brave eleven-year-old girl who escapes from slavery to traverse the country and return to her family.

[Soun Tetoken: Nez Perce Boy Tames a Stallion](#) (1984) A young orphan boy is adopted by the son of famed Nez Perce Chief Joseph and is swept up in the events leading up to the Nez Perce war with the U.S. Army in 1877. Befriended by a stallion and a coyote pup, Soun's adventure unfolds during a time of growing racial tensions and conflict.

[Om-kas-toe: Blackfeet Twin Captures an Elkdog](#) (1986) Life in the Blackfeet tribe is never the same after young Om-kas-toe and his twin sister discover and capture a horse. An exciting story of resourcefulness and loyalty, this historical novel has been a reader favorite for decades.

[Kunu: Winnebago Boy Escapes](#) (1989) An unshakeable bond with his grandfather, and pure determination to return to his homeland drive Kunu to escape the Crow Creek Reservation. Together, Kunu and his grandfather embark on a journey that demands grit, courage, and resilience.

[Moho Wat: Sheepeater Boy Attempts a Rescue](#) (1994) After losing his left hand to a vicious mountain lion, young Moho Wat is determined to overcome his injury and learn to hunt. His bravery is put to the test when he must rescue the beautiful Wind Flower from an enemy tribe.



Pathki Nana: Kootenai Girl Solves a Mystery (1995) A very bright, and yet lonely young girl, Pathki Nana often feels she's an outsider in her own village. But when she stumbles into a mystery, she discovers courage and resourcefulness that she didn't know she had.

Amee-nah: Zuni Boy Runs the Race of His Life (1995) Navigating life with a disability is a challenge for Amee-nah; his clubfoot makes it all but impossible for him to keep up with the other boys. But when he has the opportunity for a corrective operation, his dreams become much closer.

The Truth about Sacajawea (1998) The only book ever written that tells the eyewitness truth about this famous teenage Indian mother who was indispensable to the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Doe Sia: Bannock Girl and the Handcart Pioneers (1999) When two brave girls have the unforeseen chance to become friends, their bond is what keeps them alive through harrowing perils of the West. Their loyalty and teamwork ultimately translate into their survival.

Takini: Lakota Boy Alerts Sitting Bull (2003) A seven-year-old Lakota orphan plays an important role in the events leading up to the notorious Battle of the Little Big Horn. A plucky boy blessed with seemingly boundless good fortune makes it out of many tight spots, but will his luck run out?

Wonsit: Ute Girl Crossing Wild Wyoming (2018) In the aftermath of an unprovoked attack on her Ute tribe, Wonsit and her family again face the challenge of relocating to a far-off reservation. Accompanied by her faithful mule, Willow, Wonsit's adventure puts her resilience to the ultimate test.

My First Book: *Naya Nuki: Shoshoni Girl Who Ran*

My first book was about Naya Nuki. When Lewis and Clark got out there and met the Shoshone people on August 17, Lewis came back to Clark with the Shoshoni to trade for horses. Suddenly these two girls met each other, jumping up and down, laughing and crying. Sacajawea says to Lewis, "You found my people. This is my best friend. We were both captured when we were eleven years old. My friend escaped and made it home alone. I was scared. I didn't want to try. I thought we'd die, but she made it." I said to myself, that's a story that every child should know. She loved her people so much that she put her life on the line to get back to her mother, her brothers, and her sisters.

I said I'm going to write a book, and I'm going to put a kid in it so the kids can relate to them. Lewis and Clark wrote detailed daily journals of their whole trip. So, I knew where they were, what they did, and what they had to deal with. I put this kid in their shoes. I wanted a name for the kid and thought, what if I make this kid a girl? That'll amaze those kids even more that she's going to be able to do what she did. So I found out in Shoshoni that Naya meant girl and Nuki meant run. *Naya Nuki: The Shoshoni Girl Who Ran*.

I had the whole story about how she made her plans to escape. How she hid food away. How she worked really hard for that tribe, smiling all the time so they wouldn't suspect a

thing. How she stored up food and hid it under her pillow. And then she waited for the night, for the clouds, and for the rain to wash away her tracks. It was her night to run. She took off after everyone in that teepee was asleep. She snuck out of the door and headed for the place where she hid extra moccasins and food. Put those in the sack and tied her pack onto her back and started running. She ran all night long. And the next morning, daylight came, she hid. She hid in the bushes. She made it as comfortable as she could, and she slept. Started to get dark and she's up. And when it was dark, she's running again. Five nights she ran covering over 100 miles. She was unbelievable. She had to do that or they would find her for sure. Well, they came looking for her. No one could find her. She didn't use a fire or anything. She didn't leave any evidence. They couldn't find her. So that girl made it all the way back home.

The chief of the tribe called the people to a big ceremonial dinner. They got the dinner going, the fire lit, and the meat over the fire. All the people in the circle around it. They took the meat off the fire. Cut pieces off and everybody was enjoying the celebration. And then the chief said, now we're going to hear the story. And that's the way their history was done by storytelling. They couldn't write. They wanted to know every detail and she told them. They all sat there, wide-eyed. We're looking at an amazing Shoshoni girl, the girl who ran.

I had the story laid out because I knew all that land. I followed their descriptions. I would see an obstacle. I would see buffalo. I would see all the things she saw. She didn't have a gun or anything. But what she would do is, look and see where somebody hunted. There would be carcasses. And there would be some fairly decent meat on them yet. She would get those bones and chew on them. And eat all the meat from them. So that's where she got the food. And she traveled out of that Three Forks country. She got up to the Missouri River, and she went up that river day after day after day. And she found plenty of food. And she made it back to her people.

So, you wouldn't believe what happened to that book. When it came out, they called me and told me they had the books ready to go. I said, ship them overnight because I'm coming to Michigan. Every town we pass through, I will drop a book off at the bookstore and tell them this book will make you money. Well, they said, OK. We'll see when we can get it done. Well, they put it on the schedule, but they didn't get it done and we took off. So they sent the books to [Little Professor Books in Helena, Montana](#). Fortunately the books got there before I did. I got a full box of my books that I just bought retail. Can you believe that? In every town, I stopped at a school. I would autograph a book, tell them a little bit about it and leave one copy with a librarian. Oh, man, we went to a lot of schools. And everyone said this is just what we need. We don't have anything like this. This is full of geography and history and Indian lore.

My Second Book: *Soun Tetoken: Nez Perce Boy Tames a Stallion*

Well, the book went over real big. Good old Betty at the publishing company called me and said, "The Nuya Nuki book made us big money. Do you have another book to write?" I said

Betty, it is almost done. *Soun Tetoken: The Nez Perce Boy*. She said, “When will you have that done?” I said, “Well, as fast as I can. But I need to write it three times.”

Now this book was written with the help of the descendants of Chief Joseph. Here is Chief Joseph's grandson. There is his mother. Chief Joseph was one of the most honored chiefs among all the tribes. He was honest. He helped people. He was a born leader.

So in this book, the boy, Soun Tetoken, is captured and taken away. Going to be made a slave. As soon as they get him back to that midwestern country, he starts planning his escape. He hides food. He talks to the other Indian people. He tries to convince his captors that he's the most wonderful boy they could ever find.

When it comes time to escape, he knows what he needs. He needs a pitch dark night with pouring rain to wash out his tracks. When that night comes, he's sleeping in a teepee with warriors. So, he has to quietly slide out from under his blankets. Roll that hide up. Put it under his arm. Now, wait a minute. Lord, he didn't have to do that. He put that hide out by an old snag tree. He just got up and crawled out the door and ran and got that hide.

And now, at the beginning of night, it's pitch dark, and he knows what he has to do. Run all night long. Get as far away as he can. And when morning comes, keep on running. Run for five days and five nights, stopping only to sleep a few hours now and then. Well, he finally got where he could walk in the daylight. And he has a lot of adventures. He sees a huge buffalo herd. Maybe 1000 animals. He sees grizzly bears and mountain lions. He has to be careful. He doesn't have a weapon. Wait a minute. He does. He hid that spear out there before he left. So, the boy makes his way home.

He runs into trouble in the mountains. It's October. He's in the mountains in western Montana and the snow comes. Deeper and deeper. And when he trudges through that snow almost waist deep, he gets soaking wet and he's shivering. Now he's going to die of hypothermia at night if he goes to sleep. When you have hypothermia, you die. You never wake up. In this way the kids learned the lesson of hypothermia. So, I have him go on as long as he can. Stopping for only a short rest.

When he gets back to his people, he comes down into the [Lemhi Valley](#). On his way down he meets some of his tribe. They're digging roots and picking berries. A woman and three kids. One kid saw them coming and took off running. The other three are the woman and her two kids. They knew they couldn't get away, so they stayed there. And the mother put her head down so he could chop it off with his axe. That's what she has to do. He took her by the arm. He stood her up and said in her language, I am your friend. She was unbelievably surprised. He said you need to take me down and show me how to get to that big valley. I have to get into the big valley and go up that valley and then over the mountain to find my people. She said I can do it.

Well, she took him down. And there was the chief of the Nez Perce who listened to the kid's story. He believed every word the boy said. The chief assigned some men to help him make his way. He gave him food. He gave him some tools like I think a spear, probably a knife. And he wished them well.

So they take him up over and into the Bitterroot Valley. Then 80 more miles up the valley toward Missoula. There they take the Lost Creek Trail to the west. When they reached a mountain pass, the natives showed him the path that was made by all the travelers. They just told him follow that trail. You'll find the Nez Perce. They will help you. So that's what he did. When he came to the Nez Perce he got his spear ready. But to tell them that he was a peaceful man, he took his shirt off. If you're the enemy, use your spear to stab me. When they do that, they know the guy is not an enemy. So down he went. They heard his story, and they accepted him, and they gave him food and water. They gave him hides to sleep in at night. So he was all set to go on the rest of the week to the ocean.

So, he's got to go up over another pass to get to the ocean. Which he did with help. He got down to the ocean. And it was roaring. Huge waves coming in and he just stood there. He could not believe what he was looking at. Water, as far as you could see. Roaring waves. The Pacific Ocean. Well, down they went to the ocean. And those Indians said, well, we're going back. You will find Indian people down south of here, who will help you get to Tillamook. So they left.

Next day he went down to the beach and came to this high hill that he had to climb. Where at the top you could see from miles. Down he went because he saw signs of Indians. And when he got there and they saw him they got their rifles ready. As soon as he saw that, he took his shirt off and they walked toward them. They knew he was coming in peace. They heard his story and they said you are a brave man. You love your people and we're going to help you.

So, they gave him everything he needed, food. They gave him some more clothes. His moccasins mostly were more worn out, gave him moccasins. And they gave him three guides to take him back up to the ocean. And they said the Indian people up north will be coming down to migrate south for the winter. They'll help you. They come in big canoes. They go around the [Tillamook](#).

Story goes that they came down and saw him. They had him climb in a canoe. And down they went. Now he's got to get out to the ocean. They're not quite there yet. So he goes down to the beach every day and sure enough, here comes his big longboat. These huge canoes. They're about 40 to 50 feet long. They see him and jump out and come over. When they hear a story, they said oh, you are the bravest of the brave. Get in our canoe, we're going to help you. So into the canoe they went. Now, they said, we're going to take you out to an island. It's an island that is visited by our people on the way to go fishing. And when the boat comes, they'll help you.

So that's what they did. And the story goes, he was helped by his own people. It's an amazing coincidence. The boy who gets back to his people. And they have a big dinner. They roast up some meat. There is a deer roasting over an open fire. They strip off steaming hot pieces of meat. And they all enjoy a feast. And at the end of the eating, they say now it's time for you to tell your story. People want to know how did you get here? Where did you come from? Who are you?

So, he told the whole story. And you know, the whole thing that fell together that way. You just shake your head at the history made by these people. How they helped our country find the Pacific Ocean where we would set up towns and cities. It is amazing what that young Indian boy did for us.

So right away he goes back. He's got to get to his people and tell them he found the way. And they all come over. Some 30 or 40 of them to the ocean. And there, if you've ever seen that ocean, you'll see huge dead trees logs. Some of them have rotted out. So they get some of those logs and clean them out. And make their canoes.

And out they go on to the ocean. And there's a little island out there. They head for that island. Pull up on the island. And the chief said this is where we wait. People will be coming up the ocean right away. And we will get somebody to help us.

So, the story goes that the help came. And the men were surprised. And the men helped them. And now they got to stay the winter. They got to get out of their clothes and stab some salmon. They eat fish, berries, and roots. And huddle up. And their shelters, made of elk and deer and moose hides. What a winter it was. When spring came, they waited on the shore for any sign of anyone coming.

The help came and believe it or not, one of the first canoes had the Chief of the Nez Perce and Camille who said to his people these are the best of our tribe. All of you do what you can to help them. Give them food, give them clothes. Make moccasins for him. These are our people. And we need to help them. They need our help so well on that they help them and now. They're going to stay on the ocean. So they are there all winter long. And in the spring they head back.

That story is so amazing because when they headed back they came to the place where they were going to go east. Right away they met some of their people. They were running out of food and they gave him more. And all along the way, they had help. And made it back home.

The development will begin. The information is all they need. How far each thing is. How to find food? How to make a canoe? We know it all now. We can do it. And visit it. And settled and settled along the coast of the Pacific Ocean.

The kids at Kelly School wrote about each chapter. They made compliments all the way along. They said, "Can't you read 2 chapters a day? We need to know what happened." I said, "No."

So, I drive out to Kelly School. They'd all get in the classroom and I would read a chapter. When I finished, sixty kids rose to their feet and began to clap. I knew I had a winner. Kids don't do that. So I told Betty Davis about it and she said, well, we're going to get after it and publish it. The men are doubtful. And I said, "Well. You're not going to lose any money because I'll pay for everything."

“Naya Nuki, as they wandered about, has made enough money for me to do this book. And they won't make any money. I'll make it.” She said, “Oh, don't do that. They will want to do it. I'll tell them they have to. So, they agreed to publish it.”

Well now we're going to publish the Soun Tetoken book. And it's going to come out. And I'm going to do more visits to schools. So when the book came out, I think they were like some 70 in a case. I came out to the publisher and bought my own books. Put them in my truck and started back to Michigan. I had it right after the ink was dry. Every community I came to, I went to the bookstore and handed him a free copy. And I said this book is going to make money for you. I guarantee it. If it doesn't, I will give you money. Well, the bookstores were a little edgy about it. I said if you want to read it and then let me know, fine. So. I went away.

First bookstore called and said this is exactly what we need. A historic fiction book written at the grade level of 11-year-olds. Accurate in history. Excellent vocabulary. Very readable moves along. We're going to sell it. Well, I have all those books in my truck.

And every bookstore I stopped at would buy a case. I sold a bunch of books for Baker Book House.

Now, I said at every place I stopped, take this piece of paper. If you contact me you'll get the books for a better discount. That rang a bell in their ears. I came home and Bobbi says you got some work to do. I said what? She said here's this stack of paper. These are all orders for books. So I was in the book business.

And man, I got the telephone call, Betty said, “There was more demand for Soun Tetoken than Naya Nuki. Children love what that boy did.” The next thing they said is, “When will book three be ready?” I'm already working on it.

My Third Book: *Om-Kas-Toe: Blackfeet Twin Captures an Elkdog*

Betty, you won't believe what happened to the Blackfeet. They were a tribe on the Prairie and when the United States military came, they were attacked. They had to fight for their lives. They couldn't win. So they headed north to Canada. They got to the border and they knew they were in a safe land. The mother of the Canadian people, that's the queen, will let them stay. But they said now they are broken hearted. Their land where they lived and hunted and danced and told stories is gone.

I said that's going to change. That will change because I met some of the Blackfeet people. I even went out and had some meetings with them and talks about what to do. And I said what we need to do is contact the white people and tell them we don't want to cause any trouble. But if you come and attack us, we will fight to the last man and your army will die. Don't let that happen. Well, they listen. And the chiefs got together. And the chiefs started talking. One of the Chiefs said, “Well, men, these are our people. They are good people. Let's not kill him. Let's let them live in our land.” So, they were told they could come back. There was dancing and singing and cooking of meat. Oh, what a celebration.

In the United States has anybody ever read this story? Has anybody ever know it? If not, they should. So, I said I'm going to write a story.

I came out here to talk to some of the newspapers. And they said you need to talk to Mary Brown. "Mary Brown," I said, "Who's that?" Mary Brown was one of the Indian women who was put up in Canada. Mary Brown has a mother who was a grandmother. And there was another woman who was the mother of Mary Brown. I said you mean she was a great grandmother? It was. He said you need to talk to her mother. She was a girl when that happened. She could tell me what the weather was like and everything. When you talk about having accurate research. Oh man. Thank you, Mary Brown.

Yeah. Now they want another book. Number 3. Om-Kas-Toe, Blackfeet twin captures an elkdog. About the Blackfeet and the coming of the horse to the North American plain.

Om-Kas-Toe was a boy. The boys of the tribe became hunters as soon as they were old enough. And they had to be able to ride a horse, jump on, jump off. They only had bows and arrows. When the rifle came it would be a lot easier, but they didn't have a rifle. The boys started to ride horses and use a spear to get these animals.

Well, the Om-Kas-Toe book was even more successful. It won the Wyoming Children's Book Award for the whole state.

My Fourth Book: *Kunu, Escape on the Missouri*

Now we get to book 4. What's that going to be? Kunu, escape on the Missouri.

I always went back to Michigan every summer and I stopped all along the way at a bookstore in every town and show them my books. And then they would call Baker Bookhouse and order them. Well, I stopped in this one bookstore and this woman said, "Oh, the great spirit sent you. I am Native American. And I know when a message comes. The great spirit sent you. There is no book about our people. And the spirit sends you to write that book." I sat there thinking this is unbelievable.

I said, "OK, what I'll do when I get back from Michigan to Wyoming. I will go to the library and research the next book, which will be your book."

Old Costolo lived before there were horses on the North American plains. And the people had to go out with their bows and arrows and hide in the bushes. Some go out and chase the horses toward the people hiding with the bows and arrows. And if they got close enough, they could put an arrow into that body and drop that animal and run up and finish them off with spears. And then take the hide off and cut beautiful strips of meat. And that night have a fire roasting. The meat smells so good and they lived it up. But they would have to cut all of meat off or it would spoil. So, they learned how to put it on sticks. Bend the sticks over the smoke of the fire. Put green grass in the fire to make smoke. Then they would have smoked elk or deer. So that's the way they learned how to take care of their meat.

Well, Kuno was unique because he's from Minnesota. He lived with his people on the Mississippi River. They built canoes out of trees. Huge trees. And then they would fish. And they could spear a lot of fish. Even salmon, when they ran.

So anyway Kuno, he's living there on the river and up come canoes with the United States Army to tell the people to get out of here. This is the United States. You are on our land. One of the Indian people said, "Wait a minute. We have been here for hundreds of years. All of a sudden now the land we're on is yours? We're going to stay here." The soldier said, "You're going to be sorry. A lot of you are going to die. We're coming after you. We have hundreds of soldiers with automatic rifles. We'll mow you down."

Well, the Indian people have a meeting. And they all sat in the circle. Near the end of the meeting one of the Indian people stands up. His name was Joseph. And he looks at his people and he says I don't want my pupils to die. We need to leave this place. We can go up to Canada. Where we will have friends. We can settle down up there and live a wonderful life with nobody killing us. There were some tough Indian people, and they looked at him, and they said, "You're a coward. You're afraid to stand up to the enemy. We're not going to do it." Well, they had to take a vote. The Indian people sat there talking. Finally, the circle got back together. We have decided to leave. We're going to leave and go up into the Mother Country Canada and go West. Oh man, was that Indian mad. He stood up and he said, "Well, you're going to go without me. And you're going to die. And I'll be the only one left."

Young people packed up and moved up into Canada. When they got to the border, Chief Whitebird stops and he said, "Here I say goodbye to all of you people. How we're gonna die. Boy, there was a lot of talk and they knew he meant business. You know, we have a lot of wisdom. Our Chiefs have all the wisdom. You know, people said well, we'll go back. And they went back, and the attack came. And it was horrible. They were running and shooting from behind sagebrush. They were down in ravines. They were everywhere. This was a terrible battle. The battle of the people of Chief Joseph. Finally, when the battle ended the Indian people were defeated. So Chief Joseph says, "We'll go back to our homeland." So they went up to Canada.

And all of them with their heads down go to the counter and they started West. They follow that Great Missouri River toward Montana. They get to Montana. They cross the border and they go on to a river coming up from the South. They see that river and they say there's good water. There's good hunting. That's good berries and roots. Let's go down this river. Down the river they went. They were going along very nicely. But then they made some trouble.

Indian people came and said, "What are you doing here? I said, "We're going to our homeland." And they said, "This is our land. Go back."

I am not going to have anything of it. Story goes that the Nez Perce did not go back. They stayed there. Set up their teepees. Did some hunting. And we're sort of like prisoners.

Well, along comes a wonderful Indian man, Chief of the Nez Perce named Joseph. Chief Joseph. And Joseph said to these Indian people, "We will take you back. I will lead you

back. And we can fight to the bitter end.” Well, there were big meetings and a lot of talk. And the decision was made. We're going back. While they were in for it, they got up and they headed up that river. Coming out of Montana they met trouble. There were Indian people coming to hunt. Blackfeet. Well, those Blackfeet people saw these Indians coming. Came up with a white flag and said, “What are you doing here?” They told him we're coming home. He said, “No. You can't come. We don't even have enough food for our own people. We're going to starve everybody. Go back home.”

Finally, one of the Indians who was the leader stood up and he said, “We will stop here. We will build teepees. We will hunt. And when we get enough meat and food to last us a long time. We're going across the border.” So they stayed there, probably 40 years.

And then the day came. Pack up. We're going home. You couldn't believe the horrible fight it was. Indian people dropping everywhere. But one of the Indian people was very wise. He was Chief Joseph. And Joseph said to everybody, “Stop. Let's have a meeting.” And there they all sat on the ground talking. And Joseph said, “Let's all go home. We can make it. There's plenty of food for everybody. We have a lot of good hunters. And your people have rifles. I think we can do it.” They listened to Chief Joseph. And everybody was dancing and singing. We're going home.

You can imagine how hearts were beating as their people cross the border into that land. Which they did. And nobody shot at them. And they made it onto the reservation and spread out along the river. It has ice cold, fresh water. They had some deer hunting. They had some berries and roots. Now they're home. A great dance was held. Celebrating homecoming. The Nez Perce, led by the vulnerable Chief Joseph. The one who loved his people and helped them get back home.

And this first story is an amazing story. Yes, so many ups and downs. And kids get the idea that if you stick to your guns, you'll win. If you give up, you lose. It's that simple. Kids used to hear me say that about going to school.

Naya Nuki Peak

Numerous mountain peaks in Lewis and Clark country have been named after Sacajawea or Sacagawea including [Sacajawea Peak in Idaho](#) (11,936 ft), [Sacajawea Peaks in Idaho](#) (10,160, 10,390, and 10,365), [Sacajawea Peak in Oregon](#) (9,843), and [Sacagawea Peak in Montana](#) (9,654). In Montana, the peak next to Sacajawea has been named Naya Nuki Peak as explained in this story in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle:

[‘Naya Nuki’ author to climb her namesake peak](#)

By DANIEL PERSON Chronicle Staff Writer, Aug 16, 2008

Come Monday afternoon, people climbing Naya Nuki peak in the Bridger Mountains should have some reading material waiting for them, courteous of a 77-year-old man who, in a roundabout way, is responsible for the mountain's name.

On Monday morning, Kenneth Th omasma, author of “Naya Nuki: Shoshoni Girl Who Ran,” plans to summit the 9,449-foot peak with about a half dozen signed copies of his book, published in 1983. Th omasma will leave the volumes in plastic bags for anyone who wants one.

The book tells the story of Naya Nuki, an 11-year-old Shoshoni who was kidnapped by Mandans in the same raid as her friend, Sacagawea. Sacagawea remained in captivity, eventually entering American history as Lewis and Clark's guide across Montana. Naya Nuki was not so patient and escaped captivity to travel from present day North Dakota to southwest Montana alone.

Naya Nuki does make a brief appearance in annals of American history; Meriwether Lewis describes her embrace with Sacagawea when the two were reunited.

When Th omasma published the 175-page children's book, no peak was named for Naya Nuki. That was still the case five years later when Bozeman youngster Kristin Anderson, as related by syndicated columnist Paul Harvey, checked the book out at the public library and read it again and again.

Considering it unfair that Sacagawea has a peak named after her, but Naya Nuki does not, Anderson embarked on a crusade to have the U.S. Board of Geographic Names dub the slightly lower peak beside Sacagawea named for the “Shoshoni Girl Who Ran.”

She succeeded, and Monday marks the 20th anniversary of a ceremony dedicating the peak to Naya Nuki, an anniversary that Th omasma said he could not let pass without doing something to commemorate it. He expects the climb - with family and whoever else comes - to be a slow one, he said. He has had a hip replaced since he first scaled near the summit for the dedication ceremony.

Th omasma said of the two Shoshoni women, Naya Nuki in many ways is the more fascinating story.

“The other little girl (Naya Nuki) decides that 1,000 miles isn't going to stop her from having freedom,” Th omasma said Saturday. “She crossed all these rivers, found her own food, put her life on the line for freedom. To die for freedom is a powerful American story.”

“People admire a spunky little girl who says: Forget it, I don't want to be a slave. I'll die instead.”

Sacajawea Dollar

In 1998, Ken published *The Truth About Sacajawea*. In 1999, he sent this nonfiction book to the U.S. Mint along with a nomination for the Lemhi Shoshone teen who served as a guide for the 1804 Lewis and Clark Expedition to be the face of a new dollar coin. He worked with Wyoming Senator Mike Enzi, who was on the Banking Committee. He later went to

the White House to champion his nominee and eventually succeeded. This story from the Jackson Hole Guide printed on July 29th, 1998, quotes him extensively:

Thomasma speaks for Sacajawea by Curtis Hubbard

Jackson Hole author Ken Thomasma is leading a campaign to honor the Shoshone girl who served as a guide on the Lewis and Clark expedition by featuring her image on a new \$1 coin.

In June, a committee appointed by U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin voted 6-1 to recommend that the new dollar coin include the “image of liberty, represented by a Native American woman, inspired by Sacajawea and other Native American women.”

Rubin is expected to make a final decision on who will appear on the coin in August.

Until then, Thomasma is spearheading a letter writing and public relations drive to help Rubin find his way toward the young guide.



“Sacajawea was kind of a unique teenager, to say the least,” said Thomasma. “She is a role model for teenage girls, for those who suffer abuse and for those who need to find inner strength to overcome adversity.”

Thomasma said Sacajawea “Was owned by a man twice her age who beat her. Yet she rose above all that adversity and performed very well... And she received not a cent for work on the expedition. It all went to her husband, who probably squandered it.”

Thomasma pointed out that the young Indian was described by Lewis and Clark as essential to the success of their expedition in reaching the Pacific Ocean.

Sacajawea is a major figure in our history. The time has come that we should honor her and what she represents,” He said. “This coin would be a fantastic way to do that.”

Thomasma wrote a series of seven children’s book entitled “Amazing Indian Children” and a non-fiction novel “Truth About Sacajawea.”

Thomasma's interest in Sacajawea and his eventual move to Jackson Hole, sprung from reading the journals of Lewis and Clark while working at a Montana summer camp in the late 1950's.

"We kept returning (home) to Michigan at the end of each summer, and I thought, 'If I'm ever going to write this book (about Sacajawea) I need to move West'."

More than 25 years later, Thomasma has become a leading authority on the Shoshone people and takes seriously what he views as attempts by "the Eastern elite to discredit the Indian people" by choosing a different image for the dollar coin.

One such attack, Thomasma said, was a July 24 article in the *Wall Street Journal* questioning the panel's recommendation of the "obscure" Shoshone.

"Anyone who says she's obscure hasn't been out West," Thomasma added, noting that mountains, monuments, schools and other buildings were named after the young woman.

"This is the way we've treated Indian people since we came in contact with them. Our legacy in dealing with them is atrocious and now, to have somebody from the almighty New York elite taking pot shots at her (in the *Journal*) ... I just saw red when I saw that article," Thomasma added. "It's another case of the majority culture kicking around the Indian people and not giving them credit for anything."

This article by Daryl Gadbow in the [Missoulian](#) on March 10, 1999 explains much of what Ken did:

Man who fought for Sacajawea coin comes to Missoula

Students at Missoula's Mount Jumbo and Paxson schools were treated to stories about Sacajawea Monday and Tuesday from the author who led the campaign to make her the image on a new dollar coin that will be jingling in our pockets in January 2000.

Dressed in beaded buckskins and moccasins, Ken Thomasma brought the 16-year-old Shoshone girl to life for the students, with tales of her adventures with the Lewis and Clark expedition. Thomasma, of Jackson, Wyoming, is the author of the book "*The Truth About Sacajawea*," based on the explorers' journals.

As he has done in previous visits to western Montana schools, Thomasma also conducted writing workshops for the students, and continued his stories in the evenings for their parents.

Thomasma clearly is excited about the new Sacajawea dollar coin, which will be unveiled in Washington, D.C., in April, at a ceremony scheduled at the White House.

"The amazing thing that people should realize is how unique this coin is," said Thomasma. "It's the only coin in the world to have a child on it. Her baby is on it. It's the only (U.S.) coin with a person looking at you."

“We've had the Indian head penny and the Indian head nickel, but this is the only Native American coin to have a real identity. She's up there with kings and queens, and emperors and presidents. That's not too bad for a 16-year-old girl.”

And, Thomasma added, this is the first coin that was designed in cyberspace.

“Over 90,000 people logged onto the U.S. Mint's Web site, and overwhelmingly chose the design with the baby on it,” he said.

The design, featuring Sacajawea looking over her shoulder while her infant son sleeps on her back, was one of six finalists for the gold-colored coin.

“You should have seen the comments on the Internet,” said Thomasma. “There was some heartwarming stuff about the coin from little kids, and women, and all kinds of people. They were saying ‘This is the most fabulous coin ever minted’.”

Thomasma orchestrated the letter-writing campaign that helped influence the decision of Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin to select Sacajawea as the image for the new coin. In doing so, Thomasma and his supporters had to overcome opposition from some government officials who wanted the Statue of Liberty to be the image on the coin.

“We generated between 500 and 1,000 letters to Secretary Rubin,” Thomasma said. “We said this would be a great honor for her and would send a wonderful message to America.” Seven months later, a citizens' committee voted to put her on the coin and voted down the Statue of Liberty.

“They said you have real men on coins. We want a real woman. And who could be more real than a teen-age mother, who was kidnapped from her home, and still performed in an indispensable way. We need to honor that kind of fortitude and resolution.”

Thomasma plans to lead a contingent of 30 to 40 Shoshone Indians, from the Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho and the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, to attend the unveiling ceremony of the coin at the White House.

“We're going to have dancers and drummers perform on the south lawn of the White House,” he said. “I picked some young girls about Sacajawea's age. One's 21, with a 7-month-old boy. I talked to the White House liaison and said they can have wonderful speakers about the coin, but at the end of the formal program we'd like to have the three young Shoshone girls come up and say thank you and do a dance of thanksgiving to America.”

Thomasma said he negotiated with the Shoshone Tribes behind the scenes to iron out a couple of controversies that arose over the design of the coin. In the end, he said, the coin honors all Indian people.

He plans to keep promoting the new coin after it comes out, Thomasma said, to ensure its success.

“I hope to get Missoula to lead the way and be a Sacajawea coin city,” he said. “She came right through here two times. We'd make a sign by the cash registers that say Sacajawea coins will be given in change if requested. That'll prove we don't need the Statue of Liberty to be successful.”

Thomasma's next book, *DoeSia: Bannock Girl and the Handcart Pioneers*, a historical work of fiction for children, will be released Aug. 1, he said.

More information about the Sacajawea dollar from the [US Mint](#) and [Wikipedia](#).

How Sacajawea helped Lewis and Clark reach the Pacific Ocean

[This is one way that Ken would tell kids what it was like for Lewis and Clark to travel from the southern Bitterroot Valley to the Pacific Ocean story.]

Lewis and Clark said they met Sacajawea when they were on their expedition to the Pacific Ocean. They met her in a place we now call Montana. They were out there trying to get to the Pacific Ocean, and they came to the mountains. No way to get over those mountains without horses. So Clark took a couple of men and left that river where the Three Rivers came together and hiked up over the mountains. They came into this beautiful valley and there they were, Shoshoni Indian people with hundreds of horses. He gave the chief some mirrors and ribbon flag uniforms and said come back over the mountain with me. We want to trade you for some horses. We'll give you many wonderful things like the things I've given you. Well, it did happen. They went over. And uh, they got afraid because when they came out and started down from the river there weren't any explorers there. You know, Clark hadn't got that far up. So the Indians are going to take off and head home. Clark said, “Here's my rifle. If they're not down the river. You can shoot me.” Will that convince them? So, an Indian and an explorer went down the river. Only about 3 miles down. There's Clark. He brought him back up and there was singing and dancing. The meeting began. And they were finally able to get some horses. And the Indian people said, “We'll give you a couple of guides to take you over the mountains. And we'll give you some guides to take you out to the ocean.” That's the way they made it. They went over the mountains. Down in the valley, there were all the Shoshone. They had a couple of guides. One was called old Toby. He knew his way around. He led them out to the ocean.

Well, they didn't get there right away. And the Indians began to think it was a trap. They were going to leave. And that's when Clark gave them his gun. But they made it to the ocean. They talked the Indian people into coming back. They had to get horses and pack everything up. They had to get over the mountains and then down the river, out to the Pacific Ocean. Out there, it rained every day. Every day. They said their clothes were rotting on their backs because of the rain. But the rain finally stopped. Their soaking wet clothes dried out.

Yeah, they came to the Columbia River. And it was a huge river. And of course the natives said this is the right river. Because Clark began to wonder. Where are we going? Yeah, they made it and now they have to figure out what to do. Do they go down the river? If they do, how did they go down? Along the bank on horses? In boats? The Indian people said. We

know where there are people with horses and boats. But you got to climb this ridge, 1500 feet to the top, and then cross that ridge and drop down to the ocean.

Where there's a place called Tillamook. Tillamook is where you'll find Indian people, with horses. [Tillamook is west of Portland on the coast.] That was a rugged trip. Tough going up. Tough coming down, horses slipping and sliding and falling. But they finally made it. And now they go down the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean. When they get down there, there's this huge estuary. It's like a giant lake. And the Indian people said, "we go this way and we get to the ocean." We get there. We set up our camp. We get fish. We get berries and roots. So that's the way they made it to the ocean. And then they have to, of course, head back to tell Lewis what they found. Then they all have to pack up eventually and head for the ocean.

Lewis and Clark Getting to the Pacific Ocean

[This is another way that Ken would tell kids what it was like for Lewis and Clark to travel from the southern Bitterroot Valley to the Pacific Ocean. He spoke in the first person as if he were Lewis.]

So, I have to go up those 90 miles. I get up there. And there is a sign that says. Let's see. What did it say exactly? I think the name said some kind of name about over another pass. And I said, well, I can go over another pass, but. Where is it? And it had a sign that pointed up the valley. So, I went up the valley. And I climbed and I climbed, and I climbed for miles. And finally, I came to the top. And there was a sign. The valley was seven miles below. Seven miles down into a valley. And there I would find a trail along a river. And that trail would lead me to the ocean. So, I went up that trail. I got to the top. And I looked at it and it is rough. Trees falling all over the place. I had to go around all kinds of trees. It was miserable. And I finally made it down off the ridge. Into the valley. And there in the valley I saw the trails.

And that trail looked like it went on forever. So, following that trail I finally came to a wonderful surprise. Natives with horses. And I talked to them. And I had some trinkets to give. I had some wonderful things for them. One thing they liked was ribbon. And I have red, white and blue ribbon. So I told them that I needed their help. I needed some horses. I needed a guide. And if they help me, I would have many more gifts for them. I told him the great White father back in the land beyond this valley has a lot of wonderful things for you. Good food. Medicine for sick people. All kinds of good things. They said OK, we'll help you. And they led me down that river. And we came to a village. And there was a huge village. Teepees everywhere. And they invited me into a teepee where they had good things to eat. And they said, "We have a couple of men here who will take you the rest of the way out of this valley. Out to the ocean." I said, "Wonderful. We'll give them some treats."

They led us out to the Pacific Ocean. When we came out to the ocean, I could not believe what I was looking at. There's this huge delta. Water all over the place. Spread out. Here I am wading through this water. Wading out to the point where I could see the ocean coming up onto the shore. And I said, well, I gotta go take a look. I gotta go down the beach and see

if we can get all of our people down here. Because we're gonna have horses and wagons. And everything. It's going to be a big challenge. So they said, OK.

We got a couple of our best people, they'll take you. And boy, was it rough. We went through swamps. There were snakes. There were suckers. I pull blood suckers off. Throw them away. It was miserable. Well, we finally came to good water. And went on down and there it was. A beautiful bay and harbor. That's what I wanted to find. So I said well, I got to go back and get everybody. Thank you for showing me the way. So, as the long story goes, I went back. Rounded up everybody, we went along the swamp. Way out to the beach. And there we are. Ready to follow the beach.

Well, my friend said you've been away from here a while. Store up some food. Get organized because where you're going, you could starve to death. I said, well, I won't go with everybody at first. I'll take a couple of men and go and take a look, which I did. And you could see it was passable. So off we went. Now the problem is. How do we find the river to the ocean? We're on. We're on the harbor. We're going to find that river. And the guy was one of the men said the rivers over there, you just have to get yourself the boats. And get across this harbor and you'll find the river. It's there. Well, we got some boats. We got some men who knew how to run those boats. I said OK, man, go. We got enough food and everything ready to go. We're going to make it a try. So, we started out. And we went across that inlet. Walking in the mud up to our knees. Finally, we came to some solid ground and walked right out of the mud and up onto the beach. I said, man, we made it.

Ooh boy. Look over there. There's the inlet. We hit it right on. They said you sure did. How lucky can you be? So we stayed there for a while and I said. We're going to organize and get going. Down that river, up that river. So before long we were on our way. And it was a battle. Going upstream. Fighting occurred. It had to be 6 -7 miles lower. We went up that river. Came up on a high plane. And look what we could see. What we were looking at. The ocean. We're going to make it to the Pacific Ocean. Out to the Pacific Ocean. We went. And I remember my men walking out on the beach. And putting their toes into the Pacific Ocean. And hollering as loud as they could. We made it to the ocean. Ooh, what a day that was. Only tells me we have a way to go. It's going to be a battle here on against the current. Well, we got everything over lined up, ready to go. Stored up a little food. And up that river we went. It was tough because we were in mud almost up to our knees. Finally, we came out of that and made good time. Well, when I was at the ocean, I said to my friends, "Now, what do we do? Here's the ocean. We can't go across the ocean." They told me that if I go South on the beach there is a place that we can climb up and go over to a beautiful, beautiful ocean bay. And there will be all kinds of fish. Stuff to eat. Let's do it. So off we went. We came to a cliff that was straight up. Straight up. What are we going to do now?

My guy says we're going up it. We're going over it. Otherwise, we lose. I said men, we can do it. You could not believe the battle. Foot by foot. We would stop and drive one of our ice axes into the side of the hill. Tie load on and rest. Pull the ice axe out and upward. Go. Another 10 feet. Took us hours to get to the top. And there we stood on top of that Ridge. With the Pacific Ocean as far as you can see. Now down we go off of that Ridge. We came

down. To a place where the ridge kind of leveled off and the slope was easier. And we went south along the river and came to this beautiful meadow. And there were people living there. There was a place where people had built homes. It was really a surprise.

And they gave us some food and took care of us. And I said to the men, “Well we got to get up over that Cliff and onto the ocean. And that's going to be hard. Let's get everybody up here and we'll start the work. Well, it did take us a long time to get up that Cliff. Foot by foot. Digging in and holding on. And when we get to the top, the reward is a trail leading down to the riverbank and the ocean.

Well, we may have the ocean. But now we have to get everybody over. We have to go back and get everyone up that cliff. I think we were there a week getting everybody up over that Cliff. And on to the ledge up above before we could start out to the ocean. But we did it. We got out to the ocean. The men were so happy. There were fish. There are crabs to catch. Fried crabs. That's good. All kinds of good things to eat. The battle was won. It's back to civilization. And let everybody know. They can pack up and we'll lead them to paradise. We'll lead them to all kinds of seafood. It's going to be glorious. Yeah, the job took a month. A month of hard work and labor. But we all ended up on the ocean. Living the good life. Roasting on an open fire. Smells good. Eating was good. We made it. So that's the story of me getting to the ocean.

Obituary Jackson Hole News & Guide, 12/6/2023

Thomasma, 93, was family man, educator

Kenneth Ray Thomasma, of Jackson, died Nov. 14 with the love of his life at his side. He was 93. The following was provided by his family.

Ken was born on Sept. 2, 1930, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to Peter and Freda Thomasma. He lived a life of great beauty, wisdom and joy, holding a special place in his heart for education and, above all, a generous and encompassing love of family and friends.

Known for his dedication and hard work, Ken began working in childhood with his father picking tomatoes and developed a love of the vegetable that followed him through life. He graduated from high school in 1948, attending Grand Rapids Junior College for two years before serving in the Navy for two years. Upon discharge from the Navy, Ken enrolled at Calvin College.

He accompanied a friend one evening to Reed Lake Roller Rink, where he met the love of his life, Bobbi. The first night they met Ken asked if he could call her, and the two have been inseparable ever since.

The greatest adventure of their life began Dec. 26, 1956, with the birth of their son, Dan. As a family they visited Europe, and Ken and Dan climbed Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn. Stateside they climbed every mountain they could find, including every peak in the Tetons. This love of the outdoors met with Ken's love of education as the whole family traveled

west each summer to Lost Trail Camp, where Ken and Bobbi were co-directors with Harold and Jean Smart.

In the 1970s they made the move west permanent, settling in Jackson, and Ken took pride in building their home with Dan and his father-in-law. Ken took a job as an educator and worked hard to ensure every child had opportunities to thrive, even building an ice skating rink for Kelly School that he continued each winter with his son.

In 1983, Ken found a new way to share his knowledge with the world through the publishing of “Naya Nuki,” the first of 12 books he wrote. Ken loved to travel to schools and museums, sharing his love of reading and knowledge of Sacajawea well into his 80s. While this is the love that he is most well-known for, Ken’s true joy throughout life was found with family.

From the minute they were born, Ken’s grandchildren, Melissa and Oliver, were doted on by Ken. He took great joy in spending days on the river and lake with his whole family, and was even more overjoyed when his two great-grandchildren were born.

He and Bobbi spent 68 wonderful years together hosting family and friends in their home, going on adventures and living life together until the very last moment.

Ken was preceded in death by his son, Dan Thomasma, of Jackson. He is survived by his beloved wife, Bobbi, of Jackson; brother Roger Thomasma and his wife, Sandy, of Michigan; daughter-in-law Cathy Poindexter, of Jackson; grandchildren Melissa Thomasma, of Victor, Idaho, and Oliver Thomasma, of Cody; and his two great-grandchildren, Hazel and Arlen.

Services will be held at 11 a.m. Saturday at the Presbyterian Church of Jackson Hole, with a reception to follow in the fellowship hall, where family and friends are encouraged to join. Members of the family would like to thank all their family and friends for the support they have received, and the staff at St. John’s Health for their exceptional care.



In addition to being an educator, Ken Thomasma wrote 12 books.