

Yes, after 50 years as Secretary Treasurer for Municipalities of Arthur and Melita, I'm retiring. Thank you Mayor Lamont for this dinner. Emma and I are honoured. You suggested I "entertain" these folks with stories of my early years. Before dinner, I'll recall misadventures that resulted in losing a good friend. After dinner, so as not to ruin appetites, I'll tell about losing my arm.

In 1879, a lad of 18, I arrived in Sourisford. My parents had passed, so I left Ontario for adventure. My first shelter wasn't much – a covered cave in the side of the river - finished just as winter struck with Christmas-time fury. In early March, my dog "Buddy" and "Bucko" my pony and I headed to Winnipeg to replenish provisions. Spring had come early, so traveling was easy. I had 4 day's food and a good sense of direction. Trouble is, winter wasn't done with us.

Remember, no rail lines, bridges, villages or farmers to rely on. Weather forecasts were provided by the horizon - and whatever we felt in our bones. By the time we got to Plum Creek, where Souris is now, we were in a major storm. I built a shelter with branches and a blanket and fortunately - the storm calmed by morning. Unfortunately, I awoke - snow blind! Couldn't see a thing. What to do? Well, nothing. Bucko was used to scrabbling for food, so Buddy and I settled in to wait it out.

Misfortune, though, tightened its grip. As I slept, Buddy found our food stash. Ate everything. Even the tea. Things were getting serious fast. After three days, my eyes cleared. But desperate now, I headed north where I knew I'd find help. The snow, though, was too deep for Bucko. And the nights were getting colder. I dared not sleep in the open! I decided to return to Plum Creek - to our old shelter. I found wood and fashioned a rack to dry my mitts. Then, exhausted, fell asleep. Buddy – cozing up to the fire, jostled the rack and I awoke in horror seeing my charred mitts. What now?



Walter & Buddy

I'm not sure you'd agree. The option I landed on was to go on without Buddy. I portioned his meat and fashioned some mittens from his hide - and said a prayer - before Bucko and I went on home - humbled but still determined. The curious part of the story, though, was that a skunk, dazed from hibernation, crossed right in front of us. I threw my hatchet with my remaining strength. Killed it on the spot! Suddenly I was feasting on good fortune - and made it home whistling a merry tune. Please, enjoy your meal!

See ya' later!

David Neufeld adapted 'Walter Thomas - Before Dinner' from a story written for Vantage Points 4.