

Yorkton Stories

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About Dan the Storyman, Poetree and Friends, and ultra running

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Dick DeRyk

You could say we are turning the tables on Dan Calef by telling his story. After all, he was Dan the Storyman, known locally as the story-telling head of the Yorkton Public Library from 1983 to 1999, who looked after story time for kids, and told stories on local – then national, then also American television. Here in Yorkton he was also regularly seen to be running on the streets of the city, easily recognizable by his long-ish beard and his steady gait. Dan wasn't just jogging. Less well-known than the story telling and the local running was the fact he took part in marathons in Canada and the United States, as well as what is known as ultra running – 100 kilometre runs, and events to see how far one could make it in 24 hours of continuous running.

We sat down with Dan and asked him to tell us the story of Dan the Storyman. But obviously, his story would not be complete without also talking about the television show in which he appeared for five years, a local production called Poetree and Friends.

Dan Calef was born in Chicago 76 years ago. His father was a professor at the University of Chicago, and he furthered his own education in Wisconsin. He and his spouse Susan came to Canada in 1974 because of better employment opportunities in the public library field, and he worked in Regina, Melfort, the Yukon, then back in the US for two years, then Moose Jaw and Yorkton, where the family – two daughters and a son included – settled in for a 16 year career as the chief librarian. He worked back in the United States for some years in the early 2000s, but when it came time to retire, it was in Yorkton.

Poetree and Friends is an indelible part of Dan Calef's career. So we delved into that television program with Dan and others, including Greg Popowich, who spent 18 years at CICC TV, a CTV affiliate, in Yorkton and was the producer of the show. We also received permission from Kevin Power, a podcaster who hosts SaskScapes, which looks at arts and culture in Saskatchewan, to use audio clips from a podcast he did about Poetree and Friends in 2020. Those primarily feature the two women who did the writing for the show and were also the puppeteers, Debbie Hayward and Joyce Bagley. When you hear their voices, it's thanks to Kevin Power and the SaskScapes podcast.

There is confusing and sometimes conflicting information from various sources about the actual dates of the show. But back in January of 1995, when the show was still in its prime, Calvin Daniels wrote an extensive story in Yorkton This Week and Enterprise about Poetree and Friends

at the time it went on national television. You can read about that on our website. The show premiered in late October of 1990, Calvin writes, and 28 half-hour episodes were produced over a two-year span. During that time, it won two – or was it three CanPro Awards for best children's programming, awarded by the Canadian Television Program Festival which was held from 1974 to 1999.

Production then stopped for about two seasons, before the cable channel YTV, which featured children's programming, decided they wanted to broadcast it nationally, impressed, one would guess, by the awards Poetree and Friends had won. But YTV wanted at least 39 episodes, so back they all went into the studio, and continued to produce three more years of shows, a total of 65 by the time it ended in 1997. Several sources have the show dates as 1995 to 2000, but those were likely the years it was on national cable. When YTV picked it up, it was also shown on Nickelodeon, a channel for young people in the United States.

Greg Popowich left the television business and with his wife Elizabeth, who was on-air at the Yorkton television station, moved to Regina. There she worked as the spokesperson for the Regina police department. She is now retired. Greg went back to school and became an architectural technologist, a job he still does.

Greg Popovich explains how it all started.

Greg Popowich

I approached management with an idea to do a sports show. And they said, no, you know what, we don't need another sports show, but how about doing a children's program? And that hadn't even really occurred to me. But our son had been born in 1990 and Nicholas has Down Syndrome. So at the time we were working with a lot of early childhood interventionists, I guess, and learning a lot about how children learn and how they progress. So I sort of decided, hey, why don't I use some of that and incorporate that into a children's show? I understood we could never be a Sesame Street or something like that, but if we focused purely on what kids enjoyed, and plenty of adults have said, oh, you know, it's not as good as Sesame Street because you know I just don't find it as funny or whatever, but we really focused on what the kids were learning at a particular age or whatever, and really tried to make it specifically for them. That's how it started. And then I was really lucky to be surrounded by people who really got on board, Debbie Hayward, who played Birdie, and Joyce Bagley, who wrote all the poetry, like original poetry for the show, and came up with story ideas, and there were other characters that they also played in the program. So it really wasn't one person, it was sort of a coming together of many masterminds.

Debbie Hayward

Joyce and I were blessed to be able to work together at CTV. So our desks were side by side, and so we knew each other from there, but also we knew each other through the writing group here in town, and we were very lucky to not only be co-workers but good friends as well.

Joyce Bagley

Debbie and I were both continuity writers at the TV station.

Debbie Hayward

That sounded like great fun, you know, something different for us to work on besides our regular work. And so we both said yes, and the rest is history, I think, isn't it, Joyce?

Joyce Bagley

Yes, that's exactly how it happened. They needed writers for the show. It's one thing to have the idea, but then you have to write it.

Greg Popowich

It was definitely a shoestring budget. So we ran on creativity, not money, I think. It was kind of a challenge, and everyone accepted it, and it was a lot of fun. That was sort of still in the days when TV was fun to do. You know, maybe it still is. I haven't done it for 30 years. Yeah, you could go a long way on creativity. The book publishers provided books, and lots of people provided talent and work well below what would have been a going rate, but people believed in the program. It was a real team effort, and that paid off.

Dick DeRyk

Debbie Hayward, Joyce Bagley, and Dan talk about the characters on their show and who was who.

Joyce Bagley

We made the tree, ten-foot tree made out of papier mache with a moving face. The face was a rubber type of thing. I was not on camera, but I was inside that tree moving the eyes when the show was being produced. That was me moving the eyes.

Kevin Power

But that was not your voice.

Joyce Bagley

No, it was Jim Brock.

Debbie Hayward

There were three of us actually in the tree, weren't there? You ran the eyes.

Kevin Power

It must have been crowded in there.

Joyce Bagley

You had to be in there to work Birdie.

Debbie Hayward

That's right.

Kevin Power

You must have been quite packed in that thing.

Debbie Hayward

Oh it was surprisingly roomy. Yeah as far as trees go.

Kevin Power

Dan, you were lucky because you got to sit on a limb of the tree away from all that madness.

Dan Calef

Oh yeah, it was nice out there. Nice breeze all the time.

Debbie Hayward

Dan was still in the madness though, even though he was in the treehouse.

Dick DeRyk

Debbie with more about her character, Birdie.

Debbie Hayward

They were sort of looking for a person to play Birdie, and I don't know whether I said something in a voice that I thought was the way Birdie would speak, and I sort of had a little audition. But anyway, once we did that, it just fell into place that I would be Birdie, so that just was the way it was for the rest of the show.

Kevin Power

Now, did Birdie physically exist at that time?

Debbie Hayward

No, no, he didn't.

Kevin Power

Who decided that it was going to be a bird and who made Birdie?

Debbie Hayward

Greg's idea originally was to have a bird live in Poetree, in Poetree's branches. But I was the one who made Birdie, and he's a very cheerful looking little fellow.

Dick DeRyk

And about the Couch Potatoes and other characters.

Debbie Hayward

We had such fun doing them because they were the final result of whatever adventure they were on was always to eat chips. So Joyce and I were two of the constant potatoes, and then the third voice was, sometimes it was Greg, but sometimes it was whoever just happened to be free. But Joyce and I always operated the potatoes, didn't we, Joyce?

Joyce Bagley

Yes. Yes, we always did the potatoes, and we always wrote the scripts. We would just go off somewhere and just throw lines back and forth until we got the script. Didn't take us long.

Debbie Hayward

Joyce, do you remember when we wrote the poem for the Couch Potatoes?

Joyce Bagley

I loved that poem.

Debbie Hayward

It probably took us, I mean, it just seemed the words just came. It was like magical. All of a sudden there it was.

Joyce Bagley

Don't want to move, don't want to fuss, be a couch potato with us.
Relax all day, sleep all night, eating snacks. Hey, that's all right.
Donuts, bars, pretzels, chips. We don't care if it goes to our hips.
Shakes and burgers, cones and fries, all these goodies tantalize.
Don't want to move, don't want to fuss. So bring some more snacks for us.

Debbie Hayward

Besides the Couch Potatoes and the Boggly Bananas, we also had a lot of characters. We had peas that came to visit once in a while, like Peas in a Pod. And we had Dreyfus the Dragon and Ned, who was a neighbour. And the Feathered Frenzies. Do you remember them, Joyce?

Joyce Bagley

Oh, yes, those were good.

Kevin Power

Tell me about the Frenzies.

Debbie Hayward

The Frenzies. And they were the frantic Frenzies. They were very excitable birds that Birdie knew. There were four of them.

Dick DeRyk

I asked Greg Popowich if Poetree and Friends might be a highlight of his career in Yorkton television, and how the half-hour episodes were recorded and put together.

Greg Popowich

Yeah, I think I would. It was probably one of the most creative things that I did, or that I got to work on. Well, basically, we had full autonomy, really. We kind of did what we wanted as long as we delivered the programs on time and good quality. It was a lot of fun. The way the show was put together, it was made up of all kinds of different segments that would have been shot. For example, there was a kid's craft segment and the idea there was that I remember being a kid myself and watching Mr. Dress Up and other shows where they would make a craft and it would come out as this fantastic craft at the end. So what we decided to do is just get some regular kids and do a regular craft, and they never worked out in the end, but the kids were happy. It was like what a kid would do, right? And that's what it looked like. We'd shoot a bunch of those, and then a week later or two weeks later, we'd shoot a different segment where we had some some

movement to music stuff. We had different puppet characters that did segments. We could potentially be shooting parts of all the episodes at any given time. The actual story man and poetry, that would usually take just a couple of hours per episode, but he would probably be on, out you know, 30 minutes, he'd be on for maybe closer to 10. It would vary.

Dick DeRyk

You won some awards and ended up being on national television, both in Canada and the United States.

Greg Popowich

We at the time were owned by I think at the time it was Baton Broadcasting. So we were actually owned by a larger television company, and I really wasn't involved very much there. Toronto office must have shopped it around to other broadcasters. It wasn't directly sold from Yorkton to YTV or down into the States, it would have gone through head office, I guess, in Toronto. I knew that it would run in Saskatchewan because the company that owned us owned CTV stations in Yorkton, Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, and we knew that the program would run there. As far as going anywhere else, it never even occurred to me that it would go beyond local, which it did.

Dick DeRyk

Yes, it did, as Dan recalls.

Dan Calef

This book seller that used to come to Yorkton when I moved back to Minnesota at one point, and he came to visit me there, so you know we were good friends. Anyway, he was up north camping with some of his buddies way up in northern Minnesota, and he got up Saturday and there the show comes on the TV. Dave said, Oh, I know that guy. That's Dan the Storyman. He's from Yorkton. I knew him up there. And they said, Oh, come on, Dave, you're still hung over from last night. He said, No, no, I really knew him. And anyway, it just goes to show that eventually the show went all over the States and it was surprisingly well received down there, too.

Dick DeRyk

Greg talks about Dan's involvement in the program and his contributions.

Greg Popowich

We obviously wanted to have a strong story component to the program, and we wanted to use his books published in Saskatchewan. We may have started talking to Dan about that, and sort of one thing led to another, and it was sort of like, wow, this guy is like the perfect guy, the perfect character to play Storyman, because really he was Dan the Storyman before there was ever a Poetree. So he took that character and brought it to the program, and yeah, it worked out great. It was fantastic.

Dick DeRyk

He was a very recognizable character.

Greg Popowich

Yeah, he really was the character. It's not like we changed his appearance, he was the perfect Dan the Storyman. That was him.

Dick DeRyk

Poetree and Friends definitely define Dan as the Storyman. He comments on that, and then we talk about books and libraries and the impact of the internet.

Dan Calef

When I came to the library, I was the head librarian, but I also was the storyteller. To me, that was almost more important than actually being the boss. I guess that was my nickname or whatever for story time. But when it really got going was when Poetree and Friends took off because that was sort of the rhyme. Local Dan is the Storyman of course. And so, you know, really all over town, people, they probably don't even know my last name, but they know know me as Dan the Storyman. And it always amazes me that I mean, you know, this was a little local show. You know, it was quite good given the resources. But how many people watched it? I mean, still like when I go swimming, I've been swimming for about the last eight years. And you know, about a year ago, some youngish, probably 30-ish lady came up and just about gave me this big hug and said, Are you Dan the Storyman? And I said, Yes, I am. And she said, Oh, I used to watch your show and she got all excited. Anyway, it's just amazing how many people still remember that. And it's kind of nice.

Dan Calef

I guess I started when we lived in Melfort and found out that's really what I like to do and was good at. So it's kind of everywhere I worked really.

Dick DeRyk

Do you read from books or do you tell your own stories?

Dan Calef

Some of both. Like generally with the little kids, they like to have the book because then they can actually see pictures and stuff, but it's a mix of both.

Dick DeRyk

Is storytelling becoming a lost art with everything being available online?

Dan Calef

No, I don't think so because like I haven't actually been to story time at the library here since I retired, but I think they still get really good crowds and I think parents that bring them realize what a good thing it is coming to the library, but also you know, it teaches them to listen and that sort of thing. So I don't think it's a lost thing.

Dick DeRyk

Everything is online, people are you know, kind of tied to their phones and their laptops. Does that worry you as somebody who's been involved with books and reading all your life? Is there a concern there as to where this might all end up?

Dan Calef

Like I don't do it, I don't read online, but I just think it's a different form. I don't think, you know people still read on their laptop or their phone or whatever. I don't think people are reading less necessarily.

Dick DeRyk

Poetree and Friends. How did you get involved in it?

Dan Calef

Well, it's really funny because it's part of my job. I used to go to the TV station sort of once a week to talk about the library and any special events we were having. One day I was over there doing my little five-minute thing, and Greg Popowich was the person that actually put the show initially together. He said, Oh we're thinking of starting a kid show on the TV. Do you know anybody who'd like to get involved or something? I said, Well, how about me? He said, Okay. And then I didn't hear anything for about six months, so I sort of thought they'd forgotten about it. And then he called and said, Okay, here's the idea, and we're gonna have a talking tree and we'll go from there. And so that's how it got started, which turned out to be a good thing, really for me, but also for the library and everything. So it worked out really well.

Dan Calef

Well, the idea, like I said, we knew there was gonna be this tree and I was gonna be sitting in the tree and there'd be stories. So that was the basic idea. And later on, they added a little exercise thing at some point in the show, and they had a craft thing. So those two things were added later. Birdie was the star of the show. Like that's what seems kind of unfair because I was the only human actually on stage or on screen. And so people recognize me still, you know, 30 years later, whereas nobody knows Birdie because it was her voice. You know, Debbie walks down the street and most people don't know that she was Birdie, so really she was the star of the show.

Dick DeRyk

Yeah, and Debbie was very involved with the film festival, and right now still is very involved with the horticultural society as well. Probably more people know her from that than they would from the Poetree and Friends. Joyce Bagley was the other one who was inside the tree, as I understand.

Dan Calef

She was operating the eyes, and she actually wrote most of the episodes. Yeah, she's very responsible for the content. And again, nobody knows that unless they're familiar with the show.

Dick DeRyk

Jim Brock was the voice, I think, of the tree for a while.

Dan Calef

Initially, yeah, right.

Dick DeRyk

And then Judd Niven. And Judd's in Calgary, became a member of the police force.

Dan Calef

That's right.

Dick DeRyk

Did it affect the library at all? Would that have had any kind of positive impact on library attendance?

Dan Calef

Hard to say, but probably because again, maybe if people were necessarily story time or library users, you know, they saw me on the show and they figured out, oh yeah, he worked at the Yorkton Public Library, maybe we should go to Storytime. So I can't say that that actually happened, but you know, it might have. Let's face it, more people watch TV. So if anything is on TV, it's more exposure.

Dick DeRyk

And we talked about the other pastime that has been a large part of his life, running.

Dan Calef

I've been doing it forever. I initially started as a swimmer, you know, when I was about seven, and swam competitively quite seriously until high school, and then I still off and on swam in high school. Just as I was starting high school in Chicago, we lived right near Stagg Field where the famous atomic stuff was going on. But anyway, that's where the running track was. So I used to go over there, run a bit. And one summer there was these two racewalkers there, and for some reason this caught my eye, and I thought, gee, I'd like to try that. So I did. And did extremely well. So I did that quite seriously through high school and still swam a little bit.

Dick DeRyk

Racewalking is you have to have one foot on the ground all the time, right?

Dan Calef

It doesn't always happen, but theoretically, yeah. So that's how I sort of got going on that. And then anyway, when I went off to university and being a professor's son, I had to do well. So I wasn't wasting any time on racewalking anymore. So I didn't, and I eventually tried to get going again, but never really very successfully. But anyway, then I started running just because I had to do something, and so I started running, you know, seriously, probably when I was 20 or so, and you know, was reasonably successful at that. And so I'd been doing that basically all my life and did it until probably five or six years ago. I never did much stretching and stuff. So I found I was getting more brittle all the time, and so then finally I started swimming regularly about seven years ago, but then the pandemic came, so they closed the pool for a year, and so then I had to start running again.

So I still do it off and on, but I prefer to be swimming now. The longer the race, the better for me. Like I never had much speed, but I eventually did ultra marathons, and that's what I was most successful at. Well, anything longer than a marathon. But I won the one race that I ran most was called the Edmund Fitzgerald, which was started out in the middle of nowhere in northern Minnesota and ended up in Duluth, and that was a 100K race. I think I ran that 10 times. But I also did a couple of 24-hour runs, which basically just see how far you can go in 24 hours.

Dick DeRyk

And how far can you go in 24 hours?

Dan Calef

Three of my attempts I didn't finish.

Dick DeRyk

How do you prepare your body, your mind for running, you know, whether it's 24 hours or a 100 K or a hundred miles or a marathon? How do you prepare for that?

Dan Calef

Well, yeah, I mean, I pretty well ran my whole adult life, so it's just something that I've always enjoyed doing. And I've quickly discovered early on in my career that I really never had any speed. So it seemed like the longer the races were, the better I did. Like I have a friend, Albert Orban, who was in Nipawin. Like, whenever we would race, we were pretty even. Like he would always beat me at 10K. 20K was sometimes I would beat him, sometimes he would beat me. And then further than 20K, I would almost always beat him in the marathon and further if we ever ran further than that. So that was, you know, I quickly caught on. Well, this is what I'm good at. I'm not going to beat anybody in a 10K.

So I remember like I'd run marathons quite a few, but I'd often thought about doing an ultra marathon further than 26 miles. And when we're living in Moose Jaw, one summer day in July, I think, I ran for four hours. And I thought, okay, if I can do that, it was a really hot day too, I thought, I'm ready. Another friend took me out to Alberta. I think it was the Vermilion. I forget what the race was called, but it was a 50-mile race, and I did quite well there. And it was kind of a strange race because it started at midnight and ran for whatever reason. I can't remember what place I got, but I did quite well. So then I thought, well, there are longer races than this. Maybe we should try that.

Dan Calef

So I think possibly the next longest race I did was the Edmund Fitzgerald, and the last 25 miles is right along Lake Superior, so it's a beautiful race. Not that you're feeling very good when you get to those last 25 miles. But anyway, so eventually I ran that 10 times, I think, and did quite well there. And then I thought, well, there are 24-hour races, maybe I could try that. So I think I actually ran four of those. I know one was in Victoria, where it rained after about 16 hours, and I got really cold and I quit. So I didn't finish that one. I think I ran 85 miles. And then there was one in Seattle, I think, where again I didn't finish. I'm out the same 85 miles. And then there was one in Wisconsin where it was really hot. And I told myself, now be careful when it's so hot, wait till it gets dark, and then you'll feel better. But of course I didn't listen. So I didn't finish that one either.

But finally I went to this one down in California. It was three races at once. It was 24 hours, 48 hours, or six days. Well, I wasn't gonna try the six-day one. But I just told myself, no matter what, you have to finish this time. And so I was very careful at the beginning, and the weather was good. And anyway, eventually I finished, I think I finished fourth in the whole race, not just the old guys category, and ran 125 miles. So that was far and away my best effort.

Soon thereafter, I got nominated to compete for Canada at the World 100K Championship, which was in Belgium, I think, and we had three kids in university, so I thought I can't go, we can't afford it. And of course, I could have just asked for donations. I should have, I don't know why I didn't, but anyway, no doubt I would have finished last because I would be running against you know 215 marathoners as opposed to me a 250 marathoner, but it would have been pretty neat to put on the Maple Leaf once at least.

Dick DeRyk

When you get ready for a race, is there things about diet or hydration or warm-ups? Do you do anything special?

Dan Calef

Not really, like especially in a longer race. I probably should have paid a little more attention because I used to drink a lot of beer, I still do, and so that's not the best post-race liquid for you as you get more dehydrated, of course. But that was probably not such a good idea. But otherwise, no, I've never had much of a special diet. I just eat whatever I want. But there are people who clarify certain things.

Dick DeRyk

Mentally, is that tough getting prepared for that?

Dan Calef

Yeah, especially in a race was longer than the marathon. You know, you realize this is not going to be easy. For me, one of the most important lessons to learn was you're really not racing against other people. You basically need to listen to your body and what it's telling you. I'm going too fast, but slow down for the first five or six hours, be careful. In Victoria, I think there was a famous ultra runner there. So after about 16, 18 hours, you know, I was only like a few laps behind him, and I thought, okay, this could be really good. So I tried to basically stick with him, and that was a mistake because I just wasn't ready at that point to push ahead so hard, and then I dropped out eventually. It's really more listening to yourself, what your body's telling you, and just be careful and make sure you're gonna be around at the end.

Dick DeRyk

Well, I remember you, and many people will, watching you run in Yorkton here. I think your beard was a little longer maybe at the time. Maybe not quite as grey.

Dan Calef

You know, that's how most people know me because there's this crazy guy out when it's 30 below, and there he is, still out there, which I was. I mean, if you're gonna be serious, you know, let a little weather stop you, especially where we live. So, yeah, so most people probably know me as a runner rather than not running.

Dick DeRyk

If you do an online search for Dan Calef Running, the top results will be a link to Ultra Running magazine and Dan's race results. There you will see that in 1984, he ran a 50-mile race in just over six hours and 29 minutes. In 1995, he ran a race that consists of 24 hours of nonstop running. He covered just under 125 miles in that time and finished third. Then in 2002, the Edmund Fitzgerald, a 100 kilometre race in Minnesota, he ran the 100 kilometers in 10 hours, 35 minutes, and 9 seconds. He finished 15th out of 35 in the men's division and second in his age category, ages 50 to 59. He was less than four minutes behind the low time for those ages, and 11 minutes ahead of the next runner.

Dick DeRyk

You still do some storytelling occasionally in your retirement?

Dan Calef

I didn't for quite a while. Like when I first retired, I used to do birthday parties and stuff and maybe charge 20 bucks or something. And I haven't done that for a long time. But just recently, the Paws and Claws Rescue people, we go over there just about every weekend to visit the cats. So they said, Well, you know, we're gonna move into our new building here pretty quick. Would you be interested in doing stories once in a while to see if we can attract some more kids? And so I think I've done that three times now, and it's actually been a lot of fun. It was a little crazy last week because I had been with the puppies, and they were roaming around, and I'm trying to tell stories and they're barking, and the kids are more interested in the puppies than me. So that didn't work too well, but the one with the cats was better, so they're a little better behaved.

Dick DeRyk

So if a club or organization has a special event...

Dan Calef

Sure, yeah. I don't know how many, you know, maybe the parents will still remember me, so the kids certainly won't. But yeah, no, that's fine. I'm happy to do it.

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