

Famous folk who crossed my path

Wilken's Watch (Queen Anne/Magnolia News)

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A new friend asked me the other day how many famous people I have met during my 30-plus years behind a typewriter. It's an interesting question because I learned the hard way that in our celebrity-driven culture, everybody cares about famous people to some degree.

Maybe not everybody is "US" and "People" magazine crazy, wasting actual hours of their lives reading often inaccurate drivel about other people's relationships, then turning on the tube after the news and watching the same crap over again.

But I discovered people's celebrity jones certainly existed after I returned from four years as a reporter-editor in Sun Valley, toiling away for The Idaho Mountain Express, located in Ketchum, in the heart of Blaine County.

I tried talking, a couple of times, about the proliferation of the super rich and the co-committant degradation of the natural and social environment in gorgeous, mountainous, tree-covered central Idaho, to alleged radical friends, upon my return to Seattle. Their eyes glazed over. Did you meet any celebrities? They would ask when I finished my little speech. The answer is yes and no. Did I date Demi Moore after she and Bruce broke up?

No.

Did Mariel Hemingway give me a signed copy of one of her grandfather's books?

No.

But Demi Moore was a regular customer at the Epitome restaurant, owned by my then girlfriend, Kiki McGregor. I occasionally helped out there. I brought Demi her drinks a few times. I'd always wondered how she got some of her early movie roles (this was 1988 and 1989 we're talking about here). She seemed a very unnatural actress to me. Then I saw her and listened to her talk. She was stunning in person, even without dressing up, and she had (still has?) one of the huskiest voices I'd ever heard. After my brief encounters, if I made movies, I'd have cast her.

Definitely.

Mariel Hemingway had the post office box directly above mine at the Ketchum Post Office. I'd stand there looking over a note from one of my daughters, still here in Seattle and living with my ex-wife, a couple of allegedly great offers from book and record clubs, and bills from my Seattle existence forwarded by the aforementioned former Mrs. Wilken, while Mariel would mutter in her very high-pitched voice about all the unwanted scripts she was withdrawing from her box with both hands. I said nothing, but I remember thinking that life just wasn't fair. I knew I could act every bit as well as any girl, even one as beautiful as Mariel was then.

The biggest tipper to come in Kiki's restaurant was Kevin Costner. After a champagne brunch he tipped \$1,000 on a less than \$500 tab. After that, I'd gladly sucker punch anyone who made fun of "Waterworld." Leave Kevin alone, damn it. He is a supremely good critic of restaurant servers.

Even if I had liked magazines like "People," my Sun Valley experiences convinced me not to take them seriously. For example, one week Richard Dreyfuss and his then-wife were on the cover of the aforementioned magazine. A long story about their great love. I found that odd since both he and she were customers of our restaurant, but not together. Mr. Dreyfuss was drinking a bit and the soon-to-be ex missus, the great love, was hanging out with a local doctor.

She actually went to a neighborhood carnival with a group that included Kiki and me one night -- the two girls seemed to hit it off, I stayed in the background, probably identifying with the future-Mr. Holland because of my own recently concluded bad divorce opus just prior to moving to Idaho.

I'm taking no position on the failing movie-star marriage, just noting that "People" was telling the entire country of a couple's love while that couple was separating. Gossip sucks but bad gossip? Forget about it.

The most famous folks I met outside of Sun Valley were sports people.

I started as a sportswriter in Cincinnati, a town far inferior to Seattle in more ways than I can count, which is why I chose to stay here and only visit family there every summer for a week or two. But one place

Cincinnati whips our butt good is in major league baseball teams. The Cincinnati Reds were the Big Red Machine. Let me count the ways sportswriting in Cincinnati surpassed here.

Seattle baseball: Ken Griffey Jr., Randy Johnson and a bunch of future stars traded before they blossomed. Cincinnati: Pete Rose, Johnny Bench, Tony Perez, Joe Morgan, Roy McMillan, Johnny Temple, Ted Klusewski and Ken Griffey Jr. and his dad. Not to mention the great Frank Robinson and Vada Pinson.

I did more than one story and often hung out in the training camps of Aaron Pryor, the world junior welterweight champion who destroyed Alexis Arguello twice on national television. Pryor was 40-0 before drugs got him. Sugar Ray Leonard, my pick as the best boxer in the past 40 years, yes, even greater than Ali, always avoided Pryor as a professional.

Seattle had Boone Kirkman, a journeyman heavyweight. The only really great fighter from this area was Sugar Ray Seales, an Olympic and later world champion, and he was from Tacoma.

I interviewed George McGovern a few years after his failed run for the U.S. presidency. He seemed like a nice guy.

Once in the early '70s I was running down a New York City street and bumped hard into Mary Tyler Moore. She frowned. I apologized and kept moving.

I interviewed Jimmy Breslin once when he was on a book tour. I loved his books, but he was a lousy interviewee, seemingly pained to have to spend even a day in Cincinnati.

And I used to hang out with Richard Price whenever he visited Cincinnati back when he was a promising young novelist and not an Oscar-nominated screenwriter and near best-selling author. I had dinner with him here in 2008 when he was on a book tour but we aren't as close as we were when we were both promising, before he became famous and I became a small-town journalist (Ketchum, Kauai and Port Orchard).

I dated a crazy Seattle girl who slapped Matt Dillon in a bar once. She never hit me, but she dumped me for a musician.

There's more, but I'm tired of bragging. I guess the answer to my new friend is, famous people, yeah, I waited on a few, and interviewed a couple more, but since I never really cared much about fame or even being famous, which is different from being respected or even well-recognized in your field, it evidently didn't mean all that much to me. Not that I would turn down big money and a little idolization. But as a Queen Anne news columnist I have to figure, the bucks and the fawning fans are pretty unlikely.