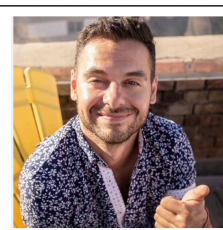


Kyler Zeleny

Dorothy Hundt, right, shares some local history with patrons at the Lucky Loon Saloon in Tompkins, Sask., which she once managed. She joked that almost everyone in Tompkins is related.

Kyler Zeleny is a photographer, writer and educator. The final book of his Prairie trilogy, *Bury Me in the Back Forty*, launched last week as part of the Contact Photography Festival. Ian Canon is an Edmonton-based Métis writer and poet who is working on his second novel.



Ian Cannon

## ***Lucky Loon Saloon, Tompkins, Sask.***

Only the Lucky Loon's owner was in the bar when we arrived. The space was somehow both smaller than we expected – the upstairs hotel was no longer operational and a lobby was hidden behind padlocked doors – and larger than necessary. Long gone were the days when the saloon had wall-to-wall clientele.

But after a few minutes of small talk, Corey Thomas, who had dreads, big hands and a baritone voice, and recently took over the bar, assured us more people were coming.

We'd heard that before. Over the past three years, we visited nearly 30 Canadian small-town bars, a mission started with a challenge: Kyler – a self-proclaimed Prairie doctor with the PhD to prove it – bet me that we could walk into any bar on the great plains and come out with a story worth repeating. And so, on unplowed roads surrounded by vast fields, we drove by shuttered businesses and houses on unsteady foundations, looking for the tallest building in town, which was generally a hotel and its bar. By the end of our travels, though, Kyler lost that bet. Half the places we visited had little to no life in them, and the other half were boarded up and abandoned.

We heard firsthand about what's ailing these bars – government measures, chief among them – and why it felt like the communities they served were circling the drain, too. Once, these places were the hearts of towns where a few hundred people still hung on; eventually, it became clear why we consistently found them lifeless. The bars were canaries in a coal mine.



On the outside, the Lucky Loon's sign reads 'Woody's Tavern,' a lasting tribute to its former owner. On the inside, business is visibly slow on this winter day.

So we figured the Lucky Loon for another bust. But suddenly, four women entered in a generational procession, from oldest to youngest: Dorothy Hundt, Connie Lindsay, Melissa Secord and Kourtnie Evans. They sat down and got to chatting with us as they ran down the town's history. "Almost everyone in this town is related," joked Dorothy, who once managed the place.

Then something rare happened – that thing that we came to recognize as a sign we were in a place worth ordering a second or third beer at. As more people arrived, tables were added end-to-end and mismatched chairs multiplied, and it wasn't long before Connie called up the bar's previous owner, John (Woody) Woodward, whose sign ("Woody's Tavern") and presence still loomed large over the Lucky Loon. A few minutes later, he walked in with a cane and sat down; the stories came hard and fast. While he talked, his right hand never left the table except to bring a beer to his lips.



John (Woody) Woodward shares the stories of Lucky Loon patrons past and present.

We heard about Gus Wickstrom, who once appeared on The Daily Show after making a name for himself predicting the weather by looking at raw pig spleens. We heard about Suzy Robinson, who called everyone “baby,” and often fell down the hotel stairs. We heard about the time Woody brought in strippers

from Calgary – “They were good-looking girls too,” he said, before revealing they were men in drag, as if it were a punchline to a joke. Finally, we heard about the murder of David Katz – a story written by local legend Henry Poegel.

There he was. We were looking for characters like Henry – someone who stood out, whom the conversation inevitably returned to, who came from a generation of characters either dead or dying. When a bargoer told a story about an old-timer from days gone by, that’s when we’d know, on our quixotic mission to document these small bars, that there was something here.

Henry was described as a big man with a stoop, “one of the smartest men you’ve ever seen” without a lick of common sense. He lived in the hotel and could be found asleep under a car on account of what Dorothy referred to as a “sleeping sickness.” The way they reminisced about him was sentimental: “That ol’ son of a bitch,” Woody called him, as if he were symbolic of a reverent past, a time when the bar ran through two pallets of beer a week. If that wasn’t enough, folks around the table said they were sure that Henry haunts the hotel: “The ghost,” they called him.

He was clearly special to all of them. Even the way he used to eat chicken wings was lodged deep in their collective memory.

“My God – bones and all!” they said in unison.

Near the end of our time there, Dorothy told us that funerals were one of the rare times the bar would be full. I asked what Henry’s funeral was like.

“I can’t remember,” she said, trying to place the event. “I wonder why?” It seemed they didn’t understand how important Henry had been to them when he was alive – how he had represented a time in their lives that only became worth remembering well after the fact.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote that a man has two deaths: one when he is buried in the ground, another when someone last speaks his name.

So as small-town bars disappear, along with the characters who gave them life over the decades, we wanted to document these spaces and stories. We felt a responsibility to these people – to try to put off their second deaths as long as we could, before it was too late, and to find out: What did we lose, with the death of this generation of irregular regulars?





The Amisk Hotel in Amisk, Alta., was one of many Prairie watering holes where Kyler Zeleny and Ian Canon looked for compelling human drama.



A local, since deceased, stops by for an afternoon drink at the Hillcrest Miners' Literary Club in Crowsnest Pass, Alta., is within view of the mountains separating Alberta from B.C.



Lee plays music at the Amisk Hotel, which he owns. The authors tipped extra for the music after Lee unwittingly overcharged them by guessing what they ordered.



At the Alberta Hotel in Pincher Creek, Eric Funk tends to his drink as he and Robin Fischbuch reminisce about friends they have lost over the years.

## ***The Windsor Hotel, Humboldt, Sask.***

In the fall of 2021, Windsor Hotel owner Kathy Loessl (now Hathman) stood in front of a long table a step away from the bar top. Dale, a trucker, and Merna, an Indigenous woman in her 60s, were seated. All three were eager to share their stories with us, battling for airtime while continually circling one name: Frank (Frankie) Streicher.

Frank was born in Humboldt in 1920 to German immigrants, and died there in 2000. Kathy described him as looking like Jethro Bodine from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, with his clothes held up with twine. At one point, he lived on the corner of a plot of land he didn't own, in a granary with a friend by the name of Tony Becker. When Tony died, Frank buried him under the granary's floorboards, and continued to collect his pension for the dead man's daughter.

He didn't have a particular spot in the bar, but like most characters often do, he had a particular habit: He'd drink two Budweisers – one for him and one for his friend Tony – then pay for them from a sweaty bill he'd pull from his sock, the money clipped to the inside by a diaper pin.





A leather chair shows its age at the Windsor Hotel in Humboldt, where Kathy Hathman is the second-generation owner.

Frank was odd: Later in life, he moved into the hotel, and Kathy's mother, who owned the hotel before she did, once said that she'd found a half-dozen muskrat skins rotting away in the bottom shelf of his dresser. But he was a genius too, Kathy told us: Without any training as a mechanic, he developed a remarkable touch for the work. If he couldn't fix your tractor, she said, that's how you knew it was toast.

That gift wasn't what made him remarkable, but it was hard for them to pin down exactly what made Frank so obviously special; when we asked, they only told us more stories. It was more about what Frank represented – a specialness that only became clear upon reflection. He seemed less of a person than a nostalgic lamppost lighting their memory, a symbol harking back to a time in Humboldt's history when things seemed to be moving in the right direction.

But even if he was gone, Frank was everywhere. Near the end of our visit, a woman who had been silently playing the slots nearby leaned over and said to Dale, Kathy and Merna, "You telling them about Frank."



Alberta Hotel patrons Robin Fischbuch and Eric Funk had many memories of wilder, younger days.

### ***Alberta Hotel, Pincher Creek, Alta.***

We didn't end up finding many living Franks in the flesh. Still, we quickly came to appreciate the rare openness of the small-town bar – something I hadn't ever experienced growing up in Edmonton. We learned the rituals and became familiar with their rhythms: In a small town, you can walk into just about any bar, buy a beer and, on the off-chance there is a local there, ask if you can join them. After looking you up and down, they'll usually say "Sure," with a flat but accepting affect.

That's how we sat down with Robin Fischbuch and Eric Funk in Pincher Creek. Robin was a well-groomed farmer, and Eric, a decade or so his senior, reminded me of the actor Walter Matthau. They reflected on just how many of their friends had passed, wondered who was next, and reminisced about how wild they once were. "Back then, you'd work two weeks and you'd owe money," Robin said. "Cus of the bar," Eric added.

They regaled each other with their friends' full names and one or two stories that made up their memories. In particular, we heard about Robert (Bob) Ursel, who might be found hanging upside down, smoking a cigarette with beers all around him, playing Jimi Hendrix. That same man made "a million bucks on a



children's story," as Robin repeated a number of times, evidently both proud and surprised by his friend's literary success.

To them, I was a mere sounding board. They looked at each other rarely, and me never, while habitually repeating one phrase again and again like a prayer: "Yup, those were some good times."



A buffalo head keeps watch at a bar in Patricia, Alta., a hamlet just west of Dinosaur Provincial Park.



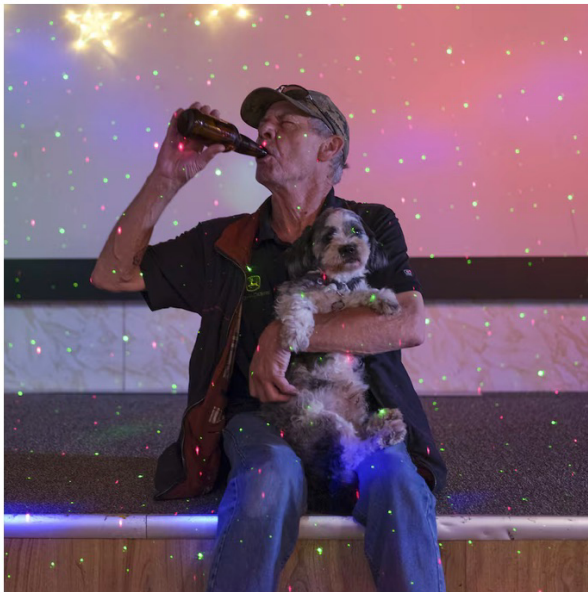
Owner Joe Stuart recalls how locals who had finished their morning farm work would stop by the Patricia Hotel for a pre-lunch beer. But that generation of patrons is gone, he says.

### ***The Patricia Hotel, Patricia, Alta.***

Joe Stuart, the owner of the Patricia Hotel, knows about good times. Now that he's an old-timer himself, by his own admission, he can wax nostalgic for the old-timers of his day, who would spend their mornings doing their farm work, then come into the bar around 11 a.m. They'd have a couple beers then go home for lunch, he told us, though a few of them would stay all day. "Not any more," he said. "That generation died." I called theirs a generation of characters, and Joe agreed, but with one caveat: Every generation is different, and every generation dies.

As an example of that particular generation, he told us about Marvel (Mister) Edey. Once, he was too drunk to drive himself home after lunch, so Joe drove him instead. This man lived down by the river, in the basement. His wife Helen, who lived upstairs, would often have to step over him on her way to work – she drove the local kids to school in a yellow bus. But after Joe dropped him off at home and dawdled a bit before returning to the Patricia, who should he see but Marvel Edey, already back and on his second beer of the sitting.

"Don't make guys like that any more," Joe told us.



Rick and Willy the dog live it up in Trochu.



Lee does likewise at the Amisk Hotel.

Of course, we still found living characters on our journey across small-town Prairie bars. In Mannville, Alta., we met Mike, who gave up his dream of being a comedian in Toronto and moved back to run his parents' bar, the Mannville



Hotel; he spent the entire night thinking we were cops. In the Trochu Hotel in Trochu, Alta., we met Rick, an old oiler with an English accent and a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel named Willy who followed him around the bar; he admitted that, in his youth, he put half a million dollars up his nose and left Britain on account of demographic shifts.

In the Amisk Hotel in Amisk, Alta., we met Lee, a man who spent most of the night in a Guy Fieri wig with an earring dangling from his left ear; he played us a couple songs, then told us about a physical altercation he had gotten into with a customer that left him with a mangled finger. When we were about to leave, he overcharged us – not because he intended to, but because he didn't care enough to write down what we'd ordered. Instead, he took a shot in the dark, and was wrong. I tipped extra for the music.

But none were of that generation, of Marvel or Frank or Henry's uniquely rowdy and oddball ilk. We made our peace with what Joe had learned: They don't make guys like that any more.



A mural at the Manyhorses Saloon celebrates its namesake animals and the mountain scenery of Alberta.



A patron at Manyhorses celebrates his windfall of nearly \$700 from a video lottery terminal.

### ***Manyhorses Saloon, Forestburg, Alta.***

You can't miss the peaceful scene that's at the heart of Forestburg's century-old bar: a huge mural of a couple of horses, appropriately, staring at bargoers as if tempting them to ride up the mountain vista behind them. It was made all the more peaceful by how empty the room was when we arrived, with just a single occupied table and walls covered in small-town bric-a-brac.

I asked Manyhorses owner Kara Pearcey about COVID-19 and the effect it had on her bar. It left her nearly six figures in debt, she told me. Then we were interrupted by a young man named Cole, announcing that he'd just won \$700 on the video lottery terminals, or VLTs – whose perpetual whirling sound was the only other thing keeping us company.

Depending on who you ask, VLTs are either saviours or villains: the reason a small-town bar was dead or dying, or the only way it could pay its electric bills. Lawrence Weppeler, the owner of the Holden Hotel in Holden, Alta., told us his bar would be busy once he got his VLTs installed; Greg Myles told us the first thing he did when he took over the Halkirk Hotel was take the VLTs out.

For some bars, the VLTs were the only thing keeping the lights on after COVID-19 measures bled them dry or pushed owners into enormous debt. But Cole's boast made us



realize that patrons weren't sitting around bar tops, turning the bartender into a priest taking confessional and sharing their stories. They were sitting in front of VLTs, alone, looking for quick wins and short-order dopamine a button press away.

VLTs and COVID-related government measures weren't the only things hurting bars. The 2008 indoor-smoking ban was the first in a series of laws that many bar owners said negatively affected them – and where there isn't smoke, there's fire. It seemed like every third or fourth bar we went to either had suffered a fire or knew of a neighbouring bar and hotel that burned down. Rumours about insurance fraud or arson would usually soon follow. Then there are the DUI laws. Taxis don't operate in these towns, and there are certainly no Ubers, so when Alberta and Saskatchewan lowered the blood-alcohol limit at which a vehicle could be impounded, an already thinning crowd was further thinned.

There was no consensus, however, on what is killing the small-town bar: just a series of small changes that have whittled away at these establishments over the years. There were also the sociological factors, which largely went unmentioned: demographic shifts, less social cohesion, an aging and shrinking population, a weakening local economy, shifting roadways, the rising costs of running a business.

They all amounted to one thing: The future doesn't look bright for the small-town bar. And when you have no place to create memories or share your stories, you have no place to create a collective history and identity.

Back at the Lucky Loon in Tompkins, Sask., where locals were bending an elbow and reminiscing about Henry Poegel's eccentric approach to eating chicken wings, ex-manager Dorothy Hundt found herself feeling wistful for a time when this was more routine. "It was busier [back then]," she told us. "But – that's all changed."

"The kids are getting older, so they might come out again," she added, and then paused. "You hope."

Just then, a man walked in. The whole table turned, and shouted: "Dennis!"

It may seem like nothing, but this small gesture is an indication of community. Once those things go away, everything else will rapidly follow – bones and all.



A patron tries their luck at a VLT at the Mannville Hotel, one of the many small-town bars that have endured through tough times across the Prairies.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-on-the-rocks-the-death-and-life-of-canadas-little-bars-on-the-prairie/>

I don't know if you could call it a "class" thing, but every little town sorts itself out according to who frequents the local watering hole, and who wouldn't be caught dead in it, or seen going into it. It takes a certain "courage" to go in and be known as a regular in the pub. This is not "Coronation Street", the "hub of the community" British "pub on the corner" thing here on the prairies.

I strain to remember the last time I was in The Rock Room/Hag's Hideaway here. Probably I was 16 or so, looking 12, but my friends and I were served. We thought it a big, bold thing to do—even if we blanched when the RCMP officer on duty walked past our table. He said nothing. The cops let us get away with frightening things back then. It is owned and operated now by Korean immigrants buying their way into the country. I'm pretty sure the atmosphere is quite moribund. I wonder if they really knew what they were getting into when they came. Many Korean immigrants here are good Presbyterian Christians. But who knows what their "profitability"/justification calculus is.

TJB