

Sons of the River

A Nebraska Memoir

Norm Bomer

Norm Bomer, *Sons of the River: A Nebraska Memoir*
Published by Canon Press, P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
www.canonpress.org
800-488-2034

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05 04 03 02 01 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Cover design by Paige Atwood
Cover artwork by Carol Bomer
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bomer, Norm, 1946–

Sons of the river: a Nebraska memoir/Norm Bomer.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-885767-67-6

1. Bomer, Norm. 2. Farm life—Nebraska—Ewing. 3. Ewing (Neb.)—Biography. I. Title

CT275.B5838 A3 2000

978.2'745—dc21

00-009413

For the Sons of the Elkhorn

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Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
bears all its sons away;
they fly forgotten, as a dream
dies at the op'ning day.

- I -

The First Hole in the Wall

Night is true night in the ranch country that spreads into the Sand Hills south of Ewing. It is night that seems unaware of the glitter of civilization not far away. The heavens are intimate, enveloping the landscape with color and light without veiling the drama of the darkness.

In the summer of Gordie's wedding, this is where Clayton Hoke and I hunted, gliding over undulating hayfields in his white Impala, dancing graceful reels with the haystacks. Our flight was smooth as flute music in the moonlight and quiet as the stubble that whispered under our tires. In those days of our youth, it was always flight away from everything toward some unseen greatness which we never expected to reach.

The saber beams of our headlights slashed the night, occasionally igniting the eyes of coyotes that nested in the tops of the haystacks. Although we shot a few coons out of the high belts of cottonwoods that hemmed the fields, our hunting had an abstract quality. It was the fantasy and freedom of a Nebraska childhood which I relived in this darkness. It was light to me.

In a small wooden box on my dresser is a black-and-white school photograph of a smiling little boy in wire-rimmed glasses. Gordon Shrader, the boy in the picture, was Ralph and Belva Shrader's only son—a farm boy from just beyond the river ridge northeast of Ewing. Gordie was the first boy I met in May of 1952, when the church elders and their families came into town for the housewarming of the parsonage for the new preacher—my father.

I kicked a hole in the wall at the head of the stairs that evening, just kept kicking until both the wallpaper and the plaster were gone, leaving an open arch above the baseboard. I was five and a half and didn't know what else to do to impress a Nebraska farmer of six.

The replacement patch of bare white plaster greeted everyone who climbed those stairs for years afterwards. It's still there after half a century, fossilized under strata of wallpaper.

The house was moved long ago from the center of town to the edge of town, two blocks away. Gordie and I have moved too—from the impetuosity of children to the hardened wisdom of men. The holes we have foolishly kicked into our lives have left more than scars of plaster.

Two little boys are standing silently side by side, each with an arm over the other's shoulder. I see them—I see Gordie and me—as I look back through the ever-rolling stream of our lives. And then the picture grows slowly wider and deeper, for our enduring friendship has given me passage into a story of forgotten people and a posterity that itself teeters on the edge of silence.

- II -

A Picnic at the River

The mighty rivers of America have been vulgarized by commerce, glamorized by legend and song. Acts of the national drama have played across their stages. They have determined battles, fostered grand engineering projects, and fomented disasters. The Mississippi, the Missouri, the Columbia, the Ohio, the Hudson. Their histories have flowed into national, even international, identities.

It's likely that a river flows through the life of every American in every generation. In one person the channel may be shallow. In another it may be deep.

A river flows through my life. But it is not numbered among the mighty. It is neither wide nor long, neither a builder of great cities nor an ally of great armies. It has never even irrigated my land or watered my cattle. It skirts the tiny Nebraska town that was my home for only a few of my childhood years—my father's first charge as a young Presbyterian minister. And yet, year after year, the Elkhorn River cuts a channel deep within my soul, shifting and shaping me like its own sand.

It swells and chokes me with memories, then subsides to reveal fragments of driftwood along its banks: a whiney old green pickup parked under the hickory tree beside my North Carolina home; elk horns mounted on the rough bark of my locust bedposts; boots in my closet; a Winchester squirrel gun on my son's bedroom wall; a pair of nineteenth-century spectacles lying dusty on my desk.

The wide sweep of the Elkhorn River Valley can be captured from the high ground two miles west of Shraders'. The Ewing water tower pokes its silver head above the soft green summer of the treetops which billow out and away toward the Nebraska sand hills.

Beneath that vast canopy in May of 1870, just below the juncture of the Elkhorn and its South Fork, fifty-three-year-old James Ewing arrived from Tennessee with his wife, Sabrina, and two daughters. There he unhitched their covered wagon in woods a mile west of what is today the Antelope County line. He soon discovered an old man named Ford camped on the same side of the river a short distance upstream. The fellow had arrived only weeks earlier, and he died within the year.

Near the forks of the river, Ewing built an oak log cabin with a sod roof—the first house in what was officially to become Holt County six years later. And with a pouch of seeds and an ax to pierce the soil, he planted the first field of sod corn in a clearing beside it.

Short, square Calvin Gunter and his wife, Ruth, came by ox team from "Ioway" the following spring, staking a homestead a mile upstream from the Ewings and establishing their new home in a dugout on the river's north bank.

As other settlers began to arrive on the frontier, they agreed to call their community Ford to honor the old man who had so shortly preceded them. The first small and infrequent mail deliveries from Norfolk, fifty miles down river, were brought by stagecoach to the Ewings' log cabin for distribution.

Norfolk was not only the postal railhead; its very name was postal. The original name, Norfork, had been derived from the town's location on the North Fork of the Elkhorn. But when the Post Office Department approved the town's petition for a post office in 1867, it changed the name to "Norfolk" on all documentation.

Federal bureaucrats apparently thought the town fathers couldn't spell. In their desire not to jeopardize their postal status, the chagrined town fathers acquiesced.

That historical anecdote had more than a folklorish effect on the culture. To this day, the town is "Norfolk" to the people of the Valley.

When the westward rails of the Fremont, Elkhorn, and Missouri Valley finally crossed the South Fork in 1882, the Ford postal station was transferred from James Ewing's fiddle case to the depot on the edge of the new village across the river. George Butler, the first appointed postmaster, called it Ewing Post Office in honor of his pioneering predecessor.

It wasn't until May 8, 1884 that the village of Ewing was incorporated by authority of county commissioner J.E. West. The new town was, even as it is called today, "Gateway to the Sand Hills," leading the way into the vast landscape of Nebraska's west. James Ewing had indeed opened the gate, driving his stakes a full four years before John O'Neill established the small Irish colony bearing his name—twenty miles further up the Elkhorn.

Before 1876, Holt County, Nebraska, was known by pioneers as Elkhorn County, much larger than it is today—16,000 square miles of wilderness. It eventually became ten counties, a vast map marked, even today, with only a few road lines and a smattering of town dots. Elkhorn County reached from the Antelope County line 300 miles across western Nebraska to what later became Wyoming. When the narrower boundaries of Holt County were officially confirmed in January of 1877, the rest was mapped as Unorganized Territory or Indian Territory but remained legally attached to Holt County for judicial and tax purposes. It was the West, the land of *taraha*, the buffalo. It was the hunting ground of the Pawnee, the Ponca, the Omaha, the Cheyenne, and the Sioux.

“The Indian who gazed down the Elkhorn Valley must have thought that here indeed was the playground of the gods, the true Happy Hunting Ground,” read an article in the September 6, 1884 edition of the magazine *The Leading Industries of the West*. “The hollow was governed by quiet and serenity and adorned by magnificent trees, green, green grasses turning to gold in the August sunshine, blue skies and a shining river winding crazily from one end of the world to the other, with branches making an unorthodox pattern over the entire countryside.”

It was that antlerish pattern which had inspired French Canadian trappers of the late eighteenth century to name the river *Corne de Cerf* (Horn of the Elk). Were geographical names part of the creation itself, however, the name Elkhorn County would have seemed only natural. The Elkhorn River was the life-blood of the valley, giving vitality not just to a land but to a people.

Its native cottonwood, white elm, ash, oak, and willow provided lumber and fuel. Wild plums, chokecherries, grapes, gooseberries, and wild asparagus flourished by its side. So did elk, white-tailed deer, wild turkey, beaver, and quail. And reaching out along the Elkhorn's many tributary streams were clusters of hackberry, box elder, linden, and basswood.

“There is no more beautiful prairie country in the world,” wrote painter George Catlin in 1832.

From the banks of the river the valley ascended as much as 500 feet, sometimes gradually, sometimes abruptly. The bluffs and rolling prairie beyond the trees were thick with native grasses like blue joint and wild oats, rich forage for the buffalo and the prong-horn antelope and eventually for the livestock of pioneers. Prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse nested there in abundance.

On February 21, 1872, James Ewing's oldest

daughter, Anna Davidson, seventeen, bore a son—the first white child born in Elkhorn County. On April 15, James Gunter, who was delivered in Calvin and Ruth's dugout just up the river, became the second.

I entered the Gunter home three generations later, where short, square Lionel Gunter and his wife, Martha, were raising a covey of handsome, soft-spoken sons—Calvin Gunter's great-grandsons. A two-story frame farmhouse had long since replaced the dugout, the subsequent log cabin, and the original frame house which had burned down at the turn of the century.

When I was a child, my father occasionally drove our family north from Ewing on the county road, across the old bridge, then down a long driveway through a cornfield and into trees where the Gunter house stood. I remember a Sunday afternoon when he parked our '50 Ford on the shaded barnyard among the chickens. Lionel told us it would be fine if we wanted to leave it there and walk on south through the trees with our picnic lunch.

Bill Bomer was the preacher, after all. The people of the upper Elkhorn Valley gave him genuine veneration and sometimes charity—which came amiably wrapped for my dad, a city boy fresh out of seminary like a loaf hot out of the oven.

That heat generated some righteous steam which, on a particular Sunday morning in his first year, he had let off with a sermon about Sabbath observance. He thumped his pulpit and delineated the relevant sins under each of two sub-points, sins of omission and sins of commission. The latter category included such things as milking cows and gathering eggs on the Lord's day.

A few days later, he made a pastoral call on one of his rural flock who happened to be tossing some eggs out of a chicken coop—eggs that had obviously not been gathered in timely fashion. Their color more resembled Nebraska storm clouds than white fairweather ones.

“This is the way the preacher likes ’em,” the farmer announced with a gleam in his eye. The seminary of the farm.

It was Sunday again as we now walked through the grove south of Gunters’ house, where Mother spread the picnic blanket by the Elkhorn. I tossed sticks into the water, and my little brother tried to imitate. I was six. Bruce was three. As ants crawled across our blanket during the meal, we all discussed ant behavior and its lessons about work, and then Daddy explained why going on a picnic on the Lord’s day wasn’t really a violation of the Fourth Commandment. But, he suggested, we probably shouldn’t talk about it around anyone from church.

I remember too the tin pail under the sink in Martha Gunter’s kitchen. It was full of arrowheads from the cornfield at the corner. Lionel told me the place had been an Indian battleground, and I was enthralled. Describing it as the site of an Omaha hunting camp along the river would have been a bit humdrum by contrast. As in all boys, my imagination helped write the script of the play in which I acted. But my life in that isolated culture really was filled with adventure. I lived on the Elkhorn. I was Gordon Shrader’s best friend. Sioux braves, come to steal Pawnee ponies, were lurking in the trees—or might have been.

As I stand above the river today where James Gunter, Lionel’s father, once gazed out over hundreds of Ponca teepees, my imagination contributes to the script in another sense. For the players I see along the Elkhorn are all real, and my imagination is memory.

- III -
Out to the Farm

The road slopes immediately down to the west from Ralph Shrader's old place at the corner. Gordie used to ride his bicycle down that hill a quarter mile to Grandma Shrader's with Tuffy bobbing behind him on the blur of his stubby legs.

The tool shop was down there. So was the old gable-roofed barn with the horse stalls, the milking shed, and the sow pens. Ralph spent a lot of working hours at Grandma's. It was still like home to him. He had grown up in the brittle old white house on the south side of the road. And now his brittle old mother sat inside rocking with her blanket, even in the summer.

Gordie often rode his bike back and forth to Grandma Shrader's. It was especially exciting the year he got a speedometer. He could pedal that old one-speed down the hill hard enough to make the needle nibble at the thirty. He had to stay on the hard middle of the narrow road. Otherwise, his wheels would get bogged down in the deep sand along the edges, and the wide rubber tires would become studded with sand-burs.

There were trees—mostly gone now—big cottonwood trees rising like castle towers along both sides of the road. Their high masses of leaves chattered softly in the summer breeze. On some lonely afternoons, they sounded like the rushing waters of a stream following the treetops west down to the Elkhorn River.