

Characters and Kindred Spirits

Gail Balden

August, 2010

Can you tell the truth in a small town? That's the question posed by author Kathleen Norris in her book *Dakota*. She lives on the border between North and South Dakota, in a town "so small that the poets and ministers have to hang out together." Her contention is that many writers depicting rural and small-town America have found it necessary to write about that world from a distance, often because in places where nearly everyone is related, it becomes more difficult to tell the truth. And telling the truth might mean acknowledging our differences and conflicts.

On my travels to small towns throughout the United States, where I can write about them from a distance, I often find that people are not all that different from me except that they go about things in a different way—a good lesson to keep in mind in today's world.

Take the Madwoman's Attic Guest House on Race Street in a small town in Michigan where we spent a night in June. The walls of the delightful upstairs room were covered in bright pink and red cabbage rose fabric. Black and white stripes covered another wall, and tasseled lion-based lamps rested on bedside tables. Downstairs, a parrot chattered in the kitchen and a cat meandered through rooms filled with crystal lamps, fountains and feathers. Quotes were painted on the ceilings. "One should always be a little improbable," seemed a fitting example of the artist owner who said she keeps "semi-regular summer hours," and met us at the door in her red silk pajamas.

We visited a nephew who lives in the "Magic Bus," a converted yellow school bus with Popeye, his one-eyed dog. For the 4th of July parade, he rigged up a device to shoot tie-dyed tee shirts out of a cannon into the boisterous crowd. It's never too hard to find our nephew. The Magic Bus is wildly colorful and the only one in town.

I laughed when my brother said his dentist would leave his repaired bridge in a tackle box on the front porch if my brother was unable to pick it up before the dental office closed for the weekend. When I asked my friend Kandie, whom I've known since I was four years old where she kept the napkins, she said "in the basement on the shelf facing the old school we went to." "And the vases?" I asked. "On the shelf facing Ann Arbor Street." While visiting a friend's farm that had been in the family for over a century, I was heartened to see pages of history before me in the weathered hay rakes and tack still hanging from hand-hewn timbers along rough-sawn planks. Her address is Old Leeman Place.

We met a woman whose scrap metal pig statue was stolen from outside her store just off Hog Island. "He was my attack pig," she said. "He kept customers in line, but obviously he missed one." At a Farmers Market,

we discovered a French woman with a few specialty pastries for sale. “I sell just a little of this and a little of that,” she said including a yummy half chocolate, half vanilla éclair she called “A Divorce.”

At one time in our travels we came upon a cowgirl caravan of Sisters on the Fly, an organization that claims to “have more fun than anyone” in their rolling homes—small vintage trailers that are cute as cowgirl boots. Their mission statement is "Offering empowerment and sisterhood through exceptional outdoor adventures.”

At home on the coast, I try to squeeze out every last drop of the sweetness of summer by holding Friday soirees in the last rays of sun on the deck. These evening gatherings for friends, neighbors, characters and kindred spirits often end around the fire and have left us feeling more connected to our small town tribe. Of course I don't know much about the characters in our towns. I've only lived here 20 years. But even if I did, I'd probably feel uncomfortable writing too many details of their lives. “Can you tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in a small town?” Probably not.