

# Take charge of the stories we are telling

An Editor's Opinion  
By JAMES SMORADA

Old wisdom and Napoleon said that history is written by the victors. True, but what does it mean?

Put another way, it means that if we are to insure our future, we must control the stories about now. To insure the future for the state, the town, we must decide now what is being said about us. That decision will condition what will be said of us later.

The Jamestown Arts Center presented a performance by two men and a woman Wednesday night. Roadside Theater offered songs and stories as taught by the elders of the mountains of Appalachia.

You remember Appalachia. It was that poor corner of the nation 20 years ago that could not feed itself. We all have a media picture in mind: dirt road, shack by a stream, hollow-eyed folks in shapeless clothes looking hopeless.

The picture was a politician's meadow, a place to plant promises and raise expectations. What happened there is not unlike what is happening to this place today, the performers pointed out.

The media picture did not include the information about the region's past. It did not recall that Appalachia produced the wood and coal for this nation in two great world wars. The media did not recall that parts of the region gave itself until it was exhausted.

Appalachians got pity for their efforts. Poor people in the mountains became part of a political push. Thankfully pity was not the final word.

The mountains were not full of poor people. The coal may have been mined and the woods cut down but the people prevailed. In them some of the comic and dramatic genius of the nation flowered - decades ago and again in this century. The seeds caught the wind. The place still produces those who teach a nation how to sing, to tell stories and how to laugh. No wonder Nashville is nearby.

These people control the stories, not the politicians, not the media. The rest of us will not remember the poverty but we'll retell a tale, sing a song, laugh with them. We will look back and see ourselves.

What is being said about North Dakota these days is not unlike that which is being said about Appalachia 20 years ago. We are told that we are in trouble. We are told the farm-based economy is insufficient to support its people so they are leaving. Nothing is coming in to replace the migrants. North Dakota is a poor place getting poorer. No industrial growth has become something of a political issue.

We all know the stories by heart. There is precious little to counter them. This is the kind of scenario custom-made for political hay. We don't need hay, according to the Roadside Theater troupe, we need to take charge of our stories.

This is not the first time that people here have faced adversity. There are stories of the grim and humorous in each family. The survivors tell them. The media accounts do not talk about the fact that people are generally safe from physical harm here, raise families and have reunions.

We don't need to get all fussed up when someone teases the state about its northern-ness; Alaska has made a name for itself and it's much colder.

Taking charge of the story is an individual effort. It means listening to the old ones and repeating their versions. It means something else too. It means we stop dotting on the one version of our fate unless, of course, we want it to come true.

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