

Room for a view

The quizmaster

He always called me “Kahlin,” with a long “a,” as in “aardvark.” The first time we met, I was 28 years old and had just arrived from Sheffield, England, to join his practice. My wife and I were driven over to his farm to be introduced. I’m sure that secretly he loved the “green” British doctors he met, because we were always awed by the sheer size and expanse of everything in rural British Columbia.

He asked me a question, not seriously, but in a whimsical kind of way with a long, almost Texan, drawl: “Kahlin, do you know how big our practice area is?”

“Um ... no.”

“It’s slightly larger than Wales!” he declared triumphantly.

It wasn’t difficult for me to produce the obligatory gasp of disbelief. To anyone accustomed to British distances, it really was amazing.

Later we inspected his vegetable patch. There was asparagus over a foot long and as fat as my thumb. Corn with lush green leaves and huge cobs reached toward the cloudless sky. “This is an ancient flood plain, Kahlin. You can grow anything here. Just plant the seeds and add water and POW!” He gestured extravagantly.

He kept horses and four or five dogs. His 16-acre property, much of it alfalfa fields, stretched down to the Fraser River. The river wasn’t pretty so much as awesome. The town of Lillooet stood on the far bank, and all around were mountains. Sun-baked

desert ones to the south, forested snow-capped ones to the northeast.

We inspected his workshop. My experience of workshops was of tiny garden sheds the size of a small washroom.

Mike’s workshop could house three trucks side by side. There were large drawers filled with every tool imaginable, ranging from small hand drills to enormous two-handed drills and sanders that could make short work of an Egyptian pyramid.

In the middle of the shop stood a small aluminum rowboat. Mike had just bolted on a new oar lock, and the bolts were protruding an inch from the inside. Having done metal work in England, I knew exactly what to do. Eager to show I knew something, I suggested he saw the bolts off and then file them down.

“That takes a long time, Kahlin,” he said. “Watch this.” He then reached deep into his drill drawer and drew out an enormous disc grinder and a welder’s helmet that wouldn’t have been out of place in a Star Wars movie.

“Stand back, Kahlin.” He turned on the grinder and went to work.

The noise was deafening. I scurried

away, terrified by the shower of sparks that poured all over me. Then I cringed in a corner for the two minutes it took to grind down the bolts.

It was becoming clear that Mike did things a little differently from what I was used to in England. He loved to solve problems quickly, decisively and powerfully: hence his fascination with all those wonderful tools. He also loved larger-than-life numbers and facts, and during our partnership I was constantly quizzed.

“Kahlin, do you know how many simultaneous mes-

sages can be transmitted down a fibre-optic telecommunications cable?”

“Kahlin, do you know how many tons of dirt a day a D8 Cat can move?”

“Kahlin, do you know how many cells there are in the human body?”

Invariably, my reply would be “Um ... no.” Invariably, the answer would be astronomical. Once, after his clothes dryer broke down, he figured out how many revolutions it had done in its lifetime. The number was, of course, in the millions, which seemed to reconcile him to the fact that it was time for the machine to quit.

Was he a good doctor?

Darned right. His problem-solving



skills and larger-than-life sense of humour allowed him to handle anything thrown his way. He gave a safe anesthetic, did a safe cesarean, was bright, stayed up to date and knew lots of tricks of the trade for dealing with the vast array of problems, major and minor, encountered by isolated rural physicians. His faults were few. He admired "can do" people of any variety but had little time for the "can't dos." Sometimes his forthrightness with people could lead to tension, but being of a similar ilk myself I often didn't see this as a fault. One thing was certain: many people owed their life, limbs and health to him.

It's been a few years since I've visited Mike, but sometime soon I'll drop by

his house. We'll share a pitcher of juice in the shade of his patio and look out at the Fraser River and the mountains beyond. We will catch up on all the news, and sooner or later he will show me his latest project. The last time I visited, it was welding.

"Kahlin," he asked. "Do you know what chicken shit is?"

For once, I thought I knew the answer, but of course I was wrong.

"Chicken shit is what you get when you're welding and the weld gets too hot. The metal sputters and it looks like chicken shit. It's darned hard to weld without chicken shit, Kahlin."

He then proceeded to show me a trailer that he had welded out of iron

railings. There was plenty of chicken shit (this was the first time he had ever tried welding), but that trailer was light and functional and will probably survive World War Three.

I don't know what his current project is (I hear he has acquired a name for himself as a water diviner), but he'll tell me about it at some point. He'll turn to me with that almost Texan drawl and say, "Kahlin, do you know how many ..."

Colin Rankin

Dr. Rankin now practises as an anesthesiologist in Langley, BC. Even today he cannot look at power tools without remembering his old partner.