

A hard story about a friend

You pick up the telephone, dial, get what facts you can, repeat the process a couple of times, and then write. Like doing any quick, easy story that does not involve much research and chasing people down for face-to-face interviews. Quick and easy. But it is different this time.

Looked at from a distance, the facts are not that unusual as far as the type of stories that are common in newspapers world-wide. 'Shooting victim dies of Apparently self-inflicted gun-shot wound. Only this shooting victim is not just a name to write into a story and then forget; it is someone you know, someone whose life crossed yours and made a strong impression on it.

You remember when you first met his sister Rose just outside the home of her father, Phillip, in Ruby. You were nervous then, like you always are when you first drop into a new village to meet new people and seek out new stories. Maybe it won't work this time. Maybe you'll fail merably and just not get the story. Maybe you'll screw up somewhere out there on the frozen Yukon and mess things up for everybody; maybe 50 to 60 below zero weather will set in on unexpectedly and leave you as frozen as the river.

The contact with Rose eases the tension. Then you meet the father, Phillip, and he feeds you moose and Pepsi. You feel much better about things. Still, though, you have yet to meet the main subject of your story and so the nervousness is not gone. Then you climb onto the snowmachine with Rose and head up the river. There are a couple of minor annoyances, like when water from an overflow gets inside the snowmachine track apparatus and freezes it up, forcing the machine to a halt to chip away. This doesn't really bother you, though. It's a good opportunity to snap a photo of Rose taking care of one of the tasks she and her brother must contend with, and the mountains and forests rising out of the Yukon are beautiful to look at.

It is dark when Rose finally guides

the snowmachine past chained sled-dogs who bark their welcome, and inside, Howard Albert and his apprentice-trapper James Wright are busy stretching marten skins by the light of a kerosene lamp. Albert's manner is quiet, and he feeds you with moose stew. Now that you are here, and have met everybody, your confidence grows and you feel the story will go off well as it usually does.

It is a good story, a story of a family cooperating together to make a good race for their son. Father, Phillip has made a sled. Sister, Barbara has made mukluks, younger brother James is taking care of the puppies which are too young to race, and the other brothers are busy trapping beaver to feed the dogs. Rose is making mittens, and helping greatly in handling and caring for the dogs.

You spend the rest of the time following Howard as he trains the dogs on runs down the Yukon, and sitting on the back of his snowmachine as he checks his trap-line, pulling out three beaver. At night there is the radio, with its trap-line chatter, and rock and roll and country music while Howard and James play cards.

Howard talks of the hard times he had with alcohol, but how getting ready for this year's race encouraged him to beat those problems. You feel good when you leave. You have a good story, and you feel that you have made some friends.

So this last story on Howard Albert is pretty hard to write. You can't possibly know what happened. You would like to ease the suffering of those family members and close friends who have loved him so, and supported him. You can't.

You wish you could have known of the suffering that led to this final decision so you could have tried to ease it before the fateful and ever-lasting decision was made.

You can't.

All you can do is tell his family and friends how sorry you are, and let them know that, as briefly as he crossed your life, Howard Albert made a very positive contribution to it.

—B.H.