



## Exposing prairie life

Dunn soaks up prairie culture during 400-kilometre, one-month trek through

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Penticton Herald

**T**here's a lot that can be said about the Prairie provinces, but the inscription on the Saskatchewan licence plate sums it up best - Land of living skies.

For a photographer, that's as close as one gets to Nikon nirvana.

"Because of the open space, you get this fantastic

quality of light," said Kevin Dunn, who meandered through Canada's bread basket for a month earlier this summer with nothing more than the clothes in his backpack, a couple of trusty Nikon cameras and a stash of film a tourist would need a decade to shoot.

"Once you see the sky out there you don't forget it," said Dunn, who has roots in the flat lands. "The prairies are like an ocean. You don't have that sense of constriction. It's a place where your mind can be free."

Dunn was hoping to use his lens to pry open the lives of the folks living along the abandoned 400-kilometre short track railway from Consul to Pangman, Saskatchewan.

The idea was planted in his mind 12 years ago when he worked as a news photographer in Moose Jaw. He witnessed the stress the town folk endured as the last Via Rail passenger train rolled out of town.

"I think there is a lot of emotion tied to the railway," he said. "The railway founded small town Saskatchewan."

Dunn was fascinated by the names of these small towns, situated exactly six miles apart to allow optimal distance for trains to speed up and slow down.

"How can you lose with names like Cadillac and Admiral," he said, noting more fascinating than the names, were the people he encountered.

A locked door at someone's home is as foreign a concept to folks on the prairies as beach blankets are to the Inuit.

It wasn't uncommon for Dunn to run across a farmer who would open his home to Dunn, a total stranger. Farmers would even go as far to call their neighbours, miles down the road, to let them know Dunn was en route and to leave the door open the food out.

"That's typical hospitality built on trust," he said. "They're proud of that. They're genuine in every sense of the word."

There were also some poignant moments during Dunn's trek such as his stint in Admiral where he encountered a school teacher whose one, and only, job for the last 22 years was teaching at the local school house.

Enrolment had plummeted and her job was in peril. However she was excited to note a new family moved to town. When Dunn said it would be great for the local kids to



KEVIN DUNN/Special to the Herald

Kevin Dunn's cross-province trek, top, took him from Consul to Pangman, Saskatchewan along the southern short track railway bed earlier this summer. Dunn's aim was to get a feel for the prairie life, above, through the people he encountered. The railway was the life blood of many prairie towns, many of which have long blown away and are only remembered through cairns, left.



have new friends, she responded "there are no other kids in town".

"It's gripping stuff when you're on your own and haven't seen people in days and that's the story you get," Dunn said. "The image of her balancing on a balance beam has a great metaphor for what she and other Saskatchewan teachers are going through."

For every sad story there is another that displays the resilient nature of the prairie spirit and how it's woven into the fabric of the community.

He recalls the story of a farmer who struck it rich with a lottery win and spared the local grain elevator from the wrecking ball.

"Instead of pulling up and blasting out of town like everyone else, he bought the elevator, painted it up and saved it," said Dunn. "I thought that was very cool."