



• SOURDOUGH CHRONICLES •

# MEMORIES OF RENDEZVOUS

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**D**el looks me directly in the eye and asks, “What are you doing this summer, girl?”

With a loud bang, the door slams against the outside wall. Snow swirls and patrons yell, “Shut the door!” while “Ramblin’ Man” by The Allman Brothers Band blares from the jukebox. I look up from behind the bar I’m tending, and the commotion fades to silence as I lock eyes with a man staring back at me. Framed by the open doorway, the welder stands in the gusting wind.

He slams the door behind him, never breaking contact with my eyes. A group of customers yell their orders from the front table, but I ignore them and walk up to face the welder. “I drove straight through from Nelson,” he says. “When are you off?”

“When the Kopper King shuts down,” I say, with a quiver in my voice. “I can meet up with you then.”

“Darn right,” he replies. “I just drove almost 1,000 kilometres through a blizzard for you and Rendezvous!”

It’s 1978 and Whitehorse is about to celebrate its legendary winter event, the Yukon Sourdough Rendezvous Festival, which attracts people from around the world for a party unlike any other. Held at the end of February, it celebrates the passing of winter and arrival of spring. I’m the barmaid at the Kopper King Tavern and have been waiting for the welder to show up since Christmas. He works on pipelines in the oil fields of Fort Nelson, B.C.

I’m flustered as I head back behind the bar to wrestle with a keg of beer. On a regular weekend we change out two kegs a night, but during Rendezvous it’s more like three to five. In order to tap the keg, I have to stand on the counter and plunge a long metal rod into the keg to turn and lock it. The plunger lock is worn almost smooth. I fear this part of my job.

A chant of “Black Label, Black Label” comes from the front table. I plunge the rod into the keg, turn it to lock, and step back to let out my breath. Suddenly, the pressurized rod shoots into the air, missing my face by one inch, and sticks into the ceiling with a twang like an oversized stainless steel arrow.

Everyone runs up with empty glasses to catch the fountain of fizz as I drown in beer behind the bar. Whooping and hollering, the crowd shoves glasses under the flow and some simply stand with their mouths open wide. I try to stifle the erratic fountain with my hands, but am blinded with beer. I grab a few dirty bar rags, fight my way through the crowd, and climb through the waterfall of brew. As I clamp down on the keg to stop the frenzy, grown men cry out with disappointment.

Many people travelled by snowshoe out of the bush for Rendezvous weekend. They’ve come to the Kopper King to start their festivities and some, along with their dogs, aren’t shy about catching some shuteye in the bar before heading to the parties. Dogs sleep under the hearth of the circular wood fireplace oblivious to the commotion, and some hippies are snuggled in with them. Letting patrons catch up on their sleep in a warm place is a neighbourly thing to do, but I don’t understand how they sleep through the sounds of the pool table and wail of the jukebox.

## THE CANCAN GIRLS SWING MINERS TO AND FRO, AS OTHER MINERS SWING HIPPIES TO THE RHYTHM.

A haze of smoke fills the dark room, a combination of cigarette smoke and wood fire. Patrons yell for another jug of beer and more glasses. Two waitresses and I handle the insatiable thirst of the bush people, balancing fully loaded trays in each hand.

As the night rumbles on, we hear whooping and whistling from the lounge next door: it’s the Rendezvous cancan dancers making the rounds. The Rendezvous Queen candidates drift though the bar, dazzling everyone with their smiles as they sell tickets in hopes of winning the crown.

Then the door busts open and the colours of the rainbow flow into the dingy bar. Everyone stops what they’re doing to clap their hands and stamp their heavy work boots on the floor in appreciation as the cancan girls flash their frilly, multicoloured skirts to the beat of the music.

The dancers kick higher and higher as momentum builds. Two of them drop to the floor in the splits; the feathers adorning their heads sway with each movement. The floor is bouncing with enthusiasm as dollar bills are stuffed into the girls’ garters. For more moola you can even remove the garter with your teeth!

Harmonica George, as he’s known, howls a riff into the microphone onstage; then the band starts with a jerk, everyone links arms, and a Yukon square dance begins. The cancan girls swing miners to and fro, as other miners swing hippies to the rhythm. A miner dances feverishly by himself in the corner all night long and doesn’t stop his gyrations until the music ends.

After my shift, I wander to the Capital Hotel on Main Street and slide up to the welder at the bar. Someone yells out, “Hoss is about to hump 500 pounds of flour in the flour-packing contest!” We all grab our bottles of beer and empty onto Main Street to witness the Rendezvous competitions. We all watch out as Crazy Charlie is throwing his axe; he can’t hit the broad side of truck. Suddenly, a dog team charges through the front door of the bar, their handler looking to wet his whistle.

“C’mon Hoss, you goofy bugger, you can do this!” shouts one spectator. “It’s only 500 pounds—way less than that moose you hauled out on your back last freeze-up!” yells another.

I spot the Keystone Kops skirting the edge of the crowd. People not dressed in Rendezvous fashion (gold-rush-era attire) get thrown in their mobile jail—and it’s freezing cold out—but can pay their way

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out with cash or a song. Some were known to strip down to their birthday suits to escape.

Most ladies are in full gowns and feathers, and barmaids are in fishnet stockings, petticoats, and tiny corsets. Most men slip garters on their arms and come as they are, but a few show up in top hats and tails.

Main Street is decorated in gold-rush style as businesses compete for the best-décor prize. Ladies in gowns stroll arm-in-arm with scruffy miners, sipping on libations, which is acceptable and part of the fun. It's the time of the year when grown-ups are encouraged to play.

It's the ultimate pub-crawl—no cover charges, no tickets for entry. We slip from bar to bar looking for friends we haven't seen over the long winter, thumping each other on the back, making plans for the spring, and taking turns buying rounds of drinks.

The cancan girls show up in our new location causing another happy commotion. The work-worn hands of grizzled miners tremble as they attempt to stuff dollars in their dainty garters. A big bill means a big kiss on the cheek. Those red lipstick marks are badges of accomplishment on scruffy faces.

Those were the days, my friend, where the entertainment flowed from bar to bar. We thought they would never end, but they did. And while Rendezvous still continues, there was something so rambunctious and rare about those early days. I feel very fortunate to have been part of that era. **Y**

