

The Pipeline Blues: Crafting An Historical Story

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*There's just something about a song or story
that brings things into focus a whole lot sharper
than any stack of statistics.
Jerome Wheeler*

“The Pipeline Blues” is a story of indirect persuasiveness, citizenship, humor, sewage, an historical event in my own hometown and of a song that galvanized a community and brought about change in environmental policy.

Inspiration

I was immediately struck by Jerome Wheeler’s song “Talkin’ Columbia City Pipeline Blues” when I first heard it in 1999. Like any piece of effective art, it empowered me and affected me emotionally. I could relate to the memorably described characters and their journey. Instead of a pedantic, heavy-handed style, information was presented in a humorous style that allowed for my own thoughts on the problem presented. And, the images were vivid. For example:

*The next time you flush your stool,
Be thinking of us Boone County fools
Who have to drink downstream from our latrine.
Now, Columbia’s got a sewer to the ocean,
Full of do-do-do-do-do-do-do.*

I was smitten with the idea of creating a story about the song, written in 1988, the events that inspired it and its effect on a community.

Research

Not living in Columbia in 1988, I was only vaguely aware of the events surrounding the song. So, I thoroughly researched the local newspaper archives and interviewed the journalists, those prominently mentioned in the articles, politicians and community members. My interviews with Jerome Wheeler were invaluable for final fact checking and particularly, in adding “color” to the story.

Crafting a Story: Guiding Principals

As I began to craft “The Pipeline Blues”, I kept in mind my own six guiding principals:

- I tell stories in order to entertain, educate and empower.
- I bring true stories of our past to life in order to better understand our present and to better inform and shape our future.
- Identification with a main character significantly increases interest in a story.

- Every story needs an element of suspense to keep the listener engaged and desirous of continuing to journey with the main character to the story's conclusion.
- Vivid characters and images are the colors that bring stories to life.
- Any story of an actual event must be written so that it becomes an experience universal to all listeners and one that impacts the listener's current life experience.

Crafting “The Pipeline Blues”: Essential Questions

Crafting a story is seldom a straightforward process. At times, I became overwhelmed with the mounds of information and interviews that I had gathered, the numbers of characters involved and the legal, political and scientific aspects of the story. Over eight months, I created six versions of the story with different emphases and from different perspectives. Because I work orally rather than on paper, I recorded my thoughts and versions on audio recordings. I then ran each version by objective colleagues for creative input and by those I'd interviewed for checks on my facts and interpretation of events. During this process, I slowly crafted the final story by continually keeping my guiding principals in mind and by repeatedly asking myself the following questions:

1. Why do I want to tell this particular story?

I decided that I wanted to document this event because I have passion for environmental issues and was proud of my hometown's actions. Even more, I wanted to illustrate the powerful effect of one person speaking out, of creative problem solving and of artistic expression. I wanted to tell the story to inspire those working against overwhelming odds and to encourage pro-activity. I also wanted to share my delight in Jerome's ingenious, humorous song.

2. Of the many stories and sub-stories within this one event and of their relation to several larger issues, on which specific story thread do I want to focus?

This is always the most important, most difficult question. By returning to the question of WHY I wanted to tell the story, I was finally able to narrow my focus and settle on the specific story: the story of my hometown that developed a dangerous problem because it had grown too quickly without proper planning, of a citizen who took note of an illegal and unethical environmental policy and came up with an innovative solution (wetlands sewage treatment) and of a song that inspired a citizenry to open its eyes, fight city and state financial and legal powers and create a precedent setting change in public environmental policy.

I could now answer the other essential questions.

3. Who are the primary and secondary characters?

Immediately, I decided that the town itself was a character – with strong points, flaws, needs and desires. I then selected three very colorful, very different protagonists: Doug Elley (who first noticed the problem, persisted in bringing it before the city council and suggested the wetlands sewage system), Tracy Barnett (author of unceasing and pointed newspaper articles) and Jerome Wheeler (songwriter whose song galvanized the community). For antagonists, I

selected the city council members and engineers who put financial concerns above the environment and public health.

4. How can I make this story of a specific event in a specific place into a story of characters and actions with which anyone could relate – a story of universal experience?

The overall theme of environmental safety is already uppermost in the national political scene. To bring it to a personal level, I brought out smaller themes existing in all people's lives: a problem sneaking up on you while you are just trying to keep up with day to day life, suddenly realizing that those in power have made decisions that might negatively impact you, continually having to consider all decisions in relation to financial costs, admitting wrong decisions, deciding whether or not to stand up for your beliefs no matter the personal time or money involved.

5. What are the important episodes that move the plot along? Which specific events should I put in or leave out? What are the small moments behind the big moments?

There were so many episodes within this one event that it was difficult to decide which episodes to select to move the story forward. First, I outlined how the town's problem developed, the characters who discovered the problem, the obstacles they had to overcome to solve it and the eventual victorious resolution. Second, after determining my main purpose for telling the story (question 1), the specific thread I would follow (question 2) and the main characters (question 3), I removed all episodes and characters that did not directly relate to or support them. Therefore, I had to edit Jerome's song to reflect my editing of the larger story. Third, I highlighted the smaller moments in each episode that I selected for inclusion, focusing intently on the actions and thoughts of my main characters – as if I was momentarily looking at them through a magnifying glass in slow motion and noting each thought and action.

6. Through whose voice should the story be told?

To tie the listener directly to the characters in the Columbia, I decided to introduce the story through my own eyes, a person who had grown up in Columbia in the 1950's, 60's and 70's. I selected specific and colorful examples from my own experience of how gradually, and without most people realizing it, my town grew beyond the capacity of its sewage treatment system. Beginning the story in first person made the action immediate and real rather than something that happened in some unknown place to some unknown people.

7. To whom would I be telling the story?

One must consider the background and experience that the listener brings to the story. I initially created "The Pipeline Blues" for adult audiences in the U.S. with an exposition and plot that assumed an understanding of sewage treatment and a specific political process. When I told the story to fifth graders at Baker Demonstration School, I introduced sewage treatment through a young person's eye. I took students through my own early childhood experience with sewage management that changed as my family progressed from outhouse to indoor plumbing that emptied into a field to our eventual

move into Columbia where our sewage was added to thousands of other people's sewage. I also added brief details about political process.

8. How do I structure the story?

Because the story is partially about a song, I decided to employ music as a structural device. I highlighted an edited version of Jerome Wheeler's song in the middle of the story. I then framed the story by beginning and ending with music.

The story begins:

*This is a story about a town like so many towns all around
That grew 'til it was bursting at the seams.*

*This is a story about my hometown that went one way, then turned around and said,
"Show me a better way to be."*

*AND, this is a story about a song, written, sung,
came along and totally changed the scene.*

Do-Do-Do-Do-Do-Do-Do-Do

The story ends:

*. . . Now Columbia's got a newer sort of notion
Of what to do 'bout their do-do-do-do.*

To keep the listener engaged from start to finish, I maintained a thread of tension throughout. Rather than introducing all facets of the primary problem at the beginning of the story, I designed the story so that just as the main characters meet one challenge, an additional obstacle is revealed. The constant slight suspense keeps the listener wondering if the protagonists will ever fully overcome the problem and makes the final resolution even sweeter.

9. What style and tone should I employ?

I decided to echo the style and tone of Jerome's song. I felt that listeners would stay more engaged and hear this particular material more fully if it was presented in an inviting, inclusive, humorous, indirectly persuasive style. Rather than feeling lectured, scolded or defensive, the listener would enjoy the story and listen with open heart and mind. Thus, the story would provide a more empowering experience.

10. Color: How do I make each character and moment come alive?

After making all of the above decisions and determining that I had all the components of the story the way I wanted them, I went back over the story with a fine-toothed comb and "colorized" it with more vivid imagery, character description, humor and detail.

For example, I changed my introduction of protagonist Doug Elley as "an old hippie" to the following scene:

A quiet, unassuming man with longish, graying hair and wire rimmed glasses stood up. Eyeing him across the room, several of the city council members had the sneaking suspicion that this was a guy who lived some sort of progressive-alternative lifestyle. And, more than one of them feared that underneath his suit jacket and white shirt, there

lurked a tie-dyed t-shirt – but not one that had been purchased recently. In other words, he looked like an old hippie. Well . . . he WAS an old hippie.

Rather than describing Jerome Wheeler as “a songwriter well known around Boone County for his very distinctive Boone County accent”, I created the following:
Jerome Wheeler was somewhat of a celebrity within a certain societal grouping in Boone County because he’d had an actual top-40 hit . . . back in the 1960’s. He’d also once performed under the pseudonym Cesspool Baker with a band called the River Cowboys. So, you might say he had a natural interest in sewage and rivers.

For the young people’s version of the story, I added:

. . . and most interesting of all, he had absolutely no teeth. And, as he explained to me, sometimes his false teeth got to paining him and so, he got to leaving them in the truck and just gumming the songs as he performed.

Youngsters love this description – which is absolutely true.

In creating the scene for a pivotal moment in the story, I initially wrote: “The Coalition Resolved Against the Pipeline became so powerful that it threatened to block the city’s application for federal funding.” In creating a more vivid and humorous moment, I wrote:

The Coalition Resolved Against the Pipeline, better known as C-R-A-P, threatened to block the city’s application for federal funding. And I’ll tell you what, I think we are all very familiar with just how powerful C-R-A-P can be when it decides to block something up.

Taken out of context, this statement may seem a bit “school inappropriate”. However, within the humorous context of the story’s subject, it does not offend.

In my original version of Doug Elley’s description to the city council of the pipeline that was to carry sewage to the Missouri River and dump it directly upstream from the aquifer beds for the town’s drinking water and directly upstream from his little town of Lupus, I merely referred to the pipeline as carrying sewage. To bring home the toxicity of the contents of the sewage and to create a heightened image for listeners, I carefully researched the exact contents of the sewage and wrote:

That “guy” went on. “Now I’ve been doing a little research about what’s going into that pipeline. And, according to my research, if Columbia builds this pipeline, it is going to be dumping into the river each day -- about 2 and a half miles upstream (that’s about 30 minutes, river time) from Lupus -- 13 and a half million gallons of chlordane, chromium, cadmium, copper, nickel, lead, mercury, zinc, cyanide and arsenic . . . oh, and human waste.

I carefully selected toxins with names that were unfamiliar as well as very familiar to most listeners.

“Colorizing” the story is like putting icing on a cake. It adds deliciousness to substance, bringing out the flavor.

Permissions and Legalities

When telling a story of an actual event, one must double-check all facts and take extra steps. For legal and ethical reasons, I contacted each character in the story and obtained verbal permission for my characterization of them (even the antagonists). In addition, I gained permission from Jerome Wheeler to use his song and edit it as needed. Finally, I contacted an attorney to ensure that I was in no way slandering any individual, organization or corporation mentioned in the story.

Epilogue

Since 2001, this story about Jerome's song and it's impact on Columbia, Missouri has gone on to inspire public policy and environmental action in other communities. Indeed, Jerome's indirectly persuasive song and the subsequent story have been much more effective than any stack of statistics could possibly be!

Materials and Resources Regarding "The Pipeline Blues":

1. Horner, Beth. The Pipeline Blues, CD, 2001
Available at www.BethHorner.com
2. Horner, Beth. "The Pipeline Blues: A Tale of Environmental Triumph" in The Scenic Route: Stories From the Heartland, Indiana Historic Society Press, Indianapolis, Indiana, 2007.
3. Wheeler, Jerome. "Talkin' Columbia City Pipeline Blues" on River Cowboys by Jerome Wheeler & Friends, CD, Blue Coaster Records, Columbia, Missouri, 2006

About Storyteller Beth Horner

Storyteller Beth Horner is a former librarian, having worked at the Yale University and Champaign, Illinois Public Libraries. A festival favorite across the country since 1983, Beth has performed at the National Storytelling Festival, served on the National Storytelling Association's Board of Directors and been awarded the National Storytelling Network's Circle of Excellence Oracle Award. She had conducted workshops and performances for the American Library Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. Beth delights in performing in libraries and schools and in conducting writing and story performance residencies for students. Her story, "The Pipeline Blues" was recorded for *Live From National Geographic* and used as a basis for her work on narrative with NASA engineers and educators. In addition to her touring storytelling work, Beth recently worked with the Johnson Space Center's Story Mining project, collecting stories from the scientists behind the Apollo Space Missions.