

Storied Wisdom of Stompin' Tom and Stetson Gene

by Ralph C. Martin

Within the last few weeks, we've lost two enthusiastic raconteurs of rural Canada. Stompin' Tom Connors was known as a poet of the land. Eugene Whelan, with his Whelanese parlance, was anything but a poet. He admitted that "Canada has two official languages and I don't speak none of them." Nevertheless, they both made it clear with their lives and words that rural Canadians have every right to stand proud.

Pieces of plywood, with hollowed impressions, are testament to Tom's rhythmic stomping on the stages of Canada. Similarly, the big green Stetson served notice that Stetson Gene was on the scene. Tom sported a Stetson too, but his was always black.

I met Whelan once when I was a student in Ottawa and he was still Canada's Minister of Agriculture. On my way in the door to hear him speak, he politely asked me a few questions and I shyly responded. I was shocked 20 minutes later, during his talk, as I realized his eyes, jowls and, in fact, his whole sun-toughened face was focused on my seat as he said "Ralph Martin will agree with me." Goodness knows what I might have agreed to but I dared not let my attention drift after that.

Stompin' Tom was known for his succinct lines to sketch identifying moments of our lives. He reflected a realistic interpretation of ordinary people, in particular places, as we tapped, smiled and hummed along. We didn't know we needed a quintessential Canadian bard until he relentlessly stomped his way into our hearts and collective consciousness.

Although resolute about their positions, Tom and Gene were resilient with intentions to overcome. In Tom's words, "Let's get to it and at it and at it and to it / you gotta tune your attitude in / if you don't get at it when you get to it / you won't get to it to get at it again."

Stetson Gene and Stompin' Tom both grew up in poverty. Six year old Gene, in the middle of a family of nine, lost his father at the beginning of the depression in Essex County, Ontario. The family auctioned their prized Holstein herd at a time when payments took years. However, his mother, with a Mother's Allowance, kept her brood together.

Tom was an orphan at an early age and until age 13, he provided labour on a PEI potato farm and had many other tough jobs, thereafter. His lines, “Your bed’s all ready on the bunkhouse floor / If it gets a little chilly, you can close the door,” sound authentic.

Whelan, in his book of the same name, describes how he was fired up in a 1983 speech about the poverty he was observing in Mexico. “Don’t you think they have eyes that can see you as you drive by in your big limousines or as they watch you on TV? Don’t you think they’d like just a little bit of what you’ve got? Don’t you think they’ve got any feelings?” Later in his book he notes that “if rich countries spent 5 times what they spend on foreign aid, that wouldn’t be one tenth of what they spend now on arms.” Poetry or not, his clarion message resonates with the Occupy movement today.

Gene, ever the promoter, gave Gorbachev, a former farm combine operator, a Stetson during their 1983 Canadian tour. The two Ag Ministers liked each other. Along with the hat came advice about how the Soviets would never feed themselves with state control of the Soviet food system. I don’t know how much influence Whelan (stories from his neighbours aside) had on the evolving ideas in Gorbachev’s mind about Perestroika and Glasnost. From my personal experience, I know Gorbie would have been expected to listen up. Gorbachev had time to observe the back roads of Canada on that trip while listening to the candid commentary of a congenial champion of family farms. At Gene’s farm, Gorbachev expressed surprise at the informality during their country-style beef and chicken dinner.

Tom would have told him “Well it’s alright to dance and dine / by candle light with fancy wine / but when we can’t afford to roam / we’ll have a shindig here at home / and dance around to country sounds of old flat topped guitar”

Recently an Ideas program on CBC noted that wisdom includes the 3 traits of affecting, reflecting and intelligence. Stompin’ Tom and Stetson Gene qualify. They could feel what ordinary and extraordinary people feel. They took time to roll around thoughts, feelings and observations. And although they both had folksy demeanors, they were sharp as tacks. Thankfully, they revealed and shared their very selves.

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