

Second-Best Haircut

June 30, 2018

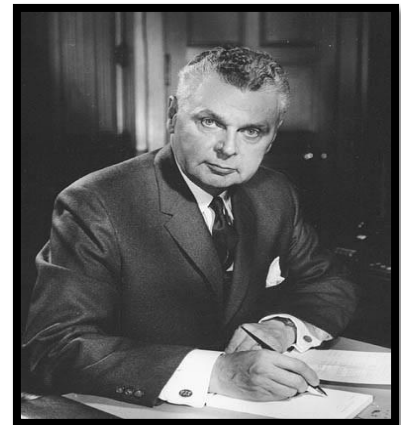
Rocky Mountain House, AB

Grandpa Billie cut my hair on his sun porch when I was about five years old. It was the best haircut I ever had. Not the style, Grandpa only did one haircut – short on top, shorter on the sides - it was the *Grandpa experience* that made it special. He talked about sports, and the weather, and the birds he had seen that morning, while I sat on a tall stool and looked out over the prairie; my hair clippings drifting in the breeze.

Grandpa used mechanical clippers, occasionally they would snag a hair and pull it out. But I didn't mind because it was Grandpa - he told stories that were better than any books, while he clipped and snipped.

At one point Grandpa made a political reference, my first while sitting in a barber chair; he called the Prime Minister "*John Beef-n-Bacon*". I am not sure if it meant he approved or disapproved of PM Diefenbaker, but it was the first of a long line of political commentary from barbers.

As he was finishing, Grandpa counted my ears and told me; "*any haircut that ends with two is a good one*" – words I continue to live by!



I could have sat there all week, but other customers were waiting. Grandpa brushed me off with a little whisk broom and told me, "*You can join the army now!*"

I remember that haircut every time I sit in a barber chair.

Today almost sixty years later, I had my second-best haircut - in Rocky Mountain House. We are staying at the cabin for a few days, and I was feeling a bit shaggy. I knew the barbershop would be busy on Saturday morning of a long weekend, but I needed a summer *buzz*, and I was willing to wait.

I enjoy going to the barber. Sitting in an elevated swivel chair, shooting the breeze with a pro has primal qualities. You can't get a real haircut at the mall – you will come out with less hair, but that is only 20% of the experience. You must go to an authentic barbershop for the full effect

– the kind with a blood and bandages pole out front, and no sink. The barber should be over 50, own his own shop, and he (yes “*he*”) should enjoy a game of verbal volleyball.

Cactus Jack fits all those criteria. Jack’s shop is a block off Rocky main street with ample parking, and a view of the mountains through the cracked front window.

I knew I was in the right place as soon as I crossed the threshold – the shop was packed with people whose hair was the colour of intelligence. Jack was holding court at the first chair, surrounded by an eclectic assortment of paraphernalia. He hesitated his barber duties as I walked in and temporarily became receptionist: “*it’ll be about 30 minutes - but the chairs are comfortable*”, Jack said, through a wide smile - under a very wide nose.

I did a quick head count and calculated that either Jack was expecting an assistant, or I was going to be here for more than half an hour - there were a lot of ears to be lowered ahead of me. Either way, it appeared to be the kind of place I could hang out for a while. I sat down and absorbed my surroundings.

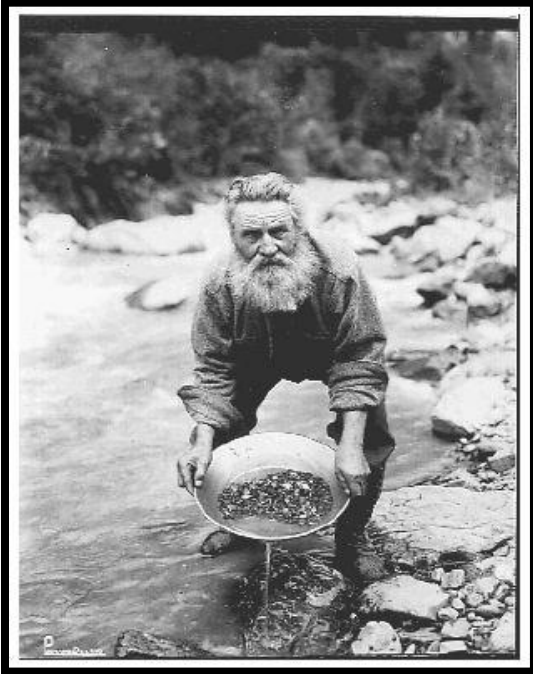
Where to begin?

I’ll start with cacti - *Cactus Jack* obviously has a thing about desert flora. There were dozens of varieties of cacti, all looking like fish out of water, as desert plants do in a cold climate. Most were flourishing, in a pale languid kind of way. One spindly spine had reached the ceiling so somebody (presumably Jack) had cut a hole in a ceiling tile so it could continue its hopeless journey to the sun.



The black bear in the middle of the room was an attention grabber. It is hard to miss an aggressive-looking omnivore, glowering down at you in the waiting room. I tried to remember; if a bear attacks, are you supposed to play dead, or make yourself seem bigger? I couldn’t recall the proper procedure so presumably, had this bear been alive, I would have been lunch.

There was gold panning equipment for sale at the back of the shop. Pans, sluice boxes, sieves.... most barbers offer hair conditioner, shaving supplies, etc. – not Cactus Jack!



I was trying to keep one ear peeled to hear the barber/customer conversations, at the same time take in my surroundings and observe my fellow customers.

I have never done any psychedelic drugs, but I imagine the effects are much the same as a trip to Cactus Jack's:

- *"I got that scar on my head from a bullet fragment while I was in Kabul."*
- Jack has a kiddie corral in the back but the toddler who just came in is playing with live ammunition from the display case.
- Customer waiting beside me: *"That is a 50-caliber round – just like the ones they used to kill those terrorists in Iraq"*.
- Jack is wearing three belts, one to hold up his pants, one to hold his scissors holster....I have no idea

what the third one is for? Insurance?

- *"I know it is a 50 caliber because we used them in the Reserve. The ones with the fabric connectors are for machine guns. You can take out an aircraft with one of those...blah...blah....."*
- *"Liam! Don't poke the bear's eyes!"*
- *"Madam, you have very predictable hair – I know a person by the way their hair behaves – you are a very reliable person."*
- Husband: *"Ta' Hell, she is!" Ha!*
- There are paper money bills from every country in the world tacked to the pole holding up the roof – and monopoly money, and a phony \$1,000,000-dollar bill, and Canadian Tire money and
- *"Did I tell you I was in the Reserve?We blah....blah...blah....."*
- A gold miner is in line for his annual haircut: *"Just the hair. Don't trim my soup strainer"*.
- He entered the shop looking like a gorilla and left looking like a balding gorilla.
- That old cadger shuffling in must be 95+.....!
- *"Do you want my seat; I am just about ready to sit in the barber chair?"*
- *"No, I'm better at standing – I hope that bear isn't hungry."*
- *"You have a well-developed solar panel on the back here, Roger, but your hair is healthy otherwise."*
- *"Reserve....blah....blah...Reserve... blah....."*
- Cadger to Reserve Guy: *"I was in Europe from '41 to '45. We saw some action when the Germans bombed London – that was rough. So, you were in the Reserve – ever see any action?"*
- *"No."*

My turn came but I wasn't ready; I was having way too much fun in the lobby. I asked the nonagenarian-veteran if he wanted to go first but he declined. I get the feeling this wasn't his first trip to *Jack's* and shorter hair was not his main objective for coming. Fair enough....

I took my place on the cathedra - my 15 Minutes of Fame!

I am in the centre ring of this circus now, and everybody is tuned in to hear what I have to say (except Reserve guy; who's entire world is located somewhere between his right ear and his left).

- *I see you have a hatchet there by the mirror – I hope you don't intend to use it.*
- *I could, it's very sharp.*
- *Maybe just a trim...I like my scalp where it is....*
- *OK, I'll use the clippers this time – it's your first visit. Where are you from?*
- *Millarville. We are running the oldest horserace in Canada there tomorrow - 113 years!*
- *I didn't know horses lived that long...Ha!.... I go by Millarville often....I have a friend at the Pass.*
- *#22 is the most beautiful drive on the planet – but I am a little biased.*
- *I never take #2 – there is so much to see off the beaten path.*
- *The Road Less Traveled.....*
- *Yup.*
 - *Look up there at my girlfriend's picture.*
- *I lifted my gaze to an image of the ugliest creature I have ever seen, as Jack checked the level of my sideburns.*
 - *You are a lucky man, Jack.*
 - *She was beautiful when she was young.*



We had lost our audience. I don't have a piece of shrapnel in my head, my hair is not remarkable in any way, and I have never been in the Military Reserve. Everybody in the shop had diverted their attention elsewhere, so I had Jack to myself.

I had a déjà vu with Grandpa in it, as Jack and I rambled on. He dusted me off with a little broom and the haircut ended – way too soon.

I gave Jack \$25 for the second-best haircut I ever had, and another \$5 for the entertainment.

**I counted my ears as I left the shop.
Two! This is going to be a very good day.**