

McGowan's Retreat

Rob Smith



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Cover design and photograph © Drinian Press

Drinian Press, LLC

P.O. Box 63

Huron, Ohio 44839

Visit our Web site at: www.DrinianPress.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009902709

ISBN-10: 0-9820609-3-9
ISBN-13: 978-0-9820609-3-3

Printed in the United States of America

Chapter One

Bendy Ditch

For most of the year, the Bendy Ditch gurgles quietly and doesn't carry enough water to officially make Elkhorn, South Dakota a backwater settlement. It does, however, lend its name to almost every business in the small town. Though difficult to find, Davis McGowan was on a mission, and he had managed to locate the elusive settlement of Elkhorn. It was marked on a road map that he bought at a busy truck stop just west of Sioux Falls.

"Here it is," he said to his wife. Beth was taking her turn at the wheel on the long drive between Dayton, Ohio and Bozeman, Montana.

"Don't tell me that you've found the Garden of Eden?" she queried with a soft laugh.

"Better that that," said Davis, "I have actually found Elkhorn, South Dakota which lies at the very crossroads of paradise. No, I take that back; Elkhorn doesn't appear to be a crossroads to anywhere at all. There's one road that goes in, and it just stops. The map doesn't actually name the famous Bendy Ditch, but there is a twisty blue line that runs east into another line that's marked 'Oak,' which must be a river or creek."

“So the place really exists?” added Beth.

“Apparently it does, and it is just where Shelly said it would be. If we get off I-90 at Presho, we’ll be, maybe, fifteen miles from checking out her story. I’m telling you that it doesn’t look like much on this map.”

When Davis found the small dot of a town, they were driving past an exit for Montrose, and Presho was still over an hour away (maybe an hour-and-a-half if the speed limit signs meant anything). Even before they found it on the map, they had resolved to make the out-of-the-way trek if only to test the reality of a tale that seemed farfetched.

Their friend, Shelly Martin, had been the pastor of the Elkhorn Methodist Church for eleven years. Towards the end of that time she married Jerry Ferguson, a Presbyterian minister in Miller. This was a second marriage for both. They had each lost their spouses through long illnesses.

Both having recently lost a spouse, it only seemed natural that the Methodist pastor at Miller would introduce Jerry to Shelly. Despite the geographical awkwardness of their dating relationship, their cautious courtship outlasted the paralysis of their individual grief. They secretly dated well-away from their home turf, and met often for dinner at a restaurant in Pierre. When each announced their engagement to their respective congregations, everyone was taken by sur-

prise. Everyone, that is, except the minister friend who had introduced them. The Rev. Jack Warren enjoyed the coup that the three had pulled. "Imagine," he said, "three pastors from small towns knowing something before the grapevine has a chance to invent its own retelling of the story."

...excerpt from Rob Smith's *McGowan's Retreat*