

# IS IT SKILL? OR JUST DUMB LUCK?

I've had this movie unreeling in my skull on and off for the last few years. In it, a reporter keeps showing up at a story the instant it breaks. A shooting, a bombing, a hijacking—one unreal event after another—he's there. Late in the film the guy realizes that he's causing the news. So *that's* how he snaps all those Pulitzer Prize photos.

It's a great film—Oscar material. Maybe. I wish. Still . . .

In putting together this month's *RM*, I kept getting the feeling that I was living that film.

Picture this. *RM* Guy is driving from Glasgow toward Colstrip to try to take the one photo that will do justice to the vast, wild, stunning landscape in the middle of Montana.

But he has to deal with one cinematic setback after another. Every time he stops to shoot the wildflowers or the landscape, somebody stops beside him to help. It's what called in the biz, the surreal part of the movie. The scene is deserted, the road clear for miles both ways, but as he steps out, somebody from nowhere stops from out of . . . well, nowhere.

Even a young woman—she keeps 50 yards away, to be sure—but she hollers, "Are you all right?" *RM* Guy thinks, *This has to be a movie*. This'd never happen in California—except in the movies.

At last he gets lucky. He gets a flat tire. How is that lucky? *RM* Guy gets to meet two guys from a road crew, who are at his car before he can get the trunk open. They change the tire for him and will not even let him help. He knows they will not accept payment, so he offers to buy them a beer. They refuse even that.

He arrives at a tire shop near dusk, limping up on three tires and that Frisbee they call a spare tire. The shop is closed. It's been closed for an hour, according to the sign. As he starts to pull back into traffic, he looks in his rear view. Another Samaritan from out of nowhere is in the mirror. The guy hollers, "You need help?" It's Tire-Shop-Guy on the way home late. He re-opens the shop, repairs the flat and refuses to be paid until *RM* Guy forces the money on him.

*Where do you find people like this?* *RM* Guy asks.

It's rhetorical. You find them in Montana, of course.

Okay, so you're thinking, *What's the big deal? How are those little incidents worthy of a movie?*

Let me finish.

Couple weeks earlier, at Fort Benton for the River Festival, *RM* Guy is shooting photos and shooting the breeze with artists, soaking up the ambience of "Art on the Levee."

One 16-inch sculpture, "Cheyenne Dog Soldier," is a brave with a lance wearing this complex headdress of 400 raven and owl feathers. While moving in for a close-up of the brave's face, all of half an inch tall, the artist, Steven E. Lillegard from Stanford, says, "The model for that sculpture is here today from Oregon, giving an interpretive



program."

The model is Michael Bad Hand Terry, dressed in native garb, painted, animated, superb. And the sculpture is an incredible likeness.

After Terry's done talking, *RM* Guy asks Terry, "Do you have that headdress? Would you mind putting it on for a picture?"

Terry says *yes* and *no*. You can judge for yourself how well the artist did by checking out the two photos.



As for *RM* Guy, no skill whatever, just pure dumb luck.

Witness.

Back in May *RM* Guy is noodling around an idea for a story on Fort Peck Dam near Glasgow, maybe taking a photo that will recall the famous first Life Magazine cover shot by Margaret Bourke-White.

He sees a woman taking a photo of an older woman at the Interpretive Center. He just can't keep his mouth shut. "You'd better take that shot again," he says. "Your camera strap was falling down over the lens."

He meets Lois Lonnquist. She grew up in a Fort Peck boomtown. She's writing a book about the dam. So she's a story in this month's *RM*, page 7.

Thinking, *Not bad*, he drives up to the spillway and shoots a few pictures. An older gentleman is looking over the gates, which haven't spilled water in years due to the prolonged drought.

The two men exchange polite hellos, and *RM* Guy walks toward his car.

The gentleman calls after him, "I helped build this dam."

*RM* Guy is in a hurry. He doesn't want to be rude about it, but at its peak the project employed just shy of 10,000 men. So he says something innocuous, like, "Nice dam."

And the gentleman says, "I was in that slide of 1938, you know."

No, *RM* Guy didn't know, but he isn't stupid. This gentleman is a story.

He learns the man's name is Norman Beaudry, who simply was not meant to die on Sept. 22, 1938, although

God knows he should have drowned or been crushed.

*RM* Guy gets a photo, and he puts Norman's story into the magazine on page 9, Enjoy my good luck.

