

Forging a New Frontier
by Karen Chace ©
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The call came a week before Christmas. I was contacted by Anne, Vice President of a local Massachusetts company; plans for their 75th anniversary celebration were underway and they wanted a storyteller to write and perform their story. She shared some of the details and their vision for the evening. She wanted it to be fun, upbeat and entertaining. I was intrigued. I can do this!

Then I asked the million-dollar question. “When is the celebration taking place?” “In two weeks,” came the reply. The answer rocked me back on my heels. Only two weeks to interview, research, write and learn the piece? Can I really do this? I was doubtful and shared my concerns. She assured me the employees would be writing letters about their corporate experiences. They were compiling a book to present to the founders’ sons during the celebration; she would forward their letters to assist me in creating the piece. My mind ping-ponged back again. Okay, yes, I can do this!

Then I watched the first week slip away. With the holiday rush upon us, the letters arrived at a painstakingly slow pace. The letters offered professional snapshots of the business and I discovered a common thread, the respect employees at every tier held for the founders and each other. Yet critical elements were missing — there were no personal vignettes that would bring this story to life. What were the founders like beyond their office walls? During the past decades, surely there were some light-hearted moments, challenges faced, tales of camaraderie, and kindnesses that are the heart of what makes a company not only succeed, but flourish for 75 years.

I read the letters again, searching for something to latch onto and found buried within them, two teasers that begged further explanation. One person wrote, “I remember the time the roof collapsed.” Another reminisced, “I remember the nickname Speedo.” There had to be stories behind those casual, off-hand remarks!

With one week left, I pleaded with Anne for more information. “Put me in touch with those who know the timeline of the company, both professional and personal.” I compiled a list of questions and sent them to those who submitted the letters, hoping they would respond with some personal memories.

The next day the president of the company phoned. We talked for hours; he shared a detailed timeline from the company’s inception during the Great Depression to the present day. I inquired about the roof collapse and found out it was indeed a great story! I questioned him about the mysterious Speedo as well. Laughingly, he admitted he was the owner of that mysterious

moniker; his company cohorts bestowed it upon him after a hard-fought swimming race at the company picnic long before he carried the title of president.

Conversations with other employees followed; I cautiously prodded for personal tidbits and the stories began to flow. I soon realized that while the interview questions were important, the best tools were my own two ears. As I listened intently and let them freely talk, rare gems in the form of memories began to fall from their lips, reminiscent of the folktale “Diamonds and Toads.”

Once the pieces were gathered, the question of how to frame the story came into play. Anne wanted to keep it light and funny, but the president was very specific about the many important names and events he wanted mentioned. With less than a week to spare, I felt like I was lost in the woods without a compass.

I kept trying to find a way to give it a folktale feel; I did not want it to be merely a recitation of facts. Finally, a single sentence in one of the letters sparked an idea. Years ago, an important client offered the owners another business to represent, but only on one condition— cease working with their competitor or they would take their business elsewhere. The fateful scene was described as “The day two men came in wearing black hats...” Instantly, a Tall Tale with a western theme popped into my head. But how could I tie it all together?

Since the company began in 1932, I researched that year; it was one of the worst years of the Great Depression. I had my opening! I juxtaposed the difficulties of the Depression with the hardships of the Wild West, comparing the founders to cowboys in search of new frontiers. I continued to research, gathering facts and jargon that would link the western theme with the business story and found that cowboys lived by their own set of unwritten rules known as the Code of the West.

The Code was a perfect analogy for the relationship the founders forged with their employees and clients through the years.

- Welcome strangers
- Honesty is absolute
- Your word is your bond
- Always help someone in need
- Live by the Golden Rule

Using the timeline provided by the president, I separated the story into decades, weaving the important names and client information with comical vignettes gathered from the interviews.

I completed the story with only one day to spare, a day devoted to practicing the tale I would deliver the next evening. The room was overflowing with people dressed in their finest as the

Boston skyline shimmered in the distance. An overwhelming nervousness washed over me. How would the story be received?, But as I began, conversations stopped, eyes focused and their body language spoke the silent words we all love to hear, “I am listening.” At the end of the performance, the greatest compliment was spoken silently as well — when the Chairman of the Board rose to shake my hand, there were tears in his eyes.

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