

# The Killdeer

## And Other Stories

### From the Farming Life

Even after dark, if you are quiet and attentive, you can hear a Killdeer far off. Sandbars, mud flats and grazed fields are where you find them. They are common place. So much so, that you might miss them if not for the unique sound they make as they fly overhead, or dart back and forth on the ground, as if they are wondering which way to go next. So it is with Michael Cotter's stories. They are like a comfortable pair of slippers. Not flashy at all, but each time you put them on and walk in them, you are so glad you did. They are so ordinary, but the way they wrap around your soul surprises you. And like slippers you thought you'd never buy, Michael's stories surprise you. Even though they are not flashy, energetic or dramatic in ways we have come to expect in this digital age, they are grounded in universal truths, with characters that are timeless. They provide us with a sense of memory, wisdom and peace that celebrates the human spirit, and revels in the common man, woman, boy and girl that is in us all. When Michael tells his stories, it's as if time stands still. We are reminded of who we really are ... down deep ... after the television is turned off, the radio is silenced, and we have put our egos on the shelf to rest a spell.

—**Rex Ellis**, Director of Museum Programs, Smithsonian Institution, a Circle of Excellence storyteller of the National Storytelling Network and Author

“When Michael Cotter shares a tale, you can see the sun rising over fields. You can hear the cattle chorus and feel the cool mud of the barnyard beneath your feet. Michael Cotter brings spirituality to observations of daily life.” —**Judith Black**, Circle of Excellence Storyteller and Recording Artist, Boston, MA area

Photo by Rochester Post Bulletin staff



In 1984 Michael posed for his first professional storytelling picture. It was under this windmill in the 1930s that the hoboes shared their stories.

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And Other Stories  
From the Farming Life

## Michael Cotter

Honored by his peers as a Circle of Excellence Storyteller  
of the National Storytelling Network



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*Dedicated*

*to my older brother Dick*

*who challenged me to be more brave*

*than I wanted, and to dream. I didn't have a chance to tell him*

*that he was my hero.*

## *Acknowledgements*

Hillary Clinton once said, “It takes a village to raise a child.” The same is true about a book of personal stories that come from my community. The first of those who helped me on my journey include my family: Dad who found humor in unusual places, and my sons, Marty and Tom, who took responsibility for the farm when I travelled to tell stories. Storytelling festival supporters like Mike Bednar, Joe and Martha Ott and Betty Benner, somehow believed I could be an artistic director .

Good media people at KSMQ, KAUS, and WHO—as well as regional newspapers—connected me with a wider audience. Most of all, I salute and thank the community of neighbors in and around Austin, Minnesota, who supported me and let me tell their stories nationwide.

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Photo by Agnes Boss



Michael and Bev Cotter

I thought that my stories could never be written in my voice. Then I met Beverly. Her German logic, my Irish way, and our mutual love of words blended. With that understanding and trust came a dream. She questioned, “Why can’t these stories be written?” Then, she picked up her pencil and asked, “Michael, will you tell me a story?” Thanks to her determination and talent, my stories will live on in the written word.

—Michael Cotter



## *A Farmer and a Storyteller*

“Cut out those damn stories and get some work done around here!” That was my most dreaded message from my dad. Our farm was a livestock farm and it was pretty labor intensive in the early years. There were two or three hired men around all of the time. Some were hoboes who drifted in looking for food and work and shelter, and others were young people coming from farms where they needed to get out and earn their own living. They lived in a bunkhouse between the house and the barn, and they ate their meals in the house with the family. Mealtime was a time of relaxation and that was when the more humorous side of my dad’s personality would come through. He could be quite entertaining.

Our farm was a mile in every direction from any other farm, so there were not any neighbor kids to play with. My brother was older, a hard worker and very quiet, but we were still good friends. I really liked animals. Even though they were going to market eventually, they were my pets. Except for the

school year, that was the extent of my companions.

My dad was fifty-five years older than myself, and very much the manager of that farm. He believed that everyone should be doing work that matched his size and age. I was always interested in people and wanted to get to know them, and I guess I liked to talk. Dad would often interrupt me with that, “Cut out those stories...” statement, and it always made me feel a little put down and embarrassed.

If I would complain to him or be offended, his way of handling it would be to say, “Mike, you’re a nice young fella, but you are such a damn old hen of a man.” He meant I should not take insults or put-downs personally, I should just be able to let them roll off my back.

His announcement reminded me of my place: that I had a responsibility for the well-being of the farm: that I was not like those other men; that my dad was not a young man, and it was up to me to assume some of the responsibility. My job was not to interfere with their work, but to use my energy to sort of manage and help us be more efficient.

We traveled very little when I was young, and I loved hearing the stories of these people whose lives were so very different from mine, and the routes they had traveled before we met. Some were war veterans—and they were often alcoholics. I had to learn to not be afraid, but to stay away from them when they were angry. Yet, they wanted to share their stories. Some were just a few years older than me, on their own for the first time in their life, trying to find their way in this big world.

The alcoholics at the end of a drunk were quite pitiful

before they could get their façade, their shield, back up. I sympathized with their pain because it seemed they really had no future. I thought my dad just didn't seem to notice the hurt feelings, or the disappointments, or the failures.

An example of that was a situation involving a man named Hank. We were putting up hay on a Saturday and it was getting close to evening. Hank wanted to get up town. We knew if he did, he would be gone for two or three days. A rain was coming and the hay needed to be put up in the barn to be protected. One more load had to be brought in from the field, but Hank was headed for the bunkhouse to get ready to go to town. Dad grabbed him and told him to get back out in the field.

I was maybe eight or nine years old at that time. It was my job to drive the horses and pull the hay loader, and Hank was to load the hay. Both of us knew how to work well together.

When we went back to work, Hank was so angry that he threw the hay right on top of me as I was trying to drive the horses. I was afraid he would push me off the wagon. Later, we had to stop and rest a while and put down the sling rope. Hank's anger was so great that all of a sudden he looked at me, furiously, and said, "I am better than this! I am better than this!"

Then, without any warning, he started talking about fighting in France and sleeping among those dead bodies; and getting up in the morning, picking up his gun and going back into battle.

I started seeing that Hank had known a life that I had

never dreamed of, and understanding, maybe a little better, why he needed to get away from life for just a little while. As time went on he started telling me more about his life. I think I knew these men in a way that my dad did not. More likely, Dad felt that his position required him to keep some distance between himself and hired hands.

I have fond memories of summer evenings, when the milking had been finished and darkness was settling. The men would be sitting under the windmill that was pumping cold water across the milk cans to cool them. Maybe there was a little fire started to keep the mosquitoes away. These men, with all their different backgrounds and life experiences, would gather and start sharing their stories. I was just fascinated with the world that they knew that I did not.



These stories were all inside of me. When I was introduced to the storytelling world, I knew I had to be a part of it. Yet, I never believed that my stories would ever be done on stage. When I started meeting with storytellers, I would tell about something that happened on the farm and someone would say, “That would make a good story.” I was shocked because it was just a little incident.

When we would meet for a weekend of storytelling there was so much affirmation. I would drive home with all of these things rolling through my head and my mind would be whipping. One time, I planted corn most of the night, got

up the next morning after very little sleep and headed to a storytelling weekend. I wasn't a bit tired and I knew something crazy was happening.

I began to realize that all my encounters, whether with people, animals, or machines, were potential stories. I began to see stories everywhere. The first story I told was about a little bird trying to protect her nest. I was amazed at how people listened and then shared their stories with me. Then I remembered my dad in his old age, and the old dog that was a good friend, but didn't understand Dad's sense of humor. Dad would sit on his tail, pretending it was an accident. Toby would get furious! Then, a few moments later, they would be making up and Toby would be licking his face. It was this same sense of humor that was so very helpful as we worked together when I was taking over the farm. Dad had the ability to turn a heated situation into one of laughter. It helped to ease our generational conflict.

My stories of family and farm have taken me to places I never dreamed possible. I was so surprised the day my hired man came running out of the shop, hollering, "The Smithsonian's on the phone!"

Now I have the chance to relate those stories as I remember them, and they call me a "storyteller."



## *The Killdeer*

My name is Michael Cotter. I am a third generation farmer from Austin, Minnesota, where the land is flat and the soil is black. Many of those farms have been in the same families for a hundred years, and ours is one of those farms.

This started changing rapidly in the 1960s, and I think it was because of the introduction of the one hundred horsepower tractor. Prior to this time, the tractors ranged from twenty to sixty “horse.” The biggest tractor on our farm was a fifty five horsepower machine. Then they came out with the one hundred horse, and where this doesn’t sound like a big change, those wheels had to be doubled to utilize the power.

Very shortly, we were introduced to the two hundred horse, and then the three hundred horse, and even the four hundred. There didn’t seem to be any limit to the power, because these were the four-wheel drives. Each tractor had eight large tires standing as tall as a man.

These large machines needed large fields, and so

drainage ditches were dug in that flat, black land. A drainage ditch is a canal ten to fourteen feet deep, where the water runs only in the bottom two or three feet in the dry season. Three feet below the ditch bank, tile lines were laid like spider webs that fanned out into the low swamp area, and the fields became larger; but many others disappeared. Other changes happened at this time. As those fields grew in size, whole farms disappeared.

If you were to drive west of Austin on Interstate 90 and look to the south, you'd see a hundred acres of very flat land. That's part of our farm. When I was a little boy, my brother and I would trap muskrats in the winter for spending money. One day I stood on what is now that field, trying to count the muskrat houses. There were so many I could not count them all.

The story I want to tell you is about one spring day, while operating a four-wheel drive tractor, I was pulling a thirty-five foot wide disc along the edge of this ditch bank, where many little stones had been brought up from deep in that earth.

Ahead of my tractor, was a bird called a killdeer. These are little land birds with small bodies sitting on top of quite long legs, and when they run they almost look like they are floating over the land.

Killdeer have a couple of special characteristics. First, their cry sounds a lot like their name. But the most noticeable trait is the way they defend their nest, which is just eggs placed among those little rocks, eggs that match the stones perfectly.



The killdeer protects her nest with drama. She acts crippled, and with a wing dragging and looking very helpless, she tries to lead the enemy away from her nest.

This spring morning, the bird in front of that big tractor began her familiar drama. First she dragged one wing, fluttering just in front of the eight big, rolling tires, trying to lead the tractor and big disc off to the side and away from her nest. Of course, with these big machines, there is nothing to do but keep going, even knowing that the nest must be near. Soon she's back again, more crippled than before. Both wings are dragging now, almost tumbling along the ground, barely staying clear of the eight big tires that are steadily rolling. Again, I have no choice but to keep going.

The bird comes a third time. This time it's different. Like life itself, the pretending is now over. She's going to take her stand. With a piercing screech I hear above the sound of the engine, she stands her ground in front of that big rig.

I slammed in the clutch and pulled the kill switch. When that big diesel engine stopped its roar, I was shocked at the silence. It became so still. I was able to hear the water running in the drainage ditch. I was even aware of the birds singing along the ditch bank. I looked down on that killdeer standing so tiny in front of the tractor. She was just looking at me and she, too, had become silent. She wasn't even as tall as the rubber lugs on those eight, big tires.

Because there was no one to make fun of me, or to question why, I said to that bird, "You have got to show me where it is." That's when the magic happened. It was like

she understood. There was just a moment's hesitation, and she moved off of the corner of my tractor, spread her wings, and sat down. Defying her instincts, she showed me her nest. I restarted that diesel engine, and with the hydraulic lever brought that disc up on its transport wheels. With almost a foot of clearance, that machine rolled over the top of the bird.

Then, returning those sharp disc blades to the earth by means of the hydraulic, I opened the throttle and that black, diesel smoke rolled. Soon those wheels were moving at six miles an hour again.

I turned and looked back through the dust. I could see that square piece of untilled soil and barely spot the lone bird sitting there. I knew then that our time together was over.

