

BOMB TRACK

WITH ITS LOVE FOR THE GAME AND LARGER-THAN-LIFE CHARACTERS – INCLUDING THEIR AFFINITY FOR PROFANITY – FLIN FLON IS A ONE-OF-A-KIND HOCKEY TOWN

BY RONNIE SHUKER

IN THE WANING DAYS of the pandemic, THN's editor at large Ronnie Shuker embarked on an eight-month cross-Canada road trip in search of all things hockey. In his trusty four-wheeled friend 'Gumpy,' named after Hall of Fame goalie Gump Worsley, Shuker ventured from coast to coast to coast, through all 13 provinces and territories, visiting more than 50 hockey towns in the country. He played, watched and talked about the game with all the puckheads he met along the way, from pros and semi-pros to beer-league veterans and fans. The following excerpt is taken from his book *The Country and the Game: 30,000 Miles of Hockey Stories*, published by Sutherland House Books in Toronto and set for release on Oct. 15. The excerpt picks up Shuker as he's making his way through the Prairies on his way to Flin Flon, Man., home of the legendary Bombers and their unique – and talkative – cult following.

PHOTO BY RONNIE SHUKER

I am now far enough north in Saskatchewan that it makes sense to turn northeast back across the Manitoba border to Flin Flon, named after Josiah Flintabbatey Flonatin, a fictional character in a novel by British author J. E. Preston Muddock. Flin Flon is a town of talkers. But it is a certain kind of talk that only happens here. It covers all topics but converges into one. History, tradition, people, the mine, the weather, music, sex – every conversa-

tion leads to hockey. They call it Bomber Talk.

I drive past the large statue of "Flinty" that greets people coming into town, and then another of him riding a submarine on the eastern edge of Ross Lake. I check into my motel and drive to the old Whitney Forum, built by Flin Flon's main employer, Hudson Bay Mining & Smelting.

When I arrive, the Bombers have just wrapped up their morning skate ahead of their game that night against the

Weyburn Red Wings. Players collect their shoes from the cubbyholes outside the dressing room (no footwear is allowed inside). Coach and general manager Mike Reagan, clad in a Bombers jumpsuit, comes out and leads me to one of the lounges.

"It's a lifestyle, it's a culture here, the Bombers," he says. "We'll have probably 700 to 800 people here tonight, and there are Bomber fans that don't come to the games but they

follow it intensely, whether listening on the radio or just talk at the mine."

Flin Flon so self-identifies with its hockey club that to talk about the team is to talk about the town. The team actually predates Flin Flon, which wasn't incorporated until 1933, by six years (although it wouldn't be named the Bombers until 1936).

The Bombers have a mythology all their own, one borne of place. It is impossible to export



it beyond the borders of Flin Flon. You have to live or have lived here to be a Bombers fan, and you must love the team as much as the town, because the two are as inseparable as the Bombers' maroon and white.

"Bomber Talk is every day," Mike says. "The coffee shops, the theme is the Bombers. Even in the summertime, everybody's still talking about the previous season or the upcoming season."

Born in Flin Flon and bred on

WELL, HELLO THERE

'Flinty' welcomes visitors to the town along with a sign explaining the origin of Flin Flon's name.

the Bombers, Mike was raised by a single mother who billeted players to give her young son male role models. Mike played four years for the

Bombers in the late 1990s. After four years of college hockey in the United States and a short stint in minor pro leagues that took him through the Deep South and, briefly, Quebec, the Bombers brought him back in 2007 as coach and GM. He's been here ever since.

Flin Flon lies on the western edge of Manitoba and trickles

over into Saskatchewan. The Bombers play in the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League. For most teams in the league, road games are an hour drive out and an hour back home. For the Bombers, short trips are three to four hours away. Life is lived on the road aboard the bus. Their longest drive is Estevan, 15 minutes from the American border, 11 hours away. Road trips often feature four games in five nights or three in three, getting back into Flin Flon anywhere from two to five o'clock in the morning. One of Mike's main recruiting requirements during the summer is to look for players who can handle the rigors of the road.

"Our road trips are long, and some people see that as a disadvantage," he says. "Don't get me wrong, it's tougher, but I also look at it as it prepares us for playoffs. When playoff time comes, we're used to the grind of the road, whereas some teams aren't. I also look at it from the perspective

that our guys get an opportunity to come close together on the road."

I follow Mike back to the dressing room. Everything about the Bombers, their logo, the inspirational quotes on the walls, their blue-collar, fan-friendly playing style, the arena they play in – it all mimics the mining mentality of the town. On the inside door, a sign reminds players, "Through this door walks the heart of a champion." In the team's gym, "Nobody outworks the Bombers." Where the players dress, a large maroon rug, with the words "Built on Passion," covers most of floor, mirroring the fluorescent sign above it on the ceiling. Above a large TV is a moose rack from a Bombers super fan, Clarence Pettersen, who donated it to the team a week before he chose to get the shot to end his life because of cancer. The signatures of every Bomber who's ever graduated from the team as a 20-year-old covers the plywood ceiling of

the laundry room. Everything is in maroon and white, even the washer and dryer.

In the early days of the Bombers, the players did their laundry like miners. "In the mine, they used to dry their clothes using a pulley system with chains," Mike says. "They had a pulley at the top and they'd hang their underwear up there. Then they'd pull it up and the heat would dry out their stuff. They used to have that here. In the ceiling there were baskets, you put everything in there."

I leave Mike to prepare for the game and drive to CFAR, the local radio station, to talk with Flin Flon's professional talker, the Bombers' longtime play-by-play caller, Rob Hart. Although the walls outside his second-floor office are covered in posters of rock bands and musicians, Rob's tiny, windowless, half-wood-paneled, half-white-brick office is almost all hockey. It virtually enfolds Rob as he reclines on his swivel office chair, arms crossed, resting

PHOTOS BY RONNIE SHUKER



on his belly. Although a longtime Canadiens fan, he's wearing a Florida Panthers T-shirt, prescient since the Panthers would make it to the Stanley Cup final this season.

"Flin Flon's got a mystique, it's a special place," Rob says. "We talk about the history of the team and the success of the team, but there's a lot of characters in the community itself. That makes it fun to go to the rink as well."

"Is it common for people who leave Flin Flon to keep tabs on the Bombers?" I ask.

"I get emails from people all over the world that listen to the Bomber broadcast. There's a pilot in Japan who used to send me emails regularly that he was listening and to make sure I put a shout-out to him during the broadcast. He lived in Flin Flon for a couple of years way back when, is a fan, and he just listens to the games."

In an age when cutbacks are keeping NHL radio broadcasters at home, Rob still travels with the Bombers to almost every road game. Even the Maple Leafs' radio crew no longer travels with the team, forcing fans to listen to them call "road games" off a TV in Toronto, even during the playoffs.

I go back downstairs and get talking with Austin Mattes and



Raphael Saray, two of the station's other voices. I'm about to leave when the station's manager, Dianne Russell, pops out of her office.

"They used to say you're either a hooker or a hockey player if you're from Flin Flon," she says.

It isn't the first time I've come across this joke. Birk Sproxtton wrote about it in his poem "The Hockey Fan Reflects On Beginnings."

*Flin Flon? they say.
Why the only people I know
from Flin Flon are hockey players
and hookers.*

*My mother is from Flin Flon,
you say.*

Long pause.

And what position does she play?

"When the mine started, that wasn't totally untrue," Dianne says. "It was either you played an instrument, or you played hockey, or there was a red-light district, because there was a lot of single guys up here back then. It was like a shanty town."

Flin Flon is a lot like Newfoundland. It is rocky and hilly and has a similar vibe as a once one-industry town. Even though that lone industry isn't doing so well, the people still have hope that things will turn around for the better, that the town will find its way again. If nothing else, Flin Flon has the Bombers. People here are



happy, content, and love to talk. If there is a difference, Newfoundlanders are born storytellers, while Flin Flonners are born talkers.

"Who are you talking to next?" Raphael asks.

"Brent Lethbridge, you know him?"

"Uncle Lefty!" Raphael says. "He used to have a TV show, the fabulous Bomber Show. That was kind of the Bomber hype show."

"He'll give you lots about the Bombers," Austin says. "He loves the Bombers, too. He's a really talkative guy."

"Retired insurance salesman," Raphael says. "Part-time rock star."

After dinner, I drive back to the arena to meet with Brent before the game. The concrete walls are half maroon and half white with a black stripe in between. The creaky wooden floor in the lobby, where we sit, is all maroon, as are stacking chairs piled along the walls. Brent has brought along his sis-

HART'S HEART

The Bombers' play-by-play man has a deep passion for hockey and the town. His packed office is proof.

ter-in-law Jennifer Hanson, a former anthem singer for the Winnipeg Jets in the 1990s. I tell them I've just come from the radio station.

"So you've talked to all the professional talkers," Jennifer says.

"I was wondering if everybody in Flin Flon is a professional talker."

"Well, there's lots."

"People are happy to talk," Brent says.

Both Brent and Jennifer were born in Flin Flon, both are musicians, and both understand the analogy between being in a band and playing on a hockey team. In Flin Flon, music and hockey are intertwined.

As a company town full of miners, Flin Flon's only land link to the rest of the country used to be the train. No roads were built to it until the 1950s. It was a booming mining community back then, but it was isolated. Hudson Bay Mining & Smelting knew it needed to offer more than just jobs to keep

people from leaving. They started to hire special miners.

"There's not much to do in the winter, so two things got a foothold," Brent says. "One was musical culture and musical theater, and the other was hockey. If you were a hockey player, a good hockey player, they would hire you to work at the mine. They'd work out a little deal where you'd get paid full-time, but you weren't there when you're on road trips, and when you were there, you weren't working when you were practising. So they got full pay. It was almost a little bit professional."

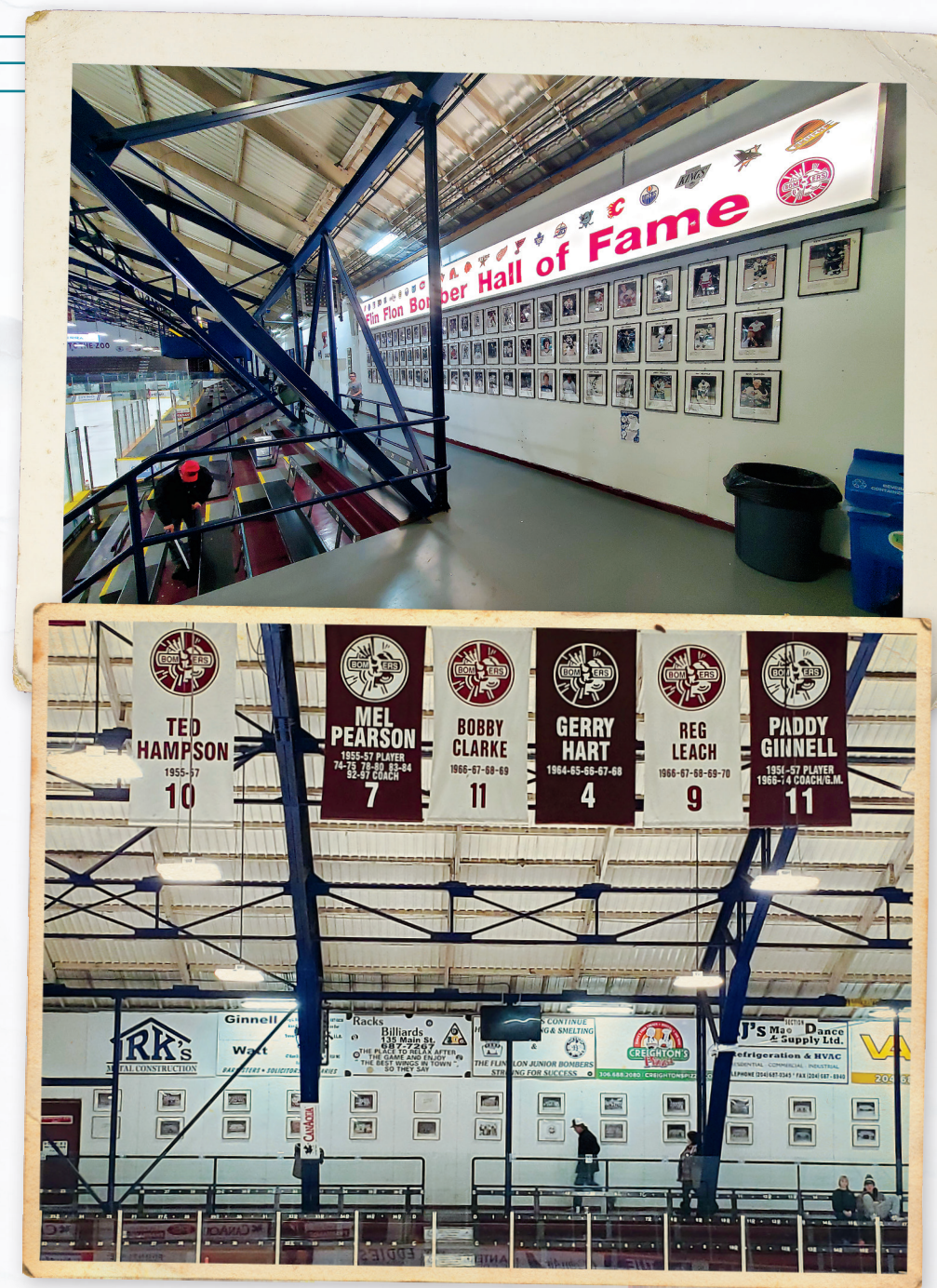
They would hire singers, too.

Jennifer's father was hired as a tenor, and she became a singer herself. She left Flin Flon at 18 when her career took her to Atlanta, Georgia. Bomber Talk followed her there.

"I had a house gig at this bar, and people would find out that I was from Flin Flon, and they would wanna talk about Bobby Clarke, about hockey and Flin Flon, especially if they were hockey fans," Jennifer says. "This guy walked up to me once, and he goes, 'I heard you're from Flin Flon.' And I was like, 'Yes, I am.' He said, 'Bobby Clarke ruined hockey.' I was like, 'Hey, man, he is a national f---ing treasure in Canada. I will



PHOTOS BY RONNIE SHUKER



not have you speak about him like this."

Bobby Clarke, the archetypal Bomber. His connection to his hometown runs deep. Clarke, whose father had been a driller in the copper and zinc mines, played three years for the Bombers before leaving for the Philadelphia Flyers. Although he lives in Pennsylvania, Clarke still has family in Flin Flon, owns property in town, and comes back to fish from his cabin some summers. He is all over the Whitney Forum, including the Bomber Hall of Fame, although a mural of him

depicts the left-shooting Clarke shooting right-handed. The gymnasium at Ecole McIsaac School in town is named after him, and tourists still ask to see his signature in the Bombers' laundry room.

At a team function in town, long after he retired, Clarke once referred to himself and other Bomber alumni as players who had "Made in Flin Flon stamped on our ass." In true Flin Flon fashion, Clarke made profanity an art form in hockey. If, as Gordie Howe once said, all hockey players speak two languages, English and profanity,

Clarke was fluently bilingual.

"When I was a kid, the CBC came up with this great brain wave," Brent says. "Toronto's playing Philadelphia, 'Let's put a mic on Bobby Clarke.'"

Jennifer laughs hard. She hasn't heard the story, but she knows how it will end.

"They put a live mic on him, and Andy Van Hellemond, who used to come here and referee, was reffing the game," Brent says. "Bob's on the bench and something goes sideways and he says, 'Andy, you f---ing c-----er!'"

"Bobby, you're only sup-

posed to say that in Flin Flon!" Jennifer says.

The name Flin Flon, the cast of characters and professional talkers, the combination of hockey and music, the unusual border-spanning layout of the town, the long tradition of the Bombers, and the lore of Bobby Clarke – it has all created a pop culture cult following of the team and the town. In the movie *Mystery Alaska*, Canadian actor Mike Myers plays a sports reporter from Flin Flon named Donnie Shulzhoffer, who describes the goalie in the championship game: "He looks like he's from the Flin Flon Bombers." The town and the team are also a favorite among low-budget, straight-to-video releases, like *The Road to Flin Flon*, a 1990s comedy in which a Californian travels to Flin Flon to find enlightenment, and *Santa's Slay*, a Christmas horror comedy in which the protagonist wears a Bombers jersey while trying to track down a murderous rampaging St. Nick.



Much has changed since the heydays of both Flin Flon and the Bombers. Once a city of 15,000, Flin Flon is now a third of that. The mine's headquarters are still in town, but the mine itself has moved to Snow Lake about two hours away. The old Glee Club has closed, the red-light district is gone, and the Bombers haven't won a championship in 30 years.



"If there wasn't a fight at the bar on Saturday nights, there was nothing happening," Jennifer says. "It's not really like that anymore, but in the '80s and the '90s, it was like that. I don't know if it was the hockey bug, I don't know if it was the small-town vibe, but if you didn't get stoned, drunk...and in a fight, it just wasn't a good weekend, you know."

The three of us go out to watch the game. I look around the arena. Glass-encased Bomber jerseys of alumni hang on the walls along with old team pho-

tos. Across from us, I can see the bright white sign for the Bombers' wall of fame. Above us, Bombers banners hang the length of the rink. At the far end is written "Welcome to the Zoo." This is where Flin Flon's most colorful fans watch the

WHERE'S THE REST?

Flin Flon fans toss moose legs on the ice after wins. Once, a visiting team took the legs, leading to a brawl.

games, while the Queen looks over the ice from the other.

Flin Flon is a town built on people working underground, getting

dirty, clawing a living from the earth. Fans demand the Bombers play the same way, and they

aren't shy to remind the players of that.

"Hit him! Hit him!"

"Come on! Nail these guys!"

"Hit their goalie!"

As a mining community, the people in Flin Flon expect physical hockey, and the Bombers have rigged their rink accordingly. It is 15 feet shorter and 10 feet narrower than regulation size. It is blue-collar hockey played in front of blue-collar fans in a blue-collar town, and the Bombers send them home happy, with a 4-3 win over the Red Wings.

As is tradition after every home win, fans heft a couple of moose legs over the glass. I watch them slide to center ice, where a pair of Bombers pick them up to be placed with all the others in a freezer in the team's dressing room. Several years ago, the Red Wings kicked off a bench-clearing brawl with the Bombers when they tried to steal the moose legs after a loss.

I thank Brent and Jennifer and begin making my way to the exit. As I file out with the rest of the crowd, I understand something Raphael said to me back at the radio station.

"We don't have hockey fans here. We have Bomber fans." **H**



Ronnie Shuker is an author, editor, freelance writer and an editor at large for *The Hockey News*. He has travelled to places like North Korea, Chernobyl, Transnistria and the Himalayas, where he took part in the Guinness World Record for the highest-altitude hockey game ever played. He lives in the Greater Toronto Area and plays pickup hockey north of the city.