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A Raccoon Is Born

I never planned to be a publisher until the day I went to the dump where I saw a family of raccoons crossing the dirt road and slowed down to try to give them time to get across. A gigantic truck appeared behind me and I was afraid he'd smash into me, so I prayed I'd miss the raccoons, which I did, but the truck ran over momma raccoon and three of the babies. Only the littlest—the fifth one—survived.

Later, I was talking to a friend about how sad it was that the only book of local history was going to go out of print, and

somebody said, “We need a publisher around here!” and it all clicked. I had taken a graduate course in publishing ten years ago, and was involved in various levels of book production and sales for years, but this was a whole new deal. Before you know it, the Fifth Raccoon, Colorado's Smallest Publisher, was on its way.

The first title *Serious and Grave Plots: A Listing and Look at the People Buried in Mancos Cemeteries* by Darrel Ellis was done in Microsoft Word, I indexed it and did the cover and binding on my dining room table. I expected to sell about twenty copies. Imagine my astonishment when we sold almost a hundred in the first month.

Then came *Fantastical Treasure Tales* by a fellow who had spent considerable time in the river panning for gold. Imagine an old 1893 prospector who goes up Bear Creek, imbibes some

magical Bear Juice with the last of the Colorado Grizzlies, and instead of sleeping through the winter like the bears, he sleeps for 100 years; when he wakes up, Mancos is changed. Other tall tales about Mancos mining follow.

The third book was a labor of love done with an 84-year old friend whose palsy prevented her from typing and included a hilarious story about two gals taking an old “gomer” bull to the sale barn—almost. He gets out of the trailer and runs all over town defying capture. Then I did a book for a family reunion of 300, just putting an old edition back together in presentable form and sold 100 copies. One of our bestsellers we outsourced to Trafford because there were copies selling on the internet for \$150 and ours is only \$30.

“Everybody has a story, and everybody’s story matters,”

became my motto. Book after book kept dropping on me out of

the clear blue Colorado sky here in the Center of the Known Universe, telling the history and stories of Mancos.

Now about money. Most big publishers work on a 7:1 ratio. If a book retails for \$7, it costs \$1 which includes printing, catalog, sales rep commissions, warehouse costs, review copies, everything. I knew in my small scale operation, this would never work so I use a 3:1 rule. When I start looking at a book, once I get past content, I look at the page count, the cover cost, the marketing cost, and work backwards to the unit price before I ever commit to it. If a book comes off my dining room table costing \$3, it retails for \$10.

To market titles, I have a healthy mailing list of previous buyers, have an ad in the local paper for \$15 a month, am a member the local artisans coop (\$50/month and one morning a week), and I mail catalogs twice a year, and offer “piggyback”

mailing to selected local advertisers for a fraction of their cost if they had access to my mailing list, which helps offset my postage. This is micro-publishing!

Now let me say that I am most definitely NOT in favor of people self-publishing books about their dead cat Fluffy. But well edited, nicely printed local history serves a purpose, enchants almost everybody and enables people's stories to be told. I've even had families come to me with one extant copy of a book that I put back into print cleaning it up with Photoshop. We sold 20 the first week. But nobody said it was easy.

In addition to doing almost everything myself—editing, typing, layout, indexing, contracting for art, distribution, shipping, wholesale, retail, sales displays at Christmas fairs and the county fair, I love helping books come alive. I always remember that momma raccoon and her three little ones. And

the littlest one, the one who survived—The Fifth Raccoon.

Gwynne Spencer is the editor and everything else of The Fifth Raccoon, Colorado's Smallest Publisher

(www.fifthraccoon.com) from her Secret Rebel Base by the Mancos River.