



Cliff Livingstone (Rt)

He’s turned down the McDonald’s franchise for Canada—twice, and

once had the Athabaska oil sands leases in his possession. Owner of a multimillion dollar website, yet he can’t turn any of this into a fortune, big or small. He has turned these and dozens of other amazing stories into this book for your reading enjoyment.

Book 3 in the “CliffR” mini-series has a lifetime of funny stories about chasing the brass ring in business, from music to software to flowers to websites. Stories about John Lennon, Rochdale, selling flowers in a biker bar, being faster than the Snowbirds, NABU, and selling speakers to the future hearing impaired. You get to meet more interesting characters from the CliffR reality such as Coupon John and Ottawa’s Max Keeping. Seventy stories of adventures in Canadian business. Or one long adventure in “close but missed” opportunities, brushes with fame and fortune, humourously described in short, true, autobiographical stories.



CliffR adventures in business, book 3

Introduction

If you have read either of the previous two books, then you will have probably realized that this whole autobiography thing is actually like a calico quilt that would do a Quaker proud. Not only are the little stories which make up the running montages of the whole affair joined end to end, they’re also joined top to bottom and sometimes even side by side.

Similarly, each book in the CliffR series ends like a sort of season ender, with a scintillating “Who shot JR?” Dallas aspect ready to open up the next season for gasping desperate fans. The CliffR Project books don’t end quite so extreme mind you. They

are definitely like heh, heh, easy going little “Cliff” hangers nonetheless, hopefully leaving you drooling down your chin to see what could possibly go wrong at yet every next tick of the clock all over again in the next version to come.

I had made my mind up years ago to snag enough money by the age of sixty-five that I wouldn’t end up on a cot at the Salvation Army. I euphemistically called the snagging “The CliffR Project’. Cliff is my first name and R is my middle initial. Or maybe “R” for rich or for retirement. But I missed so many opportunities to make it rich, I started to write down those stories, so “CliffR” became a working title for this book which follows my business “no cigar” adventures.

If you haven’t read any of the earlier books yet, then you won’t have a clue what all this is about until you finish this one. The point is, once you finish this one, nothing but a stalled sense of humour should stop you from also reading the othr available books. Or more as they become available, as they are all part of one big giant calico quilt covering maybe six books. It’s like making a silk purse out of a silk ends.

Also, in this book I continue to coin new words and continue to twist the English language like a pretzel at every opportunity, although my editor winces. I determinedly continue to make fun of the obvious. I also continue my right to hyperbolate at every possibility. I also continue my right to take off into the deep blue sky and word waft a bit from time to time.

If you had read book two, you will remember that in 1988 I had gone to see a venture capitalist to receive a \$10,000 jolt of money to help quick start our Ring World text editor styled word processor project which my twin brother Greydie had quick started into existence two years earlier. But at the meeting Greydie had inadvertently punted the ten thousand out the window by opening his mouth at exactly the wrong time.

The timing was not wrong because I was getting ready to pull a fast one on the investor; it was because a tiny bit of unfinished business from the year before still hadn’t been officially concluded on paper. A very picayune situation in its own right but sufficient to pooch the whole deal forever. Even an untimely tiny grain of sand in the wrong orifice can bring a roaring diesel engine to its knees.

Little do consultants know how little they know

So one day in Ottawa in the latter 1980s, I went to see yet another party as yet another potential financing possibility for the Livingstone twins word processor project. As the fates would have it, the target party was the President of the once

Nabu Company in whose basement I had once tweaked my famous Ohmwatt twaddlers hi fi enhancers as detailed in a previous book. His name was John, a local area high tech baron who was reputed to be a straight shooter.

After Nabu, he had channelled his way along until he had come upon the brilliant idea of selling real estate by photos and phone numbers over Cable TV. I never found out if he was the originator of the idea or not. At any rate he was a busy local beaver all right, setting up a whole chain of them for different market areas throughout Eastern Canada and the American North East.

John asked his secretary to give Ring World a quick try. Without dictate or fanfare, he also cut us a check for a thousand bucks to help us get by with our rent. After his secretary gave a raving report, he had a copy of the program couriered to an out of town consultant and said we could worry about working out a deal after he heard back from the consultant.

The consultant reported back after a few days with the purely rhetorical question, “Why would anyone want to go to all the trouble of developing another word processor when a perfectly good one, i.e., WordPerfect, already exists?”

The fact that WordPerfect, of course, was the very word processor whose short comings Ring World had been specifically designed to address, seemed to have passed straight over this guy’s evidently very pointed head. He hadn’t even bothered trying out the program. Goes to show that for every new idea there are a thousand defenders of the past.

I often wonder how many companies have actually been consulted right out of existence by such consulters. And the large subsequent bill for services. I once knew a guy who was financial director of a company that had gone bankrupt. He went straight out and had business cards printed billing himself as a “financial consultant”. Thus confirming what a lot of people already know. Namely that many consultants are simply jobless people who presume to show experienced executives how to do their job.

In fact, I’m not even sure how or why anyone gets to be called a “consultant” about anything in the first place. I have my suspicions. I do know one thing for absolute sure, they at least have to know where they can get two or three dozen business cards printed for about ten bucks.

I’m also sure that at least some just assume the status by self-acclamation. Like somehow saying it’s so makes it so. It’s exactly the same way that someone gets to be a “Thundering Voice for God” on TV. If you’ve got your flagrancies down pat, you get your patsies down flagrantly.

Whatever else is true, the other one thing I know for sure is that consultants don’t know what they don’t know. Little do they know how little they know. Well that’s actually true for anybody. But back on topic, what consultants do know on the other hand you will hear about loud and clear in full Technicolor broadsheets and the bills to prove it.

Sadly, it’s in the very nature of the creed and the very backbone of their fee, be it a little or be it a lot, that if a consultant knows anything about something at all, they’re usually a whole lot wiser about it than you or I. Which justifies their existence and allows them to get away with it. So who are we to question their results as I mentioned oft before in the earlier books?

It’s the same thing as the UBC Philosophy Department all over again from forty years ago. If someone thinks you know more about something than they do, you can say just about anything you want about it and who’s going to argue? It’s universal and the consulting industry owns the franchise after the philosophers.

If the medium is the message then in this particular medium, the message is, “beware of those who set themselves up in temples and shrines’, because hot air is about the only thing some of them have to go on as the medium.

There are consultants of course who are actually experts in their field and worth every penny of the five or six thousand dollars a day they usually charge. You might consider lawyers as a good example, of the fees part at any rate.

I also knew of a so-called financial consultant who counselled a friend of mine out of a hundred thousand dollars in less than six months. Shep had evolved a rather successful career in auto sales at the sales manager level and was looking to put some of his exhaustively earned gains to good use.

On the consultant’s advice, Shep put fifty thousand bucks into the backing of a pair of young convenience store operators. He did it twice, back to back, a hundred thousand all together, as if the first time wasn’t lesson enough.

In both cases the store operators didn’t have a clue to what they were doing. A slight factor the consultant had failed to perceive and had failed to factor into his recommendation to go for it as relevant. I mean like how tough can it be to run a convenience store? Both times the operators were right out of business again after barely getting in. And in both cases Shep was out of the money in exactly the same lengths of time.

The reason for the new owner’s demises was simple. The new owners were not aware of the feast and famine cycles which are apparently endemic in the convenience store business.

Thus, in both cases, when a feast cycle happened they thought they were finally

on easy street and bought the new thirty six inch TV and red hot convertible they always wanted. When the next bust cycle came along they had no money in reserve with which to hold out and restock the shelves. So, instead of glittering gold falling out of fresh new bank deposits every day, they caught the red rays of the setting sun on their bright new roadster as the bank was hauling it away,

In a consulting case of a different kind, a Burmese owner and his wife of a small computer company I once knew through contact with our eventual antivirus software, had made a pile of money in a big sale to the Federal Government in the early nineties.

Thinking it would therefore be a good time to retire, they invested a little into a year long world cruise. The remaining three hundred and fifty thousand bucks they put into the capable hands of a very slick business card carrying financial consultant for safekeeping. Heavy on the word “con’.

When they got back, they asked the consultant how it was doing. “Lost it”, was the reply. “Lost what”, was the question. “The money”, was the reply. “How much of it”, was the question. “All of it”, was the reply. “How on earth did you do that”, was the squeaked out questionnaire. “Don’t know”, was the shrugged off reply.

And that my friends, is just how easy it is to slice and dice someone who doesn’t look into the eyes of someone across the desk quite as carefully as they should have when handing over the keys to the safety deposit box after accepting their beautifully printed card.

Last I heard, our Burmese friend was an, um, immigration consultant for Burmese people wishing to come into Canada. To his credit he probably at least knew what he was doing about immigrating to Canada, and had a beautifully printed Burmese type business card to prove it.

The first time I heard the phrase, “don’t know”, regarding something important missing, happened to me while I had still been managing the rock band MTYD of Books 1 and 2 in 1968. My girl chum Dianne of the Vancouver “Diamond Sunrise” surprise had inherited a very valuable set of heritage furniture.

Dianne had no place of her own to put it and didn’t want to sell it just yet. At the time, we were renting a small warehouse for rehearsing. Actually the large back of a small store front. So I let her stash the stuff in the warehouse.

When the band had decided to go on our first trip to Toronto, we let one of the other up-and-coming Vancouver bands use our rehearsal warehouse to keep paying the rent and keep it open for us when we got back. When we finally did get back, the furniture was long gone. “Gone where”, I asked the band. “Haven’t a clue”, they replied. “How long’s it been gone”, I asked. “Haven’t a clue”, they replied.

Clearly the conversation was never going to clue up the missing furniture. I’m

willing to bet they knew exactly where it went and that the furniture had probably bought a nice little round of tickets on the Yellow Submarine for friends, family, and countrymen. Well, probably not family.

At any rate, because of the astute observation from John’s out-of-town computer consultant that WordPerfect was all that was ever was and ever would be needed, the next step with John was never taken and he told us not to worry about the thousand bucks he had given us in advance.

Until the early new millinium, John was president of a software company which did over seventy million dollars in sales near the end of the nineties and rising. I for one was not surprised. I always felt that John was a class act after the magnanimous way he had dealt with us and really hadn’t needed to. Like I’ve said before, “Class tells”.

Later again, in the spring of 1989, we were introduced to a small company who did specialty work for the Federal Government. The Department of National Defense in particular. A demo was set one evening with all relevant parties present and the demo went well for a change.

When we were done, the President of the company, Robby by name, immediately cut a check for a thousand dollars. Somebody must have been whispering “thousand bucks” in everyone’s ear all the time, because we sure seemed to see that number coming our way in a lot of these advances. Robby explained that he had to go to Chicago the next day, but would see us the day after he got back to work out all the details of a deal.

Robby got back two days later. Unfortunately, Murphy was in the building and fate had decided to turn upon us with yet another upstanding fickle finger of it-self. Robbie explained most apologetically that his money was going to have to go somewhere else for the next couple of months. Shades of the TV satellite antennas from the previous book all over again.

The books had been steam-cooked...

Seems that one of Robby’s company’s products, which they were selling to the Department of National Defence, was the lining for rooms for making them radio-proof using a patented method from Switzerland and manufactured in Chicago.

If you don’t know what a radio-proof room is, it is a specially lined area where guys like CIA and NSA put in a pile of gadgets undetected so that if someone lights up a stogie in Moscow Square, they could tell you how many inches were left and what brand it was. Because of the radio proofing though, the smoker would have no idea on the planet that a snoop was at the end of the match. A cloak without a dagger.

Robby’s company was the Canadian representative for the Chicago manufacturer.

His company had just signed a big contract with the Department of National Defence to build a high-level radio-proof room for their own cloak-without-dagger operation to spy on people like the CIA, FBI, and KGB.

When Robby had gone to Chicago, the Chicago manufacturer suggested that it would make a lot more sense for Robby to just set up a plant in Canada to manufacture the stuff for himself under license and save all the shipping. And don’t I wish it had turned out as simple as that for the both of us?

Robby immediately sent us over to an associate across the river in Hull, Quebec. The associate was cued up as the temporary Man-in-Havana to hold the fort for our Ring World project until Robby’s company could come back on line again as the main dollar-cougher-upper later on in the picture.

Robby’s associate in Hull was none other than High Tech poster Nick, the guy with the ten thousand Tundra North posters who had tried to sell them unsuccessfully to computer nerdies à la CliffR Book 2. In fact, that was how we had originally come to meet Nick in the first place, i.e., as Robbie’s hold-the-forter.

Nick started the ball rolling. Almost immediately the company from Toronto for which he was regional sales manager, called him to an emergency meeting in Toronto. Seems that Nick’s posters and other ventures off the side, and now with Ring World coming into center stage, had become too much for the head boss at the head office to eschew.

The concern was because of the obvious potential that Nick could become defocused from his job of sales at the regional sales office in Ottawa. Which after all was supposed to be his primary and only focus in life at the moment according to his job description. Corporate executives have these little kinds of ins and outs concerns worked out to a tee.

So from now on, as Nick heard it rather bluntly explained by head office in Toronto, he was either going to be working for himself or working for them. Nick had two days to make up his mind. Being no dummy, Nick saw pay checks coming in every month as a way more viable short term job prospect than commissions coming in maybe eventually from Ring World et al.

So once again Greydie and I were suddenly off the air again for working with anyone outside of ourselves for our daily bread because of people outside of ourselves. Do you ever get the feeling that someone else is always pulling your strings?

Robby told us though, that his original interest was still on hold and not to worry. We would just need to hang on until he got through all this radio room stuff. We would then be back on track in his radio-free shack. Shades of the TV satellite dish fiasco all over again.

Robby then proceeded to implement step one of his failure-proof master plans for snoop-proof accomplishments. Namely to buy out a small lamp manufacturer in Hull as his starting point to build on. The lamp business was operating marginally.

Step two of the plan was to run the business uphill until it started providing decent cash flow. Step three was to then make an addition to the manufacturing area with sufficient room to start manufacture the anxiously awaited radio screening material. Step four was to actually make the stuff and satisfy the original Government contract that had started it all off.

Step five was to make a whole pile of money. And step six was to step back in our direction ready to rock and roll again with Ring World and a big wad of cash to finally get it up and running properly. How simple things always look on paper.

Exactly six months later, the lamp plant was kput. How come you ask? Turns out the original books had been steam cooked in a double boiler all the way. Robbie’s consultant on the deal apparently hadn’t picked up on the whistling steam from par-boiled lobster. Instead of a marginal profit per quarter as the books had showed, the company had actually been turning crimson red every week like maple leaves in the fall on their inevitable way to the ground.

What had thrown Robby off so badly was that the doctored books had been duly signed off by a chartered accountant. So the books were presumably to be believed. Where’s good help when you need it? I’m telling you, you can’t trust printed business cards any more no matter whose name they brandish. Just ask the investors of Enron, WorldCom, Adelphi, Nortel, etc, etc, etc.

Rip offs of a devious kind aren’t new. Years before in the early seventies, after all the mortgage and encumbrance records had been carefully checked, a friend of ours in Alberta Canada bought a house at the beginning of the foothills of the Rockies just west outside of Calgary. Six months later a church came forward with a hidden second mortgage agreement demanding full payment of forty thousand dollars or else. The original owner was long gone with the money. Our friend ended up having to pay it up or move out.

Didn’t do the church much good for getting paid though. The tax department got wind of the deal and took away their tax-free status. Apparently the tax department had had no previous inkling whatsoever that the church was using their non-profit charitable status for making such decidedly uncharitable full profit deals. The tax department started taxing them from then on, probably the most expensive forty thousand dollars the church ever collected under the plate.

Similarly, after getting waylaid by a consultant’s recommendations twice in the convenience store racket, Shep decided to call on his own expertise of twenty-five years in the car selling business and ended up buying the lemon of a lifetime. He had decided to go uptown and bought himself a small Suzuki car dealership in 1995.

The dealership had an exceptional track record according to the books. In any kind of deal, if the books look good, smell a rat. Because presumably the somebody wouldn’t need to be selling now would they? Poor Shep never saw it coming.

He ended up losing everything this time, including socks, underwear, house, and would you believe even the pooch. Even for a while the wife, who learned to forgive and forget and eventually came back.

The old adage “let the buyer beware” is not without good reason. Greydie and I have always been on the lucky side of this one over the years. All we have ever lost from that particular slick one was only a bit of sleep and a few pounds now and then. Then of course was the house in Aylmer, Quebec which I will get to eventually.

At any rate, Robby was now officially in our growing ranks of yet another potential backer who had started out looking promising enough, only to have fate deal them out of the picture within twenty-four to forty-eight hours after our hooking up with them. Kind of interesting that, isn’t it?

One of these days I’m going to have to figure out how that timing thing actually works. Like which is the horse and which is the wagon? If I can just figure out how to get the whole deal going in reverse, I can start by backing into it empty-handed and finishing off by walking out fully-loaded for a change.