The Man Behind



A Prairie Christmas

Stories are Jeff Gould's livelihood — and his way into our hearts at Christmas

Story by JOHN ANDREWS

"I'LL TELL YOU a quick story."

During a two-hour conversation with Jeff Gould on the front porch of his home on the south edge of Sioux Falls, that phrase comes up at least half a dozen times. That's because stories are Jeff Gould's life.

"A buddy of mine named Jim helps people who work at Millenium Recycling," he begins. "Now who would work at a recycling place? It's noisy, it's dangerous, there's dust and it pays minimum wage. Convicts work at that place."

Not even a minute into the story, Gould has already settled into the cadence that he's perfected over 40 years on radio. He knows what syllables to emphasize, where to take a breath and when to pause, letting the silence linger so the audience — often unknowingly — leans forward just a little bit, eager to hear what's next.

"He says 'Jeff, Christmas is coming up. Would you come tell some stories to these guys?'

"Sure, I guess.

"I walk in through the back door, which is loud because they've got blowers going and skid steer loaders and venting fans. Everybody has those airline ear protectors on and masks. The room has cinder block walls, and the tables don't match. It probably holds 120 people but 30 are there and they all sit separated from each other. It's cold and the fluorescent lights are flickering.

"Normally this time is to talk about OSHA regulations. But Jim gets up and says, 'Jeff's a friend of mine. He's gonna tell some Christmas stories. Jeff?'

"These people are stoic. They've taken off their ear protectors, but they've still got on the coveralls and the Carhartts. But here's what else they have: distrust. They're tattooed and scarred and none of them are looking at anybody else. They're not talking to each other because they don't trust each other.

"So I start talking about sledding. I figure everybody has a story about snow and going downhill with something. They start to lean in. The tough guy in the front row smiles like a little kid. A rough looking woman in the back row barks out a laugh.

"I told another story, and then another. Then I was done. And one of the guys says, 'Do you have another story?' Well, I didn't, so I made something up. I said, 'I want to talk about the most important Christmas gift that people aren't giving much these days. I want to tell you how to say Merry Christmas.'

"I go to the guy in the front row, a small mousy guy with gray hair and a ponytail and watery blue eyes. I say, 'Here's how you say Merry Christmas. You hold out your hand, look them in the eye so you can see their eye color, and you say, "Merry Christmas!"' He *grabbed* my hand and said, 'Merry Christmas!' Then the next guy, same thing. And afterwards, in a row. 'Merry Christmas!' 'Merry Christmas!'

"Later, I said, 'Jim, what was that about?' He said, 'Jeff, these guys are fighting. They're trying to see if they're gonna survive, or if it's even worth it. They're tired of being judged. But your stories reminded them of who they used to be. And for the first time in a long time, they let somebody see them.'"

As he finishes the story, I realize that I stopped taking notes because — just like those tough recycling plant workers — I had leaned in across the arm of my wooden rocking chair. Thousands of South Dakotans know that lean, because for more than two decades they've listened to Gould spin stories on *A Prairie Christmas*, an hour-long radio broadcast that has become appointment listening for many families. They pause while wrapping presents, baking sugar cookies or stringing tinsel on the tree, absorbed by a story that wraps them in the warmth of the Christmas season.

I glance at Gould and see tears welling in his eyes. The story has gotten to its teller, too. "I've told this story a million times, but it still makes me cry," he says. "People hear that in their car, they hear the catch in my voice, and it makes them feel something. And they love that, because Christmas is not about Bing Crosby or Santa Claus. It's about love."

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A Prairie Christmas has aired on Sioux Falls radio since 1938. It began with Ray Loftesness, who grew up near Garretson and

developed a remarkable knack for crafting stories that resonated with listeners. His show, called *Lofty's Holiday Inn*, originally on KSOO radio and later KELO, blended those carefully curated stories — many based on his own life experiences in Garretson, in World War II, or touring the country with Fred Waring and his band — with familiar and comforting Christmas carols and hymns.

Over the decades, *Lofty's Holiday Inn* became as much a part of South Dakota's winter culture as singalongs at the Nora Store or Christmas at the Cathedral are today. After Loftesness died in 1991, the show continued as *Christmas Memories*, a collection of classic Lofty stories and music. Gould took the helm 21 years ago, changed the title to *A Prairie Christmas* and provided a touch that only his own unique life's path could have brought.

Originally from the Twin Cities, Gould graduated from the University of Minnesota and Brown Institute. He started his radio career in Mitchell, then worked as a farm reporter in southwest Minnesota before moving to Sioux Falls in 1991.

He began to establish roots. He and his wife Libby, now a retired high school and middle school music teacher, moved a home built in 1885 from its original location near Eighth and Spring to a small acreage a few miles south of the city (urban sprawl has since put them on the edge of city limits along busy 85th Street). They started a family that eventually included four daughters. And he tried to find his place in radio.

At one point he considered moving to a bigger market, which would mean a higher income for his growing family. But a colleague bluntly told him he was neither Rush Limbaugh nor Howard Stern, the two radio behemoths of the 1990s whose style and success other radio stations sought to replicate.



"That's when I said, 'God, you are now in charge of my career,'" Gould says.

The adage that God works in mysterious ways was borne out quickly when the next day Gould was offered a position on the

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FIND A PRAIRIE CHRISTMAS

A Prairie Christmas airs on KELO Radio 95.7 FM (or streaming live on q957.com) in Sioux Falls weekdays from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., starting the day after Thanksgiving through Christmas Eve. About 15 years ago Gould syndicated the show to other radio stations. He's also begun taking it on the road, staging theatrical productions in communities throughout South Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa. New this year is an online streaming channel launching on November 15 called "I Like That Story" that allows listeners to hear the show on demand. Find it on I Heart Radio or ILikeThatStory.net.



radio station's sales team, a job that he says taught him organization and the power of optimism. Then, one of his clients — a funeral home — asked if he would work for them as a manager. So he left radio and spent 15 years helping families plan services. The move also served as a catalyst for his storytelling career.

"I don't remember when, but at one time they asked if I would ever do a funeral," he says. "The family didn't have a minister or a pastor, so they asked if I could lead the service. They figured my background in radio performance would lend itself to that role."

He began sitting with families, encouraging them to talk about their loved one. They told stories, many of them rich with valuable life lessons. "You see the truth in an hour and a half," he says. "You see a life. The audience is grieving, so they don't see the story, but the wisdom is undeniable because it's so relatable."

Gould has served as celebrant at more than 600 funerals. He calls what he does, "planting seeds and pulling weeds."

"What is a weed out of this life that I would pull, and what is a seed that is smart?" he asks. "And everybody has those. I pray about that person until I get to a place where I can feel their story. My job is to give hope and wisdom to the people who are there."

And after every service a story or two gets added to his collection. Eventually, he accumulated so many stories that he wrote seven books, including the first two volumes of an eventual four-volume series called *Insight and Inspiration from the Heartland*, filled with anecdotes and lessons to guide readers through each 25-year quarter of their lives.

In the meantime, he got a call from his former employer.





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They needed a host for their annual Christmas program. Would he be interested?

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Today, it seems Gould was born to be the steward of *A Prairie Christmas*. "I love stories, and my job in building a show is to take people on a ride. I tell a funny story, a nostalgic story, a mascara story. I ruin a lot of mascara."

He consults a thick binder full of stories that are a combination of personal recollections, listener submissions and fun historical anecdotes, like the origin of candy canes or the Slinky. "If it's snowing outside, I'm going to talk about the magic of snow. If I'm a little bit salty that day, I need a story that calms me down," he says. "I just live in the moment on the radio."

That medium provides a special connection with his audience. "If I were to do a video, I'm talking at you. If I peel off the video and it's just the audio, I'm talking with you," he says. "It's just you and me, in your car or wherever. All of the sudden, we're friends. It's almost mystical. When I turn on the microphone, they appear. I can feel them listening. I can feel them reacting."

He can physically see the reactions when he does *A Prairie Christmas* before a live audience. It also allows him to use local musicians and other visuals. Once, he showed a photograph of himself as a 5-year-old boy and said, "I'm going to show you some things that you'll either remember or won't believe actually existed." One of those things was the lawn jart, a popular toy from the 1950s that combined a javelin and a dart. "They were trying to get rid of us," he says to a hearty laugh.

There's the story about how he came home from school one day and begged his mother to play his favorite Alvin and the Chipmunks record. When it was over, he asked her to play it again. And again. And again. When he came home from school the next day, would you believe that no one could find that record?

He also tells about the time his sister sewed a pillowcase dress for their mother as a Christmas gift. The fabric had gold, yellow, orange, white and green stripes, with big gold buttons. Their mother wore the dress to the store one day, quick to mention that her daughter made it, then suggested that she should probably put it away so as not to ruin the beautiful fabric.

"Whenever I tell stories like this, people immediately think of the story that it reminds them of in their own life that they have also forgotten," he says. "Stories are like treasures in an attic. You find them and you forgot they were there. People thank me for helping them remember a precious story."

The Christmas season can be a whirlwind of gift shopping, parties and school programs. But for just an hour or so, switch on the radio, pull up the streaming channel or take your family to the local theater and let Jeff Gould tell you a few quick stories.

America's Story

After more than two decades of hosting the popular radio show *A Prairie Christmas*, Jeff Gould has learned a valuable lesson. "They don't want to hear it after the 25th of December!" he says with a laugh.

That led him to develop *America's Story*, a show with a longer shelf life that utilizes music, poetry and historical anecdotes to illustrate eight traits that every American inherited from the country's founders and how it happened.

"It's not a political speech," he says. "I want it to be a story that every American can resonate with. This is the most remarkable story in the history of human government."

The story assumes special resonance in 2026 as the United States celebrates its semiquincentennial, or 250th birthday. Visit www.americasstory250.org for information on how to schedule a performance.

