

My Real Education

by

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It begins with my life at home and my family.

I have a photograph of myself when I was about five years of age sitting beside the family dog, Peter, a Chesapeake, a breed rarely seen today, but once an important hunter. He saved my life on several occasions, for he wouldn't let me run onto and across 33rd Avenue where we lived in Vancouver, no matter how often I tried.

I was always trying to do something I was not supposed to do, like scraping old chewing gum off the road, making a good chew of it for myself; or climbing up a weeping willow tree onto the roof of our house, and edging my way up to the very peak where I would sit triumphantly. Neighbours would phone my mother with the dreadful news that her tiny son was sitting away up there and in imminent danger, to which she would laconically reply: "Oh, he'll be alright. He got himself up there, didn't he, so I'm sure he can make it down."

I had a big thatch of red hair and a knack for getting into fights with older boys. It wasn't that I was the biggest or strongest boy around, though

maybe I thought I was. I remember in Grade One at school getting into a fight with two boys who were across the street as I walked Becky Brown home from school. They started to chant: “Becky Brown, Becky Brown with her panties hanging down...” at which she burst into tears.. In a righteous rage I ran across the street and plowed into those boys with fists flying. They took off. Becky smiled at me when I returned. She even squeezed my arm.

There wasn't a lot of fighting at school, but we had a few bullies. One of these, much bigger than I was, decided to show me who was boss, and punched me in the nose, which bled copiously. Feeling very sorry for myself, I returned home still bleeding. I showed my father how badly I had been damaged, but he expressed no sympathy. He only said: “Go back and hit that bully hard.” “But he's bigger than me,” I cried, “and he'll hit me again.” “It doesn't matter,” he said. “Just make sure you hurt him. Give him a black eye, or something that makes him look bad. After awhile he won't bully you anymore.” So I followed my Dad's advice, and after a few more lost fights found out he was right. So I was already learning something outside the classroom.

When I was eleven, in the days when I loved to climb trees, I was high up in a birch tree on our boulevard when my brother, Arthur, who was fifteen opened the upstairs window of my bedroom and stuck his head out.

“Mother says you have to come in for supper!” Then he held his arm out. To my horror he was holding my BB gun by the stock with the gun barrel pointed down.

“I’m going to count to ten. If you aren’t down from that tree by ten, I’m going to drop your gun on the patio.”

I knew he hated my BB gun because I was always shooting at birds and squirrels and chipmunks, and sometimes hitting them. So I think I descended that tree in about 10 seconds, in time to hear the crack of my gun on the stone patio. When I examined to see what damage was done, I found the muzzle smashed.

I had to get back at him, no matter what. The BB gun had been my favorite possession — what was Arthur’s? It came to me in a flash. His big aquarium of tropical fish, of course. With what care he looked after his exotic species! So I arose in the middle of the night, crept downstairs to the room which contained his treasure, and I turned off the heat required by the tropical species, knowing that in the morning they would all be lying belly-

up on the surface of the water. I had done something horrible, and I knew it, but I had my revenge!

For Arthur it was a terrible shock. My parents, who were quite well off, nevertheless felt that they could not afford to replace the tropical fish. There were so many of them, and they cost so much, and in 1939 it was still the Great Depression. However, my mother talked Arthur into turning his bedroom into a kind of aquarium by painting copies of all the tropical species on the walls and ceiling of his bedroom.

This was the beginning of his deep interest in art — which eventually led to architecture. Many years later, at his 80th birthday with hundreds present in the Museum of Anthropology, I was able to assure him that it was my act of horrid vandalism that led to his becoming one of the world's great architects... so would he forgive me? He answered in a loud voice: "No!"

Aside from the ways in which my early life experience contributed to my real education, there was the influence of my family, starting with my brother Arthur Erickson who became one of the world's leading architects. Of course there was the age difference of four years, meaning that with a few exceptions Arthur's social life and mine were disconnected. The exceptions, however, played an important role in my life. I'm thinking of

Arthur's girl friends, particularly Blackie Lee (now Sparzani), the daughter of Frank and Ruth Lee, who lived a couple of blocks away, and who became friends of my parents. The Lees owned a large sweep of land on a superb sand beach north of Parksville, Vancouver Island. Every summer we spent a week or two there, swam often, even when the tides were far out, though I spent much of the day shooting at crows and seagulls with my .22 calibre rifle, and sometimes at seals basking on the big seaside rocks. One day I hit a seal, crept up to the rock where I heard it squealing and found myself staring at a baby seal which was dying in front of me. I never shot at seals after that.

Mrs. Lee, whom we called Mona, loved classical music. At first it meant nothing to me, but gradually I came to like it, especially after Arthur, who attended a weekly music appreciation group at Lawren Harris's home, began to collect classical records.

However, the most vivid influence came from watching Arthur and Blackie dancing to Swing and Latin music. Arthur, to my astonishment, was a superb dancer, though where he had learned the art I have no idea. I believe it was a natural gift. Blackie too danced with surpassing grace. As I passed into my fourteenth year, I had difficulty taking my eyes off Blackie, especially when she was dancing, though she was four years older than I.

In later years Arthur went out with another beautiful dancer, Diana Chesterton, whose father was an important banker, and a man who loved the game of bridge, to my mother's delight.

My mother died in 1979, and I will never forget this very elderly man coming up to me at her "Wake", for she did not want a funeral, only the presence of her friends and family at the last of her wonderful parties. Old Chesterton said to me: "I will never forget Myrtle, your mother. I say with all modesty that I am a master at the bridge table. But your mother was something else. I have never experienced such atrocious bidding — and she got away with it every time! She was a marvel."

A "marvel" my mother indeed was, not only at bridge and golf, but at the game of life, too. Born in 1895, she had been brought up in Winnipeg by her father Charlie Chatterson, a police officer who became a private detective, and her mother, Sarah, who in later years ran a candy store in Vancouver, much to my delight. My father, Oscar, had been sent to Winnipeg from his native city, Toronto, to open the western branch of a manufacturing agency, relaxing with snow-shoeing in the winter, tennis and horseback riding in the summer. While galloping out on the prairies he met my mother who also loved to gallop, and they soon became engaged. However, World War 1 intervened, and my father, serving as lieutenant in

the 78th Winnipeg Grenadiers, was hit by a shell in the great battle of Amiens. He lost both his legs above the knee and when he was able, wrote to his fiancée to tell her that he had been reduced to half a man and therefore she was released from the engagement. She replied that he must live up to his promise to marry her: better half a man of such quality than any other man, and that was that.

So they moved out to Vancouver where my father established a drygoods manufacturing agency, taught himself to drive in a car modified by some special devices to make driving possible for him, and learned to walk with two canes capable of bearing his weight. They built a home in Shaughnessy near my mother's favorite golf course and developed a stimulating social life.

Just about everything for my father was difficult — from fitting his little stumps into the metal legs, then slowly climbing to a standing position and walking step-by-step to his car which he drove to his office building. There, parking, he had to climb a set of steep outside steps to where he could take an elevator up to his office on the top floor.

Here's what amazes me about him when I think back. He not only never complained, but retained a keen sense of humour, giving the impression that for him life was good. Only years later did I learn that his

little stumps often bled as a result of the friction caused by walking. But I never heard that from him.

Brought up in Toronto, he had no schooling after Grade 8, for he had to contribute to the family purse. Having lost his father when he was a year old, his mother, a Swede, had brought him and his older brother and sister to Toronto to live and work. Living on a farm in Sweden , she had little education, but a lot of courage and determination. So my father always believed that hard work and native intelligence could lead to success. It certainly did for him. I, too, accepted his work ethic, which meant that though in Vancouver, living in a well above average residential area, I was expected to contribute to the family purse.

My brother applied this work ethic to his schoolwork and always got top marks. I was different, something of a rebel, and when it came to jobs always sought to find work far from my home in Vancouver. It was in these jobs that I got my real education.

My first summer job, when I was fourteen, came about when my friend, John Brenchley, told me that his uncle who was a cattle rancher in the Okanagan would be willing to hire him and a friend to help bring in the hay. John was looking for a job in Vancouver, but I talked him into

accepting his uncle's work offer. So off we went in the early days of the Second World War in 1942 when the Germans were winning everywhere.

Today machines are used to cut and bundle the hay, but in those days everything depended on human muscle — learning to lift large quantities of hay up onto a horse-drawn wagon. We worked 12 hours a day seven days a week, had a quick meal in the ranch house with two other helpers and, as darkness fell, retired into a small tent out on the field, which (tent and field) was soon crawling with grass hoppers.

God, it was hot up there! And no wonder since we arrived at the ranch in the beginning of July. It was not only hot, but also dry, with no drop of rain for many weeks. It was a land completely unlike my coastal home with its vivid green grasses and thick forests. In the Okanagan and the Cariboo and much of the Kootenays the grass was almost yellow and the predominant pine trees kept their distance from one another. In that time of the year the bugs were dominant, especially clouds of grasshoppers and at night teams of mosquitoes dive-bombing us, hungry for human blood.

The haying season was in full swing, the word “swing” being appropriate. The hay had been bundled in loose piles and our job was to lift these piles forkful by forkful onto the hay wagon. There was little

mechanization in those days, so the wagon was pulled by workhorses named Cain and Abel. John and I were in pretty good shape, but barely strong enough for driving the fork into a pile of hay over and over and over again and then lifting the loaded fork high enough to be deposited on the wagon. Most people think that hay weighs hardly anything, but the hay we were lifting had only recently been cut. I never weighed a forkful so I can't say exactly how heavy it was. I only remember that I had to strain to lift it up to the height required, and increasingly so as the day wore on into twelve hours of labour, though there were three short breaks. In the mid-morning and mid-afternoon Frankie, a boy of eleven years and the rancher's grandson, arrived at the work scene with a pail of water and we were allowed to sit down for fifteen minutes and slake our thirst. Then, at noon Frankie would arrive with our half hour lunch: a cheese sandwich and a peanut butter sandwich plus a small pail of lemonade to share. Dinner was served at eight, usually made up of local roast beef, potatoes and green beans, with jelly for dessert — all of this made by the rancher's daughter, Sarah, who was fourteen and showed no interest in us but only in Jack Stearns who, along with Pete Envers, both fifteen, formed the other half of the haying team.

Jack and Pete had a tent of their own and let it be known that they were the superior hayers. I have to admit that they were, too, though only a

little better. One day as we were walking to the ranchhouse after work, Jack poked me in the side — not lightly— and so I poked him back. Then he grabbed me and tried to throw me on the ground, but I withstood him, surprised at my own strength. Still, I was no match for him. He soon had me down on my stomach, his knee hard in my back. Then he grabbed my hair and pulled my head back until I gasped out “you win!” He was not only strong but clearly a far more experienced fighter than I was. Jack, whose father was a bricklayer, quit school when he was 13 and went to work. It was a rough world out there, and Jack had to learn to defend himself. Although he was smaller than I was, he was not only strong but very fast, and early in life learned how to fight, both wrestling as he did with me, and using his fists when he had to. He came from the hard school of life which I knew little about.

After dinner at about 9:00 PM John and I would head for our tent, first shaking the grasshoppers off the outside canvas, then climbing into our beds which were sleeping bags lying on top of (you guessed it!) piles of hay. Our sleep was fitful because the mosquitoes somehow got past all our defences so when the 6:00 AM gong went off we were hardly ready for a day of haying. Breakfast helped a little for the lovely Sarah made the most marvellous thick porridge topped with loads of brown sugar and drowned in

milk — much better for you, the rancher said, than ten inch flapjacks covered in syrup, though we weren't so sure.

Tom (I forget his last name) a 54 year old winter trapper, rode the hay wagon pulled by Cain and Able. When the wagon was at last full it would head off for the barn, while another wagon took its place. There were two helpers at the barn, both local guys, Hank and Jeff, who worked at haying in the early summer and then hired out for fruit picking up at Naramata. In the winter they went to the coast to work at any job that paid well. So the loaded wagon would stop at the barn and the hay would be thrown into the haybarn, which was just a name for the upper floor of the barn; the lower half, or main barn, housed farming equipment and machinery and the nine horses, which included the four workhorses.

Meantime, we would be out on the field loading hay onto the second wagon driven by a guy of 29 who had a bad leg due to a break that never healed properly. By that time I couldn't get my mind off Sarah and imagined kissing her, again and again.

After a time, with the hay pretty well harvested, we took on other tasks, my favorite being searching for cattle who were out on the range. In a month or so they would all have to be rounded up and returned to the ranch, so the more that was known about where so-called strays were the better.

The rancher's old father looked after the horses. His name was Frank Baird, a gristly, bristly guy standing maybe 5'9" of corded muscle. He'd been born somewhere between the South Saskatchewan and the Bow River in 1875, having a father who traded whiskey for furs with the Ojibway, Cree, and Blackfoot Indians. But the Northwest Mounted Police came in and stamped out most of the whiskey trade, then along with army units, attacked Riel's Metis people, putting an end to their hope of a separate national existence. Frank's father turned to ranching on the vast lands of the prairies, and made a bare living selling beef to the slowly growing prairie communities, the buffalo having been slaughtered. After his father's death Frank took over the running of the ranch and married Susan Biggs, who gave him seven children, five of whom died young. I tried to get Frank to tell me all about the Northwest Mounted Police, but he would only say that they were "damned good" on horseback. He said there were no fences anywhere in those days, and the main problem was horse thieves, which you had to track down for yourself, usually without success. Now, he seemed to care only about his five horses, and gave us hell when we reined in our mounts too sharply.

Old Frank had only one bad habit I knew of, and that was spitting tobacco juice right across the table when we were eating dinner, he having

finished his. He usually hit the spittoon lying on the floor beyond, but not always. Nobody else complained, and so I said nothing, but I think he guessed my disapproval. One day he turned to me after squarely hitting the spittoon and said “You ride too fast, son. One day you’ll have a fall. But in the meantime I don’t want to hear any horse complainin’ about the way you ride.”

Of course, I paid no attention to Frank — until it happened.

In that area of British Columbia pine forests predominate with little or no undergrowth, and wide gaps between the trees. Riding at full gallop one day, my horse suddenly dug in its hooves, causing me to dive away over its head and fall in a heap, feeling like a broken doll. Then I opened my eyes and saw the cause of my horse’s sudden decision to stop. A foot and a half away was a large porcupine, all its barbs gleaming and distended in my direction. I rolled rapidly away, proving I was no broken doll, just a careless kid with a lot to learn about how to react to danger, for one thing, and how to begin to appreciate people very different from me.

The next round of work experience away from home was with the forest service near Cowichan Lake on Vancouver Island.

There were seven of us, mainly 15 year olds, in the fire suppression crew, all students working for the summer, only two of them from Prince of Wales High School, the other being my friend, Daryl Duke, who later became a talented film director. Our main job was to get quickly to new brush fires and extinguish them before they spread. Of course, we didn't sit around waiting for fires. We were kept busy carrying the building materials for a forestry look-out to its site on the top of a mountain.

We slept in a tent barely large enough for the seven of us. The rain, when it came, was intense, and our main preoccupation was keeping the floor of the tent dry by digging a drainage ditch around it. The latrine was a hastily dug pit with two eight foot 2' by 4's forming the seat, so defecation was mainly a problem of balance. Food was mostly out of tins: beans followed by canned pears or peaches. We were supposed to have one day off, part of the time doing our laundry, but much of the time listening to Tommy and Charlie reading aloud stories from sex magazines — a mixture of the silly and appalling that had most of us giggling into the night.

Finally, we got a fire alarm signal, and ran to the truck that was to carry us to the site. The only road to our camp was a long disused logging road made up mainly of potholes. We jammed ourselves onto the exposed back of the truck and hung on for dear life, hoping that the fire would be out

by the time we got to the site. After more than two hours bumping along we got onto a main road which took us over forty miles of smooth riding before we swung off onto another logging road. When we arrived we grabbed our tools, mainly shovels, picks, mattocks and axes, hiked to the fire site, and set to work in that wilderness of fir and hemlock. Luckily, there wasn't much fire to find, but a hell of a lot of smoke, so we spent several hours digging and ditching to snuff out all hidden sources of fire. Fire embers can take a long time dying out.

We showered under an old firehose emitting a full stream of water which battered our young bodies. One day my pal Daryl who was waiting for his turn in the shower stared at me and pointing to my lower stomach said : "My God — you've got a tick!" I looked down and saw a small black body protruding from my skin. Daryl left to get the patrolman in charge of our group. In no time four members of the crew were holding me down on a table while the patrolman used a razor to cut the animal, as they called it, out of my stomach. That razor really hurt, especially when he cut deeply enough to be sure he was getting the whole beast. I bled profusely, but they had soon bandaged me, and the patrolman gave me a shot of his brandy. He said that there was a variety of the tick that was very dangerous and this might have been one of them. "They'll travel under your skin and get lodged in your

brain and that's the end of you," he said. I thanked him profusely for saving my life. Yet I'll never know if the one they cut out was the deadly variety he described.

Most of the time that summer we spent clambering up a nearby mountain, our backs loaded with lumber and other items that would be used to build a fire look-out. The trail we followed was not only steep but embedded with sharp rocks that made the climb tortuous and sometimes dangerous. On my first climb up, I learned the use of language I could never find in any dictionary. Eventually we got all the building supplies to the fire look-out site. I remember the despairing look on the faces of the two carpenters hired to build the cabin as they stared at the piles of lumber we had flung here and there.

One other memory I have of that summer was the howling of wolves in the night — weirdly powerful and full of indescribable longing.

Next year when we were sixteen my friend Peter Wilson met me with a bag over his shoulder, and we started hitch-hiking to Prince George, carrying with us a bottle of rye whiskey half filled with gin. We had finished it, too, by the time we got to "George" where Pete had an uncle who was a lawyer well known in the town. He was sure he could find us a job there in the forest service. He did find one for Peter, leaving me to scramble, until I

got ill-paid work as a bull-cook in a remote camp supplying wood for the bridges on the soon-to-be-built John Hart Highway joining Prince George and the beginning of the Alaska Highway at Fort Nelson. I had to get up at 5:30 AM and build fires to heat water for the men, not only to wash in, but to supply their coffee. The rest of the day I spent cutting wood, washing dishes, and taking out garbage.

I don't remember what my pay amounted to except that it was pitifully little. So when a couple of the men offered to pay me for doing their laundry — a job they hated since it would cut into their one day off — I agreed. The problem was how you did laundry. Doing it in the small tin bowls we called sinks where we washed every morning was out of the question. However, one of the men had used a large wooden barrel and told me it worked quite well with the help of a plunger, the kind you use for clearing a jammed toilet. So I followed his advice: throw the dirty clothes into the barrel, add three or four pails of hot water and some soap, and drive the plunger up and down on the watery mess below. Eventually, I got to know when to quit plunging. All that then remained to do was to pour the dirty water away, and with another couple of pails of clean water rinse the clothes, hanging them out on pine trees surrounding the camp. The whole process took longer than

I'd planned on, mainly because all our water came from a hand-operated pump for a 40' deep well which could fill only one pail at a time.

Most of the men avoided tasks on their one day off because that was their Poker Day, and most of them were players, meaning they were committed to an all day poker session every Sunday no matter how much they won or lost.

I got along pretty well with the men, though they were a tough lot. A few had rifles and enjoyed shooting bear and the odd moose, though none of them had hunting licenses. I became disgusted with some of them who, if they saw a bear of any age or gender would shoot it, which meant that the cubs of the mother they killed would soon die, left on their own.

The cook, Charlie, pronounced Cholly, for he was Chinese, not much more than 5' tall, and sporting a small pigtail, always served the same meals. Breakfast was pancakes with a few strips of bacon thrown in and served with the vilest coffee I have ever tasted. Lunch, which was eaten at the work site, wherever that might be, was four thick slices of bread with ham or cheese for filling. Dinner, the most important meal of the day, was always a thick stew with canned beans or peas on the side. The meat in the stew was more than a little putrid since there was no electricity and Charlie had never learned to solve the problem by keeping the meat in the proper mixture of

salt and water. The men complained bitterly about this. I remember one man standing up and throwing his plateful of sour stew in Charlie's face as he went by. Then, when such complaints had no effect, the men began to play practical jokes on Charlie to make his life miserable. One trick, I remember, involved carrying him out in his cot when he was sound asleep, for Charlie had the habit of using sleeping pills. He woke up in the morning lost in the wilderness. Amazingly, he did not complain. I asked Charlie how he found his way back, for the wilderness was totally uninhabited. He made a sign with his finger which I finally realized was a circle which he was making wider and wider, representing the widening circular route he had taken until he said he heard the sounds of sawing, and that meant camp. He smiled broadly, telling me about it as though the experience was a game which he enjoyed playing. Finally, the stew problem was solved when the assistant camp manager took the long trip into Summit Lake where there was a community store and learned how to properly preserve meat using the correct balance of salt and water.

So eventually the men decided to make things right with Charlie and told him that since the stew tasted better, they would not play any more tricks on him. He replied: "Oh that alright. You play tlicks Cholly, Cholly play tlicks you. Me pissy in de coffee."

It was not the quality of coffee or stew that convinced me I had to find another job. It was the problem of taking out the garbage, which sounds easy, but wasn't. You see, there was no such thing as a garbage can, and so the garbage had to be carried out to what they called "the Dump" a quarter mile away in the forest. The reason for this distance was the bears which frequented the region. On my first trip there, I found three bears at work on the Dump. So naturally I unloaded my garbage where I stood, and got out of there fast. The next day I found a bear working on the fresh garbage of yesterday, so again I dumped what I had where I stood. And so it went, the garbage dump getting closer and closer to our camp until one day I stepped out from the cookhouse with a fresh load and there was a bear affectionately waiting for me. I decided it was time to find another job.

When I returned to Prince George, Peter informed me that the Forest Service, due to his uncle's probing, had a special job for us. Along with another school friend, Chris, who appeared on the scene, we would accompany a forest patrolman on a search- and- rescue mission.

It turned out that a Forestry Look-out man posted on what they called Coffee-pot Mountain had managed to use his short-wave radio to inform Headquarters that he had cut through most of his shin-bone with an axe

while chopping wood, and needed help as soon as possible — preferably yesterday. We travelled in a flat-bottomed boat about 14' in length with a 5HP outboard motor which we didn't need going downriver from Summit Lake surrounded by a wilderness of small fir trees. I was fascinated with several beaver who swam under our boat as we navigated the stream for I had been taught that beaver stay as far away from people as they can. Then it started to rain with force. We arrived at an area not so heavily forested, and the patrolman told us we would camp for the night. We had no tents because we had to travel light in order to accommodate the wounded man and his gear. We made a kind of shelter out of forest branches covered with ground-sheets and the patrolman found reasonably dry wood under some trees, splitting it with a hatchet he carried, and then ordered Chris to get the can of kerosene from the boat and pour some on the fire-wood. Chris, very much a city boy, thought "some" meant "all". He poured the whole can on the wood causing a conflagration as the flames leapt 10' in the air. It was soon over, and we slept poorly that night, shivering in our dampness and suffering the attacks of myriads of mosquitoes..

At first light the patrolman woke us and after sharing a few biscuits before we started our climb, the patrolman spoke to us: "You will find this

climb a tough one, especially because there is no real trail. You just follow me and try to remember our route.”

Chris looked at me and whispered: “If he knows the route why should we”

But he didn’t get to the end of his sentence. “Suppose something happens to me,” the patrolman said. “I slip and fall and break a leg or something. These things do happen. The problem is not going up because you keep going up until you are at the top. It’s coming down that matters unless you remember the way. Understood?” We nodded. “And remember,” said the patrolman. “We’ll be carrying someone down with us.”

I must admit I hadn’t thought much about that. How could we manage to get a crippled man down a mountain when it was so tough going up, for it was a steep climb through shale which gave at every step? We soon found out.

Bud Jameson was a grizzled old character, who had been brought up by Indians in the Great Slave Lake region. The wound on his leg looked pretty bad, yet to the patrolman basically uninfected. The old man said he’d been using certain natural remedies to bathe his wound, but I regret to this day not remembering what those remedies were. He had not dared go far from his tent, which was on the only level ground. The patrolman decided

we must make a stretcher and carry him down, so we did that, cutting a couple of poles to size and stretching a bear skin across, then fastening it with leather thongs.

We knew it would take at least a day to get him down the slope to the Crooked River where our boat was, so we spent the night on Coffeepot Mountain. He told us many tales about his life in the far north. One was about getting lost on the Barrens when he was only seventeen. The temperature was about minus 40°F. He'd been visiting his girl friend and drank a little too much rum — not a little, he corrected himself, a lot. They found him in the morning in the process of freezing to death.

“You make a mistake on the Barrens and it's ten to one your last,” he said.

“So how come an experienced man like you hit your shin with an axe?” I asked, ever willing to say the wrong thing.

Bud looked at me as though I were a chunk of ice that should be melted away. “I'll tell you something, kid. When I chopped at that tree I got to thinking about the last time I did a woman — how good it was — how I'd like to do her again and again. And I missed my swing. You got it?”

Shocked, I struggled to keep a straight face.

“I see by that blank look you don't got it,” he said.

But he was wrong: I got it alright.

The next morning, finishing the last of his coffee, Bud said that a black wolf had visited his tent two nights before, peering in through the open flap. He said, “These wolves are rare, coming as they do from Siberia. And when you see one like that you know your time is just about over.” There was a long pause, “So I’m glad you made it up here.” Another long pause, “I’ve got a woman I want to marry in Prince George, name of Gladys. If she’ll have me. Can’t remember her last name.”

I’ll never forget the descent down the slope of the Coffeepot. The problem of carrying a wounded man on a stretcher downward was enormously magnified by the many slopes composed of shale, which swooped away beneath our feet. We had a fall about every dozen steps but Bud never complained, though once he was flung out of the stretcher.

There were several rest stops down the mountain. I remember one a few hundred yards from our destination, when the old man said: “A cow moose stopped here about three days ago. She had her young one with her.” At the time, I wasn’t even listening to him, just trying to regain a little strength for the next ordeal. Later, after the trip, I asked the patrolman how the old man knew about the cow moose. “I didn’t see any sign of a moose,” I said. “People like that,” the patrolman answered with a tight-lipped smile

“they can read the wilds like a book. A tuft of hair on a tree, for example, will tell them the size and sex of the moose. I don’t know much about it myself, just that I have a lot to learn from old guys like him, who don’t even know how to read the King’s English.”

If descending the mountain with a wounded man in a wilderness stretcher was tough, getting that man up the Crooked River to Summit Lake was almost impossible. We city boys had completely forgotten that if floating down a river was easy, the return fight against a strong current was a titanic labor. True, we had a 5 HP motor on the boat but, with the load of luggage and the old man, progress was so slow that again and again we had to bend our backs and push the craft up the stream, at least waist deep in water, and where the water was too deep, which was usual, we had to rope her and pull her, stumbling through the thickets of the shoreline on either side.

I must admit that during this struggle with the river current my friendship with my school-mate, Chris, suffered considerably. More than once I caught him, hanging onto the side of the boat he was supposed to be shoving along, his feet floating near the surface. Of course I yelled at him, but with only marginal effect.

To this day I'm amazed that we were able to do it — for there is a limit to human fortitude — but one day we found ourselves paddling out onto Summit Lake, trucking down to Prince George, and getting that old man into a hospital. I heard later that in time his leg healed. Whether he moved in with Gladys I'll never know.

I am not quite through talking about my experience with the forest service, this time as a forest-fire Lookout man. These are the guys (including gals) who daily climb up to a glassed-in observation tower set above a one room cabin for sleeping and eating. My cabin and tower was perched on top of a mountain on the north side of Upper Campbell Lake on Vancouver Island, with a clear view over the beautiful Sayward Forest stretching out of sight to the north-west.

Now enrolled at UBC, I was able to work for close to four months, during the period of greatest forest fire risk. So my first challenge was learning to do the job I was hired to do, and do it well. My second challenge was learning how to survive alone: feeding myself, and learning how to live with loneliness, by which I mean learning how to live in and with the wilderness. So I read a great deal, including the *Odyssey* and Toynbee's *Study of History*.

Our job as Fire Look-outs required our being in the viewing tower during daylight hours watching our territory for signs of smoke. This meant constantly scanning the whole area with my binoculars moving slowly and carefully from one side of the territory to the other, especially over long distances, only as I approached the nearer landscape moving a little more rapidly. If I saw anything even faintly suspicious I would use a standing telescope at the side of my small tilted desk behind which I sat on a tall stool with a back rest.

The observation tower was about 8' by 8' and completely glassed in, except for the corner supports. At the bottom of the ladder leading up to the observation tower was my cabin, about 12' by 12' which contained a table for meals, a single sleeping cot, a few shelves for books, and a large wood stove for cooking and heating.

My duties, other than fire-watching, included noting cloud colour type and altitude, wind direction and speed, barometric pressure and wood moisture content. Each day I was required to report my data to Campbell River Forestry Station by short-wave radio. Here is where I experienced a strange phenomenon. After about two months on the mountain-top I was able to predict the exact barometric pressure before I looked at my instrumentation. What is the explanation for this? I believe the human being

in his natural state had abilities which we have lost. Like animals today we were once able to sense the oncoming tsunami or earthquake and get to safer ground. My experience suggests this faculty can be reawakened in time, but not in a city environment.

As for wild life the only animals I remember being aware of, aside from cougars, were wolves which I never saw but heard howling at night, and deer which I often saw on the forest's edge, staring at my cabin. Once three hunters appeared on the scene. They had booked into a small resort on the other side of Upper Campbell Lake, and asked me if I'd seen any deer during the day. I lied and said no, for I hated the hunters, their rifles slung on their shoulders, prepared to murder a small deer, and then take photographs of one another proudly displaying the lovely animal they'd just killed. If only there were some way of hunting the hunters.

Once a week I was allowed to radio in my food and other needs, knowing that after two days I would find my order packaged and sealed at a special location on the north side of Upper Campbell Lake. Having to keep fire-watch during daylight hours, I would descend the mountain at twilight the next day, attach the goods into my back-pack, and climb back up the mountain in darkness using a flashlight. On one such climb I noticed the tracks of a cougar that crossed my own on the last trip. I don't know how

often he followed me, but it was an unsettling experience, the thought that behind me in the night I was being followed by a big cat.

Most of the food I ordered came in tins, including beans and fruit, but once I decided to order a roast beef — a food I truly longed for. I cooked it in the oven of my wood stove and waited an hour before removing it.

Raising the roast to the top of the stove I cut into it with my carving knife, and was overpowered by the smell of... rotten meat. It was a tragic and stupid mistake. Angrily, I shoved the roast back into the oven and forgot about it. What I completely forgot was that as I cooked my top-of-the-stove foods, boiling some and frying others, I was also heating up the oven, that being the nature of a wood stove.

So one evening about 8:00 PM, as I lay on my bunk reading, there was an explosion, the door was blown off my stove, flames shot out, and I was in the middle of a major crisis. Stupidly, I flung the cabin door open, and clouds of smoke swept out. Grabbing a pail of water I flung it on the stove, creating more billowing smoke. Eventually, running back and forth from the pump house to replenish my water supply I managed to put the fire out by soaking everything. But it was not quite the end of the fiasco. My short wave radio gave me an emergency call. It was from Campbell River headquarters and it was the Chief. “The Sayward Forest lookout reported

seeing a fire at your location. What the hell's going on?" "It's okay, Chief," I replied. "Everything's under control. There's no fire here." "Is the Sayward look-out seeing things? If so, I'll have to get rid of him." "No, no, Chief, he saw a small blaze which I rapidly controlled." "He said he saw a column of smoke." "Well, maybe there was a little smoke, but there's nothing now." Anyway I managed to keep my job, though I'm sure there was some doubt about me.

That was not my only or major experience in that cabin. A Look-out tower has to be exposed on the top of a hill or mountain giving a wide view over the countryside beyond and below. It is therefore exposed to severe wind storms which means that the look-out cabins have to be fastened into solid rock by steel cables attached to each corner of the structure. Mine certainly was and it seemed to me unnecessary. I mean we don't get hurricane-like winds in B.C. Do we?

Then came a night I will never forget. It began with distant thunder, not unusual in itself, which naturally grew in volume as it approached. Then came a powerful gust of wind which literally shook my cabin. I turned off my kerosene lamp and waited. Soon I was in the midst of a deluge of rain, accompanied by flashes of lightning that smashed at my mountaintop. I could see the big fir trees as part of a black background and heard grinding

crashes as some of them fell under the battering assault of wind and lightning. One particular tree, a majestic monster, fell with a terrible sound of splitting and cracking. Suddenly I was very afraid. What if a tree should crash against my look-out? There would be nothing left of it — or me — not with the size of these trees which grew on the non-viewing side of my cabin.

Then, completely unexpected, a feeling of great calm came over me, which I could not then and cannot today explain — and the lightning flashes moved on.

The next summer my education took place in the Yukon, or to be more precise, the Klondike, the site of the gold-rush of 1898, possibly the greatest gold rush in history, attracting thousands from the played-out gold fields of California, and the Cariboo.

Most of the '98 miners took ship to Alaska, then followed the trail into the Yukon, Lake Bennett, and the Yukon River, rafting or boating the hundreds of miles to Dawson City, there to get provisioned for the real ordeal which was to climb through the Klondike region, the name for a system of creeks centered on what they called the Mother Lode and which eventually dumped into the mighty Yukon River. Somewhere in that creek system the miner would stake his claim, build some kind of shelter, and

begin to pick or hack his way down through the rock-hard permafrost to bedrock where the gold, if there was gold, would be found.

With my school-friend, Chuck McDougal, we flew up to Whitehorse, then in a smaller plane up to Dawson City. We landed on a cold day in early May and drove in a truck about 50 miles to Bear Creek. There we gathered a few other new employees of the Yukon Consolidated Gold Corporation and were trucked another 50 miles to a mining camp at Dominion Creek in the center of the Klondike, where we dumped our stuff in the usual bunkhouse, Chuck being assigned a bunk some distance from mine. There were about 40 beds in all and several sinks at the far end for washing up. The only bathroom was a 25' shed with two six inch logs stretched over the yawning odorous cavern below. There you had to perch, goose-pimples on your butt, wasting little time getting out again.

The key to mining operations in the Klondike after the war were the dredges. Each site, such as Last Chance Creek and Dominion Creek, had one of these gigantic machines, which featured an enormous steel shaft that could be dipped into the mine site. Rotating on a conveyor belt around the shaft were steel buckets that moved out along the base of the shaft, gouged into the ground at its tip, rotated over the end and conveyed their loads back along the top of the shaft to the dredge's processing centre.

But this operation was not possible as long as the ground was frozen rigid with permafrost, so our job was to thaw it.

As early in spring as possible, working in teams, we carried bundles of pipes, some of thigh high diameter and others of calf high diameter, and laid them out systematically, larger pipes feeding smaller ones, over the devilishly slippery tracts of land to be mined. Next, we used a sledgehammer to drive a metal wedge into the ground, which we then pulled out to create a small hole in which we put an upright narrow, roughly 10' long pipe. We placed multiple upright pipes equidistant from one another within the system of ground pipes. Hoses were used to connect the ground pipes to the top of the upright pipes. Then, to each of these vertical pipes we affixed a metal collar topped by a sliding weighted ring. As the pressurized water rushed through the ground pipes, up the flexible hoses, down inside the vertical pipe and out through the small holes in the bottom to slowly melt the permafrost, we lifted the heavy ring up the outside of the pipe and slammed it down on the fixed collar, twisting and forcing the pipe further into the ground. We did this over and over again, jamming the pipe down through the permafrost to bedrock where gold was supposed to lie, our sweat alternately soaking and drying in the frigid wind. If we didn't hit bedrock before the pipe got too low in ground, we'd affix another pipe on top and reiterate the process,

sometimes ending up with as many as three or four interconnected vertical pipes. Night after night, I was so exhausted that I slept deeply despite the aching of my every muscle.

I didn't know any of this my first night in camp, though. That night, I was so tired after our long journey that I didn't even hear the snores from some of the other bunks. When I did wake up about 5:30 AM I saw that a blizzard was blowing outside, so I fell back to sleep. It wasn't long, however, before someone was jiggling my bed with his foot. It was the "old" man who slept in the next bunk (he may have been fifty years old).

"Time to get up. You'll need some grub before we go out to work."

"But we can't work today," I said. "There's a blizzard outside."

"Blizzard or no goddamned blizzard," the old man said. "We go out to work.."

And so we did. I will never forget that day: carrying bundles of 10' steel pipes on my shoulder in the freezing cold. I still can't figure how I managed to get through it. But I do remember what happened when the work-day was over. Still fully dressed in my work clothes, some still frozen to my body, I simply collapsed on my bed, wondering how I was going to get back to Vancouver, for I had no money.

I was certain I could not put in another day like that one. Again the bed jiggled and sure enough it was the old man next to me.

“The gong’s goin’ to go off any time. And if you ain’t there within five they won’t feed you, kid.”

“I don’t give a damn,” I said. “I’m finished.”

There was a long silence. “I’ve got some medicine here that’ll fix you up,” he said. “ Even if you don’t eat, it’ll make you feel better.”

I turned my head to look. He held up a bottle of rum, and I thought why not, if it makes me feel better. So I gulped down a big swig of the stuff, and suddenly felt that I was on fire.

Guess what? I did make it into the eat-house, and moreover went to work the next day and for the many days after that — all due to that shot of rum. What I did not know, but soon learned, was that what I drank was 150 Overproof Lemonheart Rum, which you couldn’t buy in Vancouver, but which kept the Yukoners alive in the winter, or so they said. Alive and working.

I remember visiting the dredge processing centre one day with a message (otherwise workers were forbidden entrance). Inside was a warren of processing rooms and machinery. I tried to open one door, but it was locked. Peering through the door window I was surprised to see a pile of

sawdust about 7' high in the middle of the room. Later I asked the foreman about this. He burst out laughing. "Sawdust, you call it! That's pure gold dust, my boy. Soon to be melted down into gold bricks."

One Sunday stands out in my memory when Chuck McDougal and I and a couple of other guys decided to search for an old cabin, deserted early in World War 1, which we thought might contain a poke of gold dust or two. However, we came to a rushing stream crossed by a 12" steel pipe. The two guys who had lived and worked in the Klondike for several years shook their heads and said the pipe over the rushing stream ruled out any attempts to cross to the other side. But Chuck McDougal stared hard at me.

"You'd like to cross on that pipe, wouldn't you? But you'd never make it, Erickson. Forget it."

He knew me too well — that I was a sucker for challenges. And then he added:

"I'll give you ten dollars if you make it, because I know you can't make it." And with that, he had me.

To walk on the pipe meant placing one foot *exactly* ahead of the other foot all the way to the other side for about 30'. A few feet below you the water is rushing by, affecting your balance if you look at it, and you have to look at it, for the pipe itself only occupies a fraction of your visual field. I

knew that the only way I could succeed was through a huge power of concentration willing me to see only the pipe. The rest of the visual field would have to be blanked out purely by willing it.

And believe it or not, somehow I succeeded, to the amazement of the others, and myself, when it was all over and I had crossed back again.

It was about mid May when the ice cracked and began to move on the Yukon River. Even though we were supposed to be working a seven day week, the 24 hour holiday celebrating the ice breaking was an exception, which occurred about a week after the actual break-up. Everyone flocked to Dawson for the festivities which continued through the night. I and a couple of friends from the mining camp grabbed a table and watched the dancers. One of them was a girl who really attracted me — but do you think I got anywhere near her? Not a chance. Around 4:00 AM I escaped the tumult and the noise, and at first stumbling rather than walking, followed a rough path south along the Yukon River.

Eventually I found myself in an area I've since located on a map, about seven miles below Dawson City. It was an empty land that went on and on. Lawren Harris' paintings have captured the northern land as no one else has. His paintings were shown in Paris and generally criticized for their complete lack of human presence. But Harris caught the essence of Canada.

Something caught my attention as I stood not many feet from the Yukon River, which carried large pieces of ice from the break-up. It was something I vaguely heard and felt rather than saw, a sort of ragged thrumming sound. Then I looked up to see the ridge on the other side of the river come alive with a vibrating motion — and then realized that the whole forest was in motion like the forest of Dunsinane in Shakespeare's **Macbeth**. I became aware that I was standing in the way of vast herds of caribou migrating to the feeding and breeding grounds of the Barrens to the East.

In a sort of trance, I watched these thousands of animals crowding and plunging into the Yukon River — a few of the old ones carried away by huge chunks of ice, but most swimming with power. I stood transfixed as the animals climbed up on my side of the river and surged eastward, swerving around me as if I were a rock in a stream, eyes fixed, as though possessed. Years later I tried to make sense of the experience:

“You can imagine the effect when out of this emptiness suddenly emerges a moving mass of creatures carried by such a force of need that it will not be stopped by anything. One seems to be present at the primordial spectacle of life emerging from nothing, or what seems to be nothing, as though in confirmation of what the cosmologists tell us: that at the Big Bang the whole universe came into being from nothing.”

But for me it was not nothing. For me, it was “The ancient earth mother...the Mother Lode as the old Yukoners used to call her: this source of the salmon and of the caribou and of human beings is not nothing. Rather she is the source of everything. That is why she seems like nothing, because her vast womb bearing all that we are and all that we will ever be must be empty if it is to give birth to absolutely everything.”

Chuck decided to fly home, but I chose to go “down” to Whitehorse by going “up” the Yukon River in the paddle steamer, on what turned out to be one of its last trips because the river was getting shallower and shallower. I will never forget those dreamlike days and nights on that mighty river which flowed inexorably as though trying to drive us back to be swallowed by that implacable wilderness.

In Whitehorse, I managed to hitch a ride on a truck headed down the Alaska Highway to Grande Prairie in the Peace River country. My driver was a man in his forties who liked humming little tunes which I couldn't recognize and talking about his failed marriages. “Someday,” he said, he would “get lucky and marry the right woman.”

I asked him how long he'd been in the trucking business and he said, “Since the war. Don't you know what happened? The war ended and the Yanks took off, leaving just about everything behind, piles of equipment of

all kinds, including tractors and trucks. From then on, Whitehorse had a new life, which included a new trucking business. Most of us didn't even bother painting those military vehicles, just used them as they were. And we had plenty of goods to market along the highway. I made my money selling converted US tractors as farm machinery to farmers of the Peace River country. Those were wild and wonderful days, let me tell you. The lid was off and hoop-de-da!"

He yanked his steering wheel over and we came to rest by the side of the road. God knows where that was. I looked around and saw nothing but taiga forest.

"This is where I fill up my gas tank."

"But..."

"No buts about it."

He got out of the truck and I followed him to find him rifling in a tool box. "Here," he said, "take this... and this..."

He gave me a heavy hammer and a couple of steel punches, and grabbed two large buckets.

"Let's go," he said over his shoulder as he stomped off through the forest. About 50' in we came to what looked to me like a 10" diameter pipe lying on the ground.

“Here’s our gas.” And he proceed to hammer a hole in the top of the pipe.

In a couple of minutes, a column of gas shot into the air.

“You hold that big bucket over that jet, and I’ll hold the gas bucket under it, and when I say so you grab the gas bucket and run back to the truck and pour it into the gas tank. Got it?”

I did as I was told, over and over again, until the trucker said, “That’ll do for now.” And with a hammer he drove a wooden plug into the hole, sealing it.

It wasn’t until we resumed the drive down to Watson Lake, a town on the way to Grande Prairie, that he took the trouble to explain to me that the pipe was carrying gas from Norman Wells, which the Americans with Canadian government permission during the war had opened up in the Northwest Territories, and delivered to Alaska.

“It’d be a shame to just leave it lying there,” he concluded.

“Does everybody know about that gas line?” I asked in my innocence.

“Well, the truckers sure know. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be in business. You take what you find.”

After my mining stint in the Klondike I might have thought my mining days were over, but it was not to be.

My parents had left home on a trip to the East, mainly to visit my brother, Arthur, who was studying architecture at McGill University. I decided to search for a job in the usual place, the newspaper Want ads, and found that a mining company was looking for young men to work in a base metal mine north of Stewart at the head of the Portland Canal, which divides B.C. from Alaska. The job called for a two day journey to our destination on an old tramp steamer. Since I'd spent just about all my earnings for the year I had to go steerage, the cheapest way to travel and also the most uncomfortable. Five of us shared the small space and slept in hammocks. One of the others was recovering from a five-day binge and threw up from time to time. So I spent as much time as I could out on the foredeck, the only space on the ship I was allowed access to, other than steerage. The foredeck turned out to be the best vantage point to watch the porpoises which surrounded us as we entered the Portland Canal. I became fascinated by their antics: their extraordinary skill, daring and speed in the water as they swooped over and under one another, frequently arcing out of the water. I was sure it was a game and they were showing off.

We finally arrived at the town of Stewart where a truck awaited us, and we were immediately transported up to the mine called Silbak Premier, which had a long history by northern standards as a base metal mine rich in ore and still offering some valuable deposits, but these had become increasingly difficult to find and to mine, with the result that the mine was a warren of tunnels.

I will never forget the first day, when we descended slowly in a shabby open elevator down to level 5 which meant that it was about 500' down and of course pitch black, so we all had to wear pit lamps. The foreman leading us made it clear that we all must carry a second lamp to replace the pit lamp if it went out. We walked through a winding maze of tunnels, stumbling over the uneven rock floor and watching out for the occasional shaft dropping vertically to a lower level. We often passed cavern-like openings on either side. These, the foremen said, were stopes, one of which “you guys will be working in as muckers.” This meant that after the miner had blown his round, that is dynamited out, the section of rock he had drilled into, we were the guys who had to load this loose rock into carriers that would transport the load for processing from rock into the various useful metals such as iron, lead, copper, zinc and so on.

We walked, or should I say stumbled, through a winding maze of tunnels, now and then hearing the sound of distant drilling. Finally, the foreman signaled a stop, and we gathered around him. He was a man of about fifty with a wintry face.

“All that matters,” he said, “is that once the miner blows his round, you get the rock loaded and out of there as fast as bloody possible. That’s your job. And no complaints. I’m deaf to fuckin’ complaints. Got it?”

I have to tell you that shoveling broken rock is not only tough work, but extremely boring. So I was not very good at it. I was working with the kind of young men who could not find work in occupations that required some skill and the ability to communicate, for they spoke little English, coming from such countries as Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. They were boys when the war started, and men by the end of it. Many had been forced into the German army, and some fought as guerillas against the Germans, reaching adulthood in an environment of barbarity. After the war many of them had turned to crime in the struggle to survive.

Most of these men did not want to talk to me, even those who had a little English. I was from another planet in terms of the reality they had known, which was a lesson I have never forgotten: that human reality far exceeds what we think we know of it, which is always a fragment. A

particular culture will present reality in its own terms, as seen from its own boundaries, thus distorting it.

I think because I managed to get some of these men talking, particularly among themselves, the foreman sought to keep me working on my own, and this led to an experience I'd really rather forget.

The foreman had walked me some distance to another stope, and told me to clear it out. I don't think I'd worked for more than a couple of hours when my light failed and I stood in total darkness, suddenly remembering that I'd left my spare light under my bed when I'd departed in a rush that morning. I shouted for help over and over at the top of my lungs, and got nothing but silence in return. In our day-to-day life we seldom experience total blackness. Like all of creation we are formed by light and live by it. We may think we experience darkness when we turn our lights off at night, and of course it is true that we do experience a degree of darkness, but it is nothing like the total blackness I'm talking about. So I am left with the lame comment that I cannot even begin to describe what it is like. However, I can describe some of the consequences.

Without a light on my helmet, movement in any direction was ruled out. Here and there in that old mine there were unmarked shafts dropping suddenly a hundred feet to the next level. The other problem was that all

sense of direction had vanished, so that even if I were able to evade old mine shafts, how could I know whether I was going deeper and deeper into that underground maze? No. I had to stay exactly where I was. Even sitting was a problem because of the razor sharp jagged rocks. I just had to stand and wait for the long hours to pass until the foreman returned to collect me at the end of the shift in about six hours.

How did I pass those long hours? Well, after my initial desperation, I realized I had to endure standing there in the absolute black with my legs growing numb. I sang what songs I could remember, including a few my grandmother Sarah had taught me. I even invented some poems, especially limericks because it is easy to remember their rhyme scheme. Then I made up speeches on various topics, and rapidly discovered how much I didn't know — about anything.

For the first time in my life I experienced what cannot really be experienced — nothingness —nothingness reigning because nothingness is the all.

When the foreman came to get me at the end of the shift and found me standing dumbly in the dark having done no work, he called me all the foul names he could drag up from a lifetime of swearing, and finished by saying he was going to fire me. I was through!

However, the mine managers did not agree with him, simply because they were short of manpower. So I got an altogether new job in a different part of the mine. I became what they called a nipper working for a miner.

I need to mark a pause here and explain that word, “miner,” which everyone thinks they understand, but don’t. The miners formed the aristocracy of the mine because they alone had the training, the skills and the knowledge that made ore extraction possible, first of all in choosing the right drills to pattern the holes so that the holes fed into one another on ignition of the right amount of dynamite.

My job as nipper was to keep the miner supplied with sharp drill-heads. The rock in the Silbak Premier mine was noted for its hardness and so the miner was in constant need of sharp bits. He would remove the shaft and dull drill-head and hand it to me. Then he’d turn to the left to get a new shaft and sharp drillhead to begin drilling again immediately. Meanwhile, my task was to remove from the old drill shaft the dulled head by means of a sliding weight which I had to activate with muscle, and I had to do it quickly so that I could fasten the new bit onto the shaft and place it on the miner’s left for the next round of drilling.

I’ve never worked so hard in my life, nor have I ever suffered such constant all-encompassing reverberating noise. Every miner was intent on

one thing — blowing his round — meaning before the end of his eight hour shift setting off the explosive charges that would blow out a whole section of the wall to several feet in depth. If he accomplished this he received a cash bonus, making him the true aristocrat that he was. Working with this need to blow his round, there were no half-hour breaks, and seldom any time for a proper lunch break. I would munch on a sandwich while standing near the miner, having just handed him a sharpened drill-head.

Only a few miners succeeded in blowing their rounds within the shift-time, but I never knew my miner, Tommy Mead, to fail to do so. And I don't remember ever sitting down for lunch while working for Tommy, who hearkened originally from northern Ontario where his father, too, was a miner.

I have to say without a moment's hesitation that Tommy Mead was the strongest man I have ever known. He was in his forties and stood barely 5' 10" but his body was pure steel, like the 120 pound drill he was constantly fitting into place. He never smiled except at the moment of the explosion of his round as we crouched some distance from the blast.

He was a man you would never want to anger. One day he returned to his room (the miners had rooms to themselves) to find a big Polack, well over 6', going through Tommy's luggage looking for loot. Tommy picked

him up and threw him out the window which happened to be on the second floor. The man wound up in a Stewart hospital, but Tommy was never charged.

I would love to know how long Tommy Mead went on blowing his round at Silbak Premier. But miners are a wandering breed, and he could be anywhere where there are rounds to blow.

Unlike my seven day work week in the Klondike, I welcomed the one day we had to relax, when several of us got a truck to take us down to a small town on the U.S. side of the Portland Canal. It was little more than a small group of buildings built on the side of the Canal and all leaning dangerously toward the water below. One of these buildings we visited whenever we could was a tavern presided over by a woman of about 50 years of age; the only human I've ever seen who could roll a cigarette while filling a glass of beer. She was the tavern owner, and I was curious about how she came to own a tavern, so I asked her. She said her last husband left it to her when he passed away. I asked her, though it was none of my business, if she'd had more than one husband. As I remember it, here's our conversation:

“You bet — my last husband was my fifth husband.”

“You actually had five husbands?” I said like an idiot, for she didn’t look that old.

“If I can count I had five husbands, and I never regretted one of them — though my first husband was my favorite.”

She lit her slightly bent cigarette, and grinned at me. “Every other year I go and have a look at him.”

“But he must have died a long time ago.”

“Thirty years this September.”

“So...” I was confused.

She laughed. “He was buried in Dawson City, Yukon, where he was a miner. So when I go up there every second year, I get them to raise his coffin, and remove the lid. And there he is, just as I knew him. He still has a lovely little mustache.”

“But...”

She laughed again merrily. “You forget the top ten feet or so in the Klondike is permafrost. So my Tommy is permanently preserved, mustache and all.”

And she poured me a free beer.

As it turned out my Yukon days were far from over. A friend of mine, Gordon Lyall, wanted to spend a summer between University terms making good money as a salesman for the Fuller Brush Company, and asked me if I would partner with him. The company no longer exists, but back in the late 40's and 50's it was a successful enterprise, manufacturing high quality domestic brushes of all kinds. Fuller Brush's success depended on skilled salesmen going door to door with suitcases filled with brushes, and a few other household products.

So Gordon and I went to a training class to learn the art of selling directly to the householder. The technique was based on the "positive question-positive answer" technique. First of all we had to *look* positive: well-dressed in suit and tie, and smiling. So, ring the doorbell. When the door opened, nearly always by a woman, the housewife, we would hold up a card illustrating three items — let's say, a pot scrubber, a nail brush, and a bottle of Pure Air. And we would say: "Hello, it's your Fuller Brush salesman with a gift for you. Which of these free items would you prefer?" The most frequent answer to this positive question was: "I wouldn't mind that one," pointing to it, "But I'm not buying anything today." When she said this, we had already opened the suitcase looking for the free item which was always at the bottom. While we carefully removed items which lay over

the “free” item, slowly lifting up articles like hairbrushes, while looking at the customer and saying something like the following: “I should mention that this brush is on a special discount sale only to the end of the week, which I believe is tomorrow.” An important skill in selling is watching the customer’s eyes which will often fasten on a product that interests her. Then the salesman may offer 20-30% off on that item.

An interesting psychological fact is that once she has said yes to an item offered at a discount, she will be more ready to buy again —and again — almost every item being useful to the householder and so defensible.

Anyway, the method works, at least most of the time. I came away from the training course confident that I could do the job, but when I learned that our sales territory would be the Yukon, I admit I was dismayed, for I couldn’t imagine Yukoners interested in most brushes.

And so we started out in our Chev car, back seat area and trunk filled with Fuller products and with our belongings tied on a roof rack. Our route was the Alaska Highway from Grand Prairie to Whitehorse, with sales beginning along the side of the road to the First Nations people living in tiny villages. That was when we learned that our lessons in selling to suburban housewives were totally irrelevant in the northern environment. The native way of life made a joke of most of our techniques and products. Most of the

shacks we entered had no flooring and unpainted walls, many without windows — so all our housecleaning brushes had no value. The only items that caught their attention were hair brushes which attracted some of the younger women.

I don't know about Gordon, but I was never able to figure out Indian families. I remember, for example, one hut we entered. A middle-aged man sat in the center encircled by seven females of all ages including one old woman. The younger women were only interested in hair brushes, and obviously wanted the man to buy some, but he was clearly not interested. At some point while this wrangling went on, Gordon pulled out a small bottle of Pure Air and pressed down the spray-button. Gordon later said to me that the smell of that place was too much for him and he just had to sweeten the air. It was too much for me, too, noticing garbage piled in one corner of the room. Anyway, the man of the house was immediately interested in the spray we used which caused a mosquito to fall to the ground. The man asked for a bottle and sprayed the air around him. A couple more mosquitoes tumbled to the ground. This was enough for him. He bought the bottle, and a second one I carried. So he dug out a spot in the dirt floor and pulled out a jar filled with five and ten dollar bills. He then decided generously to buy the ladies a hairbrush, which delighted them.

Somehow, the word spread to other native communities up the road that the white boys were selling Pure Air, and we soon found ourselves digging into our last case of it

It was in the largest community before Whitehorse, Watson Lake, that the truth came home to us. A police car stopped us, and the officer wasted no time.

“Are you the boys we’ve heard about, selling something called Pure Air to the Indians?”

“Well, yes,” said Gordon. “We were surprised it was so popular. But we figured it was because it killed mosquitoes and other bugs. Is there anything wrong, officer?”

“Is there anything *wrong*?” repeated the officer. “The Indians are drinking the stuff because it contains alcohol. Don’t tell me you guys didn’t know that. Didn’t you know that it’s the alcohol that kills the mosquitoes?”

“No, we didn’t, officer. We’ve never even heard of such a thing. We came up from Vancouver where we sell it to housewives who use it to create a nice smell in their homes. That’s all we knew about it. Honestly.”

The officer shook his head sadly. “Isn’t it time you guys grew up?”

“Yes, officer,” we chimed.

“If I hear of one more bottle of Pure Air being sold, you’re both going to jail, and the usual sentence for selling liquor to the Indians is seven years. Got it?”

We got it, alright.

In the main municipality, Whitehorse, real life began to make its meaning clear. A large part of the town was an area called Whiskey Flats where our techniques for selling to the urban house wife again seemed to have little relevance. For one thing we encountered few urban housewives in the usual sense of that phrase. Maybe one in four of the women who answered the door were married. Secondly, their homes showed little evidence of care; in fact most of them were in a shambles, with evidence of wild orgies recently played out. I really wished I had some bottles of Pure Air for sale. I had the nerve to say to one woman who had bought a hair brush from me.... “I’m beginning to understand why this part of town is called Whiskey Flats.”

She became angrily defensive. “We don’t drink whiskey up here!”

“No?”

“No. We drink Lemonheart Rum, 150 Overproof. Otherwise we wouldn’t survive the winter”

“Oh,” I said, tough I already knew something about Overproof Rum.

Our lives as salesmen were made doubly difficult by the number of malemutes around. These are the result of huskies which are mated with captured wolves, creating the mixture called malemutes. After mating the dog must be immediately removed from the wolf, which will otherwise kill it. Romantic.

I bring this subject up because it was often a perilous act to enter the property of someone who owned a malemute. I had been brought up with dogs, so thought I knew how to deal with them, but not malemutes. They never barked or even bothered growling, they would just bare their teeth — and I found out they weren't fooling. So I'm afraid I missed knocking on doors where malemutes lived unless the owner took charge and invited me in.

Our selling was done on our knees looking up at the woman standing there, and I had to get used to the near presence of young women's legs, for there were few women even as old as fifty, and none wore pants. I was also not used to the fact that many of these young women living in Whiskey Flats had never even heard of shaving one's limbs, so that I could not help but notice that all these curvy legs were hirsute. I found this hairiness upsetting compared to the smooth undulations of girls' legs in Vancouver, especially at the beach. But why should I even mention this phenomenon? Simply

because some of these young women noticed my unfortunate attention to their legs, especially their upper legs — for many wore rather short skirts — and apparently the word soon got around. A few of these ladies made a point not only of wearing sometimes extremely short skirts, but of edging close to me... very close... as I was doing my selling. I can't say how this added to or detracted from my sales skills, only that it took me twice as long as my partner Gordon to complete sales in a district.

We sold to communities far and wide in the Yukon, from Carcross in the south to Dawson City in the north, with varying success. One old-timer in Dawson City (and old-timers who had taken part in the great gold-rush were not uncommon in Dawson) winked to me as I passed in the street. When I stopped he said: "Heard about you Fuller-Brushers invading our fair city."

"Yes," I responded. "Is there anything I can help you with? We have some very fine fingernail brushes."

He looked vaguely interested. "What do you do with a fingernail brush?"

"Why, you clean the dirt from under your fingernails."

He smiled broadly. “I don’t have dirt under my fingernails, just Yukon mud,” he said. “But I’ll tell you who could use some brushes, the expensive kind that ladies do their hair with.”

“Oh, who’s that?”

“Right across the street there, in that nice looking bungalow.”

So, more than willing to follow a lead, I knocked on the door. A middle-aged woman opened the door. She was nicely dressed, and smiling. Before I could speak she held the door wide.

“Come right in.”

And so I entered and was ushered into a spacious living room where three attractive young women sat. I could not help but notice that they wore scant clothing, but then on the wall next to the fireplace was a reassuring plaque which read: “Home Sweet Home.”

I behaved as I was taught to behave, offering them the gifts on my introductory card, and immediately opening my case to exhibit a set of fine hair brushes, which they were clearly delighted to see and clustered around my case. I saw that the older woman was not very pleased.

“Girls,” she said, “you already have fine hairbrushes. I’m sure this young man has other things in mind.”

Actually, I had initially very little in mind except an awareness of encircling females who giggled a little and began touching me here and there. To make a long story short, I eventually did escape, and breathed the northern air with relief. But guess who greeted me from the other side of the street? The old-timer, of course.

“Did you sell them a lot of brushes?” he called out. “You sure should’ve done given you were in there for more than an hour!”

Our most formidable experience as salesmen happened in a little mining community called Keno Hill not too far from the town of Mayo. As soon as we had parked our car in front of the only hotel we could find in Mayo, which leaned over precariously as a result of the shifting ground beneath, some young guys began to make fun of us, especially our city clothes.

We carried our overnight bags into the hotel lobby, and looked in vain for the hotel desk. A big man passed me headed for the stairs.

“Excuse me,” I said, “We’d like to check in for the night. Could you tell me where we could find the manager?”

“You mean red-eye Eliot? He’s where he always is: spilling beer in the beer parlor.”

So we went into the beer parlor and approached the man selling beer. His eyes were indeed red, though whether he was born that way or drank until he got that way, I'll never know.

“You want a room? Pay in advance. Room 7. Top of the stairs.” He offered no key.

“Do you know where we could get dinner?”

“Sure,” he said. “Just go down the boardwalk, and when you smell grease, that’s the restaurant. Go a little further and when you smell farts that’s the beer parlor. There’s only the one other, thank the Lord.”

Finally, we got into our room, where we played our usual game of blackjack, then tumbled into bed.

The next day we started selling Fuller Brushes in the large bunkhouses near Keno Hill. There were four large bunkhouses, so Gordon and I had two each.

We had not been taught to sell in bunkhouses, which held about 40 men each. Without thinking I fell back on the technique we had been taught when selling to a household. So I entered my bunkhouse, stood at one end and called out. “It’s your Fuller Brushman with a free gift for you all (and I held up a small pack of razor blades). Razor blades!”

There was complete silence. Then a clear voice said loudly:

“Let’s see you stick your free gift up your ass!” followed by general laughter and a few more shouted directions of similar poetic merit, leaving me to stumble out of that bunkhouse to roars of laughter.

I still had another bunkhouse to enter, no doubt with the same result, so I simply had to work out another approach. This time I sort of side-stepped in, placing my suitcase on the floor at the end of one of the bunks. A couple of miners were sitting there talking to one another. I nodded to them.

“Hi,” I said, “I’ve got a few things here you might like to look at.”

“Like what?” one of them asked. I flipped the suitcase open. It had been especially equipped with items of male interest.

“Like to take a look?” I said, pushing the suitcase nearer. “There’s lots of shaving stuff here,” I said, noting that they were both clean shaven. One got off his bunk and leaned over to have a closer look, choosing to examine a fairly expensive men’s hair-brush. A couple of other guys came over to take a look, and then several more, and I was soon changing money. In fact that bunkhouse turned out to be a bit of a gold mine.

August came and went and we had largely reduced our inventory of brushes. When September came we started down the Alaska Highway for home. But our education was by no means over, as we soon learned.

I was driving the car as we approached a tiny community called Toad River and was rounding a bend with the usual bushes crowding the side of the road, when a large vehicle appeared immediately in front of us. I had no time to swerve and the truck, which was carrying four horses, hit us head on. This was in the days before seat belts. I was in immediate hard collision with the steering wheel which hit my chest — more precisely my sternum — with a terrible blow, so that I thought it might have broken. Gordon went through the windshield in front of him, and sank back into his seat, blood gushing from his head. I could think of only one thing: that Gordon would surely bleed to death because his scalp had been lifted from his skull, and all I could think was that it had to be fastened back onto the skull or he was finished.

I'll never forget the struggle I had getting my door open, because the collision had crushed in the car. In spite of my painful sternum, I literally hurled myself against the door again and again until it suddenly flung open and I half fell out. I had to find some form of bandage, and quickly. About twenty feet behind the car was a horse! And then I remembered at the moment of impact seeing horses flying through the air above the car.

The one I was looking at was trembling violently, and with good reason: a large part of the skin on his neck was hanging loosely, torn off in

the impact when he hit the ground. But he was standing on a shirt! I saw then that our personal luggage, which had been in suitcases tied on top of our vehicle, had been hurled to the ground and had burst open. I could think only one thing: I had to tie that shirt around Gordon's head.

So I tried to push the horse off the shirt, but it would not move. And in my desperation I punched it as hard as I could on the nose, and it staggered back with a terrible snort.

I grabbed the shirt, and got back to the car, finding Gordon leaning far over to one side, blood flowing from his head. His face was white, and for a terrible moment I thought he was already dead. I pushed him to an upright position, and then tied my shirt tightly around his head, and made a knot under his chin.

Then something like a miracle occurred — a vehicle pulled up alongside us, and in a moment a man was peering in.

I said, "Can you help us? Where is a hospital?"

"The nearest hospital," he said, "is at Fort Nelson, about a hundred miles down the road."

"Please take us there."

And so he did.

I should add here that I called the arrival of the car a near miracle, and that's of course overstating the case. But the reader should know that away back then in 1951 there was very little traffic on the Alaska Highway, maybe a vehicle every half hour.

In any case I got Gordon into the man's small truck and held him upright as we travelled down the unpaved dusty road. It's lucky that the vehicle was old, allowing the dust to drift up through the holes in the floor of the car. The dust settled in a mat onto the cloth around Gordon's head, reducing the blood flow.

Anyway, we made it. At the hospital they also X-rayed my chest and said the sternum was not broken and that if it had been I'd never have made it to the hospital. So, leaving Gordon to heal in the hospital after being sewn up, I hitched my way back to the scene of the wreck. and found there was nothing to retrieve. During the hours I'd been gone, the car and truck had been stripped of everything, including car parts like the batteries and tires, as well as merchandise and luggage. Somebody later tried to blame the First Nations people as usual, but remembering my ride to Watson Lake with the trucker who helped himself to gas from the Norman Wells pipeline, I tend to think it was the "white entrepreneurs" who lived by their wits along the highway and proudly claimed the Yukon as theirs.

I wondered what had happened to the driver of the truck that hit us. He had disappeared. So I trudged down the highway a mile or so to Toad River which had a small lodge offering accommodation. The young man in charge there told me that the truck driver had been there, used the phone, and waited a few hours drinking beer until finally a government pick-up truck arrived and drove him north to Watson Lake. The driver of the pick-up told the young man that if he met me I must also report the accident to the RCMP in Watson Lake. I asked if the truck driver had been in any way hurt in the accident, and the young man said he had scraped his ear, that was all. I asked if anyone knew anything about the horses, and learned that the truck was carrying them to Watson Lake to be used as pack animals. A plane had come down in the bush north of Watson Lake, and the four pack horses were to be used to carry in supplies and get the survivors out. I had seen only the one after the accident, so I asked where the other three horses had gone. He said that a couple of Indians had led away the one who had lost some skin. The other three, one limping badly, had disappeared into the bush. It wouldn't be long, the young man said, before the wolves got them.

I trundled back to the scene of the accident and remembered that in the pocket of the leather coat I was wearing I had a small camera. If I was going to have to make a report to the RCMP at Watson Lake I had to seek

evidence that the truck had been on the wrong side of the road.. So I used my trusty little camera which had its title printed boldly on it, “The Lone Ranger Camera,” to show the various tire and skid marks made by the two vehicles. And finally, I hitchhiked a ride up to Watson Lake.

The RCMP officer was less than happy to see me.

“Do you realize what you’ve done? Do you know that these pack — horses were brought up here to carry supplies into a plane wreck 60 miles away in the bush? The pilot, who is famous in these parts, had an engine failure and crash-landed. Lucky his intercom was still working and he got through to the airfield saying what he needed for himself and three passengers to survive. Normally we would have sent in a plane to drop supplies, but the low cloud ceiling has grounded all aircraft. So we advised sending in some pack animals which could have reached the downed plane by tomorrow. But not now. You’ve wrecked that plan, and we’re holding you responsible.”

I told him I wanted to write a full report about the accident, which was not our fault. I also asked him if there was somebody on staff who could develop my photographs, and reluctantly he said yes. So by the end of the day I had written out my report, and we arranged to meet in the morning when the film had been developed.

That night I took a room in a small motel near the police station, and was just about ready to climb into bed when there was a knock on the door, and I opened to find a man standing there. His face was scarred with reddish patches here and there making him look as though he had been in a terrible fight.

“The cops told me you’d be here. I wanted to meet the guy who’d smashed up our truck near Toad River and killed three good pack animals. I don’t know what happened to the fourth one.”

“Could you tell me who you are?”

“Are you goin’ to invite me in?”

I hesitated, then stepped back, and he entered, eyeing the bottle of overproof rum I had on the little sofa table, a bottle I was planning to take back to Vancouver with me. But it was not to be.

“I’m Charlie Donahue.”

“The bush pilot?” His was a famous name in the North.

“The same. And the one together with my three passengers who were supposed to be rescued by those horses you killed.”

“I didn’t kill them... I mean...”

“Anyway, I decided to walk out — took me two days. And tomorrow I’m told the clouds will lift and I’ll fly back in there — know a lake nearby.”

I poured him a hefty rum.

“You can sleep here if you like.”

“Got my own room.”

Our conversation went on for about three hours while we demolished the rum, and I listened with fascination to his life story. I only remember part of what he told me.

During the war the air force got him to train bomber pilots in crash landings. Evidently there are techniques that can minimize the peril, though over a city, survival is unlikely. However, even in cities you may find a very wide boulevard, or a river, or even a canal. He was definitely an expert at landing in a treed location because he'd had his share of such crash landings in the North, and survived them.

One thing he said has really stuck with me. When the Dew line was being developed in the north to counter the possibility of Soviet attack, there was a great deal of coming and going of American engineers and technicians. Naturally, the pilots who knew the North were the Canadian bush pilots because it was their territory. But as usual common sense seldom prevails over self-interest, and the Americans felt it should be American pilots who flew their personnel in. And so it happened, with the result that there were a high number of fatal crashes by pilots who did not know the

geography of the North, an area without roads or communities, just endless taiga forests and hundreds of lakes without names. The problem prevailed, Charlie said, no matter the map on your knee, when you were forced by weather conditions to fly above the cloud cover and then later, when you broke cloud cover, to discover yourself flying over an utterly unknown landscape; that is, unknown to American pilots. The Canadian bush pilots had learned it all the hard way, and therefore could have serviced the Dew Line with far fewer casualties.

Unfortunately, I read in the newspaper a couple of years later that Charlie had been arrested and sent to jail for smuggling drugs into the Yukon. His sentence was heavy: six years. He had been a hero in my eyes for risking his own life to save others and I could hardly believe that this man was now a jailbird.

Since then I have heard nothing about him, but I will never forget the bedraggled figure at the door who had just walked through many miles of bush to get help for the three survivors at the site of the crash landing. By the way, he did fly in the next day after our meeting and picked up his passengers to deliver them Watson Lake.

Not surprisingly, the next day I didn't turn up at the RCMP office until after 10:00 AM, which was just as well because the all-important

photographs had only just been delivered. I could tell by the disappointed look on the Sergeant's face that we had won, that the vehicle on the wrong side had been the truck. I was free to go home cleared of any responsibility for the accident. But first I phoned Fort Nelson to ask how Gordon was. They said he was booked to go home in three days. He was all stitched up and doing fine.

And so ended the last of my summer jobs, for that fall I entered my graduation year at university. My real education – the one I couldn't get from books – had taught me life lessons that I've never forgotten. I began to understand the value of experience and that understanding gave me a little insight into my father.

My father's legs had been shot up by German artillery in World War 1 at the Battle of Amiens. German prisoners working as stretcher bearers carried him to the field hospital, which was a sports field with tented operating stations at either end. Thousands of injured soldiers lay in row upon row of stretchers spread across that field. My father knew that he would never survive, that he would bleed to death long before it was his turn to be treated. But then as it happened – you might say miraculously – he was recognized by a nurse with whom he had once danced, and she had him carried immediately into surgery. His legs were amputated, and later re-

amputated, to cut out the spreading gangrene, leaving him with mere stumps below the hip. He overcame depression and disability to run a successful business, marry the love of his life, and father two sons.

To me, this story had always been incredible, beyond my comprehension, even though I grew up with the reality of my father's disability. Without having gone to war myself, I could not comprehend the experience. But my own real education taught me not only about the remarkable diversity and adaptability of humans and our strength in facing the toughest challenges by working together, but about our power to endure, which is what enabled my father to survive and make a success of his life against incredible odds.

I learned that I could endure too, and that has made all the difference.