

Reminiscences of an Armchair Pioneer

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They say that experience is an impartial educator, and there are non so naively optimistic as those at the starting point of a new adventure, which is when caution should remind us of all we don't yet know, but it seldom does.

When we arrived in the Ottawa Valley in late November, 1965, the Town of Deep River already huddled under three feet of dazzling snow that weighted the rooftops like great slabs of iced cake. Where were the gardens, the sidewalks, street signs, people in this overwhelming white wilderness? How to comprehend the extremity of biting cold? Snowbound but undaunted we took up skiing, became proficient at piling up shoulder high banks of snow.

In the 1940's, Deep River, a small but lively town, was created to accommodate employees of the National Research Centre at Chalk River Nuclear Laboratories. In 1965 there was a variety of housing, schools, churches, a library, post office, bus and gas stations, hospital, pharmacies, hair dresser, barber, and a weekly newspaper. Cultural and sporting facilities were provided by the Drama and Choral Groups, the Yacht and Tennis Club, Skating and Curling Clubs, the Deep River Orchestra. Rugby was played at Cedar Park, golf on the nine hole golf course. The plethora of activities was inspired and maintained entirely by the unflagging and rollicking community spirit of volunteers.

During long winter evenings we read romantic accounts of trappers and trap-lines, lush pelts of wolf, fox, beaver; marvelled at tales of tall timber, logging camps, spring melt, daring river-men, log

booms and tugboats. We sympathized with early pioneers, who bushwhacked roads, cleared land, built homesteads, suffered mightily and moved on. We admired the old log buildings at King's Farm on highway 17, formerly Ferguson's Stopping Place for travellers going to and from the lumber camps on the Schyan River across the frozen Ottawa. In spring we were awed by the length of the log chute by the hydro dam at Rolphton, where individual logs were directed around the turbulent water.

Gradually we acquired a house, two children, and before we knew the eccentricities of the breed, an enchanting gray and white Siberian husky puppy with a black raccoon mask and oversized upright ears. With the invention of Muskol and Off, the vicious clouds of blackflies and mosquitoes became more bearable and we began to enjoy outdoor activities. Out on the water we learned to watch for the sudden wind changes that roiled the river's surface into long rollers of white-capped waves. We learned to recognise poison ivy at twenty paces; bee's nests were possible in the ground.

In 1975 we succumbed to the romantic ideology of the "back to the land" movement and with copies of Harrowsmith magazine tucked under our arms we set down roots on a fourteen acre tract of sand, pine and spruce, with a creek, a kilometre south of the Ottawa River and six kilometres west of Deep River. We established a two kilometre gravel road through the bush to the homesite and built a comfortable chalet in a natural clearing. Despite a limited knowledge of horses we erected a small barn for the horses our children were to ride - Licorice, a quiet black quarterhorse with a mind of her own, and Maggie, a skittish young thoroughbred as yet unriden. Other livestock included Cinnamon, the rabbit, and Smoky, the round gray practical cat who regularly deposited the chewed off nose of a deer mouse, complete with whiskers, on the front door mat.

Of course there was our incorrigibly independent husky, Chief, so named after Jack London's novel, "Silver Chief, Dog of the North". Affectionate when at home, he was an incurable wanderer.

He abhorred collars and leashes and escaped whenever he could. A twenty-five kilometre circuit was a mere romp, with distant neighbours phoning in their sightings. Luckily for him, chickens scared him witless. Porcupines enraged him, as did the resultant wrestling bouts with a pair of pliers. Dog obedience classes were a disaster -- he received a pass to prevent him from coming back. Every spring he shed his dense undercoat in ragged chunks all over the landscape.

How that dog loved to pull - kids on their bikes through hedges, kids on skis into snowdrifts. We entered him in the kid and mutt race at the Point Alexander Winter Carnival which required him to pull a sleigh with a small child aboard down the course and around a barrel. Chief turned so sharply he dumped his passenger, and sensing escape, crossed the finish line and galloped out of sight. With great delight he pulled our carefully selected Christmas tree home, to the top of the manure pile.

To us he epitomized the true free spirit of the wilderness, and he ran to the strains of his own music. In spring he would crash through bogs tracking the mysterious chorus of the peepers. In winter he chased the eerie groaning of ice music for miles down the Ottawa River. But, hungry and weary, he always came home to his human pack and we accepted him back on his terms.

He was also a clever thief, bringing home an assortment of items easily carried: a horse brush, an oscillating lawn sprinkler, flip flops, a fully packed metal lunch box. On outings in the bush, hotdogs and marshmallows disappeared from their sticks. On one occasion he arrived back at camp with a raw steak still wrapped in brown paper and string.

Always there was the special beauty of each season. I remember the rustle of spring rain, how fern and bracken unfurled, how the woods bloomed a glorious carpet of creeping arbutus, wintergreen, bunchberry, the voluptuous pink ladyslipper, how tree buds swelled and split open, how new grass twitched upward in the sun. In summer the lawns became wildflower meadows of daisies, buttercups,

orange hawkweed, purple vetch, and clover. I remember the sweet jammy aroma of wild strawberries under a searing sun. There were blueberries to be picked for breakfast, while morning mist still wreathed the hills across the river; in the woods, the sublime scent of dry pine needles on the forest floor. In autumn came the beating wings of Canada geese above the scarlet and gold maples. I remember in winter how the season's first snowfall increased in the wind's bluster, laying down sculpted layers, how on mornings of utter stillness, woodsmoke from chimneys stuck straight up like bits of stiffened string, how on subzero nights, boots creaked on hard packed snow, while in the warm barn, the soft whuffle of horses, the swish of hay.

There was plenty of outdoor entertainment to be enjoyed in every season. In March we boiled maple sap in an open kettle over an outdoor fire, convinced that the smoke, singed pine needles, bits of twig and ash all contributed a special flavour. In summer, sandy beaches beckoned with picnics at Indian Point, below the abandoned fire tower. There was canoeing, sailing, windsurfing and water skiing at Presqu'île and autumn hikes to the top of Mount Martin. Closer to home, Licorice could be persuaded to pull the wagon along our dusty road; there were trail rides in the bush and in winter, sleigh rides, snowshoeing, and cross country ski treks.

There were always chores to be done, feeding, watering, grooming and exercising the horses, cleaning the stalls, filling the loft above the stable with hay. Weeds flourished in the large vegetable garden beside the corral from where the pumpkin vines escaped and fruited halfway up a pine tree. Raspberries and blackberries were plentiful for the picking in a clearing down the road, amid signs of bear. Wood had to be chopped and stacked for the Fisher airtight stove that radiated a stupefying heat.

Through the years we overcame a number of unforeseen dilemmas and crises: three chimney fires before a structural default was corrected; a forest fire frighteningly close to the house, a horse

allergic to hay; a canoe we were towing back across the river, full of rocks, that capsized close to shore; the usual parent/teen conflicts, all of Chief's escapades. But nostalgia is a trickster that blurs the edges of memories until even the greatest aggravations become fond memories. They are like comfortable old clothes, unpacked, aired on a line, stroked, brushed, measured against the adjustments of time, with no apologies for history slightly rewritten.

Time stands still only in snapshots and memories. Now the animals are long gone; the children, grown, have moved on into their own special lives; and eventually, in 1989, so did we, to a new and compelling adventure in a different part of the Ottawa Valley, on an arable beef farm south of Pembroke, but that's another story.