

A Small "Oh Canada" Moment

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We just returned from a short road trip to Pembroke, Ontario along some of the Province's older roads and through some of its smaller communities. The most interesting part of the journey was the 2.5 hours of travel northward along Highway 41 commencing from Highway 401 up to Pembroke at the shore of the Ottawa River.



Figure 1: A typical scene along Highway 41 where rock outcrops combine with advertisements of local establishments.

Highway 41 still clings to its old charm of small settlements, winding roads, rocky roadsides and forest-covered hills. Settlements such as Kaladar, Northbrook, Cloyne, and Eganville may be just dots along anyone's search for more important life. However, they represent life as it was, in the 70s, 60s, 50s and even earlier. Not much has changed.

The Highway has been upgraded from the bumpy pavement of earlier times. Fresh and smooth pavement makes the trip more pleasant and perhaps more sleepy and distracted. One's attention is sometimes turned to the signs on the forest edge that advertise local attractions: eating spots, real estate, well drilling, small motels, and general stores selling everything from live bait to fireworks. While any diversion from the road may lead one into an unforgiving, immovable rock cut.



Figure 2: An example of the repaving of Highway 41 surrounded by a forest of trees.

Not unexpectedly logging trucks are a common sight along this stretch of highway. They carry virgin logs likely from some cutting site in the bush, and toward some southern saw mill.

Also not surprisingly, many forest animals live along this stretch of wilderness. While the typical raccoons and skunks exist along all highways, the forests along Highway 41 are still home to much larger creatures like moose and bear. Being distant from large cities such as Toronto and Ottawa means that large tracts of virgin forest can still be found, particularly in the areas north of Bon Echo Provincial Park.



Figure 3: Rock and pavement amongst the trees of Highway 41.



Figure 4: Logging trucks are a common sight along Highway 41.

On arrival in Pembroke we had the occasion to sit down one evening along the shore of the Ottawa River with some locals and a bright fire. An average-looking guitar player named Doug pulled out his six string and began playing some antique tunes from the 60s and 70s. Tunes to which he actually knew the lyrics, while most of us spent decades humming something that appeared to be right, but sounded very dumb. Those new songs of our youth which are now so very old. After an enjoyable free concert Doug's wife asked him to play "his song", "you know, the one that you wrote several years ago". He reluctantly agreed.



Figure 5: An informal gathering by a fire along the bank of the Ottawa River, where a true Canadian expressed his sentiments in song about his country.

So Mr. Doug began singing to the beat of the crackling fire. Rather average voice, quiet and raspy. Initially there was uncertainty that his voice was in tune with the guitar. But we would be the free audience, perhaps to his unexpressed aspirations to greatness.

So, Mr. Doug sang. In the darkness his face was sometimes lit up by the crackling fire and his soft guitar played smoother and smoother with each chord. His voice suddenly became more than average and the moment also.



Figure 6: The audience who listened to a simple song about Canada.

Doug began with an introduction to Canada, that was "a country north of the USA", since few on the planet would know where it was next to its big neighbour to the south. He sang that this was a country where the people are friendly and they would greet you "good day". He sang that he was proud to be Canadian and that he would raise his glass.

Doug sang about the TransCanada highway, "being longer than most, in fact it stretches, from coast to coast". He sang, if you drive our highways, our mountains and the bends, across the prairies and those wheat fields that never seem to end. And he went into his refrain "...and you'll hear Oh Canada, and you'll hear Oh Canada, we'll sing Oh Canada".

Doug sings about our summers being short, and our winters seem long. Hockey is our passion, oh its heritage is strong. And Lord Stanley is still waiting to be hoisted by the Maple Leafs.

For non-Ontario readers, the Toronto Maple Leafs are an ice hockey team that had a long tradition of winning many Stanley Cup hockey championships but since 1967 they have won nothing. And so there is this shared sarcasm by all frustrated fans, perhaps

only truly understood by fans of any sport whose team has seen many years of frustration. Doug's words expressed that shared frustration.

And Doug goes into his refrain: " And we'll sing Oh Canada, and we'll sing Oh Canada".



Figure 7: Mr. Doug, singing Oh Canada.

Doug sings about our flag being raised high. The red and the white. Our soldiers go into battle for this country's freedom. We all should be proud. And Doug wants us all to stand up good and tall, when we sing our anthem good and loud.

And Doug ends off with his refrain: "And we'll sing Oh Canada, and we'll sing Oh Canada, it's our home and native land".

There is a short period of clapping from the very sparse "crowd" that reaches the far distant shore of Quebec. And we understand that we experienced a true Canadian moment.



Figure 8: Mr. Doug, the audience, a fire, and Oh Canada.

Small town Canada is much like small town anything. Much like small town Tanzania, small town Mongolia or small town Louisiana. But in Canada we feel it is uniquely ours. Whether we catch lobster on the east coast, fish salmon in British Columbia, or fish on ice-covered barrens in the northern territories. We find true statements being made from the heart with no double talk and corporate schmoozing. The only corporate jockeying for position is whether you get the prime lawn chair with the best view of the water and the least smoke. People like Doug are found in small town Canada. While they have access to the world through the internet they still shop at the local general store.

Ice hockey has a long history in small town Canada. Those hockey teams of yester year can be found hanging on dusty frames in the small arenas of every small town. One can see how hockey equipment grew from hard experience. Many an early player broke a chin bone or elbow before padding, helmets and face guards began to appear.

There were always great families of hockey. Those families of 6 brothers all of whom grew up to play for the local team and became local stars in successive years. And as the National Hockey League began to develop some of those players' names began to be heard on regional radio, and then onto national television on "Hockey Night In Canada".



Figure 9: The wall of honour at the Pembroke Arena.



Figure 10: Hockey has a strong tradition in Pembroke, Ontario as it does in almost all Canadian places.



Figure 11: Some of the local Pembroke boys of the old times.

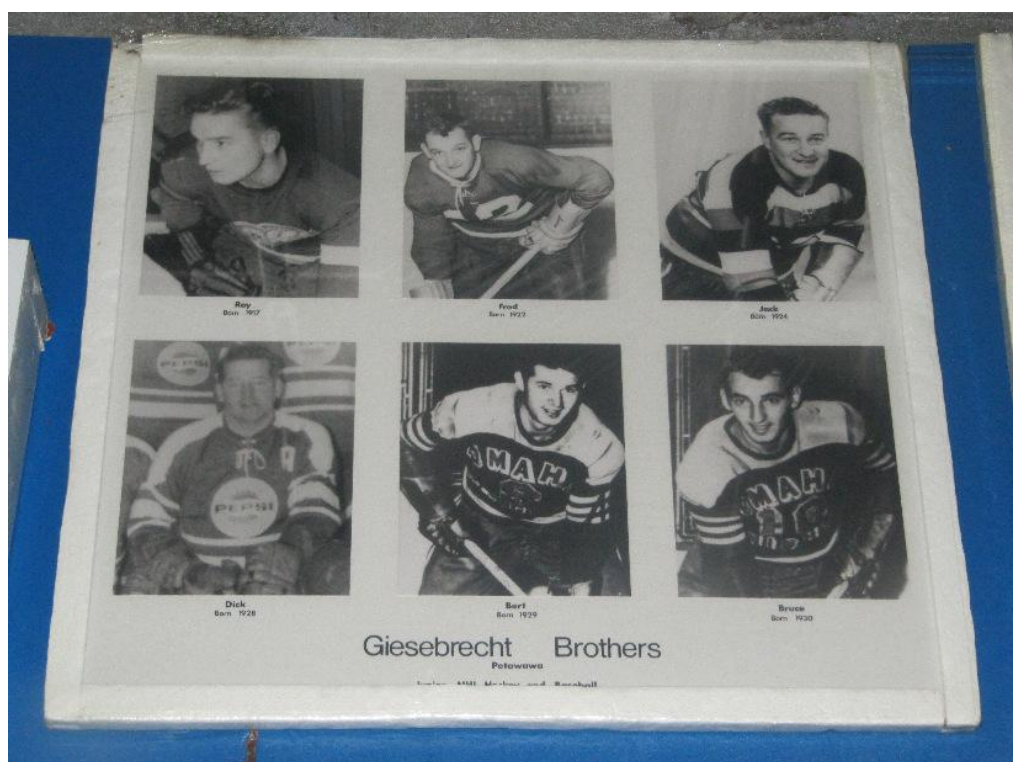


Figure 12: The Giesebrecht Brothers: a typical, great hockey family of brothers.

There was a time when Canadians understood that there are many flavours to right and wrong. We played hockey, we spoke what we felt, and we worked toward the benefit of all. We understood that we did not possess everything right and we needed to work to maintaining peace at home and beyond.

The greatest part of Canada is the kindness expressed by its people. We can, and do, and we must, take care of each other. This includes all Canadians who walk on two feet. It also includes the kindness we express to our non-human species, our forests, our waters and the understanding that we need to pass on this kindness to our next generations.

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