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2014

With SAGE to Yellowknife.pdf

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With SAGE to Yellowknife

June 2014

Keith Clouten



North with the Rebels

You had to be a bit of a rebel to climb out of bed early Wednesday morning, climb into some clothes, and be at College Heights, Alberta, to board a 5:30 a.m. bus that had “Red Deer Rebels” painted all over it. Aside from that, it was a very comfortable coach with power outlets and offering Wi-Fi at civilized locations. Those “civilized locations” did not include some of the northern wilderness.



To reach Yellowknife in Canada’s great Northwest Territories, a thousand miles away, this bus carried 44 seniors through two 12-hour sittings, separated by a night at the comfortable Super 8 Hotel at High Level in Alberta’s far north. Day One was a slightly shorter travel day for six passengers who joined us at Leduc, and just an afternoon jaunt for three ladies who boarded our coach in the town of Peace River. Many of us were strangers to each other, but we welded ourselves into a cohesive and congenial group during this seven-day escape to the land of the midnight sun.

What we had in common is that we were SAGERS. SAGE is an acronym for **S**eniors in **A**ction for **G**od with **E**xcellence. SAGE Alberta came into existence in 2012 under the blessing of the Alberta Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This organization of intrepid seniors is actively engaged in a variety of worthwhile and faith-building activities: volunteering work projects, group camping, travel opportunities, winter retreats, and an annual convention. For this 2014 trip to Yellowknife, we hired a nice bus that regularly transports the city of Red Deer’s hockey team, the Rebels.



The Mighty Mackenzie

We were traveling through a land of two big rivers. We crossed the Athabasca at Whitecourt, northwest of Edmonton, and the Peace three hours further north. These and dozens of other streams flow eastward into Lake Athabasca which overflows into the Slave River that courses northward across the 60th parallel into Great Slave Lake. This is the deepest lake in North America. Its outlet is the Mackenzie River, which we encountered on the morning of Day Two, a couple hours after entering the Northwest Territories.

The Mackenzie is a formidable barrier for travel into most parts of the Northwest Territories, including Yellowknife. It is Canada's largest and longest river, draining a watershed that extends across portions of Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and the Yukon, and it traverses 4,241 kilometers from its farthest source to the Arctic Sea.

Spanning the kilometer-wide Mackenzie just downstream from Great Slave Lake is the recently opened Deh-Cho Bridge. It is the first and only all-year crossing of the river. My condo neighbor, Elizabeth, who spent 16 years at Yellowknife, told me how a winter ice-bridge used to operate for the river crossing, sometimes from as early as November, more usually from mid-December, but sometimes as late as mid-January, depending on the season. The graded and often winding ice-road across the river had a weight limit of 64,000 kilograms and a speed limit of 20 kph. It usually closed around mid-April and access to and from Yellowknife then depended on air travel until mid-May when the ferry began operating again. Most winter roads require an ice thickness of one meter, but this depth was rarely achieved on the Mackenzie because of the rapid water currents beneath the ice.



Below: The Deh-Cho bridge across the Mackenzie River; The ferry that is no longer in use.



Snacking Along the Way to Yellowknife

The small town of High Level, Alberta, is the last chance for hotel rooms and restaurants before an 11-hour drive of 716 kilometers to Yellowknife. There are one or two little stores or cafes at native settlements away from the highway, but they are not places for a tour bus. So my co-leader, Ellen, did some big-time snack shopping at Costco before the trip, and also loaded about 400 bottles of water into a storage compartment of the bus.

The only significant stop during the day's drive was at a territorial park near the beautiful Lady Evelyn Falls where the Kakisa River flows over a limestone escarpment a short way upstream from its confluence with the Mackenzie. The lady in charge of the small visitor center invited us to make use of indoor tables and chairs, so Ellen set up a variety lunch buffet of chips and snacks.



Above: Kakisa River, and the Lady Evelyn Falls

Below: Left, the Mackenzie River. Right, where the Mackenzie River leaves Great Slave Lake.



Frost Heaves Next 100 Km to Yellowknife

Most of the 532 kilometers of paved highway from the Alberta border to Yellowknife is in excellent condition, despite the areas of frozen muskeg. But just about where the road crosses a small river at the northern arm of the Great Slave Lake, everything suddenly changes. Just here we entered the western edge of the Great Canadian Shield which covers half of Canada. We were introduced to a tipsy-topsy region comprised of ancient volcanic outcrops, whaleback rocks, and patches of soil, all mixed up with myriads of ponds and lakes. It was a strange new world for most of us. And for our discomfort, we faced 100 kilometers of bumpy road resulting from winter frost heaves.

At Yellowknife we spent four nights at the Coast Fraser Tower Hotel in the small downtown zone (picture, below left). This 13-story building, the first high-rise structure in town, was opened in time for the Territory's centennial in 1970. The royal family came for the event, and Prince Charles was given a private suite at the top of the newly completed building. The building is now an all-suites hotel operated by Coast Hotels. It offers a well-equipped gym and steam room to its guests. We learned how to be good suite-mates during our stay here.



We came all this way to join the local Adventist Church in celebrating its own history through 50 years of pioneering work. The special “homecoming” weekend began at four o’clock Friday. Before that we enjoyed excellent orientation visits to three of the city’s lakeside institutions – the tourist information centre, the NWT Legislative Assembly (it’s a round house based on igloo architecture) and the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre (really a world-class museum). Afterwards Albert Dobbin, a local church member, stepped on the bus for a guided drive around the “old town”, including a climb to the summit of a landmark known as “the Rock.”



Top: Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly.

Above left: Moose skin boat; Left: Historic “Rock”;

Above: Bush Pilots Monument at the “Rock” summit

From Gold to Diamonds

Yellowknife experienced a gold rush in the 1920's and 1930's. There were some rich finds, and soon a haphazard collection of tents, log cabins and shacks appeared all around the Rock and even on its sides. It was the first settlement of Yellowknife. Today remnants of the old town still surround the Rock. Climbing the steps to its summit, we found a monument to the bush pilots who brought the early prospectors to this region.

When gold petered out, diamonds took over. At the Visitor Centre we watched a film chronicling the discovery and recent development of large-scale diamond mining about 300 miles north of the city. The quality of the gems has led to Yellowknife being ambitiously touted as the Diamond Capital of North America. Meanwhile, Yellowknife has developed into the small but modern capital of the Northwest Territories with a population exceeding 20,000.



Above: Painting of the early settlement at “the Rock.” Several of our group climbed Rainey Hill.

A Warm Welcome

Yellowknife warmed us two ways. The weather during our stay was unseasonably warm, and no one complained. We also experienced the genuine warmth of the people. As our brightly painted bus pulled up in Yellowknife, townspeople laughed as we disembarked. “They don’t look like rebels, do they!” And from the moment we arrived in front of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on Friday afternoon, we sensed a oneness with the Adventist community there. Blake Wile and his small enthusiastic committee pulled out all the stops to make the weekend a resounding event for everyone. Numerically, we represented by far the largest influx of visitors and home-comers for the well-planned celebration. We were feted and fed four times during the weekend.

We met several special guests for the homecoming. Ken and Colleen Crawford flew in from Anchorage, Alaska, where Ken is president of the Alaska Conference. His Sabbath sermon, and their stories of pioneering God's work among native communities in the Arctic north were inspirational. Dick Duerksen came with a pocket full of Maranatha mission stories and a heart that beats strongly for the advance of the gospel among unreached peoples. He introduced three home comers who were part of the volunteer team that built the church 41 years ago. Ken and Vera Wiebe were here from the Alberta Conference. Sheila Van Alstyne brought her mother, Anna Bartsch, who with her husband Henry, pioneered the Adventist work in this remote community. Sheila's account of her family's arrival in Yellowknife in 1964 brought moments of laughter and tears. Besides Sheila's lovely singing, the local Yellowknife Maranatha Singers presented great music during the weekend.



Clockwise from top left: Arrival at the church; Ken and Colleen Crawford share stories from Alaska; Dick Duerksen interviews one of the guests who was here to help build the church. Sheila Van Alstyne sings during the service. Dick Duerksen entertains the congregation with mission stories.

Events of the homecoming celebration included a welcome soup-and-salad supper on Friday evening, followed by introductions, reminiscences, and a talk by Alberta conference president, Ken Wiebe. Sabbath was an eventful day. The Sabbath School and divine service were followed by a generous potluck lunch in the gym, an afternoon presentation by Ken and Colleen Crawford, a hike to a rocky summit in the area, and an evening picnic supper at a lakeside park. The finale was a Sunday morning brunch followed by another presentation by Ken Crawford. It all came to an end when 44 “raucous rebels” from Alberta croaked out some old territorial songs that Edith Fitch collected when she was here in 1970.



Above: Ron converses with Anna Bartsch. Florence and Ken Wiebe selecting from a generous lunch.
Below: Social interaction in the church hall. Picnic supper at a nearby lakeside park.



Our SAGE group entertains everyone on Sunday morning by singing some territorial songs.

Traveling with Friends

Friendship and camaraderie increased during the trip home on Monday and Tuesday. I had prepared a variety of activities to involve everyone during the long drives – quizzes, finding people’s names from a story, and a game for matching people with facts about them.

So we learned many interesting things about each other. How many knew that Anne Bissell was once a swimming and life guard instructor? Did Ellen Bell really co-pilot a glider? Miles Hanlan was badly burned in a gasoline fire at Yellowknife many years ago. Who knew that Dave Warner extracted teeth at a federal penitentiary? Or that John Maatanen is a retired optician? Trudi Cooper has a passion for the well-being of domestic animals. Her husband, Des, is grateful that he’s treated like a dog.

It’s a long way from Central Alberta to Yellowknife, and back again, and the drive is still something of an adventure. The overnight stops and restaurant dinners at High Level in both directions, the short side trips to thundering waterfalls, encounters with wood bison on the highway, and experiencing the “almost midnight” sun were just some of the special highlights of this journey.



Above: Wood Bison crossing the highway. A peaceful scene at Chan Lake.



Left: Alexandra Falls on the Hay River before it flows into Great Slave Lake.