

Dispatch from the North (II)

September 18, 2007



**The Model of the
Intrepid Northerner**

Settling In

One of the smallest creatures seen here at this time of year is a wonder of evolutionary selection. Known by the slightly ridiculous name, Arctic woolly bear caterpillar, this gaily striped and squiggly vision of perennial youth is right out of a J. M. Barrie play. It remains a caterpillar for a full 14 years, and withstands temperatures of down to minus 60°C by the clever stratagem of freezing rock-solid each winter. There is an existential price to be paid for extended adolescence, and don't we know it. Indeed, the adulthood of the creature is a few short weeks. On that fateful summer when it finally mutates into a moth, it uses the warm weather to breed madly. It refuses even to eat, until it gasps its last from hunger, frostbite or utter erotic exhaustion. A frenetic ending, it's true, but its life story – or at least part of it – inspires your correspondent, as he braces himself for freezing rock-solid with the coming of winter.

For now, the forests are still at their most colourful, the smattering of deciduous trees bright yellow and pink, while the undergrowth is at its greenest after the autumn rains. The scenery helps make up for the constraints I face as I go about day-to-day living. On the radio, there's CBC North, a French broadcaster called Radio Taïga, and a single pop station, with the rest of the dial drowned in a tsunami of country music. For this avid listener, that means overdosing on Mahler symphonies and Edith Piaf *chansons*. Occasionally, out of desperation, I test my mettle with classics like "It's Alright to be a Redneck" and "I Guess the Lord Made me Hard to Handle." Then I go back to Mahler.

Newspapers arrive after a day's delay, and are prohibitively expensive. Most Yellowknifers have forsaken the old-style print and ink versions. I get the sense few bother with the online versions either. Magazines are even more out of date. *The Economist*, for example, comes two weeks late, gaining a special retrospective glow one is not used to elsewhere.

Northern news is a different matter. Everyone here devours the two local papers, *Yellowknifer* and *NWT News/North*, which cover not just the usual town council slanging matches or VIP sightings at community events, but give lavish treatment to the police beat and court reports: "Drug Bust in Hay River" and "Four domestic assaults in 12 Hours" give the flavour. Often the names of the accused or convicted are appended with full family pedigrees, so readers know this is so and so's cousin, not their son. Such distinctions are crucial in small communities.



Still Green, For Now

Alcohol abuse gets unremitting attention -- in news stories, political speeches and even street rallies. Taking a stroll last Sunday morning, I was virtually the only spectator of a rally to raise awareness of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). The endearingly well-meaning group of marchers on the deserted windswept streets, with their politely worded placards and unneeded police escort, neglected the morning hangover phenomenon of their intended audience.

There are also a few lighter moments when it comes to alcohol. A statement in the local election by a candidate from the village of Dettah (across the bay from Yellowknife) made it into Jay Leno's introductory monologue earlier this month. Holding up the *NWT News/North* for the cameras, Leno declared: "An unusual campaign promise came from incumbent chief Peter Liske at an all-candidates' forum at Dettah Thursday night. If he is re-elected Tuesday, he'll enter a 28-day treatment program." Then Leno's punch line: "If I'm not elected...party!"

What is characteristically Northern about this story is that Liske had no idea he'd acquired his 15 minutes of Warhol fame until days later. When a *Yellowknifer* reporter phoned to tell him, Liske's response showed just how blasé people around here can be about the outside world. "You're grabbing attention, anyways," he is reported to have said. "Somebody has to make Leno."

Yellowknife After Dark

Like Liske, many prefer to be out and about at night, rather than stuck at home watching *The Tonight Show*. Yellowknifers have long carved out a reputation for their after-dark socializing. In Old Town, one nightspot, nicknamed the House of Horrors, started out as a rooming house owned by an early miner, Alphonse Cyr, known to everyone as Frenchie. (Political correctness has never been a local strongpoint.) Cyr oversaw a regimen of gambling and wild parties that became legendary throughout the North.



House of Horrors

A few streets away is a small log cabin on a stretch of road that gained the moniker Glamour Alley. Its female residents (what interesting stories some of them must have had) offered a distinctly different set of attractions from the testosterone-laden House of Horrors.



A Notable Holdover from Glamour Alley

Things haven't changed much since, though prostitution doesn't seem prominent here any longer. Today's nightspots have equally memorable names – Le Frolic, Surly Bob's, Sam's Monkey Tree – as well as a similarly boisterous clientele. After a peek through their doors, or a quick drink or two, I've learned a few things about this town's nighttime revelers. First, they tend to be young. That's to be expected, given that the median age in the Northwest Territories is just 31, lower by half a decade than anywhere else in Canada except Nunavut. Second, they tend to be overwhelmingly male.

Yellowknife could be considered a woman's dating heaven. Yes, she would need a strong physical constitution to withstand cold nights, and sufficient chutzpah to withstand slap-dash approaches. On the positive side, there's not just the discrepancy in the male-female ratio. More, there's nary a metrosexual in sight, putting to rest any worries that our adventuress might be out-plucked, out-accessorized, or out-moisturized by any of her admirers. There are one or two spots, however, she might wish to avoid. The Gold Range Hotel's lounge, 'Yellowknife's oldest and most storied bar', tops the list, given the sullen looks of the loiterers outside, and the aluminum foil covering most of the windows.

For contrast, I make an occasional foray to the plush confines of Explorer Hotel's Trapline Lounge. Here, visiting businesspeople and their Yellowknife contacts whisper in quiet corners, plotting the latest mining venture, prospects for an Arctic deep sea port, and the next strategic move in oil and gas exploration. I know I am in the presence of Northern history in the making.

Back to Nature

The North's natural wonders make indoor distractions unnecessary anyway. To rectify my infamous ignorance of anything to do with nature, I joined a berry walk sponsored by the local group Ecology North. A young Yellowknifer named Jen Morin acted as our guide. A group of about twenty of us trudged single file along a forest trail close to the city, all eyes bent groundward in search of cranberries, juniper, and soopolallie. The third is definitely an acquired taste.

Jen knew everything about each berry, and explained it in loving detail. Her tales of potential gastrointestinal nightmares riveted our attention. I couldn't help but be im-

pressed by her panache as a teacher. I was also envious. If only all of us who toil in that profession had similarly compelling threats to keep our students in line.



The Berry Quest Guide

As for wildlife, black bears roam these woods, while moose and bison can present a hazard to cars. But sightings of grizzly, timber wolf or cougar are so rare they make headlines in the local papers. Caribou are still the main interest, at least for aboriginal hunters. At this time of year, some of the communities charter flights to scout the barren lands in preparation for the annual hunt. Once the herds move south to their wintering grounds, I look forward to reading the full report in *NWT News/ North*. Ravens, large and loud, are everywhere, wheeling about in the skies both outside and inside the town limits. It's no wonder they're front and centre in native mythology. On Franklin Avenue, I'll sometimes catch the eye of a raven as it alights on a trashcan to peck away at the disheveled remains of an A&W Teen Burger. I can't shake the feeling its eerily intelligent look is malevolent. I must have seen Hitchcock's *The Birds* at too impressionable an age.

Celestial Attractions

All this pales, of course, before Yellowknife's greatest natural resource – dramatic displays of the aurora borealis. The world's tourist industry is beginning to notice. Already, about 10,000 Japanese visitors, in keeping with their reputation as travel innovators, come each winter. Their tours are specially designed to show off the North's winter allure. For most, that means nights spent on lake ice, in matching red

parkas, often with at least a symbolic stint in a carefully constructed igloo or stylized teepee, as well as snowmobile tours and dog sled rides.



The Newest Fashion in Northern Tourism

It's easy to make fun of some of their misplaced enthusiasm for all things Northern. After all, there aren't any authentic igloos for hundreds of miles, since their Inuit builders (as most Canadians, but not foreigners, are dimly aware) have never lived even remotely close to here. Moreover, sleeping in a traditional dwelling, sleeping in the North, be it teepee or igloo, is nothing like the experience these tourists get. That would require a more-the-merrier multitude, preferably nude, huddled under the furs. Not a custom likely to impress a clientele hailing from a culture where polite formality is so highly prized. But the various accommodations made to meet these visitors' Northern expectations keep everyone happy – particularly retailers, who appreciate the dollars spent on fur-lined outerwear, overpriced carvings, and kitschy miniature Inukshuks.

There's no doubt, however, about the main attraction. The nightly shows are best seen in winter, the long hours of darkness maximizing the odds of a good display. The science behind the lights is only hazily understood by many. The reason the displays are usually limited to high latitudes relates to the behaviour of the stream of gases known as the solar wind, as it interacts with the Earth's magnetic field, the magnetosphere. The latter resembles a comet, its front facing the sun and its tail trailing beyond Earth's nightside. Between head and tail are two indentations, referred to as the cusp, and these reach right down to the Earth's surface, encircling each magnetic pole. As a useful physical analogy, think of a caped Superman. (The metaphor may seem outlandish, but it's strangely a propos, given that Superman's love interest was most famously played by Yellowknife-born Margot Kidder. By unusual coincidence, there's also a small residential street here named Lois Lane.) Now imagine our caped crusader launched into solar orbit, his head pointed towards the sun. His face-up profile, cape extended, exactly follows the magnetosphere's contours.

Superman's head repels the solar wind from reaching Earth, but a few particles sneak through by way of the folds in his cape. These are carried towards Earth's nightside. Hitting the upper atmosphere through each end of the cusp, they react with atmospheric oxygen or nitrogen. A minty green light is caused when oxygen atoms are struck; the more vibrant



The Gardens of Lois Lane

tones of violet and red are produced by nitrogen. Regardless, the lightshows are breath-taking. I've seen two since my arrival. The more memorable was on a night I was awoken by a barking dog. I went to the bedroom window to see the entire northern sky lit in an emerald glow. My attempts at capturing it on my Fuji camera were a failure. But even a successful photo can do only so much to convey the effect of the light's slow-moving dance, which varies from snake shapes to unfolding beams, and occasionally climaxes in bursting coronas. I've included two images. The display above, including the faux Inuit igloo, is by Virgile Lafreniere. The even more impressive one below is by Danny Xu. His vantage beside Yellowknife Bay allowed him to capture Old Town's lakeshore peninsula, fronted by the Dene settlement of N'Dilo. Its dwellings are visible in the eerie snake-like reflection. Of all the northern lights images I've seen, Xu's is the most masterful.

It's usually believed that aurora shows are more intense the closer one gets to the North Pole. Not so. The magnetosphere's cusp doesn't hit the poles directly. Instead, it encircles each pole at a distance, which creates shifting rings of light known as auroral ovals. Yellowknife is usually directly beneath the northern oval. That makes it one of the best viewing spots, along with Fairbanks, Alaska, and several European centres such as Reykjavik, Iceland, and the Norwegian city of Tromsø. The southern oval, related to the aurora australis, is virtually always close to or over Antarctica. So it's far less famous, at least until the day that pioneering Japanese tourists start making Antarctica a must-see destination as well. Till then, Yellowknife will continue to enjoy its moment in the ethereal glow, and I'll do my best to witness as many of these shows as possible. In the meantime, I'll end, as I did last time, with answers to a few practical questions I've been asked in recent weeks.



Aurora Borealis above N'Dilo

Have you found a permanent place yet? Actually, my plans are changing. The apartment hotel I'm staying in is extremely comfortable, and I'll probably remain here until I visit Vancouver next month for an LRC-related event. Then I plan to head to Iqaluit for at least several weeks, to see how that much smaller, and more northerly, capital city of Nunavut compares with Yellowknife's abundant charms. I'll be returning here at some point later in the winter, when the northern lights tourist season will be at its height. More details in the next instalment.

What's general shopping there like? Extremely good, if you're in the market for knickknacks beloved by Japanese tourists, or more reasonably priced bric-a-brac catering to local tastes, such as day-glo posters of muskoxen. Otherwise, the selection of items such as clothing is dangerously limited. For Yellowknifers who frequently fly south, this isn't a problem. Others settle for annual road trips, bundling their families into the back of SUVs, then soldiering 900 miles southward to that fabled labyrinth of theme park attractions and retail outlets, West Edmonton Mall. For many Northerners, it's the ultimate shopping mecca.

Is there a good bookstore? Yes. The big-box competitor, which has driven out of business virtually every other independent bookstore in Canada, is mercifully absent here, and the town's Book Cellar is thriving. No one could scoff at its range of best-sellers and literary fiction, and it has arguably one of the largest retail collections of northern literature in North America.

Are you still contending with the serving staff at Boston Pizza? No, I did Yellowknife a disservice in my previous update when I said the culinary scene was an unmitigated disaster. Since then, I've wandered the streets with an idle dream that somewhere, perhaps down a stray back alley, I'd find a perfect little French bistro. You know the sort of place I mean: with sanely priced fare that is not faddishly fussy, and convivial regulars who greet one with a cheery *bonjour*. Guided by a determined reading of the local visitor guides, I finally had my dream come true. I can highly recommend the beef bourguignon at the unfortunately named Office Dining Lounge (I've hinted a few alternatives to the owners). I'm happy to report the staff know their chardonnay from their merlot.
