

What Happens to Us

September 2020,
Gilligan's Island, Alberta

Sometimes, New Normal seems a lot like Gilligan's Island. A few people, cut off from the rest of the world, coping with bizarre circumstances. We never know from day to day what object or castaway will drift up on our shore.

A new bar-b-q appeared on the island today. It floated up the Amazon and landed on the dock just as the old one expired. I followed the metric Chinese instructions and assembled it using a few Imperial bamboo tools and a coconut for a hammer.

Professor: Listen, Gilligan, how far down was she? How many feet?

Gilligan: Professor, in navy circles, we don't say "feet". We say "fathoms".

Professor: All right, how many fathoms?

Gilligan: Oh I don't know, about 15 feet.



This morning we paddled around the island in the S.S. Minnow looking for bananas. They make a marvellous breakfast.



Gilligan: Skipper, should I pick the yellow bananas or the red bananas, because the yellow bananas are green.

Skipper: Then pick the red ones.

Gilligan: But the red ones are pink.

Skipper: Gilligan, I don't care if you pick red white and blue bananas, just pick some bananas!

Gilligan: Okay, Skipper... Blue bananas?

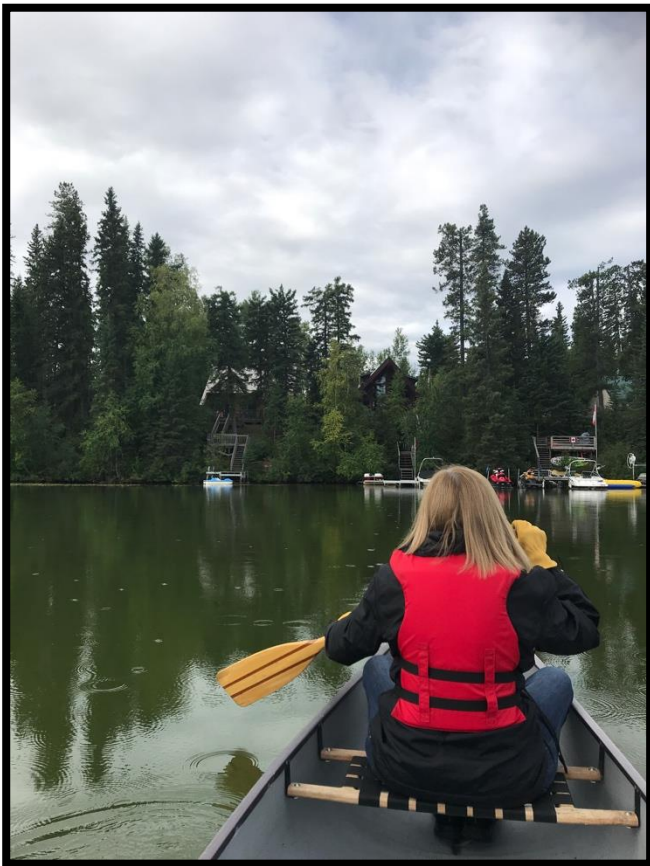
The idea of being stranded on a deserted island is so popular the writers of the show left Gilligan and the other castaways on the island in the final episode. We might opt for the same outcome.

Gilligan: Hiya, Professor. What are you doing?

Professor: I'm making notes for a book. It's to be a chronicle of our adventures on the island... I think it's a book people will want to buy, don't you?

Gilligan: Sure, I'll buy one. I'm dying to find out

..... what happens to us.

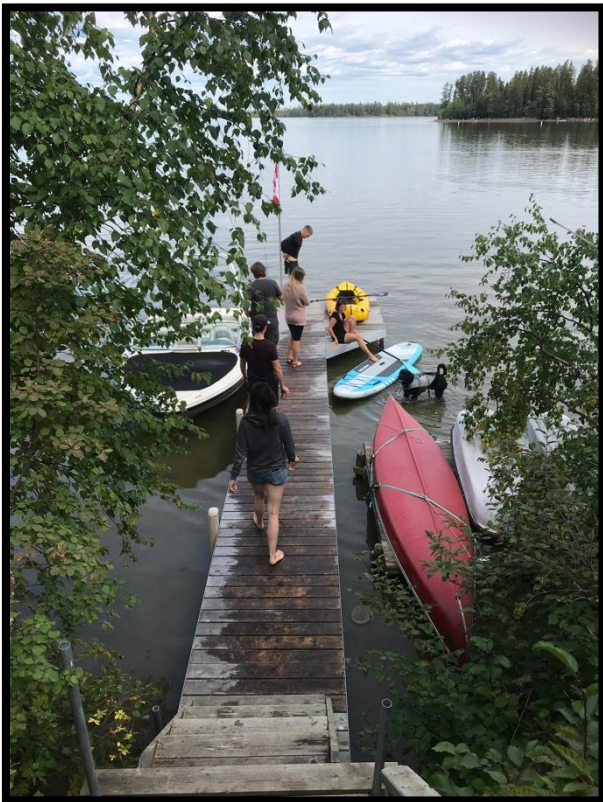


Bear, in the SS Minnow, returning with a load of bananas

What Comes Next

September 2020
Crimson Lake, Alberta

Labour Day weekend can go either way in Alberta; it can offer a glorious end to summer or present us with a preview of what comes next. This year it did both.



All our Alberta-based offspring and their partners gathered at the cabin for the long weekend. We took Covid precautions but stretched the “bubble” ever-so-much in favour of family harmony.

Saturday we were on the water skiing, sun tanning and dining Al Fresco. Sunday the clouds rolled in and the temperature dropped. By Monday, there was a snowfall warning for higher elevations.

The boat, the beer and the groceries got a workout the first day. On Sunday, the kids brought the dock in and winterized the boat. The water skis weren't even dry yet when the discussion indoors turned to *downhill ski passes*.

I love that energy and adaptability! It is a by-product of who they are and where we live.

Labour Day coincides with my birthday and 2020 happens to be one of those *significant* years – the one that is accompanied by pension cheques.

I took a cue from my kids on the weekend; I water-skied on Saturday, then made some upbeat plans for

..... **What Comes Next.**



Seriously?

September 2020
New Normal, Alberta

I bet Convict Mechanical Ltd's phone is ringing off the hook!

Like anybody hangs their phone on a hook anymore. Well, maybe this guy does, by hook, or by crook!

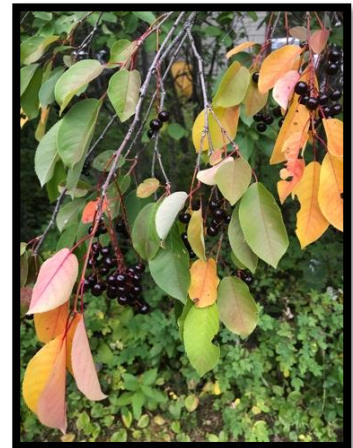


This sign showed up on a building next door to Cougars Bar and Grill and Eau Claire Distillery in Turner Valley. I haven't figured out if it is for real, or somebody's idea of a joke.

Let's go with joke, it's a good one.



Chokecherries: I tried a few, they are appropriately named.



... Seriously?

For the Kid's Sake

September 2020
New Normal, USA

Bear and I used to travel to the US at least once a year. We enjoy exploring America; it is overflowing with natural beauty and cultural variety. American history is fascinating, and Americans know how to treat a guest. We have always felt lucky to have Uncle Sam living next door. Pre-Covid, we visited regularly.



The past four years have been a challenge to the relationship with our cousins to the south. Traveling to the US recently is like dropping in on the dysfunctional family next door; everybody is screaming at one another while the parents go through a messy divorce. We have returned home from recent trips thanking our lucky Stars and Stripes we don't live there.

One Star accommodation in Vermont

with either the far right, or the far left. There is nobody in the middle anymore, no voice of reason. The American family is fractured, to the point that members no longer understand or trust one another. Some have turned to violence.

American bickering is cringeworthy to watch, even from a distance. Every US citizen has chosen to align

The Americans have a divorce hearing scheduled for November 3rd. Once it is over, the family needs to settle their differences and start appreciating what they have in common...

..... for the kid's sake.



A Nobel Prize

September 2020
New Normal, USA

Covid built the Great Wall around America that Trump couldn't, so we can't get a slice of American Pie this year, even if we wanted one. As a substitute, I picked up John Steinbeck's chronicle *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*. I had some doubts that a sixty-year-old book would have much insight today, but I had only read a few pages when I came across this gem:

"A sad soul can kill you quicker, far quicker, than a germ."

Steinbeck drove a truck and camper, which he called Rosinante (Don Quixote's horse) across America in 1960. His dog Charley accompanied him. Steinbeck talked to the dog throughout the trip. The one-way narrative woven into the story, gives Steinbeck a way to examine concepts like, dying on the inside vs. dying of external factors.

As they made their way across the lonely Mojave Desert, Charley started talking back!

Steinbeck: *When is your birthday?*

Charlie: *I don't know. Maybe it's like horses, the first of January.*

Steinbeck: *Think it might be today?*

Charlie: *Who knows?*

Steinbeck: *I could make you a cake.*

Charley: *Anybody saw you make a birthday cake for a dog that he don't even know when's his birthday would think you are nuts.*



Steinbeck won a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, for his ability to grasp the human condition and transform it into words.

Based upon the grammar Charlie uses in the book, Steinbeck is the only one of the two who deserved

.... A Nobel Prize

Six Feet Under

Summer 2020

New Normal, Alberta

It was hot outside today, 33 degrees (Celsius), so I set up a lawn chair inside the barn, where it was a relatively cool 70 degrees (Fahrenheit).

Fifty years ago this month, Trudeau the First mandated use of the metric system in Canada. Arguably, metric is a far superior system of weighing and measuring stuff, but Pierre didn't think about all the ramifications before he *rammed* metric down our collective throat.

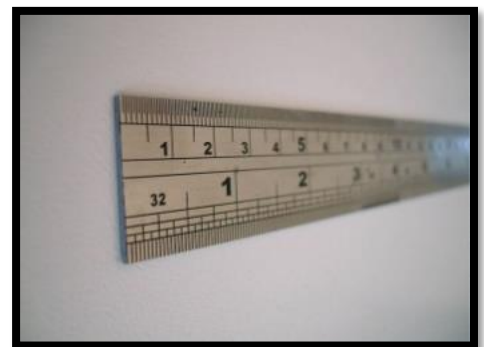
Trudeau's government either never took the mandate far enough, or he should not have started the metrification process at all. As a result of Trudeau's dithering approach to conversion to the metric system, Canada has one of the most confusing and conflicted systems of weights and measures in the world.

My example above illustrates the point. I think of outside temperatures in Celsius but still relate to indoor temperature in Fahrenheit.

The Canadian Government of the 1970's and 80's established legal requirements for metric conversion and assessed penalties for non-compliance. If you don't adhere to the provisions of the Weights and Measures Act you will receive a written warning. The registered letter sent to you by the Government of Canada, advising of metric non-compliance, will be typed on a sheet of paper measuring 8.5 inches x 11 inches. For reasons unknown, conversion to metric paper is exempt under the Act. The federal government, and all businesses in Canada, still use imperial paper, rather than A4 metric dimension paper used elsewhere.

A pound of butter still weighs a pound in Canada, but it says "454 grams" on the label. And that is just the start of the confusion in the kitchen. If you pull up a recipe on the internet, even from a Canadian website, it is likely to be calibrated in Imperial measures, yet the cans and packages in your pantry are mandatorily labeled in metric. You can easily convert imperial to metric using a conversion calculator, the problem is Canadian packaging is predominantly labeled in litres or millilitres which are "volume" measures, while recipes often use pounds or ounces – measures of "weight". A litre of flour weighs less than a litre of milk, but how much?

That is why Canadians are such great cooks, metric conversion math is impossible, so we rely on intuition.



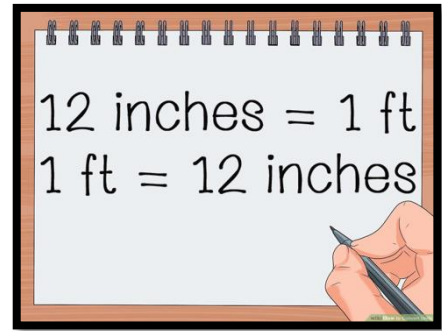
Wine is sold in 750 ml bottles in Canada but served in 6 and 9 oz glasses in restaurants. Quick, how many ounces in a litre?

Go to a McDonald's in Canada and order a "113.4 Grammer" and see how long it takes to get a *Quarter Pounder*. Do you want fries with that? 114-gram or 150-gram size?

Safeway advertises ground beef by the pound in their Canadian flyers. But when you get to the store you will have to know how many *kilograms* of meat you need.

Houses and commercial buildings in Canada, both old and new, are built with studs with 16" centres (approximately 410 cm). If Canadians were to buy drywall sheeting in metric units like the rest of the Metric world, it would come in multiples of 400 cm lengths.

Canada can *never* fully convert to metric building standards, so we are burdened with a miss-matched, dual system – forever. Well played Pierre!



American "Metric" Conversion Calculator

When you are at the Calgary airport, they weigh your bag in **kilograms**. The runway you take off on will be measured in **feet**. Once you have cleared the runway your plane will be traveling in **nautical miles per hour**. The air temperature at your Denver destination will be announced in degrees **Fahrenheit** but the pilot will be taking instruction from Denver control tower using degrees **Celsius**.



The Gimli Glider, a Boeing 767, ran out of fuel on July 23, 1983 because the ground crew read **litres**, instead of **pounds** of fuel. It is a wonder it doesn't happen every week!

Motorhomes travel 10 miles on a gallon of gas, a Honda Civic should go 30 miles on the same amount of fuel. That makes sense to me. When Canada converted to metric, using litres and kilometres, some genius decided to reverse the order. In the metric system, volume comes first, then distance. So, 10 litres per hundred kilometres is far *better* fuel consumption than 30 litres per hundred kilometres. Sorry Pierre, that is just way too confusing! I remain a "miles per gallon" guy.

Canadians in Quebec are more likely to use metric references than English Canadians. People in all rural Canadian areas, including Quebec, prefer Imperial.

Railroads in Canada travel miles and miles per hour, while commuter trains in this country use metric units.

Cattle are sold in dollars per hundredweight short, an imperial measure. Hogs are sold as dollars per kilogram.

Metric is here to stay, but so is Imperial.

When you are born in Canada you are measured in centimetres. When you die you will be buried.....

..... **six feet under.**



Covid Conversion Chart

All the Pretty Girls from Kisbey

September 1972

NW-17-7-4 W2

The road that runs past our farm in Saskatchewan doesn't have a name. The farm is located on the northwest quarter of Section 17, Township 7, Range 4, West of the second Meridian. If you tell the fuel delivery guy "northwest-17-7-4", he knows where to go.

When I lived there, we would describe how to get to our place using this *address*:

"Drive four miles south of Arcola on the Grid road, turn west at the top of Perry's Hill, go one mile then turn left, one mile south, past the Zoo Slough, on the right."

Nobody ever got lost.

(Perry's Hill is the highest point south of Arcola, towering 50' above all other landmarks. The Zoo Slough was a legendary pond and bluff (treed area), with an abundance of wildlife. The dirt road to the farm cut through the middle of the slough. In the spring, there was a 50/50 chance you would get stuck in mud, but there were deer, ducks, badger, skunk, coyote, and mud hens to watch while you waited for rescue.)



If you live in Regina or Paris, France, or someplace exotic like that, the location of the Paton farm probably seems remote, but growing up 17-7-4 was the centre of the universe. The closest town was Arcola, so we identified as being from there, but 17-7-4 was *home*.

Our worldview went something like this:

*All things within a ten-mile radius of Arcola – **Good**. Everything outside that circle – **Bad**.*

The town to the west – Kisbey, was in the *Good* zone. Kids from there came to Arcola to attend high school, so they were part of *us*. Neither Kisbey nor Arcola was populated enough to have its own hockey team, so players united to form *The Arcola-Kisbey Combines* – the Greatest team in the Good zone!



Carlyle, the next town to the east, was definitely outside the zone. Like Regina and Paris, Carlyle was a *Bad* place. The town was so big and so arrogant they had their own hockey team! The Carlyle Creeps (or something like that).



When I went to high school it was acceptable to date girls from Kisbey, but never Carlyle. And why would you want to?

.... All the pretty girls were from Kisbey.

How to Manage Boredom

September 1963

Arcola, Saskatchewan

Growing up on a farm meant we had to make our own fun. It was good practice for life in New Normal.

I was thinking about how we managed boredom when we were kids and I came up with these two memories:

Teach a Duck How to Swim

Mom raised chickens on the farm. I say “Mom” because she was the *chicken boss*, but we all had a hand in managing the poultry.

Every spring she would drive to the hatchery in Weyburn, about 60 miles away, and come home with boxes of chicks. They would be packed in corrugated cardboard cartons, with perforated holes to let air in. We had an old Pontiac Pathfinder car at the time; Brad and I went along for the ride, in the back seat. We shared the journey home with two big boxes of funky-smelling chicks. I remember sticking my fingers through the holes and having the chicks peck at them.

That year, as a novelty, Mom bought a few baby ducks. They were packed in with the chicks and raised in the same pen when we got home. The ducks grew up thinking they were chickens. They would wander around the yard, scratching and strutting. The ducks never once considered getting wet.

One day, they were wandering around the cattle water tank. I decided that this was the day one of these ducks was going to learn to swim. I grabbed the nearest one and unceremoniously dunked it in the water trough.

Ducks look soft and docile. They are covered with feathers, they have pliable webbed feet and usually show no sign of aggression – until you grab one who thinks it is a chicken and submerge it. Their feathers become quills attached to very strong wings, the paddling feet grow claws and the temperament of the *chicken-come-duck* morphs from Jekyll to Hyde.

I escaped with only minor scratches to my face and arms, and

.... the duck remained a chicken.



Ride a Steer

There is never-ending work on a farm so every summer my Dad would employ a hired hand. In the summer of '63 he hired a big, strong neighbour kid to help out. Brad and I liked Tom, he was a few years older than us and he had a great sense of humour. We were like Tom's split shadow, wherever he went Brad and I followed, one on each side.

Tom was tasked with picking rocks in a field south of the yard one day. Brad and I tagged along, as usual. When noon came, we started walking back to the house for lunch, through a pasture. There was a big dull steer standing alone as we passed by. Just for fun, Tom picked me up and sat me on the animal's back.

If you know anything about steers you know that they are not too bright, but they are very strong. It takes a long time for the sensation of something landing on their back to travel up their spinal cord, to their teeny tiny little brain and cause a reaction.

This steer was more intelligent than most. The time interval between me landing on his back and him bucking his heels six feet off the ground was minute. I was propelled high in the air and landed flat on *my* back on the hard prairie ground. The wind was knocked out of me and the sky was ablaze with mid-day stars.

... There ended my rodeo career.

I don't harbour any ill feelings, toward Tom or the duck. They both taught me valuable lessons on

... how to manage boredom.



Brad, Dad, Spot and Me, postured like my back was feeling the effects of riding a steer.

Total Silence

September 2020

New Normal, Alberta

If a tree falls in the forest, and nobody is around to hear, I don't know if it makes a sound or not. What I am certain of is; if that tree falls at our place, it will land on a fence.

I take a drive around the property once or twice a year, with a chain saw, staples and fencing pliers, and separate trees from wire. Today was that day, but instead of driving the quad I decided to go green and walk. I took a small buck saw and tools and set off down the north fence line, where I knew at least one tree made a crashing sound, had I been there to hear it.



We have abundant wildlife around our place, particularly on the back 40 acres. We are bordered on two sides by a section of natural resource land, with virtually no development. There is a quarter section southeast of us that is virgin timber.

The critters like it here.

When I use my Kubota *buggy* to get around, the wildlife always see me first. They don't get too excited, but they move on when they hear me coming.

Walking is much slower, but it gave me the advantage of seeing a herd of wild elk today before they saw me.

I saw a pair of hind legs and a tan coloured rump sticking out of the bush on the path far ahead. Elk seldom travel alone so I stopped, stood silent, and waited to see how many more might appear. Five or six females, and as many calves, wandered in and out of the spruce grove, grazing. They seemed content, living the way nature intended. The calves were almost fully grown but they were still cute, in an *elky* kind of a way.

I saw one animal deeper in the bush than the rest, but I couldn't get a good look at it. I hadn't moved and the herd still didn't know I was there, so I took a few steps closer to get a better look and a photo. The instant I moved a bull, with a magnificent rack of antlers, emerged from the shadows and looked directly at me. There was no menace in his stance; I was far enough away that I was in no danger, so I stood still again and gazed back at the bull.

I have no idea how elk communicate. There was no sound that I could hear but, at some invisible cue, the entire herd moved in unison, into the bush and away from me. Except the bull. He and I both stood stock-still and analyzed each other while his harem disappeared behind him. When they were safely out of view, the bull tossed his antlers and turned to follow. He stopped every few steps and glanced backward to make sure I was not following. Then he too, vanished.

I ventured into the spruce grove where the elk had been. There was nothing to show that the magnificent creatures had ever been there,

.... **Total Silence.**



Living the Dream

September 2020
New Normal, NWT

I have been talking about the effects of isolation for months and it just occurred to me that I have an expert in my immediate family.



My uncle Jim worked for Transport Canada - National Weather Service in the far north. He did three year-long postings in the 1960's, two at Resolute Bay on Cornwallis Island, and another at Ennadai Lake in the North West Territories (now Nunavut).

Uncle Jim's dream from a very early age, was to work in radio communication. The picture on the left was taken while he was in training in Ottawa. Jim became proficient in Morse code (note the telegraph key on his desk) and as a Ham Radio operator. His call sign VE5SK, can be seen on top of the radio.

Resolute Bay (below right) lives up to its name. Average annual temperature is -16 C. Winter days are dark 24 hours and summer days are bathed in constant sunlight. Resolute is the second most northerly community in Canada, accessible only by air. The total population is about 200. Obviously, most people have *resolved* not to live there.

But, if you think Resolute Bay is isolated, you haven't been to Ennadai.

Ennadai Lake located 400 Km north of Churchill, MB, was once home to Caribou Inuit people. Inuit of the region were known as the "People from Beyond" or "the Out-of-the-Way Dwellers"; which gives you a sense of just how far off the beaten track the place is.



Uncle Jim lived at this weather station at Ennadai for 11 months. There were only 5 people at the station, with supplies flown in every few weeks. The technicians Jim worked with were sent in and out on rotation, but there were only 4 other faces to look at, at any given time, during the entire posting.



Work involved collecting weather data daily and sending it by Ham Radio to stations at The Pas or Churchill. The technicians worked an 8-hour shift, which left 16 hours a day for sleep and personal pursuits.

I asked Jim what they did to pass the time in isolation, other than work. He said that food was important, if there was a good cook in the group, they were generally more content. They played cards, read books and Jim took up photography as a hobby. Letters from home were important but mail moved very slowly. It could take up to a month for exposed film to be returned as photographs.

If I get feeling down about being in isolation, I look at my notes from Uncle Jim's interview. I remind myself that I have telephone, internet, e-mail, digital photography, satellite TV and Radio, YouTube, Netflix, News Apps, Wikipedia, Kindle, Zoom, Skype, Amazon and about 100 more ways to keep in touch.

Jim had a Ham Radio.



Jim Paton, in isolation.

..... **living the dream.**

As Canadian as Hockey Sticks

September 2020
New Normal, Alberta

When Uncle Jim returned from the North, he often brought gifts for the family.

I was in Boy Scouts at the time and was very happy to receive this walrus tusk neckerchief slide. (We called it a toggle, or a woggle.)



When I went to look for it today in a little trinket box I keep, I found another woggle that I believe belongs to my brother Brad. Apparently, I stole it from him about 50 years ago. I resolve to get it back to Brad next time I see him - better yet, he can come and get it.

Another item that Jim brought back from the north was an Ookpik.

The high arctic isn't a place we usually look for leading edge cultural trendsetting, but Ookpik was a marvel in the 1960's. The first ones were made by Inuit artist Jeannie Snowball (isn't that a wonderful name!) of Fort Chimo, now Kuujuaq. Ms. Snowball fashioned the little snowy owls from sealskin and wolf hair. She took them to a trade fair in Quebec and they immediately sold out.

By 1968, Ookpik was a cultural phenomenon....

.... as *Canadian as Hockey Sticks*.



I insert quite a bit of music into these journals. I realize that not everybody has the time or interest to listen to all my choices, but I highly recommend you take four minutes and listen to The Ookpik Waltz, an instrumental by Jay Ungar and Molly Mason.

<https://youtu.be/szt4zhnenlk>

The two iron chains near the bottom adorned my wrist for about five years. Groovy!

One item I had completely forgotten about is a cufflink with a horse head on it - I am not sure what happened to the second one. The cufflink belonged to my maternal Grandfather, Grandpa Bob. I came into possession of the pair of horsehead cufflinks after he died. I remember wearing them to church in about 1962 or 1963. I survived several long, boring sermons thanks to that team of horses.



I returned all the treasures to the globe and screwed the lid back on. I set it on a shelf where I can occasionally look back in time, through the ...

..... **Bick's Pickle Crystal Ball**



Left to Right, Russell, Mom (Pat), Brad, Grandma Wells, Cousin Lorraine, and Grandpa Bob – Gravelbourg SK, 1958.

Coffee Beans

September 2020

New Normal, Alberta

I had coffee with several friends recently. Jason, Rick, Dave, Gervais, Doug, Colin, and Wayne.

Of all the cultural phenomena brought to the fore by Covid, *one-on-one, male bonding over coffee* is an activity I don't want to give up once the pandemic has passed. I miss the mass gatherings we used to have - all the roosters of the community getting together for breakfast or volunteer projects was a lot of fun, but that has changed with Covid. We don't meet in groups much anymore, opting instead for coffee, *mono y mono*. More often than not, these meetings occur outdoors, on lawn chairs in the yard, two hockey-sticks apart.

Coffee get-togethers are a break from routine. They allow guys to compare notes, to debate, and dwell on external things. *Coffee* expands our horizons - we exchange ideas while the world revolves in our absence for a short time.

Two of my coffee buddies are British expats, two are from SE Saskatchewan, where I come from, and three are from Manitoba. We share the commonality of being pioneers in Alberta. To a man, we are passionate about our adopted home province. We are all in the same general age range; all making the transition from working to retired. Old Alberta white guys, the perceived enemy of the new millennium! We have a lot to talk about.

Jason is technically working but employed for his *insight*, not the hours he spends *on-site*. J's contribution to his employer sometimes happens at my barn, on the way to the golf course. Our conversation this week meandered through a labyrinth of politics, Covid protocols in a corporate environment, family dynamics and good old-fashioned barnyard philosophy.



The picture inserted here has nothing to do with the topic at hand, I just liked it. Russell Erskine, my namesake, in about 1954, on a dusty prairie street, in front of a General Store. You must admire a man who can sport a jacket like that!

If you want to explore your own mind, find a coffee-buddy from an alternate edge of the political spectrum. I lean *slightly* to the right; Gervais leans *slightly* to the left – our coffee conversation is adaptable. We discuss myriad topics from every angle. In so doing, we explore ourselves. Marvellous!

I don't see Rick very often anymore, but we always pick up where we left off. We both operated businesses connected to the construction industry, so we have many common acquaintances. We draw an enduring connection through a triangulation of construction, yellow iron, and industrial finance. Our conversations are more *historical* in nature, than *vital* these days, but that is progress, of a sort.

It is good to have an anchor! Dave is an unflinching proponent of conservative values. He is a Trump supporter, not because he agrees with the President's values or his rhetoric. In Dave's mind, *any* movement to the left is the political equivalent of a bowel movement. Dave and I have about a thousand common interests. We don't agree on Trump, but when it comes to music, food, rural life, family, and Justin Trudeau there is no ambiguity. We both agree that Ian Tyson is the best musician in the world, and Justin Trudeau is a self-absorbed, free-spending drama queen, made up of two parts hair and one-part cellophane!

Doug's momma raised him right. Doug borrowed a trailer from me a while ago. When he brought it back the wheel hubs had been repacked with grease, a missing hub cap had been replaced and some faulty wiring was mended. That is how Doug rolls; he has an ingrained sense of duty that is truly inspiring. Doug is still working, so our *coffee* was a virtual experience this week. We talked over the telephone about the pitfalls of operating a business, and a life, in a pandemic.

I missed having coffee with Colin this week. He is back driving school bus - to keep busy and make connections outside the four walls. Kids need to get to school at about the same time of day I go looking for coffee, so we couldn't connect. Colin and I will solve all the world's problems next week when we get together.

Wayne was at my 6th birthday party (on the left side of this picture). He drove from St Albert for a coffee visit this week, shortly after my 65th. A personal association that endures for sixty plus years is more than a friendship. Somewhere around the 30th year it ascended to brotherhood.

Covid could drive you crazy if you let it. Fortunately, my friends and I have a cure

.... Coffee Beans



FU

September 2020 High River, Alberta

“FU” in aviation speak doesn’t have the same connotation as the slang expression does, but it is close to an obscenity.

YBW: TEMPO 1916/2008 5SM -SHRA FU HZ OVC090

I flew out to Saskatchewan again this week. There was forest fire smoke in the Calgary area on the outbound leg, but I left the hazy conditions behind somewhere around Medicine Hat. By the time I got to Arcola the only haze in the air was dust and chaff billowing out behind big combines, gobbling up a bumper crop of wheat and canola.



I only stayed for 48 hours, but there is so much going on, two days in Arcola is the equivalent of a week elsewhere. I won’t elaborate, but here is a Reader’s Digest Condensed Version of what transpired while I was there:

Dad was occupied with a delegation of First Nations people who gathered at his studio for a day to learn about their culture and history from him. I helped Brad install a second-story window, in a shop, that used to belong to my Uncle, using a skill saw and a John Deere tractor. My grandniece and nephew from Swift Current arrived at midnight in a \$100 pickup truck, after breaking down, running out of gas, and getting lost. An unoccupied house located on a property our family once owned burned to the ground, for the second time (but not from the lightning strike it once experienced). We dined at a steakhouse located in a livestock auction market four towns down the rail line (everybody had fish or chicken, rather than eat the residents). I raided my aunt’s garden and came away with a tomato the approximate size and shape of a partially deflated beach ball.



I never saw my other siblings. Kevin was in Outlook harvesting (and stealing) potatoes, and Val was at a retreat near Saskatoon, riding llamas or something - I never got full details. That’s the way it rolls in Arcola.

I hated to leave so soon, but I had obligations at home. The forecast for Calgary was as described at the top of this article, in Blue. “Blue” in aviation language means *Marginal* Meteorological Conditions.

Green is fly, Red is *stay home*, Blue means; *you decide*. In English, the partial forecast for Springbank airport above was:

Springbank Weather: Temporary Conditions – September 19th - 10am to 10pm – Marginal Visual Flight Rules - 5 miles visibility – light rain showers - smoke – haze – ceiling 9,000’.

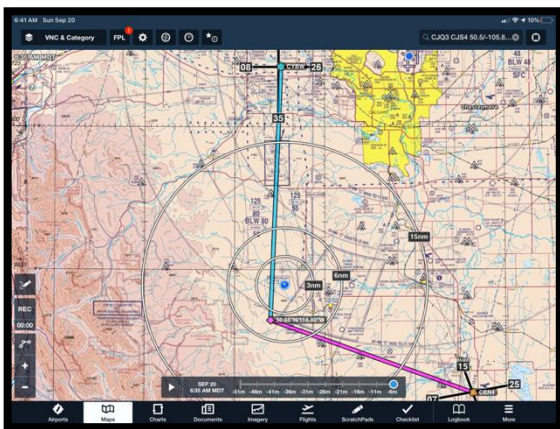
The acronym *FU* in aviation is derived from the French word *fumée* (smoke). When you see FU in a forecast it means you are potentially heading for trouble. Which is exactly what happened on the way home.

There was forest fire smoke all over western Canada, but it was especially thick in Alberta. I made a “GO” decision after assessing all the weather data, but I also built in a contingency plan. I called Bear and asked her if she would be willing to drive to Lethbridge or Medicine Hat to get me if I couldn’t fly into Springbank and needed to abort. Her answer was “*of course*” (she is a wonderful Bear).



The flight through Saskatchewan went well. It was not a day for sightseeing, but I was able to get up to 6500’ and still see for 5+ miles in any direction. The radio was quiet, which means other pilots have more sense than to fly in these conditions.

As soon as I crossed the Alberta border “*FU*” is what I wanted to tell the weatherman. The smoke got thicker, and the visibility diminished below my comfort level. I dropped down to 4,500’, which is only about 500’ above cell phone towers in the area west of Medicine Hat. I was still safe and legal but there was no way I was going into Calgary airspace at that altitude.



I checked the GPS chart and noticed that High River airport, elevation 3500’, was directly ahead. They have a paved runway, on a heading that worked with the wind today. I texted Bear and told her I would be landing there in 45 minutes and “would she come and rescue me?” Of course!

I will have to go back to High River and retrieve the airplane once the forecast is free of

...FU

A Damn Good Dam

September 22, 2020
New Normal, Alberta

There is an “On This Day” feature on my iPhone. Every morning, it displays photos taken *on this day* over the years. Apparently, September 22 is *weird phenomena* day.



These two pictures were taken out the front door of our house and cabin on September 22, 2018 and 2017, respectively.



The Weather Network predicts rain today. A vast improvement over Snowtember.

-

I captured these images on September 22, 2012, in London, UK. The Crooked House of Windsor was built in 1592. It was constructed of green wood timbers, which twisted when they dried causing the building’s pretzel shape.

The structure now houses a jewellery shop, but I wasn’t going inside. It has been wobbling for 422 years – September 22 might be the day it falls over.



This is what beavers do when there aren't any trees available to build a dam. I took the picture on September 22, 2007. There are very few bushes near Moose Creek in Saskatchewan, so the enterprising rodents pulled rocks, reeds, and mud from the bottom of the stream to create a weir.



The Weir is Weird, but it is

....a Damn Good Dam!

The sun isn't up yet on September 22, 2020. If any strange phenomena occur today, and I can capture it, I will drop a photo in here:

A trespassing bear.



Mulligan Stew

September 2020

New Normal, Alberta

I stumbled across a tune called *Old Pigweed* today. It was written and performed by Mark Knopfler, (he of *Dire Straits*, who got his *money for nothing* and his *chicks for free*). The song is a melancholy parody about how life can take a turn. The protagonist is a homeless man who prepares a stew (a life):

*Everything was in there
That you'd want to see
Corned beef and onions
And true love
Turnips and tinned tomatoes
Parsnips and a few potatoes
A couple extra blessings
From above*

The man dips his can into the stew only to find that it is contaminated with *Old Pigweed*. He is bewildered. His life (his stew) has been altered and he doesn't understand how, or why:

*Who put old pigweed
In the mulligan
Was it you
Who put old pigweed
In the mulligan stew
I close my eyes
For just a minute
What do you do
Who put old pigweed
In the mulligan stew*

As I listened to the song, I was drawing a comparison with our current predicament. It feels like Covid is Pigweed in our stew. Life was going along fine, then one day you go to dip your can in it and the flavour has changed. I was eager to hear how the song ended:

Hotel de Gink was a series of self-service hotels created by and for homeless men in the early 1900's.



The broken man doesn't salvage his stew entirely, but he makes the best of it:

*But a spoonful of forgiveness
Goes a long, long way
And we all should do our best
To get along
Add a pinch of kindness crumbling
To your loving dumpling
Okra for thickening
When something's wrong*

*Who put old pigweed
In the Mulligan
Was it you
Who put old pigweed
In the....*

... Mulligan Stew

<https://youtu.be/mGJHeuwPq4k>

Old Pigweed – Mark Knopfler



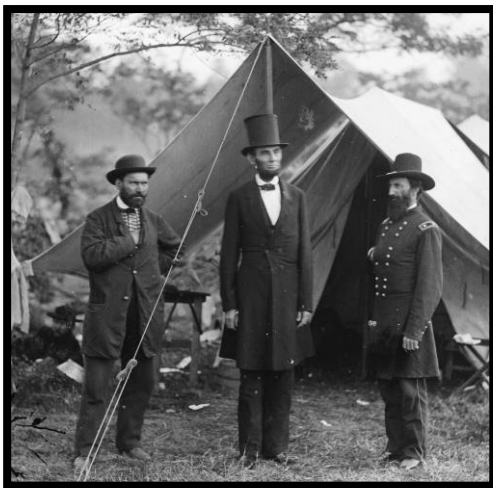
This Too Shall Pass

September 2020
New Normal, Alberta

"It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence, to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: "And this, too, shall pass away." How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction!"

- Abraham Lincoln

We could use a leader like Abe these days. Somebody with strength, empathy, intelligence, integrity, and a big hat to store it all in. Those red ball caps just aren't cutting it.



If we want to defeat Covid we can't rely on politicians. Sadly, we can no longer depend on journalists to give us the straight goods either. And the worst advice seems to come from people who purport to talk directly to a God.

Also, advice from a guy from the fictional town of New Normal, who publishes a semi-irregular newsletter, is highly suspect.

So, where do we turn for leadership in a pandemic?

Nature got us into this mess, and Scientists will find the way out. Unlike politicians, talking heads and clergy, who all have an agenda to promote, Scientist's motives are generally altruistic.

Scientists are the most likely group to find a way of straining the pigweed from this stew. I am hitching my wagon to people with no logo, and nothing to hide under their hats.

With help from all of us

.... This Too Shall Pass.

