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# Bussing About Canada

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JOHN BATCHELDER

I collect universities. Fall semester 1990, while on sabbatical, my search area was Canada, the great North American up-back. In three separate bus trips I criss-crossed five provinces, entered four time zones and collected eleven universities. To the east, I reached the French-speaking University of Moncton in New Brunswick; to the west, the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon; to the north, the University of Ottawa on the border of English Ontario and French Quebec.

## Canada, The Chile of North America

Bussing about gives me a feel for Canada's physiognomy. Canada is humbling space with few people. In total area Canada is larger than the United States, but it has only one tenth the population. This population is stretched out like a rubber band along the U.S. border. The population band is taut-to-snapping along the endless, rippling rock shield north of Lake Superior with its pothole ponds and heroic, deformed pines. During a rest stop in the cold, windy nothingness between Thunder Bay and Sault Saint Marie, a local traveling companion told me that it can take a Ma Bell crew half a day to raise a single telephone pole. They have to blast the hole with a series of dynamite sticks.

In all of Canada only in the southern Ontario panhandle between Windsor and Kingston does the population band relax to allow a meager fifty miles of north-south habitation.

In Fredericton, the provincial capital and home of the University of New Brunswick, I witnessed firsthand Canada's sparse population. At nine o'clock on a Monday morning I wandered into the parliament building. The student page in the entry hall gave me some literature and asked me if I wanted a tour. I said "yes" and stepped back to join the others, but there were no others. After my private twenty-minute tour of parliament, I crossed the empty street to the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, the largest museum in New Brunswick. Once again I toured as a crowd of one. Noting how the population of Canada is strung out on a 5,527 mile line, the essayist, Robert Burton christened his country "The Chile of North America."

In addition to being spaced out in urban oases along the U.S. border, Canadians are becoming indoor people, mall moles. In the center of every city, often covering

two or more blocks with bridges over and tunnels under the streets, is the internal weather-proofed shopping mall. These malls are clean, well-lighted, and sumptuously stuffed, but they all look alike. The various fast food and ethnic restaurants are clustered together in a basement bay. Sipping an eighty-cent cup of coffee in one of these bays, I often became disoriented. I would feel the urge to ask someone, "Excuse me. Are we in Winnipeg or Toronto?"

The most spectacular outdoor scene in my memory bank is of the forty-foot tide coming into Saint John on the Bay of Fundy. What I witnessed were continuous two-foot steps of water, a liquid Lincoln Memorial, inexorably flowing toward me. For the first time in years I felt the urge to think and say the usually abused word "awesome."

### Watch My Bags While I Whiz, Eh?

Bus travel is inconvenient. You have to accept awkward schedules which may dump you in Sault Saint Marie at 5:30 in the morning when everything is closed and you can see your breath project into the morning chill. Bus travel is uncomfortable because of skimpy seats and cramped leg room. But Greyhound of North America is trying to make leaving the driving to them more pleasant. Before we left the station on the Toronto-to-Montreal overnight run, a smiling, uniformed hostess threaded down the aisle passing out packets containing fruit juice, cookies and a napkin. Then there was the evening movie. Three TV sets are evenly spaced along the ceiling on the right side of the bus. The movie this night was *Honey, I've Shrank the Kids*. This video was mildly amusing, but the sway of the bus was like a cradle. I kept dozing off. Once as my eyes opened I saw the three TVs on the right reflected in the windows on the left. It was as if I were inside the movie. I was one of the shrunken kids stumbling around puddle lakes and trying to part twelve foot blades of lawn grass.

The shared discomfort of bus travel develops comradery. You sit shoulder-to-shoulder, thigh-to-thigh, sometimes talking, occasionally sleeping. Only at the rest stop canteen when you are sitting across from your seat mate do you make eye contact. At such times it seems perfectly natural to say "watch my bags while I whiz, eh?"

Canadian bus drivers are part of the comradery. I had a Friday night lay-over in Grand Forks, North Dakota on my trip to Winnipeg. Because of the heavy influx of Canadian shoppers there were no motel vacancies. Dan, the bus driver, used his connections to unlock a reserved room for me. He also said he would swing by to pick me up in the morning. The next morning while I was outside the motel with my bags waiting for Dan, a taxi driver asked me if I needed a lift. "No thanks", I said, "I have a Greyhound bus coming for me."

Another Canadian bus driver, Randy, persuaded me not to spend the night in the Detroit bus station. "This is drugsville," he told me. He smuggled me back into

Canada. I didn't go through customs and immigration. Then he dropped me off at a pleasant, inexpensive, safe downtown Windsor hotel.

The Greyhound bus was my mode of transportation, often my motel, and my rolling seminar. I rode on some thirty-four different busses, which means I had many seat mate tutors. After a decent interval, say, thirty miles, you start talking with the person pressed against your shoulder and thigh. Donna tried to get me to pronounce Regina, the capital of Saskatchewan, the proper way. I still prefer the original name for the town, Pile O' Bones. Barbara, another seat mate, took me on a tour of the University of Winnipeg, which is close to the bus station. Willy and Fred taught me how much higher education means to many Canadians. Willy is a retired Ukrainian-Canadian wheat farmer from Stark, Saskatchewan. He has only an eighth-grade education, but all three of his children have university degrees. Fred, a 280-pound Native American, pressed me to the window during a stretch between Toronto and Ottawa. He is a laid off logger who is going to spend the winter trapping in the woods to help support his daughter who is a nursing student at Laurentian University in Sudbury.

Brian, a graduate from a culinary college in Halifax, taught me that the English Canadian tradition of bad cooking is a learned art. At a lunch stop in Edmonton, New Brunswick, he ordered for the two of us a maritime delicacy, hard fried eggs with french fries in gooey brown gravy. Without even tasting the fries, Brian shook on more salt.

Three of my seat mate tutors, Danny, Peter, and Chris deserve extended comment.

### The Lone Ranger

Slightly built, seventeen-year-old Danny was my seat mate on the night bus from Winnipeg east. He is from Calgary, Alberta. He was going to Kingston to visit his grandmother, his real father's mother. Danny taught me that not all Canadians are well informed about the United States. He told me that he has never been to the United States and had never before knowingly talked with an American. Danny became annoyed and pouted for fifty miles when I told him that neither Detroit nor Chicago is in Canada.

When he came out of his sulk Danny began talking about himself. He and his girl friend are going to attend the University of Alberta next fall, he to become a dentist, like his step-father whom he hates, and she to become a nurse. He asked me if I wanted to see his pictures. I was expecting cute pictures of his woman. Instead, what he showed me were four colored snapshots of his horse, Silver. Oh well, I thought. I have never seen pictures of Mrs. Lone Ranger.

At the bus station canteen in Thunder Bay I chose a bowl of whatever stew. Thin Danny sat opposite me smoking and munching a candy bar. He explained to me that he had little money for food and just barely enough for cigarettes. I passed him

my half eaten bowl of whatever stew.

Before I left Danny at Canada's Sault Saint Marie, I handed him a twenty dollar bill. "This is a loan," I said. I also gave him my calling card with printed titles and address. Danny fumbled the strange, little card. "Are you a doctor?" he asked. "Not the say-ah-stick kind," I said. I haven't heard from Danny. I am assuming that he lost the calling card with my address. I don't want to believe that my Canadian Lone Ranger is a deadbeat.

### Puck, MBA

Canadians tend to be reserved in public. They dress to blend in. If you see someone wearing a white sweatshirt with a bright red maple leaf on the front you probably are looking at an American tourist.

I thought I had found an exception to the Canadian dress code in Steve, a kid I talked with at a rest stop between Toronto and Windsor. Steve was wearing a black sweatshirt that had written across the front in green, slashing, Coca-Cola script "Saddam Sucks Sand." Steve is indeed a Canadian, from Napanee, Ontario; but he has been corrupted by a U.S. connection. He is a student at the University of Michigan on a hockey scholarship.

In Peter, my seat mate from Saskatoon to Winnipeg, I found a bona fide exception to the bland Canadian dress code. Trim Peter wore black tapered pants, a long black shirt and what looked like black wrestler's shoes. His long, light brown hair was pulled back and tied with a bright red twist. Around his waist, flaring out his black shirt, was a red car trunk tie down. To complete his statement, whatever that was, Peter wore gold cupid earrings.

Peter has a quick smile, a resonant tenor voice, and an easy self-assurance. He was quite willing to talk about himself. This is Peter's statement. He is in the first semester of an MBA program at the University of Saskatchewan. His girl friend, a theater major, recruited him to play Puck in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She and other members of the cast dared him to wear his Puck costume in public for a full week. Peter told me that he was in the fifth day of his ordeal and getting used to the strange stares. "Actually," he said, "most people pretend not to notice me." But this was not always possible. Peter told me that yesterday a professor in a large anonymous finance class read aloud Peter's response to a homework problem. As an afterthought the professor asked the author to stand up and be recognized. "As I rose, there was stunned silence, then nervous laughter," Peter said.

Peter was going home to Winnipeg for the weekend. Both of his parents are Belgian and Catholic, he told me. But there is a rub. His father's family speaks Dutch. His mother's family speaks French. Because both families were so upset by the marriage, the newlyweds decided to emigrate to Canada. They left one country torn by linguistic squabbles to live in another country torn by linguistic squabbles.

Peter's multilingual parents own a bookstore in Winnipeg that specializes in foreign language books. They even stock books in Inuktituk, what we call Eskimo. Peter told me that since he was fourteen he has kept the financial records for the store. Neither of his parents has much business sense. Peter told me that his father's usual comment to a browsing non-buyer, often a Ukrainian, is to say, "Take the book home and read it. If you like it, come back and pay me."

Peter told me that most of the students in his MBA program want big salary positions with multinationals. Peter's own dream is to become the financial manager of Ontario's Stratford Shakespeare Festival.

### Chris, Son of an American Draft Dodger

Chris and I rode together from Detroit to Toronto. The bus was well into Ontario before the conversation began. In a soft voice he told me that he is a senior at York University outside Toronto. He had been visiting his grandparents, his father's parents. His father is a U.S. citizen who went to Canada because he hated President Johnson's Vietnam War. Since the amnesty law of 1986 his father can visit his parents in Detroit, but to do so he has to fill out a humiliating form that requires him to confess to his crime of draft-dodging.

Next fall Chris will begin graduate study in philosophy at University of Montreal. Chris is the only Anglo-Canadian I met on my bus travels who is bilingual. But he did not learn his excellent French in Canadian schools. Between fourteen and sixteen Chris attended a school in Geneva, Switzerland. He told me that very few students at York University take French language classes.

I have collected other examples of the unwillingness of Anglo-Canadians to accept French, the other official language of Canada. Derek, my companion from Montreal to Moncton, is a thoughtful, sensitive social worker with a degree from Memorial University in Newfoundland. Derek is learning how to sign so that he can "talk" with his deaf clients, but he refuses to learn French. "I won't learn Indian either," he told me. In his best selling book, *The Trouble With Canada*, William D. Gairdner says "I am fluent in French, but I won't speak it on demand." I question Mr. Gairdner's brag that he is fluent in French. Even his English is only basic.

### Collecting Universities

I have developed this strategy for familiarizing myself with a university. First, I like to wander about the campus for an hour, maybe two, looking, listening, smelling, feeling. I will stop in the student center to check the activities board and for pick-up conversations with students. Next I go to the admissions office to get an undergraduate catalog which, in Canada, is called the "Undergraduate Calendar." When I

went to the service wicket of the admissions office at the University of Moncton for a catalog I spoke in English rather in French. "But the calendar is written in French," the woman said curtly. "Cela ne fait rien," I shot back. "Je lis française assez bien." Her eyebrows rose a notch as if to say, "Mon Dieu, an Anglo who may be corrigible."

With the undergraduate calendar in hand I go to the library. I spend several hours reading the sections on the history and purpose of the university. Then I study the major programs and read the descriptions of the courses offered in the social sciences and the humanities. Now I am ready for some serious talk. I have found that the most knowledgeable and accessible people on a campus, no appointment necessary, are the reference librarians. Librarians are willing to talk openly and at length about the strengths and weaknesses of their university. They interpret the undergraduate calendar for me.

If I can get an appointment, I talk with the Dean of Admissions of the university I am collecting. The deans and assistant deans I talked with all said they would welcome students from Grand Valley. The University of Ottawa, a mere ten-minute walk from Parliament Hill, would be particularly interesting for our political science students. I also like to talk with professors who teach courses that have a clear Canadian perspective on North American history and politics.

What have I learned? Canada has fifty-two universities with student enrollments ranging from 53,000 (University of Toronto) to 1,276 (Trinity Western in Langley, B.C.). Most universities are in the 5,000 to 10,000 bracket. The terms "college" and "university" are clearly defined in Canada. Any institution that offers four and more years of study, regardless of its size and breadth, is a university. Thus by the Canadian definition Grand Valley is and always has been a university, as would be Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. With the exception of Trinity Western, all universities are publicly funded by provincial governments, even if they are denominational.

I was saddened to discover that universities in Canada reflect and reenforce the language conflict: forty are English; seven, French; three say they are bilingual. Ottawa University is one of the three claiming to be bilingual. It isn't. It is a two-language track institution. The same courses in chemistry, history, economics, etc. are offered in English sections and in French sections. Students can and do stay in their own language ghettos. A student at the campus center told me what must be a standard in-house story. "The president of the University of Ottawa has two telephones on his desk. One is a red anglo phone; the other is a blue franco phone."

The University of New Brunswick, established in 1785, is my favorite Canadian university. The campus is sedately spectacular. Georgian red brick buildings climb up a steep hill overlooking Fredericton and the lovely blue meandering Saint John River. I also like UNB because it offers the most interesting courses. Courses in North American history and politics are distinctly different in focus and content from similar courses offered at Grand Valley and other American universities. This reflects the origin of the province. The first white settlers were the some 30,000

United Empire Loyalists who were forced to flee from the disloyal colonies to the south. From the Canadian perspective our Revolutionary War was a war of secession within which a civil war raged. Loyalist regiments organized in all thirteen rebellious colonies, taking names like "The King's American Regiment of North Carolina," "The New Jersey Volunteers," "The Queen's Rangers from Virginia."

Bussing about Canada has been a joy, an awakening for me. Canada is foreign, but accessible, to the Grand Valley community. Next summer I plan to return to UNB to discuss details for a faculty exchange.