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My town
A young man’s search.
With yearning
and much affection

by Rick Boulton

There is something about the personality of the small town that appeals to me. The itch to take off on another far-flung, loosely charted course across the country is on me again. And here’s the point: too many people from Big Cities would never trust themselves to go out there and try a small town. I mean to live in one. When the urge comes, you seldom hear people say, “Let’s pack up and move out to the country.” A few maybe, but most say, “Let’s move to another city.” So they never get the feel for life the small-town person has.

I can remember Huntsville in 1971 when my friend Garth Thomas and all the men there, hands deep in pockets, used to go whistling down the street, and fast, too. That is the way grown-ups in small towns walk. Tell me, why do Big-City people believe that small-town people slouch or stroll? Is it because there is supposed to be so much visual inertia? Or is it because Big-City people don’t know what it is to walk anymore?

Autumn nights in Huntsville, you’d always see someone striding home for supper, whistling too, glancing up at everybody on the sidewalk, carefree, having short conversations without stopping, and after supper you’d always see the same person rushing out the same way, heading for the corner store, or to a movie.

“Nothing will ever abort the camaraderie, and nothing will alter the dim beauty of these communities.”
Once, my parents came to Huntsville to see me, also to check on how the job was going; how the situation was in the hotel where I stayed, with the hiring of the old radiator in the room, to eat a meal in the restaurant where I ate, and to generally check that I was looking after myself. Naturally, I wanted to show off the town to Mom and Pop, but the air that day was heavy and cold in Huntsville. It was Sunday, and there was nothing but big patches of emptiness and rows of still solvent. Even my friend Charlie, the old man who sat in the lobby of the hotel listening to the sound of each day dying, was absent.

For a while I felt badly about leaving Huntsville. Little did I know what was coming up, traveling to the Atlantic towns and then heading out west, waking up some blessed morning in Dauphin, Man., or Oronoco, N.B., and finding a corner for a whole summer where I would study my life and the faces of the people. I still remember the roaring silence and cold afternoons of Huntsville.

But other days came when I pushed across the country and met other men with hands deep in pockets, whistling and laughing their way along the street. You might wonder how it is with small-town Canada.

Here's a typical happening in a typical small town, and how I managed. Just before evening, I was walking alongside the sidewalk in the middle of Summerside, P.E.I., and who in his right mind would imagine me, a stranger, getting invited to the Miss Summerside Pageant at the high-school auditorium that evening by a young lady selling ice cream on Water Street? I did get invited too, all dressed up in my only sports coat with bright red shirt, purple tie, and unpressed slacks.

Ten contestants got up there on the stage, and a father turned to me and said, "That's my daughter with the red ribbon - she plays the piano." By the time the evening was over, I had a dozen new friends, including a wry, older man who wanted to know what I was doing way out there.

"I have come to see Canada," I said.

Once, a couple of summers ago, I went out and picked blueberries in Amherst, N.S., a town where I met friendly people and had a room overlooking some beautiful trees and walk-
ways. Anhersber does not have the glimmer of a tourist town, and is not on the ocean, but the place has always been full of swing, if you ask me. In this town lived four of the 33 Fathers of Confederation, more than any other community in Canada. Every town should be first at something. In 1860, the dikes gave way and the citizens awoke a five feet of water; everything movable had been escorted seaward by the receding tide.

When I was there, the town was counting itself proud to have such a lively, enterprising mayor as Norman Manour, who could discourse on the virtues of the small town for days on end, who could speak with a rapid-fire delivery, and who could say such things as, “Now I direct your attention to the Confederation Memorial Building, which houses the finest council chambers in Canada.” Once, Manour gave a noontime lecture and 60 minutes on the open-line radio show, in which our town notables and I (counted myself as a notable) took part. It seemed a long show, but everybody seemed to have a good time listening to Manour talking. Time ran out and still he kept talking. The interviewer turned off the mike and he kept talking. An old-timer who was watching it all shook his head and said, “What a showman, what a showman!”

Having experienced Norman Manour, I felt the need to improve myself. Perhaps if I were a smoker or drinker, I would have given up smoking or drinking. Instead, I picked out a little old Baptist church with a high ceiling and found a seat in the back (the church was packed). “How nice to see you again,” said a lady in a red-feathered hat. The sermon, I remember, was delivered with vivid symbolism, full of ecclesiastical wallops. The scene, like the dialogue, was time-consuming, and the sermon could have been delivered in any church in any small town.

Outside, it was a gorgeous, cloudless Sunday morning, and the sun bunched off the grass. The preacher positively beamed as he shook hands with the people. One family even hailed from Pennsylvania, and they searched through the crowd for people they knew. Everybody greeted each other, old friends, and talked about the weather and a Saturday night Legion dance coming up. Younger people seemed conspicuously underrepresented, and

the only kids present were those in the company of grandparents or parents.

Growing up in Ontario, I had no appreciation of Nova Scotia, except that it was near the ocean, it was cold in winter, and it had a picturesque landscape. I was aware of only Halifax. Wake me up in the middle of the night now and whisper, “Nova Scotia,” and I will reply, “Liverpool” or “Bridge-water.”

In Liverpool, I regularly set the alarm clock for, listen to this, 5 a.m. I would groan out of bed, dress, and rush out to the Nova Scotia south shore where I walked for miles and circled back on town to eat breakfast. Then I sauntered down Granville Street, listening to the quiet sound of the ocean, and chatting with seamen sweeping the sidewalk.

Strangers are welcomed with a smile in Liverpool. The streets are clean. There is no crime.

My friend’s place had a marble fireplace, a little sink, and a huge bed, and when I looked out the vast window, I saw exactly what author Thomas Rackall saw, gold light falling on a dream town, gleaming white churches, beautiful flowers and trees, a robin flying a chimney as the sun goes down, the quietness of the streets at night, romance, traditions, history. Who dreams of such a place?

Everybody.

One morning, I passed an empty ball park. A Liverpool man with high boots swept home plate, then spread down lime for the base paths. He said he couldn’t be sure of the principals, but there was indeed a big doubleheader today and I’d better arrive early because the place would be jumping. So I went out to the game, where wives, daughters, groups of men and boys all sat on green wooden benches to watch the sensational locals try on a tough team from the Big City of Halifax.

The Liverpool team was not as good as the team from the Big City that day, but in its falling demonstrated a strong willingness to survive like small towns everywhere without enough industry and jobs, but that long to there just the same. Final score: five to zip for the Big City, but everyone at the game seemed happy enough; the players were only 14 and 13 years old anyway.

The game was over, everyone was at
the dairy freeze and pizza place, where I got to talk to some young people. A boy in a blue windbreaker, younger brother played second base, said he was considering a job that would take him to the Big City to live. He liked the small town, but there wasn't the work. He was a nice, soft-spoken boy, and we wiled away the afternoon talking about small towns, with the aroma of root beer and pizza floating everywhere. Not far away, a local band played. Bugs danced in the fast light. Children stuffed themselves and played tag around the old cannons. Parent s just watched. "I wish," said my young friend, "someone would tell me what to do."

* * *

Everyone admits to an honest concern for the future of our small towns. I have seen the smoothes in some of our communities, studied the declining population, chatted with people who are poor and the young who do not stay, and realized the earth may not be so generous anymore in mining towns like Arl-Tokan, Ont., and Kirkland Lake, Ont.

I have seen surveys of the growth of Big Cities, heard academics talk of the eternal clash between the town and city forces, and watched my old friend Charlie in Huntsville gaze at the stars and say, "Small-town people are going to run wild one of these days." I have been to the small Baptist town and heard, "Oh, He walks with me and He talks with me..." and visited the offices of Statistics Canada, where they say, "Oh, about 50 percent of us should be in the Big City by 1990." And I have walked down the January streets of Huntsville and heard the Prime Minister's words about how "the small town is the backbone of this country" coming out of every barbershop in town.

This said, all I know is that during the last five years, I have begun to realize something: that nothing will ever change the fine simplicity of Canada's small towns, nothing will ever deter the comradeship, and nothing will ever alter the dim beauty of these communities, though in some it is not something that can be pointed to or held up. I have been to Dauphin, Man., where rich, black earth brings forth golden oceans of rapsseed, wheat, barley, and oats, and watched the whole town work with hammer and nails to help rebuild a lumberyard that burned to the ground shortly after it opened. I have been to the fall fairs in Pembina, Man., and Bracebridge, Ont., and witnessed their dog shows and tasted their homemade pies. And the women are expressionless at first, in critical examination of their pies and each other. I have talked to newly-wed Marguerite Mitchell (in her mid-70s), who lives in the peaceful, little northwestern-Ontario town of Arl-Tokan and who received no fewer than 244 get-well cards from the townspeople when she was laid up in hospital a while back.

And yet here I am, rooted to the Big City as if I were a tree, an iron pole, missing a thousand things heard and seen and felt in the small towns: the flutter of a window shade in Graveshurst, Ont., birthplace of Dr. Norman Bethune; the houses of Summerville, P.E.I., with long, wide porches with rockers and boxes of flowers; the falsefront stores and raised, wooden sidewalks of Armstrong, B.C., the sound of halls being racked in the pool hall in Huntsville, Ont.; the smell of the prairie land in late fall, when the earth is opened in long, deep slush; and the voices...

In a newspaper office: "Mrs. Cameron and her children passed through town the other day. On their way to North Bay. Understand they're doing right well up there."

In a lounge, a local DJ reciting poetry and singing Irish songs: "The fire that lies in your eyes by the spark that endures and intensifies.

In the old hockey arena of Dauphin, Man.: "This place isn't exactly Paris, France, you know, but we love it. C'mon you Kings, skate, skate, skate."

Under a fine, old, sturdy tree in Amherst, N.S.: " Ain't no work here, boy. Hasn't been for a while. Try the cities."

From a porch in Thompson, Man.: " I vow, boy, you come back here right this minute. Your father will hear about this when he gets home."

* * *

As I sit here and hear those sounds, I dream of what I've gotten my second wind and I'm ready for another go, with a new home in Huntsville, or maybe near Bridgewater, N.S., with soft light in a room, rain on the sill, and mist on the pane. Maybe there, I'll go all the way as a writer, becoming the greatest writer ever to come out of Huntsville, Ont., and write a book about the small town so golden and so touched with magic that everybody in the Big City will shout, "Take to the hills, everybody, Huntsville is where it's at." Perhaps, Old Man Charlie will still be alive and come running up those hotel stairs to find me and shake my hand. My friends, all the ones I've ever, shook hands with, and said a sad good-bye to, will be singing in the fields, shouting "Bravo! Bravo! Let's hear it for our town." Even old Aunt Mathilde will throw her arms around me and weep, welcoming me back and forgetting darker years before.

And me? I'll just be sitting there in the golden glow of the lamp bought at Fred's Hardware saying, "Well, now I'm a writer at last, and I've done justice to my town."
Once, a gas station was a gas station. Not anymore. Change is the word.

by Jack Batten/ photos by Ron Cole

At an intersection not far from my house in the city, where two main streets cross, there's a hint of a dilemma for our times. On one corner of the intersection stands a gas station of the old familiar sort—two sets of pumps, a couple of bays for car repairs, and a clutch of smiling attendants who call me by name and ask if I'd like the oil checked. On another corner of this intersection stands a second gas station, one that's not so old and familiar. The brass sign over its entrance reads "Self Serve," and it has four sets of pumps, no bays, and no smiling attendants, though the only employee in sight, a woman who tends to the cash register and collects the money, seems friendly enough.

Half a block down the street from the intersection, there's yet a third gas-dispensing enterprise, this one run by Canadian Tire. Here, we're offered four sets of pumps, scurrying attendants dressed in bright-red coveralls, and a flock of coupons that entitle us gas buyers to credits for merchandise purchased in the adjoining Canadian Tire store.

The prices of gas at these three different establishments are almost as varied as the physical layouts. Here, for example, is what I paid in December, 1974, for a gallon of regular gas at each stop:

- Familiar friendly station: 68.9 cents.
- Self-serve: 61.9 cents.
- Mass merchandiser: 64.9 cents plus a coupon which actually reduced the gallon cost to 61.9 cents.

The three stations—along with the three prices—hint at this dilemma. "Hint" is the operative word, because the three can mean exhaust the variations in the business of retailing gasoline these days. The other possibilities range all the way from such offers as Texaco's "Starburst of Bonuses" to the humble station on the back road that'll throw in a 25-cent car wash for every five gallons purchased.

There was a time when a car driver looking for a tank of gas pulled into the station of his choice and barked a quick, "Fill’er up." No decisions called for. Today he’s confronted with an almost-bewildering variety of judgment: the three by no means exhaust the variations in the business of retailing gasoline these days. The other possibilities range all the way from such offers as Texaco’s "Starburst of Bonuses" to the humble station on the back road that’ll throw in a 25-cent car wash for every five gallons purchased.

Indeed, in one special case earlier this year, a gas-station owner in Mississauga, west of Toronto, dropped his price per gallon by two cents to any customer who paid in cash, a neat case of preferential treatment to one class out of all categories of purchasers on the same premises. The prices: 61.9 cents to credit-card users, 59.9 to money-on-the-bargain-aisle customers. "Change," Don Foster says. "If I were looking for one word to describe what's going on in retail gasoline, that's the word I'd pick—change." Don Foster should know. He is automotive operations manager at Imperial Oil, the man who helps make decisions about the ways Imperial markets gasoline, and though he’s obviously reveling in the challenge of dealing with new retailing conditions, he appreciates the necessity of oil companies stepping carefully, but rapidly, through the maze of fresh problems. Foster is a robust man with a booming voice and declarative manner. Imperial Oil's response to such customers and the changing market conditions has taken a variety of forms. This includes car-care clinics, car washes, Econo and Gain stations, and self-serve outlets.

All of these new modes of selling gas the one that is most visible—and rouses the most concern among some dealers—is the self-serve operation. As of early 1975, there were in the neighborhood of 550 self-serve outlets across Canada. The figures become even more staggering when you remember that, five years ago, self-serve in a commodity like gasoline was next to nonexistent in Canada.

"Yes, but it’s an obvious social step," says Terry Moynihan, a soft-spoken, reserved man whose title at Imperial is investment planning manager. "People have grown accustomed to self-serve in supermarkets, in drugstores, record shops, any number of commercial dealings. It is simply an evolution in marketing, this self-service idea, that has now begun to happen in gasoline because we’ve got the technology to handle it."

"Look at it another way," Don Foster says. "The inevitable, continuing rise in the prices today is affecting those who go to the gas station. The customer who is conscious of gasoline prices is rethinking where he buys his gas, and he’s deciding from the service station to the cheaper, self-serve operation. Who can blame him?"

One group that may not blame this rethinking customer, but is out to warn him includes some of Canada’s service station dealers. They’re the men who operate those four-pump bays out of town, with bay outfits that stand—or used to stand—on a lot of busy corners, and they see the self-serve as a double-barreled troublemaker—"as a threat to their livelihoods and as a menace to the safety of car-driving Canadians."

"We say there are serious hazards for the public in self-serve," argues Don Stanford, who is secretary-treasurer of the Ontario Retail Gasoline Association, a body that represents a small (less than 10 percent) but vocal group of Ontario dealers. "Government regulations say, for example, that you can only put gas into specially labeled containers. But at self-serve places, people come along and pump gas into plastic milk jugs, floor-cleaner cans, into anything that’s handy, and there’s nobody to tell them differently. And look at the other dangers—drivers who leave their engines running while they fill their tanks, drivers who smoke around pumps, who spill gas, who get into all sorts of potential trouble. Then you’ve got to realize that, with fewer fully equipped stations in business, you’re going to have more cars on the road, getting less maintenance and less emergency service without even getting into the point that it’s unnecessarily driving our people out of business."

Charles Hayles has the answer to the dealers’ contention that self-serve represents a safety threat. Hayles is an assistant general manager, responsible for retail operations in Imperial’s marketing department, and he points out: "The best reply I can make to the argument is to say that it simply hasn’t proven to be the case. Two independent reports published in the U.S. show that self-serve stations are at least as safe as conventional service stations. One stated that it did not uncover a single report of a fire at a service station where self-serve was involved in any way. It’s one of those things that’s very easy to say—that self-serve isn’t safe—but the facts are on the other side."

The energy branch of the Ontario department of consumer and commercial relations pioneered self-service regulations in Canada. Faced with industry’s request for self-service operations, they investigated in other countries and issued a regulation that has been used as a model in other
provinces. It is one of the strictest in the world. And it’s enforced by inspectors who regularly visit each self-serve unit.

Hayles also addresses another argument raised by dealers against the large oil companies — the so-called territory invasion” argument. The companies, according to the dealers, have too often opened stations that sell gas at a discount price within a block or two of a long-established outlet selling the companies’ same product. The result is that the old, established dealer, who sells at a higher price, loses business and has no say in his fate — except to close shop.

“With our franchise dealers,” Hayles says, “we have what is called a trading- area protection clause written into the agreement. The clause guarantees that if we open an Esso-brand station within one mile of an old station, then the proprietor of the established station may take over the new outlet. If he chooses not to, but would rather continue at his regular spot, then we agree to reimburse him to the extent that his net income falls below what he had been earning prior to the opening of second station.”

That’s the story in the case of stations with the Esso oval hanging overhead. But what of Econo and Gain Stations, which after all are independent? Have they been placed near established Esso dealers? The answer is yes. However, Imperial marketers point out that, in their view, Econo and Gain stations attract a different kind of customer than those who patronize the full-service Esso brand.

Notwithstanding such counter-arguments, the contentions of the dealers’ associations have helped escalate the business of gasoline retailing into what Don Foster labels “a very, very sensitive topic.” Across the country, dealers’ associations have begun to take their arguments against self-serve in particular and against the role of oil companies in retailing in general to provincial legislatures for government action. And the oil companies, Imperial among them, have stepped forward, as expected, to offer their views in rebuttal and try to implement a nationwide standard of the whole vaxing issue.

Typically, the Automotive Retailers’ Association of Alberta, an organization that speaks for approximately one-tenth of that province’s dealers, presented the provincial government with a brief in late 1974 that had at its core this declaration: “In both Edmonton and Calgary, major oil companies are converting full-line service stations into company-operated, self-serve discount gas bars. We suspect the intent is not so much to serve a new consumer demand as to enter into unfair and potentially destructive competition both with their own dealers and with private-brand stations.

And what, according to the brief submitted by the dealer associations, is the ultimate aim of the oil companies in their current approach to gas marketing and price competition?

1) To drive the major brand lesser operators out of business.

2) To drive major brand operators also to the wall.

3) To give the major oil companies that control retail distribution of gasoline the complete control over the pricing and the distribution to which the consumer has been moving for.

Naturally, the entire story has many sides. Nobody senses them more than Bill West, Imperial vice-president and general manager of marketing. He’s a strong advocate of the dealer system. “Good dealers are efficient operators,” he says. “They care about their customers.” On the other side, however, he points out that in many parts of Canada, dealer associations have advanced policies — sometimes through small groups that assume the leadership — which would restrict innovation and competition, limit hours of operation, and generally cut down the availability of service. The result? The customer loses by inconvenience and less accessibility to service. The retail dealers’ organizations are asking provincial legislatures to step in, and by doing so, they are opening the business of gasoline to overhead. These operators can turn a comfortable rate of return on their investment at margins of 10 to 12 cents on the gallon (the difference between their wholesale buying price and their retail selling price). “By comparison,” the brief went on, “our typical Esso and Home stations required a combined wholesale-retail margin of about 16 cents per gallon to provide a satisfactory level of earnings to the dealer and still provide a fair profit to the company.”

The handwriting for both Imperial and its dealer associations is on the wall. “Failure to recognize the efficiency of such marketers,” the brief emphasized, “sets up a condition of extreme vulnerability for both the oil company and its dealers — hence, the threat for network restructuring to put in place facilities capable of competing into the future at reduced margins.”

Does this mean that, in order to meet the pacesetters’ challenge, Imperial intends to junk conventional stations and throw their dealers into massive unemployment?

The short answer is no. The longer answer, in which Imperial puts its current state and future plans into perspective, emerges from its B.C. brief, a document offering concepts that apply all of Canada.

All told, there are about 5,500 Esso stations across the country, and of these, fewer than 200 fall into the category of direct Imperial service stations. Of the 1,100 operated by lessors, and 4,200 are operated by the people who own the stations.

The brief made clear that the number of Esso stations owned and operated by Imperial has declined during the past three years. And what’s more, the change will take place in a manner that will boost the economic returns on their life in gas retailing and be in perspective the current and future state of that tricky business.

Tackling first things first — economics — a brief Imperial submitted to the B.C. government in November, 1974, points out the crossroads of the so-called pacesetter operators (these are the smaller independent gas marketers, such as the pioneer who put up the first GAS sign more than a century ago). The balance of stations will include sufficient service bays to look after motorists’ maintenance needs.

“The improvement of productivity,”

that the B.C. brief announced, “will be achieved by some consolidations in fewer locations in prime sites with, in some cases, expanded facilities.”

In the face of this bombardment of points of view from the oil companies and dealer associations, the response by provincial and municipal government officials has been varied. In the Vancouver area for example, there are three differing positions. Richmond, a suburb of Vancouver, has prohibited self-serve completely, while Burnaby, another suburb, has decided to let the market determine the number of self-serves. In the middle of this, Vancouver city council (representing the city proper) voted to regulate the number of self-serves to 15 percent of the oil-company’s total number of stations in the city. Feelings are bound to remain heated over the usual city council. There will be more stations or fewer, lots of self-serve and not so many conventional units? And legislators, of all people, will have trouble avoiding a stand on such a sensitive social problem.

“Politics drives cars too,” Don Foster says. “And when they hear that an oil company is going to put the big ball through a favorite local dealer’s station, it won’t matter whether knock- ing down the wall is more. With provincial governments converting to self-sell is the sensible step in terms of service and economics. He’s still going to speak up on behalf of the local guy. That’s what I mean when I say this is a touchy topic — it touches people where they live and work and against big corporations. So does it, which is what took me to doctor got into the act. He’d been listening to Enrie and me chat — his licence plate indicated he was a doctor — and he said he had something he wanted the two of us to hear.

“I appreciate these new self-serve outfits,” the doctor said. “Use them myself sometimes because I don’t want to pass up the saving. But I’ve also been a customer here at Enrie’s for at least 15 years, and I’m not about to give up on him. He’s always had the time to take care of my car. And that’s the whole point, don’t you see? There’s bound to be room in the market today — and I know times have changed — for both the cheaper gas operations and for the hard-working run service stations like Enrie’s. No reason why one can’t live with the other.”

And those Socratic words, I thought, ought to serve as aifty guide to all sides in working out the dilemma in this perplexing business of gas retailing.
Through rapids and rolling water


I first learned of the South Nahanni River in the summer of 1973. I had finished a backpack trip across the Chilcoot Trail, the famous Trail of 98, and in a Whitehorse bookstore, I came across The Dangerous River by Raymond M. Patterson. Fifty years ago, he was one of the first white men to go there, and his book is still the bible of the Nahanni, a detailed graphic account of his search for the lost gold of that river in the 1920s.

When I returned to Toronto from Whitehorse during that summer, I had dinner with a longtime friend, Tim Kotchef. I mentioned the Nahanni and the challenge it held. His first reaction was: "Why don't we do it?" From that moment until we hit the river a year later, neither of us wavered in our resolve.

The river was an obsession. Battling my way through rush-hour traffic, I daydreamed about paddling the Nahanni. Almost every night for a year, I read books and studied maps. I was fascinated with thoughts of the unknown waterfall twice the size of Niagara and by the dark tales of mysterious deaths as late as the 1940s that had given names to the Headless Range and the Deadman's Valley Mountains. That's where the river cuts through its turbulent 600-mile journey from the Yukon Mountains down across the Great Divide into the Liard and Mackenzie Rivers on the flatlands of the Northwest Territories.

To say that we faced some problems before embarking upon the journey is to put it mildly. Neither of us had ever been in a canoe. We had no knowledge of the woods, nor did we possess any ability at wilderness cooking or map reading. Worse still, we were both over-
weight with barely the physical strength to lift a canoe, let alone portage it and hundreds of pounds of equipment for miles. We agreed to meet every week to draft a plan of attack that would give us all the skills we'd need: we planned weekly shopping expeditions for equipment. Our very lives could depend upon the decisions we made months ahead of time. We spent weeks arguing the merits of each item of equipment. We bought the best down-filled sleeping bags on the market, and talked for hours with experts about the type and style of tent we should get, finally settling on a light nylon, three-man, wind-resistant tent with a tight, enclosed fly. We knew a warm and dry night's sleep is a key element to survival in the wilderness.

We had been friends for a number of years, and had gone through many harrowing work situations together, but were still concerned about our ability to get along on a prolonged trip in which the necessity for cooperation would join us together like Siamese twins. We would be completely dependent on each other. We spent long evenings trying to foresee possible disagreements. More than one team has broken up in bitter squabbles under pressure of wilderness survival, where even mundane matters can take on enormous significance, far out of proportion to their ordinary importance.
The last of the three canyons where water swirled dangerously. This section of the winding Nahanni was the most exciting part of the journey.

For example, Tim insisted he had to have a dessert after every meal. I’ve never eaten desserts and resented the need to carry so much extra weight. The compromise: Tim would put cans of fruit and many pounds of sweets in his pack and carry them himself. Later, a can of peaches would seem like the greatest delicacy I had ever tasted.

But our biggest handicap was lack of experience in a canoe. The best equipment and wilderness know-how would be useless if we were unable to handle the high waves, rapids, and rolling water of the Nahanni. It was in a way through three canyons that have walls towering 2,000 feet straight up. We had to learn to canoe or else, otherwise the trip could end in tragedy.

The people we contacted were little help. Their sincere advice was that it was no task for novice canoeists. That advice was underlined for us during the first night of canoe training. It was a course for beginners on a small lake near Toronto. I had never dreamed of watching lovers canoeing across placid lakes, that there was so much difficulty in doing it well. We simply could not make the canoe go in a straight line. It kept going in circles, or running into the shoreline while we dissolved into angry disputes about which one of us was to blame. We argued over who should be in the bow or the stern, and rapidly lost confidence in our mutual ability. Our coach taught us critical

In a view from a mountaintop, Pupil Rock juts out, forming a natural gateway that leads through the Mackenzie Mountains.

manoeuvres by having us charge the canoe straight at buoys, using special techniques to avoid them at the last second. Each time we collided with the floating object, he reminded us that, had it been a rock on a fast-moving river, we would have been finished.

Gradually, over a period of months, we learned to master the many strokes necessary to handle a canoe in all conditions. We settled on Tim, with stronger arms and better eyesight, as bow man, and myself as stern man, since we felt I had a better knowledge of steering.

But the small lake wasn’t a river, and we knew we needed practice under actual “combat” conditions. One sunny weekend in May found us with a group of rugged young men learning to master the art of white-water canoeing on the wild French River near Sudbury, Ont.

During the first day of the training course, we upset five times trying to negotiate a fast-moving narrow rapid on the French. During one upset, I broke a cardinal rule, and failed to hang on to the capsized canoe. For the first time, I learned what a helpless feeling it is to be carried underwater through a bad rapid. After 10 minutes, I was pulled from the icy water in the early stages of hypothermia — when the body temperature drops to abnormally low levels. Unable to move my arms or hands, and barely able to speak, I was picked up by the rescue canoe. We capsized many more times during that week learning the delicate art of ferrying and learning to use proper balance and correct strokes in fast waters. Our life jackets saved us, and we vowed never to take them off.

By early summer, we had collected all the equipment needed: packs, tents, and for carrying freeze-dried, fresh and canned food, a large wooden wannigan (supply chest) with a leather tulmipine (strap) that went around the forehead. Our final task was to get in shape. So, in the final few weeks before the trip, we met each morning at a jogging track and were running two miles a day by July.

In mid-July, we left Toronto by air for Edmonton, and then to Watson Lake in the Yukon, jumping-off spot for the Nahanni. The last thing both of us did before leaving was to make out a

last will and testament.

Then, early one morning, we packed our gear in a light seaplane and set off for the Nahanni. Our canoe — a tough, 18-foot Grumman aluminum — was tied to the pontoon. Five hours later, we were dropped off at a small lake near the river. I’ll never forget the mixed feelings of loneliness, fear, and exhilaration as our last link to civilization lifted off from the lake and left us in isolation. We slept that night in a silence so deep it was deafening.

The next day — our first in the wilderness — we experienced a near-disaster that shook our confidence. Even with map and compass, we were unable to find our way from the lake to the river. We spent the better part of the day seeking an exit, and failed. Frustrated and growing extremely irritated at ourselves, we pulled the canoe onshore to try walking a path to the river and return later for the equipment. Within a half-hour, we began to feel we were lost, and I worked out some compass directions.

As we grew more excited, Tim started to run, anxiously seeking the river or a lake. I tried to catch up, and fell over a log. Then, a hundred yards later, I realized during the fall our only compass had dropped out of my shirt pocket. I was unable to find my way back to the log; everything looked the same. Tim was incensed at my stupidity, and we found ourselves near blows. Deep in the swampy woods, black flies and mosquitoes were everywhere, and we were totally lost.

We had been warned against the greatest enemy of inexperienced woodsmen — panic. It sweeps over you as physically as nauseus, builds and feeds on itself and finally, even as you feel it happening, can carry you away into erratic behavior that kills. We were on the brink of it. We had no idea which direction to take; the woods looked the same everywhere, and each step might be taking us deeper into the vastness of the Nahanni wilderness. Darkness was falling; we were lost, confused, and near panic.

Perhaps it was cigars that saved us. We forced ourselves to sit down. Then, we each smoked a cigar from our precious supply, while we tried to re-capture our senses and, in some degree of calm, work out a plan of action. The solution was simple. I had read that
animal trails in the woods were not there by accident, but to serve a purpose. We knew we were between a lake and a river, and guessed the moose and bear trails would probably go from one to the other at some point. We decided to follow a trail and stay with it no matter what. It took lots of nerve as the trail we picked seemed to be going in circles. But, by nightfall, it led us to the wide, brown, and fast-flowing Nahanni. Next morning, another trail took us back to our canoe on the lakeshore, and we portaged it to the river.

The days following were serene and beautiful. The strong sun of the brief Arctic summer was hot on the Nahanni. We camped on sandbars beside some of the highest mountains on the continent in the most awe-inspiring scenery I had ever seen. The wind was up on the rivers and bars, so we were not bothered by flies. We ate large meals of spaghetti, beans and bacon, canned meats and vegetables. We set in front of the campfire talking until midnight, then slept in the comfortable security of a tent while wolf packs howled in the distance. This was the wide and peaceful upper Nahanni, and we knew that tough days and dangerous water lay ahead. But first, two natural features of the trip were to fascinate us – the legendary year-round Rabbit Kettle Hot Spring and the beautiful Virginia Falls.

Rabbit Kettle Hot Spring was reached by tracking our canoe against the current (walking along the shoreline and using ropes to pull the canoe) up the wild Rabbit Kettle River. It took us five hours to reach the spring and about 15 minutes to come back that night. At the junction of the Rabbit Kettle and another small river, we followed an old Indian trail through the thick woods, in search of the hot spring. In the middle of unbroken trees and swampland, we suddenly came across a wall of limestone, elaborately carved by sulfuric water. It looked like a medieval castle looming above us. It’s flat on top with hot pools hundreds of feet deep down through the stone, from which warm water bubbles all year.

It was easy to understand why the ancient Indian tribes had worshipped here. The swamp-like vegetation and warm springs in the midst of a deep Arctic winter were the source of tales about a hidden tropical Garden of Eden, a Shangri-la in the Arctic, a warm tropical forest in the centre of the thousands of miles of frozen Arctic wilderness.

After leaving Rabbit Kettle Hot Spring, we looked forward to reaching Virginia Falls. During the two days of paddling along the way, we could hear it roar. Twice the height of Niagara, vastly more powerful, it is undoubtedly one of the great waterfalls of the world. Someday, it may become a major tourist attraction of the North American continent; yet it is unknown to most Canadians. Already, one enterprising businessman from Fort Simpson takes tourists for a two-day trip to the falls in shallow-draft aluminum jet boats. As we passed one on the river, it circled around us while American tourists took pictures of two bearded men in worn-out stetsons.

That night, we camped on a ledge just out over the falls and met a team of biologists from the federal government parks service, from whom we learned the Nahanni was to be made Canada’s newest national park. They told us it was hoped the river would be preserved for a special breed of outdoorsmen. One of their main tasks was to develop canoes for future park users, and they indicated the park would be open to motorboats as well as canoes. We realized then that those of us on the river that summer might be among the last to experience it as a wilderness area still full of moose and bears so unfamiliar with humans they were almost tame.

The enormous amount of energy generated by the big falls is dissipated in the three canyons through which the river swings, and there, we knew, lay the most exciting and dangerous part of our journey.

The first day among the rapids and standing waves of canyon number one was terrifying. It never seemed to end. The canyon walls were sheer and 2,000 feet high. The river squeezed through, forming five-foot waves, breaking from everywhere, and rushing in and out between the canyon walls.

Water seemed to come from all directions. Plunging through, we shouted instructions until we were hoarse. As the water splashed off the canyon walls, it exposed enormous, deep gorges, then crashed back to fill them in again. To be caught between the wall of a canyon and the onrushing water could mean capsizing and, perhaps, death.

During that 10 miles, we hopscotched from one tiny bit of shoreline to another, emptying the canoe of hundreds of pounds of water that could destroy balance and sink it. I was terrified as we negotiated the canyon, and my mouth became so dry I was unable to swallow. My companions had to force water down my throat to prevent me from choking. It was the worst canyon on the Nahanni, awesome and exhilarating. The river ran so fast as we were on a different time scale. Objects far ahead were upon us in seconds. A decision to reach a point of land had to be made far in advance, or we were swept by. Yet, there was no real sense of movement.

On our last day, the river was moving in full flood, and we covered 70 miles in 12 hours. The flooding had washed away hundreds of enormous trees, which were making the trip with us. Some became stuck in the river bottom. To canoeists, these deadheads are as dangerous as icebergs to an ocean liner. We had to dodge them constantly.

When we reached the tiny Indian settlement of Nahanni Butte, with a population of 60, Indian children ran away at the sight of us – two bearded, mud-covered, and very tired men. At the local store, I bought the first dry socks I had worn in a week. Tim drank pop as if he’d never see another bottle. Both of us, being journalists, were anxious for the latest news. An Indian told us U.S. President Richard Nixon had resigned. We were back in civilization, having missed one of the biggest stories of the century.

For a time, at least, we had submerged our identities and found a kind of freedom in the wilderness. We had met a great river’s challenge, and survived. □

In calm waters, with canyon walls shooting straight up on both sides, the trip was nearing an end, and the travelers posed for a photograph.
The country likes the benefits of affluence. But it's becoming disenchanted with the very process that allowed affluence to happen.

Second thoughts on new attitudes

It's just about a quarter-century now since I graduated from university. I was a brand-new geologist. Along with many fellow graduates from the University of Manitoba, I had two tremendous gifts. One was youth, that wondrous attribute each of us holds for all too brief a time. The other was education, the marvellous acquisition of training and discipline of the mind.

Like most of my friends and classmates of 25 years ago, I had a lot of ideas about a lot of things. In the years that have elapsed, some of these ideas have survived, some have been modified, some have been discarded. And believe it or not, I gained a few new ones during those years.

I've been fortunate during my adult life in several ways. One is that I've had a reasonably wide variety of jobs. I've been a laborer, a miner, a geologist, a planner, and an executive. I've been exposed to a great many people in many places, and I've usually traded ideas with them: laborers, scientists, academics, farmers, industrialists, politicians, activists, and soldiers.

As a result of those years of experience, I can make my share of observations, and reach some conclusions about a number of things: in particular, social values. I'm interested in the changing values of our time, and how the values now emerging and commonly held will equip us for the events to take place in the remainder of the 1970s and into the 1980s.

To begin, let's examine the values Canadians held during the late 1940s and the 1950s. At that time, social attitudes were obviously conditioned by the war that had just ended. Memories of what we regarded as a normal life were based on the prewar years, and were largely influenced by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Not surprisingly, domestic goals and objectives were aimed at improving our economic standards.

Attitudes towards international affairs were dominated by the effects of the Cold War. No sooner had the western countries saved the world for democracy — for the second time in 25 years — than they perceived themselves threatened again. It was a time of great international tension. The threat that any conflict could be fought with nuclear weapons forced brand-new attitudes about armed conflict as a means for settling international disputes.

It was probably during the 1950s that human beings began to develop a love-hate relationship with technology. We loved it because technology and management expertise were creating ever-growing wealth and higher standards of living. At the same time, I think we began to hate it because technology spawned the threat of nuclear war. Also, much of technology was terribly difficult to comprehend, and many professors to find it a bit of a bore.

As economic growth continued into the 1960s, perhaps the biggest change in social attitudes in Canada and other economically developed countries was a growing regard for the quality of life, coupled with a decrease in emphasis on those efforts contributing to economic betterment. This thought is a bit tricky, to me at least, and needs careful examination. What was happening was probably not a loss of desire for continued economic improvement in any wide-spread sense, but rather a feeling that it could be taken for granted. I doubt very much if any significantly large segment of society seriously desired to give up the benefits of continued economic growth. But I do think a great segment began to assume it would continue automatically.

In addition to this decrease in the popularity of wealth creation and the emphasis on it, the process itself became the object of some mistrust. This mistrust began to manifest itself in several ways. During the 1950s, for instance, novels and motion pictures began to characterize business and industry as the domain of ruthless and conniving people. Catch-phrases such as "rat race" and "corporate jungle" were popular. Even ostensibly scholarly non-fiction works such as The Organization Man by William Whyte and The Power Elite by C. Wright Mills promoted the idea that business and industry were not the most socially uplifting segments of society.

The growing emphasis on the quality of life was a very desirable aspect of our social evolution because, after all, the only reasonable and defensible use for the benefits of economic activity is the improvement of the human condition. However, what was astounding in retrospect was that it began to contain a corollary disrespect for the very process that allowed it to happen.

It occurs to me that the phenomenon I'm trying to describe can be formulated as McIvor's Law, which states: long periods of affluence weaken stimuli to competitive or acquiescent behavior, and may provoke a reaction against such behavior.

However, democratic governments correctly perceived what was happening as the will of the people, and once a government thinks it perceives the will of the people, there is a thudding stampede to satisfy it. The combination of growing affluence, a focus on the quality of life, and democratic government came to an inevitable consequence — the attempted satisfaction of virtually every perceived social desire. Society legislated attempts to cure most of life's ills. We even decided many of the moral concepts we had built up were unnecessarily constraining, and we dumped them. In general, we sought after universal affluence, full employment, education for all, adequate health care, and freedom from the value judgments of others.

But as we settled into these new attitudes, two things happened. One was we didn't seem to be any happier, just greedier. I think by now virtually every collection of individuals with characteristics identifiable as even a loosely cohesive hereditary group has made its demands heard for more freedom and wealth, or both. Few of them are able to describe the benefits they can bring to society; all of them express with force and vigor the demands they expect society to meet.

The second factor evident with the new attitudes was the apparent conclusion that the very process permitting it all to happen — the wealth-creation process — is socially undesirable. This is manifested in many ways. Financial profit, the engine driving the whole process by creating new funds for taxes, reinvestment, and rewards to investors, has become anathema to many people. For a while, technology became so unpopular that university enrolment in science and engineering declined even further than in the other disciplines. Industry attracted regular attention for its mistakes, but almost none for its contributions.

There is another very important social trend that has taken place since World War II. This trend can be appreciated by comparing two schools of thought regarding the best means for conducting a nation's wealth-generating activities.

One school holds that wealth generation is best accomplished by a large number of participants competing with one another within guidelines established by a central agency, that is, a government. This competition is held to encourage efficiency, lowest consumer prices, and innovation and creativity, since those participants who are least efficient and creative, and whose prices are unnecessarily high will fail and be replaced. Within this school of thought, profits are encouraged, since they are the source of taxes, funds for reinvestment, and a reward for investors. Profits are also one
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measure of success—the hallmark of a company that does the right thing in the right way.

The other school of thought holds that controlled direction of the economy is more important, and that individual decision making supplemented by a collective entrepreneurial thrust is less important. So it follows that profits are unimportant, and rewards should be captured mainly by the public purse. To say it another way, this philosophy urges governments to take as much of the rewards as is possible without actually driving the participants out of business. This approach makes for a stagnant economy.

It is not very difficult to understand why the second school of thought has become so popular. First of all, for one thing, there is the tremendously greater requirement for taxes to support what I have described as "the new attitudes". In 1950, spending by all three levels of government in Canada accounted for 21 percent of Canada’s Gross National Product (GNP) of $119 billion. By 1973, governments accounted for 38 percent of the GNP, which had then grown to $619 billion. GNP rose by a factor of six; government spending by a factor of ten.

The other important piece of understanding is that an ever-increasing number of university graduates are choosing to work in governments where they will be redistributing wealth rather than in industry where they could be generating it. With large numbers of highly educated people competing with one another to spend government revenues, it’s small wonder taxpayers have been spending money wherever they leave little of the benefits to those who create new wealth.

In a sense, we have been on a binge since the end of World War II, a binge in which we’ve tried to satisfy our every want, private and public, social and economic, a binge that has led somehow to the widespread belief that the wealth-creation process, which allowed us to satisfy these wants, isn’t very desirable.

If the past decades represent a binge, the new environment in Canada and around the world indicates we are going to suffer from a hangover in the 1970s and 1980s. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, some cracks in our foundations began to be apparent.

First, there was growing evidence that the new attitudes evoked programs that were very expensive and not working as intended. For instance, the much-liberalized unemployment insurance system, designed to shelter the unemployed, has made it more acceptable for some to remain unemployed than to work; it has led to a less-efficient way of utilizing the nation’s work force. In short, the new attitudes have started to erode national productivity.

Second, we began to perceive that the economy was not responding to actions based on economic incentives. Perhaps the biggest item here was what we found we couldn’t control inflation. I think I know why. We were devoting such a large share of our resources to socially desirable, but economically non-productive, undertakings that the productivity of our total investments failed to grow at the pace necessary to support the needs of both continued wealth generation and large social programs. With demands far exceeding supply, we have, in effect, financed our expectations through increasing the money supply, with resulting inflation runaways.

Third, and by far the most important, it is becoming increasingly apparent that we have been living on a low-cost inventory of commodities—oil, metals, food, etc. Replacement of these inventories is going to cost a lot more than it used to. At the same time, demand for these commodities will grow because populations are continuing to grow.

My conclusion from all this is that we’re going to be hard-pressed to maintain our current standard of living, let alone improve it. I doubt very much if it will be possible to replace inventories of food, fuel, metals and other commodities from expensive new sources while simultaneously eroding productivity and discouraging wealth generation.

If you think I’m simply playing with words, examine the record of the United Kingdom since World War II. The high cost of their current fuel bill isn’t the basic cause of their economic malaise; it’s simply another crippling blow. In the United Kingdom, the government programs their wealth-creation process simply can’t support, so they are falling behind more and more. Their attempts to cure this situation by frequent bouts of socialism and nationalization aggravate the problem rather than improve it.

Nationalizing any industry in trouble won’t cure it, because nationalization doesn’t get to the root of the problem. If an industry is in trouble, it is very likely because it became inefficient on its own, or was forced into inefficiency by ill-conceived legislation. Adding the further inefficiency often accompanying nationalization will not cure this sort of sickness.

I’ve been adopting the role of Chicken Little up until this point. I’ve been saying, "The sky is falling!" It would be much more productive if I suggested what we in Canada could do before we can’t prevent the sky from falling. Let me specify some collective actions we can take to try and preserve our standard of living. First, we must recognize that profit is what motivates the wealthy. Profit is the source of taxes, funds for reinvestment, and rewards to investors.

With this understood, we can agree that the wealth-creation process is a vital and respectable endeavor in our society and is, in fact, the source of the funds we use to obtain social betterment.

I think most people will agree that a wealth-redistribution process is a necessity in any society, but I think the process in Canada could be greatly improved to our collective benefit. We need better methods and institutions to affect cooperation and to prevent confrontation. Don’t think we can afford to stop the squabbles that arise when segments of our society bring pressures to bear in order to get a bigger share of Canada’s economic well-being. For instance, can we afford to have two levels of government squabbling over who gets what share of gains from natural-resource taxation when the real issue is the country’s desperate need for larger new supplies of these resources?

Also, wealth redistribution might be better accomplished if we worked more carefully the costs and benefits of social programs in order to choose among them, and then choose programs with total costs we are able to meet. In addition, we might find it productive to insist on stewardship reports on those programs under way. How well are they doing? We have a long, undistinguished history in the expenditure of public funds that includes HMCS Bonaventure, the unemployment insurance fund, low-interest loans to oil-rich Iran, Churchill Forest Industries, and others. We owe it to ourselves to do better.

Canada’s wealth-generation activities should be conducted in a more stable governmental environment. We do not live in a laissez-faire world, and governments have responsibility and a mandate to provide general guidelines and ground rules. But a degree of sanity and stability should replace the current atmosphere where the rules change almost monthly, where the general attitude of governments toward investors is one of saying: "Here is what we may, or on the other hand may not, allow you to do." This is really abdication of responsibility masquerading as resolve to protect the public interest.

I think Canadians must rededicate themselves to the idea that the work ethic should have a prominent place in our social fabric. We simply aren’t going to be able – and in any case, we probably aren’t going to be willing – to continue to support people who don’t want to work. Conversely, I think the nation ought to be prepared to reward those who do.

Business must accept its fair share of responsibility. With certain notable exceptions, such as the mining industry, the performance of the private sector in describing its role in Canadian society has been absolutely terrible. For instance, the fact that the role of profits in society has become so grossly misunderstood, the fact that businessmen have allowed the idea of large fluctuations in profits to be manipulated to our disadvantage means we’ve done a dreadful job of communication. However, that’s one of the reasons I’m making this argument – to try to improve this communication.

For almost 30 years, Canadians have taken wealth creation for granted and assumed it would just keep growing. The country has shown a voracious appetite for the benefits of growing affluence, but by some strange quirk has become disenchanted with the very process that allowed it all to happen. Now we’re entering a new era. There aren’t any more cheap resources, and we’re going to have to replace our inventory of them at much higher cost. To maintain our present standard of living under these conditions – let alone improve it – is going to require much more work, discipline, and enlightened public policy than we’ve become used to.

However, maybe what’s happening will be beneficial to Canada in the long run. The new environment I’ve described will present a tremendous challenge to every citizen. Perhaps, in meeting the challenge, we’ll become a positive society with a sense of national purpose, rather than a loose aggregation of pressure groups fighting over our national economic spoils.
At Cold Lake, Alta., a method of drilling that is neither easy nor cheap. But necessary

About 180 miles northeast of Edmonton, near Cold Lake, Alta., where numerous small lakes dot a landscape full of muskeg, Imperial Oil is extracting heavy oil from deeply buried sands, oil that cannot be recovered in the traditional way.

The Cold Lake sands contain one of the largest oil deposits in Canada, estimated by the Alberta Energy Resources Conservation Board at 164 billion barrels of oil in place. (Only the Athabasca tar sands exceed this, with 625 billion barrels, according to the Alberta Energy Resources Conservation Board.) Not all of the 164 billion barrels at Cold Lake will be recoverable. Only a fraction of the oil may be recoverable from these sands. Nevertheless, it may make an important contribution to total Canadian supplies in the decade between 1980 and 1990 as production from existing conventional sources continues to decline. But heavy oil is not easily wrested from the earth. It is too thick to be pumped, too deeply buried to be mined and taken elsewhere to process.

Imperial has spent about $35 million since 1964 experimenting with potential extraction methods. Currently, injecting steam at 600 degrees Fahrenheit and 1,600 pounds-per-square-inch pressure seems to hold the most promise. The steam is pumped into a well, the sand is heated, and the thick oil thins and is brought to the surface mixed with water.

Several companies have experimented with heavy-oil recovery using steam-injection methods similar to Imperial’s. And other production methods have been tried. Some companies have experimented with “in-situ combustion” in which the oil in the sand is ignited after injecting compressed air into the reservoir. The resulting combustion process is controlled by the amount of air injected. In other efforts, solvents have been injected into the sands. There has even been consideration of using underground nuclear detonations to heat and mobilize the viscous oil. Imperial continues to examine most of these ideas, but current field research is focused on using steam injection.

After about a month of steam injection, a well can be productive for approximately three months, although a few have production cycles of up to a year. During this time, a mixture of oil and water is brought to the surface for separation. When a well cools and can no longer be pumped, steam is re-injected and the process is repeated.

When Imperial first went into Cold Lake, four wells were drilled and injected with steam from a portable generator. This pilot project—named Ethel after a nearby lake—was expanded in 1967. A steam plant was built to take water from Ethel Lake and convert it to steam for injection.

This operation continued until 1970 when it was shut down for reassessment. That didn’t mean Cold Lake had been abandoned. Back in Edmonton, a small group of technical people were analyzing the mass of data collected to determine what modifications might result in improved performance. The result was the 23-well May pilot program (also named after a lake) that the company embarked upon in 1971.

The May pilot is about a half-mile from the Ethel steam plant. A distribution system carries the steam from the
The pipe is insulated and covered with aluminum sheeting to help retain its heat. A separate line directs the produced oil-water mixture to oil-water separation and treating facilities adjacent to the steam plant.

Because temperatures in the lines may vary as much as 400 degrees, both oil and steam lines have expansion loops to provide for the movement caused by expansion and contraction stresses. The line joins at right angles for a few feet, and then joins back in. The jogs absorb thermal stresses which a straight line would not tolerate.

Only one line connects each well to the steam source and production facilities. During injection, it carries steam; during production it carries oil and water. The May pilot has been producing up to 1,500 barrels a day, two-thirds of which is trucked to Lloydminster for sale in the heavy-oil market. One-third is burned to generate steam to produce more oil.

And now there’s the new Lenning pilot program (named after a nearby lake, of course) where Imperial drilled 56 wells. Steam injection began there in early January, 1975. Production started in April.

Lenning also has its own steam plant on the site, but this is fired by natural gas. And some gas is being injected into the wells along with the steam. “We think the gas assists the movement of oil in the reservoir and increases the recovery rate,” says Bob Peterson, Cold Lake operations manager.

At the Lenning pilot, 56 wells occupy seven acres each. That’s 392 acres, enough to construct an area a mile long and more than a half-mile wide. With previous development methods, the terrain would have been covered with a maze of roads, pipes, and wellheads. Today, an aerial photograph of the site shows only an access road with branches to a plant and eight patches in the bush. Visit these patches and you’ll find the central feature of each is a gravel-covered dirt pad with seven conventional “horsehead” oil-well pumps sitting on it side by side, together with a “satellite” building containing a piping manifold that directs steam to each of the wells and similarly accepts production from each well.

With Elbe Lake outlined in the background, a steam line, showing the expansion loop, leads to the wellhead.

flakes, although each flake has eight areas instead of six. This configuration is the result of the topography and what is known as five-spot drilling. This is a pattern made by drilling four wells in a square with a fifth in the center. At the May pilot, Imperial crews drilled 23 wells on five-spot patterns in four adjacent rows. Each pattern is interlocked with the next.

But why bother with these intricate patterns? Why not just space the wells at convenient distances?

First, the object is to extract the maximum amount of oil from beneath the surface, without leaving any pockets beyond the reach of a well. Then, in the Cold Lake muskeg and bush, each time a well is drilled, a path must be built to convey steam to the wells and the oil-water mixture back to the separator building. Roads must be built to maintain the lines and pumps. The roads must be kept clear of snow.

The more you cut down this surface network, the less expense and the less disturbance to the environment.

However, the surface cost saving at Lenning is offset underground. Directional drilling is neither easy nor cheap. Ordinarily, a drill bit is fixed onto a drill pipe, and the drill bites into the ground as the length of pipe revolves. Generally, it descends in a straight line with minor deviations caused by changes in the formation. In directional drilling at Lenning, the bit goes straight down for only about 300 feet. Then, a joint near the bit allows the driller to set it at an angle. Drilling mud, which is used in all rotary-drilling operations to lubricate the bit, fill up the annulus around the pipe, and bring up the rock cuttings, has an additional function in directional drilling. It is directed against the bit in a way that causes it to revolve while the pipe moves down the hole without rotating.

Once the directional angle of the hole is set, it is possible to revert to conventional drilling with the drill pipe rotating as it follows the bit into the ground. The pipe is flexible enough to accommodate itself to the angle. Readings are taken periodically with a gyroscope-type device to make sure the well is on target.

As Lenning, the drill penetrates the oil-bearing sands at an angle of about 30 degrees. When it reaches its destination at the 1,500-foot level, the drill will have gone about 1,800 feet.

“You run a risk in the deviated hole,” says Bob Peterson. “Getting stuck is always a potential problem in drilling, and it’s more of a problem when the well is at an angle.”

Only after the Lenning pilot is sufficiently into production will Imperial know its level of success. The company is hoping for 4,000 barrels a day to be shipped to its new Strathcona refinery in Edmonton as feedstock for asphalt. Added to May and a few wells still producing at Elbe, that should mean a total production from Cold Lake of 5,000 barrels daily. But while production is important, the principal purpose of the Lenning pilot is to develop technical understanding and confidence that could lead to large-scale operations in the future.

“It’s not a money-making deal today,” points out Peterson, “but we hope we can develop it into a commercial process.”

Meanwhile, technical know-how must keep advancing.
Every summer, just as June ends and the schools are out, a memory comes to me that the years of time do not fade and experience does not dim. It is not a memory of school vacation or dreamy summers of youth at home in Nova Scotia. It is the memory of a train, an old train, red and faded from the weather, swaying slowly through the gray woods of June, on past the house where we lived, and on to the chill and sunless sea.

Sometimes, in my childhood, the train came in the night, its whistle gentle in the sleep of a child, but rousing the men of the house — my grandfather and my uncles — who would wash and dress and nuimur to the dark, and then leave the house silent, as they boarded the train for the coal mines of Glace Bay some seven miles away. I would listen as they left the village, the last whistle of the train fading upon the marshes that stretched beyond the house.

All day I would wait for its return. Sometimes we would gather, the friends of childhood and, placing an ear to the track, listen and persuade ourselves that, at that moment, the train was crawling out of the station, soon to rumble across the trestle toward the lake, so that shortly our fathers and uncles would be back, home for supper and then as the sun left its last flame upon the rooftops we would gather, all of us, for softball in the fields.

Taking the miners to work and home again was, so far as a child could tell, the life and purpose of the train. We called it the Hobo, but I never knew why. In those years of the forties, there wasn't a child in the village who did not know the Hobo. In some families, every man rode it daily, going in the dark in the earliest hours of morning and coming again in the late afternoon. I grew up with the train, and it spoke to me. It reminded all of us who we were, the children of the mine. I would watch it, learning to welcome its coming, but to stand clear when it came. Its whistle was as familiar in that village, as the barking of the dogs, the perfume of early lilac, the squeak of a garden swing.

It was the greatest of trains and it was the least. It crossed no continent, not even a county. It had no dome car, no dining coach, not even a conductor to command the cars, punch the tickets, and see to the un faulty. In fact, it had no windows, at least no windows by which you sat to look out upon the dust-dry soil, the gardens with their scarecrows, and the women hanging clothes in the salt-sea wind.

The men sat on benches. The benches lined the walls, so that they swayed with the slow and gentle motion of the train. It traveled so slowly that sometimes people joked that if you sat on the steps to the cars, you could pick blueberries on the trip from Glace Bay to Morien. This was never really proven, perhaps never tested. The only light inside filtered from tiny windows high overhead. Some men sang, some told stories. Some were silent, perhaps dreaming of days they were sure would be better.

I knew the train in ways most of my friends did not. It was not only part of my uncle's life and my grandfather's, but of my father himself. He was what was called with a measure of dignity the "paymaster". Usually, he paid the miners at the pithead, but sometimes in summer, before the men went on their vacations, he would take a heavy box and drive to the shanty in Morien. He and Angus MacAulay, a huge presence of a man who carried a revolver, the symbol of his office as company policeman. I would go with them, and parked beside the shanty where the men left the train and trudged home, my father would roll down the window and hand out the brown envelopes.

There was also a man named Cliff Townsend, the brakeman, who lived at our house. He was a veteran of World War I, a victim of the gas, an intelligent man who carried his handicap with grace and humor. Most of all though, he was generous to children. And so, most afternoons, the neighborhood youngsters gathered at the track just at the lane beyond where we lived. As the old Hobo approached, Cliff would spot us, slow the train to a crawl, finally stopping and helping us all on board for the final ride to the shanty.

I would peer inside the gloom of the cars until I spotted a relative, usually my Uncle Herbie, and he would make room for us on the bench, and we would talk about his racehorse, or the days when he played football, or whether Max Bentley was as good as he used to be. Then we would land at the shanty and walk home on the dusty, sun-warmed road.

Life separated me from the Hobo. But whenever I went and whenever I could, I took a train so that I might look out upon the land, the immense and lonely distances of India, the deep mysterious Siberian taiga, waiting as it has for centuries with its stern and quiet stare. I long for the train so that in the midst of the rush of events, I may find time, space, a moment to see. I want to see the small towns, not escape them, to look out on the backyards where men and women sit on back porches staring through twilight.

Sometimes in small towns whose names I cannot recall now, I have come down from a train and walked the streets. I have stood on corners and watched mothers and daughters at weddings and men talking quietly at funerals. I touch, sense, perhaps even feel, the humanness of life that, even in difficult times, can never be lost.

At home in Cape Breton, the old Hobo died. Men removed the rust-brown tracks. The station crumbled, and the elders grew where it was. It seemed gone forever, just as my father had gone and his friend Angus and the brakeman who lived at our house.

Then, last summer, I returned and found the track had been laid again, the shanty had been rebuilt, and the train was running as before, filled with children and adults from all over Canada, riding the train of my boyhood out of Glace Bay to Morien. When you go there, you will not find my father or Angus or Cliff. But Herbie will be there, my uncle, standing on the platform, welcoming you and recalling for all who care, a part of his life as old as our house beside the track and as recent as the fields in spring.