National Dream

Since its founding 50 years ago, the National Ballet of Canada has gone from a humble troupe of dancers who performed in church halls to one of the world's greatest ballet companies.

BY MARCIA KAYE

All opening nights are special, but on this occasion there was a particular thrill in the air. This would be the premier performance by a spirited, though rather uneven, group of 29 performers—the fledgling Canadian National Ballet Company.

Celia Franca, the acclaimed ballerina and choreographer from England who had arrived a few months earlier to become its artistic director, was prepared for things to go wrong, and go wrong they did. The set designer, who had been asked to create a backdrop for Les Sylphides depicting a wooded glade in the moonlight, showed up with a snow-covered scene. When a very surprised Franca asked, "Why did you do that?" the designer innocently replied, "I wanted it to look Canadian."

There were other hitches. The weather on that November evening in 1951 was cold, and the audience arrived shivering in rain-soaked gowns and tuxedos. Backstage, the dancers had little idea how to apply theatrical makeup. And the stage at Toronto's Elgin Auditorium was too shallow to properly accommodate the choreography.

But the show did go on and was enthusiastically received by the audience, many of whose members had seen little ballet before. Fortunately, neither had the critics. The next day, the Toronto Telegram pronounced the music, scenery and costumes to be "perfect," the technique "faultless." Franca knew the performance had been far from perfect. But it was a beginning.

Within months, the company changed its name to the National Ballet of Canada. Today, half a century later, it has become an internationally recognized cultural institution. With more than 50 dancers and its own symphony orchestra, the National Ballet is the only Canadian company to stage the complete range of the full-
Fifty years of ballet


The label, sets, breathtaking costumes, and spectacular choreography that regularly electrify audiences at Toronto's Hammermill Center serve to underscore just how far the company has come in 50 years. When it was established, professional ballet was largely unknown in this country. There was the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, which had been stunted in 1936 as the Winnipeg Ballet Club by two women from England and remained an amateur group until 1949. In most of Canada, however, ballet in those days was a Saturday-afternoon hobby taught in parish halls.

After the war, three Toronto socialites and ballet lovers—Pearl Whitehead, Sydney Mulqueen and Adore Woods—came together to discuss starting a national company. They knew that to overcome any potential regional prejudices they needed to hire an artistic director from outside the country. In 1950, the three women sent an emissary to England's Royal Academy of Dancing to get a list of possible names. When he showed the list to Ninette de Valois, founder of London's Sadler's Wells Ballet (later to become the Royal Ballet), she immediately singled out one name—"Celia Franca," she declared. "If you can get her." Franca, de Valois had once said, is "an extremely fine artist and choreographer, has very strong artistic views and great integrity of purpose in her work."

Franca, who had been enjoying a career as one of England’s finest dramatic ballerinas, was in great demand as a choreographer of works for the exciting new medium of television. Always up for a challenge, Franca agreed to visit Canada in the fall of 1950 to attend an annual ballet festival in Montreal featuring some of the country’s best dancers. The performances were even more smarthearted than Franca had expected. When asked for her evaluation, she replied, “Thank you very much,”

Three months later, Franca was living in Toronto, earning her living largely from the T Eaton Company, where she was listed as a file clerk. There was as yet no ballet company to pay her, so it had been arranged that she would be put on the retailer’s payroll. In truth, very little office work went on, as Franca spent her time recruiting dancers for the new company, not always through auditions. Lois Smith was accepted based on a photo and the recommendation of her husband, David Adams, who had danced with Franca in England. Crane Strauss, who had never studied ballet, got on in the basis of his choreographic skills. Earl Knoll didn’t pass the audition but got in when another dancer dropped out. One young man made it because he would look good bare-chested for the Arabian Dance in the Nutcracker.

Based in Toronto, the dancers rehearsed wherever they could find space—most often church and community halls. When spring came, they moved to St. Lawrence Hall, which they first had to help clean and reorganize — it had been used as a hostel for the homeless during the winter. To live up to its name as a national company, the troupe began touring the country in early 1952, with the dancers often being billeted in private homes.

Photo facilities for a ballet production didn’t exist at most of the schools, but the company simply made do. It often ordered the local cigar store as a ticket seller—the same place that issued fishing licences and tickets to wrestling shows. High school boys would be hired to carry sets, and costumes, while teenage girls were recruited as ushers. Well-meaning volunteers would frequently stage floors before performances, not realizing that a slick stage would almost ensure that dancers would slip. Without dressing rooms, dancers often had to change in basements, once having to put newspapers down so they wouldn’t be standing directly on the earthen floor. In one school auditorium in Fredericton, the stage
Players
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Betty Oliphant,
with former student
including James Kudelka
(footlights),
in 1988, and in 1967,
with Nureyev and Karen Kain
choreographing, 1977,
Erik Bruhn, artistic
director from 1983 to
1986, Toronto's
Humanaired Centre.

had no place to hang a backdrop to cover the huge, immovable pipe organ. Entreprenuer students climbed onto the roof and somehow managed to cut holes in the ceiling, enabling a backdrop to be hung. Says France: "It meant that the show could go on without looking too bloody awful."

Money was a constant problem. The first year, the company almost broke even, finishing with a deficit of $24. But with steady increases in the number of dancers, the sophistication of production and the touring schedule, deficits grew alarmingly. By 1957, with the birth that year of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, there were three professional ballet companies in the country, all vying for grants from the newly formed Canada Council. On one occasion, when the National Ballet's board of directors said there was no money for a tour, dancer Louis Smith emptied the money out of her own purse, then took up a collection among her fellow dancers. Another time, on a tour of Western Canada, the entire company would have stranded if a philanthropist hadn't wired them the money to take the train home.

Despite its financial woes, the profile of the company continued to grow, here and abroad. When the director of Russia's Bolshoi Ballet came to teach a class, he was impressed by the level of proficiency, and the National Ballet's reputation began to spread. In 1964, it became one of the only companies in the world to stage Romeo and Juliet. It had been created by well-known South African choreographer John Cranko for the Stuttgart Ballet, and the National Ballet managed to secure the rights to it, a real coup in ballet circles. Victoria Barratt, who joined the National Ballet in 1963 and continues to dance with the company in character roles, says: "You knew you were a part of something that was going to be very exciting."

The excitement soared the next year when Rudolf Nureyev, the world's best-known male dancer, made a surprise trip to Toronto to visit principal dancer Erik Bruhn. When illness forced Bruhn to drop out of a scheduled performance, Nureyev replaced him, despite injuries to both ankles.

In 1972, Nureyev was under contract to an American agent and promoter, Sid Harum, who was seeking an appropriate company to tour North America with the world-renowned dancer. Impressed with the National Ballet, Harum offered the opportunity. For the tour, Nureyev choreographed The Sleeping Beauty, in which he also starred. The highlight of the tour was a performance of the ballet at New York's Metropolitan Opera House.

Some say that Nureyev used the National Ballet to promote himself, but others say that he helped launch the company into the international spotlight. "Rudolf Nureyev was our ticket to the Met," Barratt says. "Maybe he used us, but we used him too. At first people came to see him, but they ended up giving all of us a screaming standing ovation every night."

In the summer of 1973, a very young Karen Kain and Frank Augustyn beat the top-making Soviet dancers to win first place in pay-to-dance at the 1973 International Ballet Competition in Moscow, and the entire ballet world was talking about "the Canadians." Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Kain and Augustyn were the undisputed queen and king of ballet in Canada. "They had a partnership and chemistry that was very, very rare, not just in our company but anywhere," says James Neufeld, author of Pairs in Blue: The Story of the National Ballet of Canada (University of Toronto Press, 1996). "They were terribly important because they were home-grown talent. They were ours. And however you define glamour — they had it. The company also had a major star in Veronica Tennant. Moreover, in the 1980s, when few companies had more than a couple of excellent male dancers, the National Ballet had half a dozen, including Rex Harrington, Jeremy Ramson, Owen Menzies, Serge Lavoie, Kevin Pugh and Gregory Osbome.

Wherever the National Ballet or any of its members danced in Europe or the United States, people noticed a very distinctive style. Most of the dancers were graduates of the National Ballet School, which had been founded in 1959 by France and Betty Oliphant, who led the school until her retirement in 1989. (Oliphant also served as associate artistic director of the National Ballet from 1989 to 1993.) "I don't like momentos and affirmations, and I always produced dancers with a very pure technique," says Oliphant. "Whenever our dancers went abroad, people would be very impressed and ask, 'Where did you train?'"

Throughout the 1980s and into this century, the company has continued to ride high, but with dramatic changes. While there was only one artistic director, France, for most of the company's first 25 years, in its second quarter century, the position has been held by six different people, two of whom served jointly. In 1996, the company moved into the Walter C. seated Centre, spacious new quarters in Toronto on the shore of Lake Ontario, named after the local philanthropist who had provided substantial funding for the building. The choreography has changed, too. The 2000-2002 season included a modern work — The Comforts of Soidre by Montreal

Rex Harrington as diamond in Davies and Cherub, 1988.
Supporting Ballet Through the Years

Imperial's support of the National Ballet of Canada goes back almost a quarter century. Most of the support in the early years involved financial contributions for existing productions. But in 1980, to celebrate its 100th anniversary that year, Imperial commissioned and funded a new, original ballet entitled Newcomer. The work, in conjunction with Imperial's TV series of the same name, portrayed life during the days of the early immigrants who settled Canada.

While remaining a supporter, Imperial in recent years has sharpened its direction. "Since 1990, our focus has been to find an educational component that will help children understand and appreciate the arts," says Susan Swinson, contributions administrator for the Imperial Oil Charitable Foundation. "The impact is longer lasting, since it assists aspiring artists and organizations in helping to develop future audiences." Imperial now hosts the Essos Kids Tours and Open Houses, which welcome children and adults to the National Ballet's Walter C. Carsen Centre in Toronto to tour the shoe room, view the miniature maquettes of the stage, watch classes, try on tutu's, take creative movement workshops and talk to dancers. The whole ballet company volunteers its time and talents, and Imperial representatives are generally on hand. The most recent open house in January drew a record 1,700 people. Valerie Wilder, the National Ballet's executive director, says, "It's great that Imperial comes out and gets involved in this way. It's not just once a year philanthropy but ongoing support throughout the year."

While the National Ballet receives the largest share, Imperial also supports other ballet companies in Canada. In Montreal, the corporation underwrites privileged children to attend performances of The Nutcracker by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. It also sponsors four annual student matinees and provides preparatory materials for teachers. In Vancouver, Imperial funds pre-performance chats held in the lobby with members of Ballet British Columbia and visiting guest artists. And in Calgary and Edmonton, the company makes it possible for students to attend special matinees by the Alberta Ballet, as well as supplying materials for teachers.
Winning Spirit

Special Olympics has made a huge difference to the lives of hundreds of thousands of athletes with mental disabilities. It has also allowed the world to see what good sportsmanship is all about.

BY SHONA MCKAY

It was a blistering hot day in the summer of 1999. The heavy rain that had threatened to spoil the day had stopped. In its place, an oppressive heat had descended over Carter-Finley Stadium at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. The 49,000 spectators who had come to see the opening ceremony of the 1999 Special Olympics World Summer Games being held here were making good use of the bright red, yellow and purple souvenir fans.

As twilight approached, 7,300 athletes from more than 150 countries entered the stadium, each nation's standard inspiring cheers and applause. A special welcome was given to the small delegations from Malta and Laos, two nations participating in the games for the first time.

The members of Team Canada (55 athletes, 13 coaches and nine mission staff, dressed for the occasion in red, white and black track attire) also entered to a special welcome in recognition of Canada's role as one of the two founders of the Special Olympics movement.

Almost two years later, in the cooler temperatures of an Alaskan March, Team Canada – this time numbering 97 and attired in toques, black fleece pants and fashionable red and black bomber jackets – received a particularly warm welcome as it entered the George M. Sullivan Arena in Anchorage at the start of the 2011 Special Olympics World Winter Games. Here, upwards of 2,000 athletes from more than 90 countries would compete in events ranging from figure skating to Alpine skiing.

(Include some more detail, a quote, for one or two athletes from the event, etc.)

Initially, the experience was of enormous value to Suzie, says Smith's mother, Paula.

"The chance to be away from her home and family has given Suzie a new sense of maturity and willingness to accept responsibility."

To change the unacceptable status quo, Hayden began to advocate for a national program that would enable people of all ages with mental disabilities to participate in organized sport. "The goal was to do more than simply help people get in shape," he says. "Sport provides a venue for social interaction. Physical activity and competition also help people to become more confident and have higher self-esteem. Sport gives people with mental disabilities a much better opportunity to become integrated members of the greater community."

Eventually, Hayden's vision was realized, albeit by way of the United States. In 1965, Eunice Kennedy Shriver and Eunice Kennedy Shriver invited Hayden to work for the Joseph P. 10

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Kennedy, Jr., Foundation, which is dedicated to helping people with mental disabilities and their families. Hayden accepted the offer. During the seven years that he worked as one of two directors at the Kennedy Foundation, he was involved in projects ranging from the development of special playground equipment to the establishment of U.S. federal government legislation to assist people with disabilities. One of those projects was to evolve into Special Olympics. "One day I received a call from a group of people in Chicago," recalls Hayden. "These folks were interested in holding a track meet for people with special needs and wanted to know if the Kennedy Foundation could help them out. I encouraged the Kennedy family to jump at the offer and get involved. I believed in the importance of a national sports program and saw the event in Chicago as the opportunity I had been looking for.

In Canada, Hayden was to find an ally in Harry "Red" Foster. A well-known Toronto advertising executive, Brenda and philanthropist, Foster, who had a twin brother with mental disabilities, would become the driving force of the Special Olympics movement in this country. It was Foster who, on hearing about the Chicago event, arranged for a Canadian team to attend, and it was he who organized the country's first Special Olympics games. Held in Toronto in 1969, the event attracted 1,400 athletes from 49 cities and towns across Canada. In 1972, with Special Olympics Canada established, Hayden left the Kennedy Foundation to return to Canada, where he took up a position as a professor in the physical education department at the University of Western Ontario in London. In 1975, his career took him to Hamilton, Ont., where he became director of McMaster University's school of physical education and athletics.

An internationally recognized pioneer in fitness research, Hayden, however, remained dedicated to Special Olympics and was instrumental in exporting the concept to the rest of the world. Taking a leave of absence from McMaster from 1981 to 1984, he established the Special Olympics Office of International Development, a job that took him to Europe, South and Central America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Then, in 1988, he retired from his academic career to establish the Office of European Affairs for Special Olympics International in Paris. In large part, it was Whitehead's efforts that the Special Olympics movement grew to include more than 150 countries. In 1999, he was appointed an officer of the Ordre du Canada for his work.

There's no doubt that Special Olympics has been a powerful force for change for people with mental disabilities and their families. To illustrate just how significant the transformation has been, Hayden tells the story of a young mother who recently brought her two-year-old son, who has Down Syndrome, to a Special Olympics skating competition in Toronto. "On the front of the child's stroller hung a sign that said Future Special Olympian," says Hayden. "Thirty years ago, it would have been inconceivable that a parent would walk into a public place and not only announce that her child had a mental disability but that she was looking forward to the future, not with embarrassment, guilt or fear, but with great expectations. I was deeply moved."

In Canada, Special Olympics has grown from the single original hockey team into an organization that now operates in all 12 provinces and two territories. Through scores of local chapters and with the assistance of hundreds of volunteer coaches and administrators, Special Olympics enables 22,000 Canadians to participate year-round in sports that include skiing, skating, floor hockey, soccer, bowling, softball, track and field and swimming. "The heart of Special Olympics is what takes place at the local club level," says Jim Jordan, president of Canadian Special Olympics, based in Toronto. "It's here that the most for the most people occurs."

As well as providing Special Olympics with ongoing training opportunities, local clubs make it possible for thousands of athletes to participate in annual regional and provincial competitions. Meanwhile, coaches from local clubs are responsible for choosing a select number of individuals of varying abilities to compete in regional games, and from there, those who qualify have the opportunity to compete in national and world games.

Kathy Fulford is a big fan of Special Olympics at the grass roots level. Fulford is one of five coaches of the Scarborough Panthers, an east-end Toronto Special Olympics track and field club that meets every Thursday evening from September to May. Some 30 athletes, ranging in age from 10 to 41, are members of the Panthers. One of them is Fulford's 13-year-old daughter Lori. Taking a moment out from encouraging the players to run a little faster, jump a little higher and put the shot a little farther, Fulford explains that Special Olympics has been a very powerful and positive force in the lives of many individuals. "Special Olympics is focused on achievement much more than on winning," she says. To illustrate her point, the 69-year-old former track star, Pantheir president and longtime member of the Patriots. "When they first began running with the club, two of our men had significant trouble keeping in the proper lane," says Fulford. "But now, they have learned to stay in position. And they are very proud of their accomplishments." As though to confirm this, one of the men, as he runs by Fulford, gives his coach a broad smile and a thumbs-up.

Fulford adds that Special Olympics has been particularly beneficial for her own daughter, who participates year round in the organized programs through Special Olympics. He became stronger and gained the skills and confidence to try other things. For instance, he played intramural basketball while in high school. He also, in his own initiative, approached the Yukon's organizing committee for the North American Indigenous Games to ask that a team of Special Olympians be included among the territory's representatives (a number of delegations were bringing Special Olympian teams to the games, which were to be held in Victoria). Official were so impressed with Edward that they not only granted his request but asked him to be the flag bearer for the Yukon during opening ceremonies.

Today, Kane, who says soccer and running are his "favourite sports," divides his time between Whitehorse, where he works part-time at maintenance at a local hotel, and Old Crow, where he eagerly joins his parents and

"It has been wonderful for Lori. It has provided her with the chance to make, and get together with, friends and to be active. Special Olympics has also given her a sense of pride in her abilities."

A Special Olympian from Nome, Alaska, lights the torch at the opening ceremony of the 2001 World Winter Games held in Anchorage.
brothers and sisters each summer to hunt, fish and pick cranberries.

Erilo Van Steenwijk, a Winnipeg resident, can also attest to Special Olympics’ ability to transform lives. Last March, she traveled to Anchorage to cheer on her 28-year-old daughter, Leah-Marie, who was representing Canada in snowshoeing. "Leah-Marie won a medal in the 400-metre, 800-metre, 1,600-metre events and four-by-100-metre relay," says Erilo. "She was particularly pleased that, on the last day of competition, she and her three teammates won a gold medal.

Back home in Winnipeg some weeks later, Erilo says that Leah-Marie has not yet put her medals from the games on the wall beside the other Special Olympics awards she has won over the years. "She’s still too busy showing them off to friends and neighbours," she laughs. "When she was asked to reflect on what Special Olympics has meant to her daughter, who has been involved with the organization since she was 15 years old, Erilo’s voice briefly takes on a note of sadness as she describes a young girl who was once overweight, reclusive, directionless. "You cannot appreciate the change unless you witnessed it," says Erilo. "Before she joined Special Olympics, Leah-Marie could not put a sentence together. She was incredibly shy and very unwilling to try new things. But the socialization and exercise and the self-esteem that comes with trying to do, and doing, your best have made her a different person. This is a young woman who now runs up and runs five kilometres before breakfast and who looks forward to new experiences. She’s fit. She has friends. She has goals and ambitions. I can’t help but think we have been blessed with a miracle."

Half a country away lives Sueie Smith, another Special Olympian enthused. In 1999, Smith, then a 20-year-old resident of Kincaid, Saskatchewan, had the opportunity to travel to Raleigh as a member of Team Canada. An accomplished swimmer, Smith won gold and silver medals on the 200-metre relay and the 50-metre backstroke respectively at the 1999 World Summer Games and was named Canada’s female Special Olympic athlete of the year. 1999-2002: "The experience was of enormous value to Sueie," says her mother, Paula. "The chance to be away from her home and family has given Sueie a new sense of maturity and willingness to accept responsibility." Paula notes that Sueie’s own development was timely. Last year, Sueie graduated from Three Oaks Senior High School in nearby Samburg and is currently planning to make the transition from school to work.

Paul writes that the Special Olympics have also helped her daughter to feel like a valued member of the community. "When Sueie returned home with her medals, 40 people from our village travelled to Charlottetown to welcome her when she got off the plane. Sueie was thrilled."

On the campus of North Carolina State University, the atmosphere was electric on the evening of the day following the opening ceremony as 20 athletes completed the final lap of a 5,000-metre race. As the last runner, a woman from New York State, struggled to finish the race, hundreds of spectators cheered her on. "Mary, Mary," they cried. Finally, accompanied by a roar of applause, the spent athlete crossed the finish line, collapsing into the arms of waiting medical attendants.

In the centre of the track, 36-year-old David Lynch of Olds, Alberta, was all but oblivious to the drama on the sidelines. His attention was focused solely on the task at hand. Lynch, who lives in a group home and works in a bottle recycling plant, was one of 40 athletes competing in preliminary shot put trials. Finally, under a bright moon and star-filled sky, it was Lynch’s turn. His throw was short, a result that no doubt had much to do with the late hour and high temperature. "He’ll be disappointed," said Patricia Rohm, his sister, who had journeyed to Raleigh with her husband, Mike, and parents, Donald and Phyllis, to support David. "But he’ll get over it. David is the kind of person who is too busy thinking about other people to dwell on his own troubles." Over the course of the week-long games, Lynch placed fifth in the 100-metre sprint and sixth in the four-by-100-metre relay. Best of all, he won a bronze medal in shot put.

Excitement emanated from a group of athletes from Hyderabad, India, as they made their way to the athletes’ village on the campus of North Carolina State. "None of them has been outside of India before," explained P.M. Vijayalakshmi, their coach and chaperone. After a noisy consultation with her charges, whose journey to the United States involved a train to Bombay and flights to Milan, New York and then Raleigh, Vijayalakshmi said that she was confident that the inspiration of Special Olympics was that the Special Olympics had been "excellent.""For Dino Polidocci, a resident of Chateauguay, Que., Special Olympics has been a family affair since 1979. That was when Dino’s mother, Susan, became one of the first regional co-ordinators for Special Olympics in Quebec, and Dino, then 14, served as a track and field coach at a Montreal area Special Olympics club. "Over the years, I have coached everything from track and field and cross-country running to the Special Olympics basketball team," Dino says. Since his sister sands has a mental disability, l was involved for the simple reason that I enjoy it so much. I have never encountered another group of people who complain so little and try so hard."

A veteran of three previous national games in Canada, Dino served as the sport manager for Team Canada’s softball and hockey teams. "Special Olympics has helped Todd in many ways," said John while in Raleigh. "It has taught him the value of discipline, responsibility and teamwork. It’s in part because of Special Olympics that Todd has achieved so much."

"Special Olympics has helped Todd in many ways," said his father. "It has taught him the value of discipline, responsibility and teamwork. It’s in part because of Special Olympics that Todd has achieved so much. The boy who we were told would never amount to very much is now a man who is married and capable of holding a full-time job, and who has spent a semester at community college studying computers. Our whole family looks to Todd for inspiration."

As the game drew to a happy conclusion for the Canadian side and team members rushed to congratulate one another, John added that there was one more important benefit that Todd — and thousands of other people with mental disabilities — receive from their involvement with the organization. "Special Olympics is a movement that honours people who don’t have the same opportunities as others," he said. "So often, society unwittingly pushes people with mental disabilities down. But in Special Olympics, they are recognized for what they don’t have, but for the gifts they do have. And that’s pretty wonderful."
The Great River

One of the world's storied waterways, the St. Lawrence lays open the heart of the continent

by Wynne Thomas

MY JOURNEY BEGINS WHERE THE RIVER ENDS.

The St. Lawrence, Canada's great waterway, issues from the eastern end of Lake Ontario and flows in a northeasterly direction past Montreal and Quebec City to empty into the Gulf of St. Lawrence near Sept-Îles, Que.

It is not a particularly long river by international standards. It is not even Canada's longest. With a total length of 1,197 kilometres, it falls far short of the western Arctic's Mackenzie River, which, at more than 4,000 kilometres, is the second longest river in North America. But other statistics speak to the stature of the St. Lawrence. Near the western tip of Anticosti Island (where a royal proclamation of 1763 decreed the river ends), it is more than 100 kilometres wide. Its drainage basin covers more than a million square kilometres, of which half are in the United States. It discharges water into the Gulf of St. Lawrence at a rate of more than 10,000 cubic metres a second. And it provides Canada with a crucial major riverine passage from the Atlantic Ocean to the heart of North America.

So I am starting at the river's mouth, at Port CarriÈre, Que., a short distance along the north shore from Sept-Îles. Port CarriÈre is a bustling place, its docks surrounded by mountains of iron ore pellets, and it is flanked on one side by an enormous grain elevator and on the other by an equally large iron ore loader. Ships from the four corners of the globe come and go at all hours of the day and night. This evening, a fully loaded grain carrier, the Bao Long, is leaving for the Far East. It dwarf two small but powerful tugboats that resemble scaring sheepdogs as they carefully manoeuvre the carrier out of the harbor and into the river. Another Far Eastern vessel is anchored midstream, waiting for the arrival of immigration officials, who will clear the crew prior to docking. And of the world's largest ore carriers, the St. Onta from Hamilton, Germany, is getting set to sail.

I have just boarded the Algoepe, one of 23 bulk carriers owned and operated by the Algoma Central Corporation, and among the 80 or so similar steel-hulled vessels – "hokers," as they are known in the business – that together account for a significant proportion of the waterborne commerce of the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes. More than 200 metres long and each fitted with six or so cavernous holds, these ships are ideally suited to the bulk transportation of the types of cargo that are most available from the region's ports: grain from the Prairies destined for Eastern Canada; Labrador iron ore headed for the steel mills of central Ontario and the American Midwest; soybeans from Alberta bound for Quebec City and Port Cartier; and salt from the Maritimes destined for points throughout the Great Lakes; and the occasional more exotic consignment, such as sugar and molasses from the West Indies, headed for Toronto.

The Algoepe has spent four days in Port CarriÈre, the first half of its stay devoted to unloading the 26,000 tonnes of dried peas that it had carried from Thunder Bay, Ont., near the head of Lake Superior (it is coincidence, the ship's cook assures me, that India was the origin of the peas), and the second half to taking on its new cargo, 26,000 tonnes of iron ore pellets and concentrate for delivery to a steel plant in Hamilton, Ont.

Unloading by barges, the Algoepe slips out of the harbor on a rising tide shortly after midnight. Here at Port CarriÈre, where the river is still more than 100 kilometres wide, the water level rises no more than two and a half metres between low and high tide. But as we travel west, the river begins to narrow, so that by the time we reach Tadoussac, Que., 300 kilometres away at the mouth of the Saguenay River, its width will have shrunk to 10 kilometres, while the difference in height between low and high tide can be more than four metres. It will take us the best part of 12 hours to reach Tadoussac, such is the strength of the tidal crest as it forces its way up the river that it takes little more than an hour to make the journey.

In travelling westward up the mighty river from the gulf, we are, of course, retracing the route of the early European explorers. The first white man to sail up the St. Lawrence is said to have been Jacques Cartier (Vikings may have made part of the journey). Like many of his fellow explorers, he was searching for a route to Asia. Cartier's expedition left the French port of Saint Malo in three ships on May 15, 1535, and arrived in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in July. The gulf was familiar territory to Cartier, who had visited it the previous year, but now he was pushing on up the river itself, coming upon the mouth of a second great river, which opened into the St. Lawrence from the north. This was the Saguenay.

As he pursued his westerly path, Cartier found that the shores of the river continued to narrow and the scenery changed from rock-strewn desolate to pleasant woodland. One hundred and forty-five
kilometres upstream from the mouth of the Saguenay, he came upon an island so
dense with wild grapes that he christen
ed it Bacchus Island, after the Roman
god of wine, but then had second thoughts and more prudently renamed it
Île d’Orléans in honour of France’s Prince Henri, Duke of Orléans.

Carrier journeyed on, making his
way as far as Hochelaga, the future site
of Montreal, before turning back. All in
all, the explorer was much taken with
the great river of Canada, as he called it.

In Carrier’s wake came fur traders and settlers,
and soon the river became the natural axis of New
France. Today, it is still the focus of Quebec settle-
ment: the province’s major cities and many of its
towns are strung out along the river’s shores.
The St. Lawrence remains Canada’s most impor-
tant commercial waterway, an importance that was
enhanced by the complex, as in 1999, of the massive
construction project that saw locks and canals built
and the river dredged in places to create the St.
Lawrence Seaway. Now, even the largest vessels could
penetrate the continent as far as Duluth, Minnesota,
at the western extremity of Lake Superior.

Indeed, as we travel westward we see plenty of evi-
dence of the river’s role as a major transportation
corridor. In addition to many fishing boats, myriad
other small craft – launches, runabouts, sailboats and
dinghies – constantly cruise the waterway, and we
recently pass other lakes heading downstream for Port
Carrier or Sept-Îles with cargoes of western
grain. Once we are overtaken by a splendid, pure
white luxury cruise ship, the Crystal Harmonie, on its
way, no doubt, to Quebec City or Montreal.

There are also quite a number of ocean-going
freighters, which carry a wide range of cargoes (every-
thing from fordruffs to heavy machinery) to and
from Europe and elsewhere. These “salties,” as they
are known in the shipping business, are the modern
equivalent of the old steamers, seeking cargoes of
opportunity on both sides of the Atlantic. The
domestic shipping industry has mixed feelings about
the increased use of the seaway by offshore
freighters. The grain trade from the West has fallen off in recent
years, and additional competi-
tion is particularly unwel-
come in tough times. On the
other hand, the salties carry a
great deal of trans-Atlantic
cargo that is of no interest to
domestic carriers but increases seaway revenues. And
there is no doubt that the many foreign ships that
now travel the St. Lawrence bring a cosmopolitan
touch to the Canadian ports they visit.

As we approach the mouth of the Saguenay, we
begin to encounter another type of marine traffic:
flotillas of whale-watching vessels of all shapes and
sizes, from Zodiac to three-decked
steamers. We on the Alsgcape had
seen our first whales some time
before (a series of waterpoops had
heralded the passage of a pod of
whales across our bow). Now, as
we enter the krill-rich
waters at the Sague-

St. Lawrence is still mainly salt water,
but the ocean’s tidal thrust is losing
its strength. From here, the slacken-
ing tidal crest will take nearly three
hours to travel the 145 kilometres to
Île d’Orléans, the tidal divide. Until
this point, the fresh water coming
from the upper river flows to mix
with the tide-borne salt water of the
sea, above Île d’Orléans, no salt water
penetrates – the fresh water merely
backs up under tidal pressure.

But we are not destined to see Île d’Orléans in
daylight: dusk has already fallen as, after some 18
hours under way, we come abreast of the twinkling
lights of Rivière-du-Loup on the river’s southern
shore, still about 130 kilometres from Île d’Orléans.
We are left to glide past Île-aux-Coudres (named
by Carrier after the hazelmut trees that he found
growing in profusion there), Cap-Tourmente and
the whole 33-kilometre length of Île d’Orléans (after
the island of Montreal, the biggest island in the St.
Lawrence) in darkness.

A totally different landscape greets our eyes
the next morning. The previous day, the north shore
had presented, for the most part, a prospect of small
communities strung along the shoreline at the foot
of a series of low, rocky cliffs. But here, a few
centimetres downstream from Quebec City, the bor-
dering cliffs have swung much closer and the vast,
broadening presence of the Canadian Shield – the
impressive sweep of Precambrian rock that butt-
resses fully half of Canada – is palpable.

Here, the great scarps of the shield’s edge comes within
a kilometre or the river itself, and the nearby Mont-
morency River spills over it, falling 383 metres, half
as much again as at Niagara Falls.
Shortly, we come upon one of the most spectacular sights the river has to offer: the great rock promontory of Quebec City's Citadel Hill, rising 100 metres in a sheer face from the river's edge. This is not the old granite rock of the shield but, rather, a block of grey shale—sedimentary rock—several hundred million years younger. From where I stand on the Algoma's forecastle, I can easily pick out the familiar details: the split-level military ramparts, the punctation of Mutel's towers, the roman-gothic roof of the Château Frontenac, the colourful clutter of Lower Town spilling to the water's edge. It's not hard to see why Quebec City once earned the nickname Gibraltar of America. I turn away, and in our wake I see the Quebec-Les In River pouring steadily towards the south shore. It's a transportation lifeline, plaving the river 365 days a year.

Immediately upstream of Quebec City, the river narrows again, this time to little more than a kilometre as the walls of the valley converge—times squeezing the waterway into a barely navigable channel that must be negotiated with extreme care and at minimum speed. Slowly, the giant hills give way to a less forbidding landscape. We are, in fact, crossing an environmental frontier, leaving behind the cold, harsh Labrador terrain that lies to the north and east and winging south to enter the relatively benign St. Lawrence lowlands. By water, only 230 kilo-

**Ships**

Quebec City is littered with ancient ruins, including the site of Old Quebec's first settlement, and the area was once a thriving port. Today, ships make their way through a series of locks and canals that connect the river to the Great Lakes. The locks allow ships to navigate the river's many fluctuations in depth and are a key part of the region's transportation network. The locks are operated by the Canadian Coast Guard, which ensures that ships can safely pass through them. The locks are a crucial part of the region's economy, as they allow goods and passengers to travel between the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River. The locks are an important part of the region's history, and they continue to be a vital part of the region's transportation network.


For most of the distance between Quebec City and Trois-Rivières, the St. Lawrence maintained a regular width of around four kilometres, but now, a little west of Trois-Rivières, it begins to widen again to form Lac St-Pierre, a slow-moving stretch of water that reaches a width of 15 kilometres and extends for some 25 kilometres. As it宽西部是in the town of Noint, which lies at the mouth of another historically important tributary, the Richelieu, named after France's ruthless geopolitical cleric, Cardinal Richelieu. The river was explored by Samuel de Champlain in 1609, and numerous forts were built along its banks to defend the territories of New France. Today, its valley is the source of many of Quebec's agricultural products. A large cluster of islands sit at the mouth of the Richelieu, their rocky shorelines providing a sanctuary for many species of sea birds and seals. Just now the sky is alive with flocks of birds, and we pass a sizable raft of Canada geese, numbering in the hundreds and appearing quite unconcerned at our near proximity.

As we approach Montreal, the role of the St. Lawrence as a great conduit of commerce becomes even clearer. There is a marked increase in river traffic, ships bearing the flags of many countries pass up and down or are moored alongside crowded locks. The skyline is a tapestry of loading cranes, and the river banks themselves are crowded with the infrastructure of industry: marshalling yards, kilometer after kilometer of storage sheds, piles of lumber and other raw materials and hectares of scaled containers, today the preferred method of moving many kinds of cargo.

Montreal itself provides a surprise. Although I lived in the city for quite a number of years, I am unprepared for the totally new perspective that the river confers on familiar landscapes. From masts Sweden, the bridges that connect the mainland to the archipelago on which the city is built take on a majesty that is not apparent when they are approached by land in body, hour, and Montreal's downtown skyline, with Mount Royal providing a magnificent backdrop, seems suitably exotic and impressive when viewed from the water. When one travels upstream, as we are doing, Montreal is the last port on the journey where, for
THOUSAND ISLANDS HAVE RETAINED THEIR NATURAL BEAUTY, DESPITE THE TOURISM OF THE REGION

against current demands the highest handling skills; when the ship is fairly secured, there are but a few metres to spare fore and aft and less than a metre on each side. The canals that were constructed as part of the seaway project, such as the one that bypasses the famous Lachine Rapids, just west of Montreal, remind one of the strength of the canals of western Europe, and it is a strange feeling to emerge from such a constricted series of passages into a river that literally stretches from horizon to horizon.

Negotiating the locks and canals in this stretch of the river occupies most of the night. The eastern Ontario cities of Cornwall and Prescott, too, are passed in darkness. We are, in fact, traversing the international section of the St. Lawrence Seaway, where construction of hydroelectric power dams required the flooding of natural shorelines and the drowning of several historic communities, including the village of Iroquois and a large portion of the riverside town of Moiraiburg. Altogether, some 6,300 people and 550 homes were displaced to make way for the seaway.

Dawn finds us abreast of Brockville, Ont., nearing the entrance to one of the most scenic sections of the entire river, the famous Thousand Islands. Here, on every side, the St. Lawrence is dotted with bare or tree-covered knobs of rock of varying sizes. These islands owe their existence to an extension of the 900-million-year-old rocks of the Precambrian Shield, which range from eastern Ontario across the river into New York State, where it underlies the Adirondack Mountains. At this stage, the St. Lawrence scarcely resembles the majestic and compelling waterway I had seen downstream, but rather a vast, sluggish stream formed by Precambrian stepping stones. The various subaqueous channels are busy with the nautical of island residents, small forests of mangroves mark the many shoreline marshes, and Thousand Islands tour boats of assorted sizes and profiles are noticeably common.

This region, rich in flora and fauna (a fisher's paradise, some 35 species of fish have been identified here), has been a popular recreational area for at least 200 years. And long before the arrival of European explorers, it was a popular camping spot of the Iroquois. Today, many cabins, as well as several elaborate estates and even the old castle (which wouldn't look out of place on the banks of the Rhine), occupy the islands. As the Algonquin threads its way at reduced speed among the rocky outcrops - sometimes in Canadian waters, sometimes American - we pass within basking distance of Boldt Castle, which was built around the turn of the century by George Boldt, a German immigrant who had made his fortune in New York. He was building the castle for his wife, but she died before it was completed and work was abandoned. For 73 years the building stood untouched, a ghostly reminder of lost love. Then, in 1977, it was acquired by the Thousand Islands Bridge Authority, which has spent millions of dollars on restorations to both the outside and inside of the structure.

The Thousand Islands extend for more than 80 kilometres and, despite the highly developed tourism of the region, have retained their natural beauty and charm to an extraordinary degree. There are those who would echo the comment of Louis de Buade, comte de Frontenac, who, shortly after being appointed governor of New France in 1672, described the region as the most delightful in the world.

We have passed under one of the great spans of the Thousand Islands Bridge and are approaching the city of Kingston, Ont. It is here, at a spot called Everet Point, just west of Kingston Harbour, that the St. Lawrence officially begins.

But we on the Algonquin have some distance to go to deliver our cargo of iron ore. Maintaining our westerly course, we enter Lake Ontario, flanking the southern shores of Wolfe and Amherst Islands and then of Prince Edward County. Just off Point Perre, at the southernmost tip of the country, at a navigational point known as Sodus, the Algonquin makes one of the routine calls it's obliged to make to report on its progress, this time to the control centre at Massena, New York.

This happens to be a well-known procedure to me. The house with the big brown on the shoreline just west of Point Perre, now perfectly discernible from the bridge of the Algonquin, is my home, and my wife and I spend much of the summer navigating the endlessly fascinating parade of vessels and monitoring their progress via the seaway's radio channel.

But, familiar though I am with this traffic and its place in both history and the Canadian imagination, it has taken a voyage up the whole length of the St. Lawrence to underline the vital role that this river of commerce still plays in Canadian life.

The voyage has also provided me with a rare glimpse of life on board a lakes. For the crews of these ships ("Hard-pressed sailors," they have been called), it's a demanding job, unmitigated by the glamour that sometimes attaches itself to the lives of their sea-faring colleagues. Captain Ball, a burly, watchful man in his muffler, says that weather is always his concern. Although the early months of winter bring the greatest hazards, summer is not without its dangers (for, example, casualty is liability of the Saganaga to near zero). But Ball knows that the St. Lawrence demands respect on even the calmest day, and that, in nego-

ating the seaway, a few metres can literally spell the difference between disaster and success.

On this last leg of our trip, we are headed across Lake Ontario for Hamilton Harbour. Night has fallen by the time we arrive, but unloading begins the minute we tie up at the dock. Transporting bulk cargoes is a highly competitive business and there is no time to be lost. It takes two days to unload the 60,000 tonnes of iron ore and another day and a half to take on the 15,000 tonnes of coal that is to be delivered to Prescott, Ont., 390 kilometres east of Hamilton, and then, once again, the Algonquin will be headed for the St. Lawrence.
Gordon Winch

Founder, Distress Centre

One February night in the mid-1960s, as Gordon Winch sipped a glass of ginger ale in one of Toronto’s decidedly dowdy market taverns, a man at his table parted his pockets and realized he couldn’t pay for the beer a waiter had just placed in front of him. “Leave the beer,” he said to the waiter, and to Winch, “I’ll be back.” Several minutes later he returned, paid down a dollar for the drink and carried on talking to the United Church minister whose publicly published beer preferences had earned him the sobriquet “Pade of the Pubs.”

“All of a sudden, I got a sense of what he had done,” recalls Winch. “He had sold his coat. And I said, ‘But you’ll be cold when you leave.’ He told me, ‘That’s then, this is now, and now I need to talk. It was highly emotional. And he did need to talk – he talked himself out.” This encounter, and so many others like it during his four years in Toronto’s taverns, gave Winch a profound appreciation of people’s need simply to be heard and of the frailty that listening provides. “The people I met wanted somebody to know who they were and what they thought, and they trusted we knew them.”

This foray into non-traditional ministering set Winch on a new course. To take it up his work in the pubs, Winch had left his congregation in Oak Ridges, Ont., north of Toronto, filling a void left by Arthur Pockman, a United Church minister from Stirling, Ont., who had served as a chaplain in the British army during the Second World War and who had started visiting bars in 1963. After Pockman’s death in 1964, the United Church set up a committee to explore the possibility of continuing his work. Winch, who was on this committee, volunteered to step into Pockman’s role. “Actually, I was frantic to have the job,” the minister states.

A graduate of the University of Toronto with degrees in arts and theology, Winch was ordained as a United Church minister in 1952. For the next 12 years, he served as a traditional minister, first in Saskatoon and then Ontario. In 1964, he began his work in the beer pubs.

Until Winch took up this work, he had never been in a tavern or even tasted a beer. “The first time I went into a beer parlour I was terrified,” admits Winch, who had been raised in a family of teetotallers (his mother was president of the York County branch of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union) and a farm near Keswick, Ont. “I went anticipating problems, but there were never any. The major difficulty was leaving, because there was always somebody else who wanted to talk.”

Through his work in the pubs, Winch came to realize that there was a serious lack of places for people to turn to when they needed a listening ear. From this realization came several groundbreaking initiatives.

The first was the Distress Centre, which started as a 24-hour helpline in Toronto and now includes community outreach programs. Winch, along with Jim Fisk, rector of Toronto’s Church of the Holy Trinity, Bill Kilbourn, one of the founders of York University, and several others, started the Distress Centre in 1967, modelling it on Britain’s Samaritans organization, which had been founded in 1953.

The centre logged its first call on November 1, 1967. But for several months the phones were mostly silent, which is all but unimaginable to today’s Distress Centre volunteers, who in the Toronto area alone (where there are now three centres) collectively handle about 80,000 calls annually. “The helpline concept was new to Canada,” says Winch, “and although there was a great need for it, it took a while for people to get to know and trust it.”

As executive director of the Distress Centre from 1967 until his retirement in 1993, Winch nurtured the style of listening he calls “befriending.”

“Callers don’t want their problems taken away from them,” he explains. “The fundamental element of befriending is being emotionally supportive, saying ‘I know this hurts’ without agreeing with, or justifying, behaviour.”

While initial funding for the Distress Centre came from the Anglican and United Churches, Winch was adamant that it should have no “church-based theology, other than basic caring about people.”

Winch went on to help start Distress Centres in other regions of Ontario (today, there are more than 20 in the province). He also helped found the Ontario Association of Telephone Distress Centres (now known as Distress Centres Ontario), which he describes as “a networking organization that allows member centres to discuss issues and learn from one another.”

In 1972, Winch was instrumental in establishing a program that was to have a huge impact on suicide prevention. While at a conference in Jerusalem, he heard about a program for people recognized to be at great risk of attempting suicide: the family members and friends of people who had taken their own lives. Back in Toronto, he formed a committee made up of several staff members from the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry and the Distress Centre to establish what was to become the Survivor Support Program, which functions as an adjunct of the Distress Centre. Karen Lefortoky, one of the few people in Canada with experience in grief counselling at the time, was hired as executive director of the new organization. (After Winch retired, Lefortoky also became executive director of the original Distress Centre.)

Since its inception, the Survivor Support Program has counselled more than 10,000 people and has helped lessen the stigma surrounding suicide.

“THE FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT OF BEFRIENDING IS BEING EMOTIONALLY SUPPORTIVE, SAYING ‘I KNOW THIS HURTS’ WITHOUT AGREEING WITH, OR JUSTIFYING, BEHAVIOUR”

1998, the Council on Suicide Prevention bestowed the Douglas Lane Memorial Citation on Winch in recognition of his outstanding dedication and leadership in the area of suicide prevention. Now Winch: “Helping to establish the Survivor Support Program was one of the most rewarding things I did while I was with the Distress Centre.”

In 1985, Winch and his Distress Centre colleagues also turned their attention to helping abused women and their joining forces with the Community Information Centre of Toronto and a group of women’s shelters to set up the Assaulted Women’s Helpline. “My prediction was that the helpline wouldn’t get used because it was specific to only one problem and only half the population,” comments Winch. “I was wrong. The first year, it had 2,500 calls. Last year, it had 25,000.”

Now retired, Winch continues to listen – sort of – as a volunteer at the Distress Centre. “I don’t know of anything more worthwhile,” he says. “Almost inevitably you feel you’ve been of some use to somebody, and sometimes a lot of use to a lot of people.”

Prinzipal Barter
Proudly Supporting Volunteers

Providing financial support to organizations where employees and annuities volunteers is the cornerstone of an innovative ImperialOil program

By Marqo Peleff

Ever since his retirement, Lorne Swinom has been involved in many local charitable causes. He enjoys giving back to the community through his volunteer work.

"These things may seem simple, but they add a great deal to the lodge. They bring pleasure to people who are having a very difficult time," says Conrie MacRae-Bosch, a volunteer at the lodge.

Agatha Coolen, who has volunteered at the facility since 1990, explains the impact of the Lodge's support:

"It's wonderful to be able to support so many activities and groups," says Swinom. "The grants also enable us to keep in touch with communities, employees, and annuities."
Connie MacRae-Bosch

People volunteer for many reasons to fill free time, to add meaning to life, to meet a need, to be helpful to others. In all, 7.5 million people volunteer their time and services in this country and are an indispensable resource to Canada's 176,000 charities and nonprofit organizations. And volunteering is on the rise, according to Statistics Canada's 1997 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating. In 1997, 26.8 percent of Canadian residents 15 and older volunteered. In 1992, that percentage had climbed to 31.4 percent. That means that almost one in three people in Canada in this age group volunteer. Last year, the time committed to volunteer work by Canadian residents amounted to the equivalent of 528,000 time machine hours – about as many as there are in Manitoba.

Michael Meehan, who has received a Volunteer Service Award from the Ontario government in recognition of her work.

For some people, like Derek Mitchell, volunteering has turned into a passion. When Mitchell and his wife, Gloria, a semi-professional singer, moved from Montreal to Simcoe, Ont., in 1977, they searched for an outlet for Gloria’s singing skills. The couple became involved with the Simcoe Little Theatre, a nonprofit group that presents five plays a year at the local 126-seat theatre. Mitchell became hooked on the theatrical life. When he wasn’t at his job at Imperial’s Nanticoke refinery, where he worked as a training coordinator, he could often be found at the theatre. “I’ve just finished two solid weeks of Arabian and Old Lace, running upstairs shouting ‘Change’” as Teddy Brewster, who think’s he’s Teddy Roosevelt,” says Mitchell, who took early retirement from the company this spring. But his work with the theatre group doesn’t stop when the play’s over; after performances, he can be found cleaning bathrooms, putting away scenery and stacking chairs.

Keeping a theatre going is expensive. The VIP grants help out with costumes and lighting. “We’re all volunteers here – there are about 50 core people. Some sew, some work backstage, some act and others do a bit of everything. We want to keep theatre alive in our community, so we try our best to put on a good show that people will enjoy,” says the volunteer.

“Five or six times a year we empty the change tin and serve a treat – ice cream and biscuits for dessert,” he explains. “It really lights everyone up.”

“The students have a range of disabilities. But they all have one thing in common – they love skiing. It’s a pleasure to watch them on the slopes.”

Canada – from Inuvik in the Northwest Territories to St. John’s to Nanaimo, B.C.,” she says in her Toronto office. And they are for projects as diverse as the missions of this country’s charities and not-for-profit groups themselves. “Imperial’s VIP grants have helped fund a learning research project at Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum, outfitted a Piper with the Schwartz, Lumbard Piper and Ummi band, and been used to purchase a rifle for a Montreal gymnastics club, a safety tear mace unit for the RCMP in Okotoks [Alta.] and a war canoe for the Okotoks Racing Canoe Club in Lake Echo [N.S.].”

One of the more unusual requests came from Imperial’s contributions manager herself. Barbara Heydik is a volunteer at the Toronto Zoo Foundation, and during a chat with Peggy Horrell, the organization’s development officer, she learned that the zoo was in need of a seal scale. “If we can’t weigh the seals in our exhibit, it’s hard to know if they’re getting the proper nutrition,” Horrell explained.

Heydik’s manager approved a $1,000 VIP grant. “They want me to come down one of these days to have my photo taken with the scale,” she says, musi
cing light-heartedly about the challenges that might be presented by sharing a photo shoot with several flippersed marine mammals.

Michael Meehan MONTREAL

"The students have a range of disabilities. But they all have one thing in common – they love skiing. It’s a pleasure to watch them on the slopes."
The proceeds are ploughed back into the existing historic sites or used to encourage restoration of other sites.” explains Dawe, who was recently involved with the restoration of Hawthorne Cottage, the former home of Captain Bob Bartlett, who sailed Admiral Robert Peary to Baffin Island for his successful trek to the North Pole in 1909. Last year, Dawe obtained a VIP grant for the organization to purchase computer equipment.

To celebrate volunteerism and raise awareness of its importance, the United Nations has designated 2021 as the International Year of Volunteers. “People don’t realize that in Canada, 42 percent of all charities and nonprofit organizations are supported primarily by volunteers,” says Kristin Smith, director of corporate relations for Volunteer Canada. “We’re aiming to change how volunteers are perceived and treated in the long term by all sectors of Canadian society.

“Initiatives like Imperial’s Volunteer Involvement Program are a great way for companies to reward good work done in the community by their employees, while at the same time helping out a wide range of organizations.” Smith hopes that corporations will increasingly promote and enable volunteerism.

“There’s all sorts of ways to do this,” she says. “It could, for example, be through a student mentoring program where employees donate their lunch hours once a week and the company makes them an extra hour off work so they can spend two hours a week helping students.” She also suggests companies might consider introducing a program where employees who are nearing retirement spend a few hours each week on their employer’s time doing volunteer work; this would provide the added benefit of helping to prepare these employees for retirement.

By the end of February 2001, Imperial Oil had 238 employees signed up for the program. Over the next 12 months, another 200 signed up to bring the total to 438.

“Imperial’s program is a good example of how companies can get involved in community service,” says Smith. “And it’s a great way to build relationships with employees and the community.”

Unfortunately, summer camp wasn’t part of my childhood, although I did know of some camps in the wilds of Canada where children spent their summers canoeing and hiking, swimming in lakes, singing campfire songs and living together in cabins in the woods – it sounded like heaven.

It was my mother who first told me about summer camp. The parents of her best friend, Kay, had considered sending their daughter to Canada during the Second World War to live with distant relatives. To make the prospect less daunting, the relatives had packaged a kit of information about their life, including a brochure of the summer camp the children of the family attended. In the end, Kay wasn’t sent to Canada, her only regret being that she wouldn’t be going to camp.

Periodically, Kay and her mother would browse longingly through the camp brochure, hardly able to believe that in war-torn world they knew, such blissful and peaceful places existed. And through that brochure the two girls were able to escape, if only in their minds, the strife around them.

Today, summer camp can be a way to continue to provide children with a respite from everyday life. As Madelene Allen, the owner and former director of the 80-year-old Camp Quinouac, near Saint Vincent, Que., states, “We do everything we can to give each child a period of peace and growth.”

During her 40 years of involvement with summer camps, Allen has done a lot of thinking about their value. She talks thoughtfully about the pressures society puts on children today to grow up quickly and how camp, being free from television, electronic games, advertising and such, gives children the opportunity to live in a child’s world. “At camp, a child can find fun in the simple things – making a new friend, learning to paddle a canoe, lying out under the stars,” she comments. “At camp, children are not labelled by who

their parents are, where they stand in the family or by their academic record. It is a wonderful place to experiment with who they are.”

There are, of course, children who don’t like camp. “I just didn’t like the communal living,” one friend of mine told me. “But I was glad I had the experience.”

Summer camps first began springing up in this country during the late 1800s. Of the camps in operation today in Canada, the oldest is Big Cove YMCA Camp in Nova Scotia, which was founded in 1899. Like most of the early camps, it was established to improve the character and well-being of the young.

As I look through the literature of long-standing camps, I am intrigued by the photographs from the past. It fascinates me to see children from the turn of the last century diving off docks and canoeing, their clothing worn with disregard to neatness, their faces reflecting carefree abandon. Apart from their attire, these children, born long enough ago to be the parents of my grandparents, seem to bear a remarkable similarity to today’s campers. But how different life at summer camp must have seemed to them from the strict and formal life they were used to living. Even then, camp offered an escape from the pressures of the world.

The value to children of this "period of peace" cannot be overestimated. The lasting benefit of being able to live, albeit only temporarily, in a timeless child's world is enormous, particularly for children who face difficult challenges in life, such as poverty or living with disabilities or life-threatening diseases. Such is the recognition of this benefit that many social, religious and corporate organizations are making kids to camp a priority, either sponsoring the children or running camps themselves.

My son, Gilden, was seven when he first went to camp. He had been keen to go, so we arranged for him to spend a week at a camp on Lake Couchiching, about an hour and a half's drive north of Toronto. It was about noon when we arrived to collect him at the end of the day.

We found him chatting happily with a group of boys, completely oblivious to the fact that he looked a little odd dressed as he was in a mismatched pair of jamjams with thick socks and running shoes. On our way home, I casually asked him why he was running in his jamjams and not wearing his pajamas. "Well, the boys had a banquet last night and they told us to wear something clean and I couldn't do that," he explained nonchalantly. "And then I figured that since they were pajamas I might as well leave them on for the night. And this morning I decided to keep them on because I'd packed everything else.

A little later on, as I looked at Gilden's tousled hair with the odd bit of leaf or twig entwined in it, I asked how he managed to cope with brushing his hair, a task he found particularly challenging at the time. "Oh, I didn't have to worry about it," he said. "My hair didn't need brushing at all.

And, as we made our way home, I realized that for Gilden, too, camp had been a blissful escape. -- Sara Landry