

## LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

Convention over and it is time to move on. We are heading to Regina in Saskatchewan to link up with a Rotary Youth Exchange student we hosted in Napier 35 years ago. Her dad was a Mountie and we have met up a few times over the years. She and her husband visited us a couple of years back and saw our new house under construction. They were doing work on their house, rebuilding the kitchen/living area and we were keen to see it.

Our flight out of Toronto was around the middle of the day so we had plenty of time to pack, get a cab to the nearby train station and the fast express direct to the airport – free on production of our Rotary Convention name badges. At the airport we meet up with some of our fellow Rotarians, one of whom had travelled from right alongside the train station to the airport by taxi, at considerable cost, having forgotten my earlier advice to all that the train was free.

Our check-in goes fine, no cancellations but we do recall we have to pay separately for our suitcases. Our travel agent had warned us of this and luckily transactions can be done at the self-check-in booth using passport and credit card. Plenty of time then to talk to departing Rotarians and grab a bite to eat for we had skipped breakfast to make sure of the airport connection.

A longish flight of just over three hours and again the vast size of the continent is revealed below. Not too many hills and once again I felt we were flying over the sea, so big are the “great lakes.” Eventually though we view what we believe is the province of Saskatchewan below us and can see far across the prairie with fields marked in squares and farms divided by very long straight roads – as far as the eye can see. I recall the tale (or legend) recounted by our student all those years ago, that when your dog runs away on the prairies it’s so flat you can see it run into the distance for three days.

We reach the city of Regina (population about 200,000) on time and Wendy is there to meet us. The temperatures are in the 30s! At last we have struck some hot weather. We drive into the city, noting some of the sights we have seen before.

On reaching their home Ken is there to meet us and they both show us the result of the major reconstruction. It is very impressive. Outside the house is a different story for the whole street is ripped up, footpaths and all – and has been for a month! No one can get into their own driveway and have to park on another street in another block! It still looks weeks from finishing & includes a huge number of other streets in the area.

There were children in this house on previous visits but now they have grown up and married. Only one is left. We tell stories, enjoy a drink and a visit from Wendy’s parents. We have visited *Walmart*, *Costco* and *Canada Tire* (big shops like *Mitre 10 Mega* but with groceries, clothes and furniture). We buy stuff we really need.

In subsequent days we drive past parliament where some of the “First Nationals” (native people) have erected a tent village to protest about – something. Sounds familiar! With difficulty we seek out a quaint winery out in the country and taste their products. We also enjoy “Canada Day” and a family/friends brunch.

A highlight though is our attendance at an “American Football” game – well in fact a Canadian Football game, and they are both slightly different! Don’t ask me to explain that, in fact to explain anything about the game. We first did some TV watching, under instruction, so that we could better follow it when we got there – but I don’t think that worked. Our only previous experience is watching the “Super bowl” final on TV at home but usually giving up because of the sheer time it takes!

Well now I am on site at a game and try to learn. The game is played in four 15 minute quarters, and yet strangely, takes three hours to complete! There seem to be 12 players on the field for each side at any one time. However at each set play (i.e. when begin each new phase, each 12 players run off and another 12 run on. I determine this is the “Offensive” and “Defensive” players swapping over. I am told there are 32 players in each team however I count them all when they run on after

half time and reckon each team has 42 or 43 players. There seem to be several referees, maybe four or even six and periodically, (well actually quite often) a man walks into the middle of the field of play waving a red flag and the game stops while advertisements are played on the screens and also I guess on the TVs of the viewers at home. Our team is the "*Saskatchewan Roughriders*" and they have a new stadium. It is full with 33,000 followers, almost everyone one of them dressed in the clubs colours of green. I have never before witnessed such tremendous support for a team. Our hosts even make sure we have appropriate T shirts and hats (and of course I eventually buy a cap to keep). Sadly our team loses and some very sad supporters trudge out of the stadium to the cars or waiting buses. We are among them. (The next game though they win so faith is restored!)

Time to move on and so after a "farewell supper" of pizzas with my Mountie friend – and some nice French wine that he finds from somewhere, we pack up the next morning and drive with Ken & Wendy across the prairies for about 1000 kms to reach Calgary. Accepting that (for us) it was too much in one day they had pre-planned a stopover at a small town called Maple Creek and we stayed at a place called "Ghostown Blues." This was a kind of "B n B" with accommodation in covered wagons or log cabins with small ablution blocks dotted around and a large hall/kitchen area where a self-help breakfast was supplied. It was quite an experience and very enjoyable.

The second day to Calgary (pop. 1.3 million) was a long one but again very enjoyable. Some say how dull it is driving across the prairie, but to us it was quite fascinating. All of the time we can see fields of canola, corn and wheat but with various gas and oil wells dotted around with pipes linking them all together visible at various points. Occasionally we see some beef cattle. I don't see any dairy cows or sheep. They must be somewhere else!

On this part of the journey we stop at some "sand hills" that are a heritage site and is rather strange in the middle of this huge prairie to find several hundred square kilometres of shifting sand. Then we move on and stop at another tourist site, this time a dinosaur discovery area where there are very strange land formations and a huge museum of items found in this and nearby locations,

relating back millions of years to when dinosaurs roamed the earth. It is one impressive place!

Our arrival in Calgary is timed to coincide with the famous "*Calgary Stampede*." We stay out of the city in a place called Airdrie, in fact a city in its own right. This is more convenient for the major centre is booked out with tourists visiting for the big event. We have two rooms opposite each other and in a brand new hotel at a good price and with breakfast included. This is good!

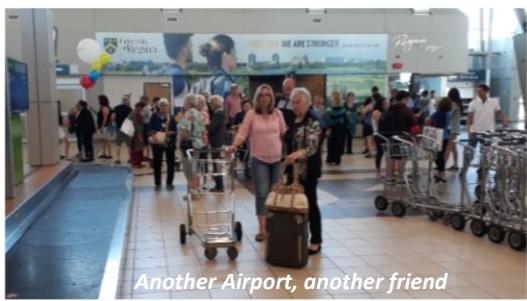
The big show begins with the "Calgary Parade" and our hosts determine it is easier to take public transport into the city. They have even booked seats for us on the street in a Rotary club run project. We leave early, get a bus, then two trains, and finally reach the centre of the city and discover our allocated seats. Rotarians welcome us and provide free water and coffee to go with our seats. (Their club sells 400 seats this year as a fundraiser. Other clubs do similar things).

We are seated around 8.30am and wait two hours for the parade to begin – and then it takes almost two hours to pass. Said to be one of the biggest parades in the world, second only to the Rose Bowls parade in California, another sporting event. There are over 100 floats or participants in the parade and it has been held for over 100 years. It begins a rodeo type celebration that goes for about ten days. We later take one trip in to the major event centre, (with 180,00 other people that day!) watch some horse events, see the stables, hundreds of booths and sideshows. The Rotarians in the area have an annual raffle for a house - valued at \$1 million! The house is actually on site and how they shift it is beyond me (it is two storied) and I see at least three booths selling the tickets. This is one big fundraiser!

We drive about a lot and see sites, visit the odd RV sales yard and are really surprised at the number of RVs on the road. I have never seen so many 5<sup>th</sup> Wheelers! What also stands out to us are the many new housing blocks and more being built - at a great rate. They group around "strip malls" many with major shops and we enjoy visiting them - and we buy bargains

I am told there is wine being made further west and now I am going to find it.





Another Airport, another friend



Great Sand Hills



Canola oil & Engine oil



Found some biking buddies



Wheat & Engine oil



This is it – the little house on the prairie!



Maple Creek - B 'n B



Quaint cabin



Any old bones!



Calgary Stampede



Calgary Stampede



Calgary Stampede