



FOR A LIVING

I had a job!

I graduated from Stratford Collegiate Vocational Institute in 1933 at 17. My average was just fair as I found school pretty boring except for English and History. The Depression was on and it was a scary time. The fathers of two of my chums had been laid off. My parents could ill afford it but they encouraged me to spend a year taking a special commercial course to better equip me for a job... in a bank or a factory. Upon graduating at 18 I was faced with unemployment — no one was hiring and my future looked gloomy.

The previous year my two chums, the Tomlinson brothers, had worked on a survey party near Hornpayne. Their stories got me thinking. I resorted to writing my first business letter to Angus Dixon, the local Member of Parliament, whom my father knew. I explained that I wanted to go to university to take engineering and needed a summer job to earn the money to go. A short time later a letter came from the Deputy Minister of Northern Development, telling me to report to Toronto for a job on an engineering survey for the Trans-Canada Highway north of Lake Superior.

Wow! I had a job!





I'd never been that far from home before, it was over 600 miles. My parents accompanied me to Toronto to catch a 10:00 PM train at Union Station. With my worldly possessions in a dunnage bag and sporting a borrowed Queen's University sweater, I arrived at the station platform. There was a gang of drunken workers whooping it up there. My mother started to cry. I was a little crestfallen until we discovered the engineering parties were on another car.

As we traveled north passing rocky shorelines, bush and small towns, I vacillated between feeling homesick for the familiarity of home and anxious to meet the adventures ahead. I met Alec White en route and we became friends. He was a short wiry Scot from Weston who had a stutter and a beautiful singing voice. We slept on the ground in tents as the train headed west, unloading crews along the way. Once at the camp we rented a canoe from the Indian chief and took a trip around the lake. We got lost and, as dusk approached, beached the canoe and struck out through the bush. Finally we came to the railway tracks but didn't know which way the camp was. We tossed a coin and then went in the opposite direction. We were getting worried when we spied some lights. The whole camp had turned out to look for us. We never went canoeing again.

Originally I was hired as an axeman on the survey crew. It was early fall when we arrived at Steel Siding and there were supposed to be bull cooks to help in the kitchen at each camp. It was two months before ours arrived, so in the meantime. Alec White and I were appointed to take turns being bull cooks week about. It was diabolical punishment akin to slavery! Up at dawn to set the fires, peel spuds, cart and carry wood and carry water buckets on a neck yoke a quarter mile from the spring. I thought of the Volga Boatmen. There were always dishes to wash and tables to set. And after all that was done, the chief would often invite the train crew from the way-freight to stay for lunch. I got to hate them.



Every other week we would go on the line with the crew and cut stakes. Once I had to move an outhouse. It was humiliating...a shitty job. After some weeks of this I got fed up and was sounding off in the bunkhouse one night that I wasn't hired as a bull cook and I was going to tell the chief to stuff his job and go home. Albert Desarmaux, a 6' 4" French-Canadian bushwhacker with an Irish accent who slept at the end of my bunk listened to me rant. Then he said, "Oh, tough it Guilliams, look at Roussy." Lome Roussy was 16 and sent all his pay to his mother in Chapleau to help support his family. His father had been killed in an accident. I lay awake that night thinking of Roussy and the unemployed guys riding the freight trains all winter. I decided to "tough it" for a while longer. The following week Tom Marr, the bull cook, arrived and Alec and I were made force accountants, a fancy name for timekeepers. I really believe that if it weren't for Albert I would have copped out instead of toughing it.



The Dog Team

Steel Siding, north shore of Lake Superior on the Trans Canada Highway project. I was 18 living with 12 guys in a bunkhouse. The first time away from home - about 700 miles away, and no car or bicycle. I still remember most of their names—

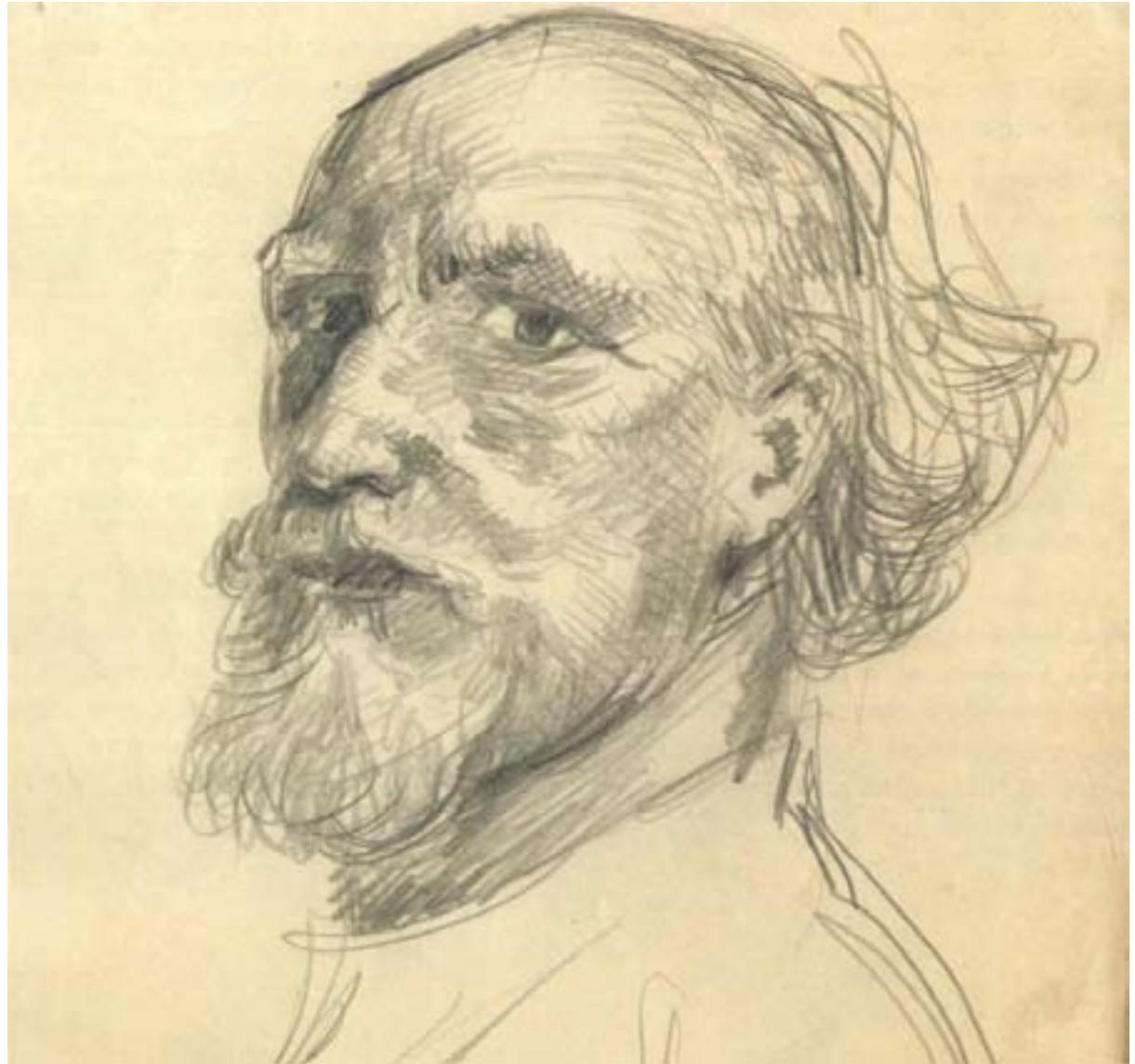
Pap Byce, Lome Roussy, Jimmie Singleton, Tom Ferguson, Ron and Bill O'Brien, Aaron Sherrif, Wilf Brotherhood, Effie Fletcher (who snored), Albert Disarmaux, Dave the cook, bull cook (Tom Marr), Dane Wanderbuss (an Indian instrument man and his white English wife. They had their own tent), Decorsy Russell, chief engineer and his young snot-nosed son for a while.



Jimmie Singleton had two Airdale husky pups and when he got transferred nearer his home in Schrieber he gave them to me. Pat and Mike were great company as my job involved walking five miles a day, checking off the number of men in the different work camps who worked for the contractors. We were employed by the Department of Northern Development, province of Ontario. I made \$50 per month with board.

In the late fall I acquired two more dogs - Black Labradors. They had belonged to a Captain Baskerville who brought them from his farm north of Toronto where they had been killing sheep. Amos and Andy arrived on the Way Freight. They were wild and frightened. I kept them chained to their lean-to, made out of pine boughs and boards. One of them grabbed my arm in his teeth so I had to smack him with a stick. Now with four dogs and all that snow when winter came, the idea of having a dog team occurred to me. Being an enterprising „youte“, I acquired a dog sled and harness from „Wild Bill“ Fraser, a trapper in Jackfish, 8 miles away.

It was time to get the show on the snow but I discovered after struggling to get the dogs harnessed to the sleigh, that they thought this was some kind of game. They played and wrestled one another until the traces were a hopeless mess. After several attempts and much swearing they would pull for a while but then suddenly stop to play or chase a



rabbit. I would trip over them and spend the next 10 minutes untangling the traces. This happened over and over and the dogs thought it was great fun.

One day Bill O'Brien from Fort William said „Bill, I'll break those fuckin' dogs in for you." As soon as they were harnessed he took a long whip and whipped them. They ran to get away, pulling the sleigh along the track. If they stopped he whipped them again. Little by little they got the idea that this was serious, but they were still not very reliable.

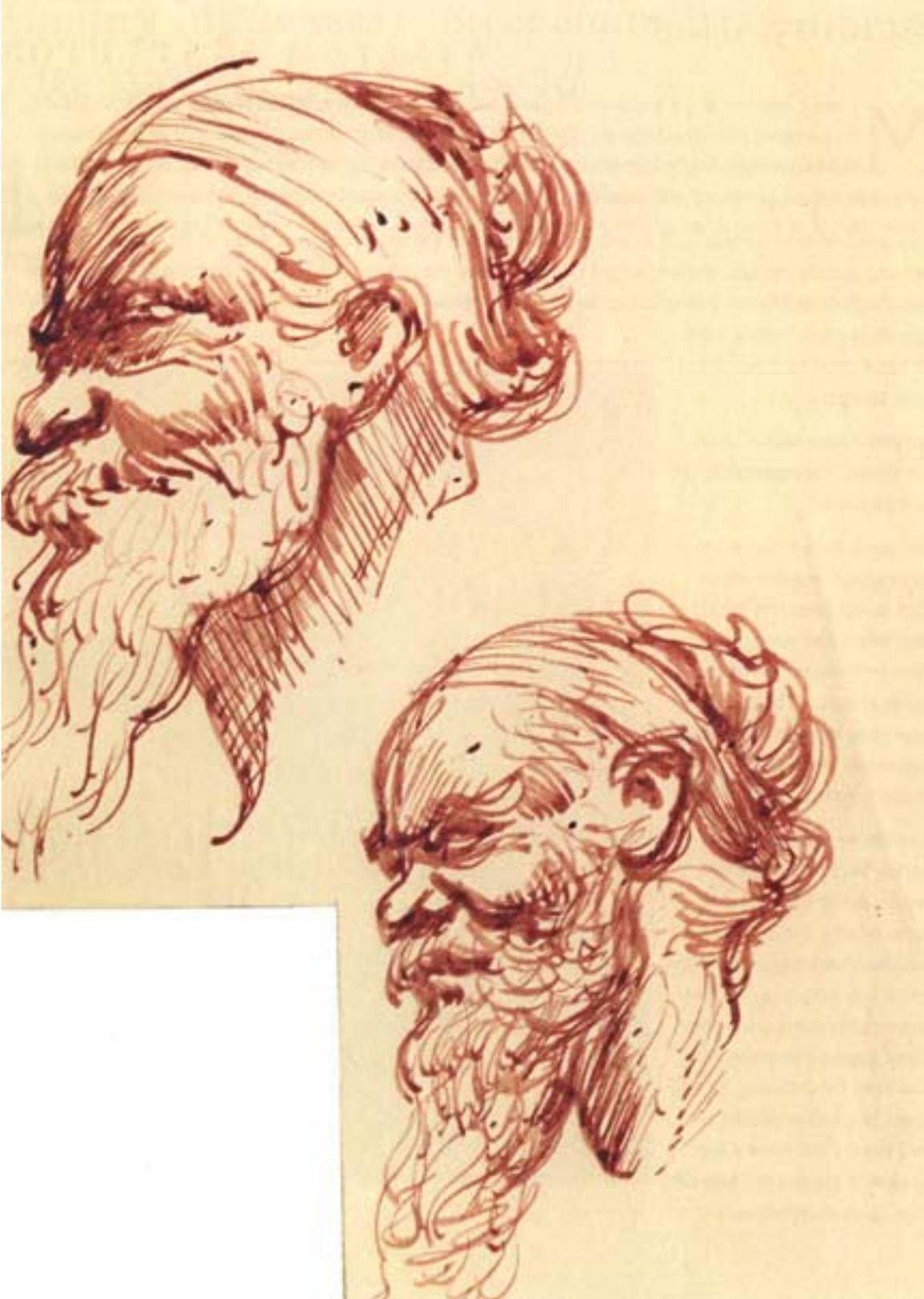
Now I knew that Wild Bill's dog Buster was an old lead dog so I borrowed him for a while. It worked. When Buster was in the lead the other dogs followed. If they messed up he would grab one by the neck and beat him up. Lead dogs take some pride in their job. After a number of trips, the dogs got the idea,

plus that was their only exercise so they looked forward to it. It proved to be a lot of work as I would frequently have to break track in the snow. Once, in a blizzard, on the way back to camp I couldn't see so I lay on the sleigh and they got me to the camp.

The sleigh proved to be too much work so later I used Amos and Andy to pull me on skis which was much easier and faster. There was one habit I couldn't break them of. On the way back to camp if I fell in the deep snow, they just kept on going, heedless of my pleading and threats. Skiing without poles was impossible. They hid out in the back of their lean-to so I couldn't get at them.



When the snow had left I took Pat and Mike with me for company. Once when we had crossed the long railway bridge over the Steel River, I was heading down the hill to the Steel camp when I heard a train heading for the bridge. Pat, who was afraid of trains and bridges, had turned back, creeping over the railway ties. Halfway back the train ran over him. I was pretty devastated. Some of the workmen went up and got him off the bridge. They buried him. Back at our camp that night the guys let Mike stay by my bunk. It was the only time he was allowed in the bunkhouse. He missed his brother. So did I.



Budding Artist

My older brother Bruce had sent me some art materials, paper, watercolors, pencils (no rubber). He had graduated from Ontario College of Art. Some businessmen in Stratford helped finance him by giving him portraits to do of teachers and principals at the high school. He got most of the talent. What I got was the leftovers, consequently I had to work harder.

It's a good thing there was no TV or a plaza so most of the spare time was spent at art. I got to like it and was usually the last one into bed. I drew the guys, the cabins, the Jackfish Church and hotel, copied from magazines. I sent these to Bruce who returned them with written notes (work this up in line, simplify the forms). Mostly I didn't know what he meant but I liked doing it.

As Mark Twain said - "After I left school, I proceeded to get an education."

I wrote to Baton's for a battery radio. It made a difference to our lives. My buddy Alec White had sung in a choir at Western. He liked classical music. The other guys liked Western. We would argue over the choice. I grew to like the classical.

A writer by the name of Harvey Hickey became time-keeper at the construction camp nearby. He had been parliamentary reporter for the Globe and Empire in Ottawa as well as reporting for other major papers from which he was fired for drinking. He still drank but was articulate and well read. I still have a logbook with big words I had to look up in the dictionary.



*Literary Influences — Steel Siding,
Lake Superior: 1936 — Age 19*

Living with 12 guys in a bunkhouse 8 miles from the nearest village of Jackfish (now a ghost town) had its challenges and limitations. Literary knowledge was confined to a few books and magazines so to compensate for the lack of stimulation I read some poetry and copied it down in my log book, which I still have.

“Will is choice — the selection by the whole personality of the emotion and action which best falls into its ideals.”

One ship drives east, another drives west
While the self same breezes blow
Tis the set of the sail and not the gale
That bids them where to go.
The winds of the sea are the ways of fate,
As we journey along through life.
Tis the set of the soul that decides the goal

And not the calm or the strife.
It matters not how straight the gate
How charged with punishment the scroll
I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.

What, though in solemn silence all
Move round this dark terrestrial ball?
What though no real voice nor sound
Amidst their radiant orbs be found?
In reason's earth they all rejoice
And utter forth in glorious voice
Forever singing as they shine
The Hand that made us is Divine

19th Psalm — paraphrased into English verse by Addison.

New York

Gradually the more art I did, the more I realized there was more to the world than four letter words and trees. I would become an artist. After a year and a half the job in Steel Siding was closed for lack of funds. It was an unemployment relief project. I had saved \$800 by the time I returned home to Stratford and since there was no chance of the job being started again, I decided to go to art school. New York had the best schools and I felt I had to make up for lost time. I boarded the train to New York with an address for Mac Ross who had lived with my brother Bruce while he was attending U of T.

My thoughts were a mixture of sadness at leaving home again, perhaps for the last time, and the excitement of facing the unknown future alone. Now like most guys on a trip I was dreaming about meeting a beautiful girl, at the same time realizing how hopeless it was, I saw this beautiful girl with a large black hat walking towards me in the aisle. She stopped and said "Hello Bill, what are you doing here?" It was Louise Morrison, niece of Hector Morrison, the Divisional Engineer for our section of the Trans Canada Highway.



Louise had been to Jackfish to visit her cousin Kay and somehow Wilf Brotherhood from Toronto and I visited them and we went on a picnic and swam in the lake and became friends. Louise was returning to the Julliard School in New York where she was studying dance. My mother had written her cousin Helen Abel, a nurse, to meet me at the station. She had felt compassion for this wayward yokel from the backwoods and was there to welcome me. What a surprise to find me suffering in the company of an attractive dancer.

Louise went on to her apartment, which she shared with two other dance-students. Helen took me by cab to 72 West 76th Street, a five story brownstone tenement building. I rented the room at the top. A large L-shaped closet with a skylight for light, a bed, chair, table and space for my trunk. There was a washbasin and a shared bath one floor down. Spartan as it was, it was more luxurious than a bunk bed.



New York was overwhelming. I got a stiff neck looking up. For about six months I hated the loneliness. Compared to the closely-knit group up north I felt like the loneliest guy in the world. I attended the National Academy of Design during the day and worked in my cell at night, walking the streets and looking in bars to see people. Mac invited me to Greenwich Village with his intellectual friends from Fredericton, New Brunswick on Saturday nights for spaghetti, beer and extravagant conversation.







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