

Memories of University Days and How I Met My Wife

By: Harry Finnigan (June, 2022)

Prologue

It was February 1968, my last year in Sisler High school, when I determined that I needed to make definitive plans as to “what’s next?”. There was no question in my mind that I was going to go to university. Most of my close friends at Sisler planned on going to university. However, following this route in life was foreign to the majority of my family. In fact, the reality was that I was about to become the first in my immediate family to graduate from high school.

While I was determined to go to university, I just wasn’t sure what I should I take. So, I arranged to meet with my guidance teacher, Mr. Clyde Perry, to get his advice.

Sitting across from him while seated at his desk, Mr. Perry posed the question:

What’s the problem Finnigan? Why are you here?

Me: I don’t have a problem. I’m simply here to get some advice. Isn’t that what they pay you for? To give advice?

He laughed, appreciating the fact that we had developed a unique collegial friendship during my three years at Sisler High School.

Okay then, what kind of advice are you looking for?

Me: Well, I’m thinking of going to university and I’m not sure what I should take.

Good idea Harry. You’re a smart guy and you should do well at university. What are you thinking of taking?

Me: Social Work, but I can’t decide between it and two other areas of study.

Why Social Work?

Me: Well, as you know, my family is on Welfare and we have a social worker, Terume Kawada, who’s a very nice person. Maybe I can help some people.

Mr. Perry looked me squarely in the eye, and emphatically stated:

Finnigan – don’t go into Social Work; you have enough problems of your own! What else are you thinking of taking?

Me: Phys Ed and then Education. Perhaps I could become a teacher.

Harry, there's no question that you are a jock. But I know you well enough to predict that by the time you're in your 30s you'll be bored to tears. Don't go into Phys Ed. What's the third option?

Me: Commerce.

Why Commerce?

Me: Well, I know it exists because Bob Firman's older sister Louise is in Commerce, and she enjoys it. I also know that you need at least a 70% average to get in and I have that.

With a big smile forming on his face, Mr. Perry exclaimed:

Do it. Go into Commerce. You're a good-looking guy and you'll do good in business!

So much for aptitude tests! At the end of our meeting, Mr. Perry provided me with information regarding the Canada Student Loan Program.

I felt good leaving Mr. Perry's office as now I had a game plan and intended to find out what I needed to do in order to be able to enter the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Manitoba. I was quite excited when I got home and told my mom about my meeting with Mr. Perry and my plan to go to university. She seemed equally excited and supportive.

However, one Saturday afternoon, a few weeks later, one of my mom's younger brothers popped by for a visit and a coffee with her. I was invited to join them in the kitchen.

I hadn't seen Uncle Johnny for a few years; so, his visit was unusual. He was working that weekend at his job with the Winnipeg Gas Company. Presumably on a coffee break. To my surprise, he proceeded to try to talk me out of going to university:

I think you're making a big mistake Harry. Going to university costs money. Instead, you can start making money. You've got your grade 12. I can get you a job at the Gas Company. You can start off as a meter reader and work your way up. And we have a great pension plan!

I doubt there were many 18-year-olds then, nor now, thinking about a pension plan. I certainly wasn't. I politely thanked Uncle Johnny for thinking of me. However, I advised him that if I was able to acquire the money needed to enable me to attend university, that was what I intended to do. At that moment, I really wondered whether I'd be successful in getting that money together.

With Mr. Perry's help I applied to the Canada Student Loan Program, a federal-provincial initiative, which was established in 1964. Prior to '64, the main criteria for providing financial

assistance to post-secondary students was scholastic achievement. In other words, high marks could get you a government scholarship.

Under the relatively new CSLP, marks as well as financial need were taken into account (with a slightly greater weight given to the latter)¹. Were this change in emphasis not introduced, I doubt that I would have been considered for financial assistance. Simply put, while I did reasonably well in school, I would not have been seen as a “scholar” by any stretch of the imagination.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief when a few months later I received a letter from the CSLP advising me that I had been granted a bursary as well as a student loan. It was a relief to know that the amount of money being provided would enable me to focus solely on my studies (i.e. I no longer needed to take on a part-time job).

Once he found out that my going to university was definitely going to happen, another of my mom’s younger brother’s, Ogle Smeall, went out of his way to help ensure that I would fit in. A sergeant in the Ft. Garry Police Force at the time, Uncle Ogle had a reputation as a kind and gentle soul. Years later I learned from a number of my friends who had grown up in Ft. Garry, and had an encounter with the law, that Sergeant Smeall had given them stern warnings (which worked) rather than “throwing the book” at them (which could have changed the trajectory of their lives for the worse).

Uncle Ogle realized that most of my clothes were relatively worn out – and out of style. He was determined for me to have a wardrobe more befitting a university student. With this in mind, early one Saturday morning he picked me up and took me to a number of sewing factories which produced various garments right in Winnipeg. Using some of the money that I had already received from the CSLP, I was able to purchase new jeans as well as fancy quality Tundra sweaters – all the rage in those days!

Now I was ready to take on the University of Manitoba!

Welcome to the U of M

While at the University of Manitoba, I came to realize just how different attending public school through to grade 12 was from attending university. Going through the grades one generally experiences the same course content as the majority of those around you. A feeling that “we’re all in this together” emerges – at least it did for me. Life at the university was different as the environment fostered divergent and at times, opposing opinions. Not quite two months into my first year of university, something happened that shocked most of us in Commerce.

It was the first week of November while many students entering their final year were preparing for job interviews which were being held in the University Students’ Manpower Centre Branch. Big companies such as the Royal Bank, Shell Canada and DOW Chemical were getting set up to

¹ “Financial Aid to Students”, The Canadian Encyclopedia, Lionel Orlikow, December 28, 2011.

conduct interviews when seemingly out of the blue, a group of student activists, who called themselves “The Vietnam Mobilization Committee”, put a large chain through the doors to the Centre securing it with an almost indestructible lock. They thus prohibited any interviews from taking place. None at all. The company in their cross-hairs was DOW Chemical.

At the time, DOW was producing napalm at one of its plants in the United States. A very nasty incendiary weapon which at the time was being used in Viet Nam against the Viet Cong, napalm would stick to one’s skin and cause severe burns. To make matters worse, during the war many innocent civilians got sprayed and suffered excruciating pain from this chemical.

Once the lock and chain were secured to the doors, it took no time at all for news to spread throughout the campus. Hundreds of students began to gather outside the doors to the Centre, not all of whom were of like mind. Fist fights broke out and the incident made front page news the following day.²

Most Commerce students were aghast! How could anyone dare to get between us and an opportunity to get a job with a good salary? Al Brackman, a second year student in the Faculty decided to launch a counter-protest the next day, proclaiming: “We don’t want the general public to get the opinion that we are a radical university such as Simon Fraser”. He reflected the general feelings of his fellow students in Commerce that while the demonstrators had the right to protest, locking the doors constituted an act which infringed on the rights of others (aka Commerce students)³.

I saw a Commerce degree as being my ticket out of poverty. Four years later, with a degree in hand, I never could have predicted what I would choose to do next. My life experiences during my four years in Commerce gave me the confidence that enabled me to make that choice.

North End “Fraternity”

Those of us from the North End of Winnipeg, who managed to go to university, stuck together. We tended to help each other out whenever we could. Without realizing it, we were part of an informal fraternity, one that didn’t require an entrance fee nor any hazing. For us, the hazing happened during our formative years while growing up in the North End.

Though not a visible one, upon arriving there for classes, we discovered that we were a minority at the University of Manitoba. A relatively small percentage of the students at the U of M came from North End Winnipeg, or blue-collar families, let alone from families on Welfare (like mine). This was particularly true in the Faculty of Commerce.

² Through research for this memoir, I discovered that one of the main organizers for the “Vietnam Mobilization Committee” and the brains behind the chain/lock action, was Mitch Podolak, who became a friend of mine later in life, and who also founded the Internationally acclaimed Winnipeg Folk Festival. “Mitch Podolak: ‘A Citizen of Earth’”, *Canadian Dimension*, Kinzey Posen, December 6, 2017.

³ “U Student Group Mounts Anti-Radical Word Battle”, Joe Wiesenfeld, Winnipeg Free Press, Saturday, November 9, 1968, p.1.

For many of us North Enders, travelling to the University of Manitoba, located on the southern outskirts of Winnipeg was a bit like travelling to a foreign land. Up until then I, for one, had spent relatively little time in the south end of the city; particularly as a teenager. In a way, we were all products of Winnipeg's "Great Divide", which has existed in the city for generations.

Historically the main cause of that divide has been attributed to the Canadian Pacific Railway company when, in the late 1880s, it decided to build its main rail line (which eventually connected Canada's east and west coasts) through Winnipeg. One of the consequences of that decision on Winnipeg's socio-economic development, was bluntly described in a Government of Canada publication in 1912 as follows:

For many years the North End . . . was practically a district apart from the city . . . The true cause of this isolation was the level railroad crossing intersecting Main Street. The traffic grew immensely; there were many passenger trains constantly going in and out of the station just east of Main Street, and in addition hundreds of freight trains choked the tracks to such an extent that traffic on Main Street was often blocked for hours. The street cars did not cross the tracks and passengers for the North End had to transfer at the crossing, often waiting many minutes in all kinds of weather. Naturally, with such conditions, . . . those who located north of the tracks were not of a desirable class.⁴

In his book, "Winnipeg: An Illustrated History", Allan Artibise explains the term "North End" as being:

. . . a label that then and since has carried with it a good deal more than geographic meaning. The North End was a synonym for the "foreign quarter", "New Jerusalem", and "CPR Town". . . By 1895 the North End had in fact become dominated by the working class and by large groups of foreign immigrants.⁵

Through the years, generally speaking, Winnipeg's "bosses" came from the South End while the "workers" came from the North. And there was relatively little intermingling between the classes. It's human nature that the lack of familiarity can breed contempt, leading to biases or preconceived ideas about the "other".

In his memoir, "Black Water", David A. Robertson, a Swampy Cree author based in Winnipeg does a wonderful job of describing the inherent biases which have existed between North Enders and South Enders in Winnipeg for generations. Robertson, who grew up in River Heights (part of Winnipeg's South End), recounts what it was like in the 1980/90s for him and his teammates on his high school basketball team⁶:

We dreaded the away games where we had to travel north. . . . That's where all the Natives lived. The kids on those teams were all Native. The kids on those teams, because they were Native, were most certainly rough and dangerous. They were probably in gangs. Those games couldn't end fast enough. Those games felt longer

⁴ "Tide of Winnipeg's Population Pouring Northward", The Dominion, Vol. 4, No. 1 (October 1912) pp. 13-14.

⁵ "Winnipeg: An Illustrated History", Allan Artibise, 1977 (James Lorimer & Company, Publishers, p. 64.

⁶ "Black Water", David A. Robertson, pp 195-196.

than they should have, When the buzzer sounded, we almost didn't stop running – just grabbed our bags and got out of there. Fast. Before the Native kids could beat us up, take our shoes, do something to us, just like we expected them to do.

Never once did we stop to consider that those kids didn't play rougher than we did, and that no matter how much they'd lost by (we always beat Elmwood by a lopsided score), they lined up, shook hands, and told us we'd played a good game. I played on the varsity team for two years, and the trips into the North End never became less intimidating. There was block white letters on the roof of an autobody shop that became visible as you crested the bridge towards Dufferin Avenue. It served as an unofficial greeting to the area, reading, "Welcome to the North End". In my mind, the words sounded like they'd been recited by Darth Vader.

During our first year in the Faculty of Commerce, we North Enders generally kept to ourselves; as did those from the South End. However, by the second and third years we got to know and understand each other better – and many of us even became friends. Toward the end of our 4-year degree, one of my new-found South End friends confided in me that during that first year, he and all of his friends thought we North Enders should be avoided at all costs as they seriously felt we all carried knives!

Car Pooling and Confronting Racism

Travelling to the University of Manitoba from the North End took about 1 ½ hours by bus – involving a transfer once you got downtown. While at times I took the bus home during evenings, I almost always got to the University via a car pool.

There were five of us from Sisler High School that enrolled in our first year of Commerce in 1968 - Laurence Steciuk, Bob Nicol, Joe Knockaert, Larry Peters and me. Larry chose to go by bus, while the rest of us got picked up every morning in Steciuk's green Chevrolet Biscayne, about 10 years old, standard shift. I remained life-long friends with these, my car pool buddies.

"Stech", as he was fondly referred to, was somewhat neurotic in those days. It didn't matter how cold it was, he would always have the window opened a bit to let in fresh air. I think he was worried about carbon monoxide poisoning for some reason. Another Stech quirk - while waiting at red lights, Laurence (who went by "Larry" in later years) had a habit of constantly checking to see if his emergency brake was on.

During my second and third years at university, I joined a car pool with another group of North Enders – Darryl Moss, was working on a Masters in English, Larry Kissick a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, Dennis Muslowski (Darryl's cousin) was in Science, while the driver, Jim Dilay, was in third year Engineering.

As luck would have it, we were unusual for a North End car pool in that we travelled to and from the University in style! Jim, who lived in the Burrows-Keewatin public housing complex at

the time, recently had won a brand, new Javelin sports car – fire engine red in colour! How did he win it? Thanks to a contest sponsored by Coca-Cola, Jim became the proud owner of the Javelin after looking under the cap of a coke he had been drinking. He had the lucky cap, telling him he had just won the car!

We were quite the crew. Kissick, the last to be picked up every morning, seemed to leave everything for the last minute. Often times, even in the middle of winter, he would exit his house while simultaneously slipping on his coat and brushing his teeth.

While the car pool conversation that first year generally centred around coursework and some of the professors we had in Commerce, my Javelin car pool mostly talked about popular music and politics.

Late one Friday afternoon in January, 1971, members of our car pool were dutifully waiting for Jim at our regular meeting spot in the students' union building (known as UMSU). He was late; very uncharacteristic for Jim.

When he finally arrived, Jim was holding a copy of the recently published "The Cursor", the University of Manitoba Engineering Society's newspaper. He showed us the headline on the front page – "Where Winos Meet and Prairie Dogs Crawl". The article described what was referred to as a "pup crawl" involving six engineering students drinking at four North Main hotels.

The author of the article went out of his way to gleefully describe the sad circumstances of many of Main Street's residents and frequent visitors. However, he did not find their situation sad at all. To him, all of them simply were drunken Indians, and all Indians were drunks. To him it was funny - a big joke. We didn't find it funny. It was disgusting.

While we were shocked that such insensitive and ignorant comments could actually be published, the reality was that many main stream Manitobans harboured similar views to those expressed in the article. What to do?

We decided to take action. To intervene. Darryl came up with the idea. There were five of us in the car pool. We spread out, each going to different locations on campus where we knew there were newsstands where piles of the offensive engineering students' racist newsletter would have been dropped off.

Thirty minutes later we were all back at our regular UMSU meeting place with stacks of the newsletter in hand. We must have collected over 5,000 of them. Once all had been deposited in the trunk of Jim's Javelin, we headed off to the North End and the Indian Metis Friendship Centre.

While the staff at the Friendship Centre were surprised to see us (young, mostly white university students – on a Friday night no less), they welcomed us with open arms. We

deposited all 5000+ copies of the newsletter on a table at the Friendship Centre, explaining how upset we were and how we wanted them to know that the article did not represent the views of most students at the University of Manitoba.

To our pleasant surprise, the newsletter became front page news in both the Winnipeg Free Press and the Winnipeg Tribune. Ovide Mercredi, then President of the University of Manitoba's Indian, Metis, Eskimo Student Association, was quoted in the Free Press as saying:

The article had defamed the Indians and thereby indicated racism. It perpetuates the stereotype image of the Indian – namely the drunken, violent promiscuous and physically repulsive being.

The article also noted that consideration was being given by the Friendship Centre to launching a legal action against the university and the authors.⁷

A week later, under tremendous public pressure, the Dean of Engineering attended a meeting at the Friendship Centre where he offered a public apology, stating that “the university is dismayed and shocked” by the article; adding that “the view of the university is that it completely dissociates itself from the article”.⁸

Ovide, who I got to know many years later, went on to graduate with a law degree in 1977 and among many other leadership positions, served as National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (1991-1997).

For me, this whole episode was a bit of an eye opener. Had our little car pool not intervened in the way we did, would anyone outside of the University of Manitoba have become aware of the article? Would the authors of it have ever been called out publicly for their racist views? It was a lesson in how anyone can affect change if they cared to. It's one thing to say you're pissed off about something, it's quite another to take the time to do something about it – to take action (like our car pool did). It was also a lesson in the power of the media to hold people and institutions to account.

Extra-Curricular Activities

I continued to play football during my years at university. I also got very involved in various organizations and initiatives connected to the Faculty of Commerce.

Football

A few of us from Sisler had been invited to the University's Football Team's spring training camp in 1968. I attended together with Bill Schick, Bob Kraemer, Bob Firman, Stan Hilderman and Gord Kraemer (Bob's cousin). It was a different experience playing with guys from all over the city and beyond, and of all ages – some as old as 34! Bill and Bob Kraemer stuck with the Bison's team, while the rest of us decided instead to join the Winnipeg Hawkeyes' Juvenile

⁷ “Angered Natives Meet On Article”, Ron Kustra, Winnipeg Free Press, Tuesday, February 9, 1971 p. 1.

⁸ Ibid, p. 1.

Football team. By the way, Bob Kraemer, who played quarterback for the Bisons, led the University of Manitoba's team to two national championships in 1969 and 1970.

To play Juvenile Football you had to be under 20 years of age. The Hawkeyes had done a great job recruiting players – hosting parties with free beer and making us feel valued. Gord played right offensive end and I played left offensive end. Our team was a power house, winning two Canadian Juvenile Football Championships in a row – 1968 and 1969⁹.

Thinking back, it's amazing that Manitoba with its relatively small population would have been able to put together teams that would win back-to-back national championships at both the Juvenile and University levels.

On the whole, playing football with the Hawkeyes was a positive experience. Our teammates came from all over the city – forcing North Enders and South Enders to get to know each other and to work hard together for a common purpose – to win!

During a playoff game in 1968 I was reminded just how brutal the game of football can be. We were playing the St. Boniface Broncos at the old Winnipeg Velodrome, when at the end of a running play a hush came over the crowd while all of us on the field looked on in disbelief. Still lying on the ground at the end of the play was Tim Thurston, the Broncos' all-star linebacker. Motionless. It was a gut-wrenching feeling to see him there and to witness paramedics arrive to take him to the hospital, where it was later determined he would live the rest of his life as a quadriplegic.

After winning two national championships, our whole team stuck together to play Junior Football, which was restricted to those under 22 years of age. We got to play teams in our league from Saskatchewan which required us to fly to Regina as well as Saskatoon for games. To most of the pundits' surprise, we came first in the league during the regular season but lost the Division championship to the Regina Rams by just one point. The Rams went on to trounce Vancouver and then Ottawa for the national Junior championship. I decided to retire from the game of football after that 1970 season.

In 2013 our two Juvenile teams were reunited as a result of being inducted into the Manitoba Football Hall of Fame. It was great to see the guys after more than 40 years. Most had receding hair lines (like me), many had put on a lot of weight and a number walked with a limp – some as a result of old football injuries. During the reception following the induction ceremony and talk of "the good old days", I was reminded of my exploits prior to our game in Montreal in 1969.

We had the choice of either flying to Montreal, playing the game and then immediately flying back to Winnipeg, OR taking the train. The team voted on taking the train, which was cheaper

⁹ In 1968 we beat the Lachine Lakers 60 – 7 at the old Winnipeg Stadium. In 1968 we played at the University of Montreal's stadium where we beat Montreal's East End Optimist Larks 41 – 0. The latter game, referred to as the "Mud Bowl" was played in pouring rain.

and enabled all of us to spend a few more days seeing the sights and sounds of Montreal. We got there on a Friday with the game scheduled for Sunday. Prior to disembarking from the train, our coach, Mike Debroni, announced that we were free to explore the city until midnight (the curfew).

A number of us began our exploration of Montreal at the trendy *Father's Moustache* bar. I became friendly with a group of French-Canadian youth, my age. After a few dances and a few too many beers, I was invited to join them on their trek to the Queen Elizabeth Hotel to participate in a French language rights demonstration.

I don't recall which political figure was staying at the hotel. What I do recall is that there were lots of young people, many holding clever signs at the protest. Following the protest, I was invited by my new-found friends to join them at a house party nearby. I had a great time. However, before I knew it, it was 4:00 a.m. – way past the curfew.

I rushed back to the hotel where my team was staying, fully expecting to be reamed out, if not benched for the game. Instead, when I walked into the lobby, there was my coach and a few others – clearly very happy to see me. I apologized profusely, explaining what I had been up to. I learned that they had called the police, fearing the worst - that I may have become a “missing person”. They were relieved to see that I was fine. My sincere apology proved enough and I was permitted to play the entire game that Sunday.

Commerce Student Activities

There's no question that besides keeping me in great shape, for me, just like in high school, playing football gave me confidence. I suspect that my reputation as a football player led some of the Commerce student leaders to recruit me to be part of the school's 4-member chug-a-lugging team.

I don't recall having to try out for the team – to prove how fast I could down two pints of beer. What I do know is that for two years in a row, our team came second to the Engineers, just barely beating out the Aggies, who came in third.

One year I was also called upon to serve as security at the annual Commerce Stag. My job was to keep the horny and intoxicated male students, the “leaders of tomorrow” from jumping up on stage and getting too friendly with the stripper. Having been raised by a single mom and an older sister I suspect I had a different perspective on this scene than most of my fellow male students in attendance. The reality was, I found the event quite disgusting. While it was a sign of the times when men felt entitled to be top dogs, and misogyny was all too common, I felt sorry for the only woman in the room.

Fortunately, I wasn't just known for my brawn during my years in the Faculty of Commerce. Through my course work I discovered that I really enjoyed courses in retail and marketing. In fact I could see myself getting involved in advertising; in particular, creating 30 and 60 second

commercials for television. When watching T.V. I often would marvel at the creativity and intelligence that had gone into some of the commercials.

In order to build a resume that would help me be a serious candidate for positions in the world of advertising after graduation, I took on a number of volunteer positions within the Faculty. For two years I served as Advertising Manager for the students' monthly newsletter, "The Enterprise". I was also one of the founding members of the University of Manitoba's Marketing Association, serving as its first Vice President.

Quite by accident, I also got involved with AIESEC; not in a leadership position, but just as a volunteer, helping to organize various events. AIESEC, an international youth-run, not-for-profit organization, provides young people with leadership development, cross-cultural internships, and global volunteer exchange experiences. The chapter at the University of Manitoba helped a number of Commerce students access internships with major corporations in Europe and elsewhere. My exposure to AIESEC definitely sparked my interest in the possibility of a career in international development.

Social Life

Social life during my first year of Commerce was virtually non-existent. I rarely missed a class and studied every chance I had. I was motivated by the fear of failure. This was my one and only chance. There was no fallback position. No one to come to my rescue. I needed to maintain a decent enough average in order to be eligible for future bursaries and student loans.

First year was the hardest. I managed to end up with a C+ average. My grades improved each year thereafter and I graduated with a B+ average – good enough! My social life also improved each year after the first.

One aspect of my social life that was totally unexpected was my connection to the world of fraternities. Fraternities (men-only) and sororities (women-only) were fairly active at the University of Manitoba in the 1960s and 1970s.

To become a member of a fraternity, you usually had to be "rushed" – i.e. invited to join. After a probationary period and once approved, you were expected to pay an annual membership fee. Such fees were beyond my ability to pay. I also saw no need to join a fraternity. I already had my North End buddies to connect with. I also had teammates from the Winnipeg Hawkeyes as part of my support system.

I ended up connecting with the Tau Kappa Epsilon (TKE) fraternity, commonly known as TKE or Teke. The connection was made through Brian Barr. Brian, had graduated from Sisler High School a year before me and was a year ahead of me in Commerce. We took a few optional courses together and became close friends.

Brian joined the Tekes in second year and despite the fact he could not afford the membership fee thereafter, was welcomed to participate in all aspects of life within the fraternity throughout his remaining years at university. Though I doubt it was officially sanctioned by his fellow fraternity brothers, he went out of his way to invite a number of us North Enders to various Teke social functions. No one seemed to mind. And their parties were a blast!

Besides various house parties and at the TKE's fraternity house (long since demolished) on Balmoral Street in Winnipeg, I recall attending a party up at a beach on Lake Winnipeg. Brian also organized trips down south where we visited TKE fraternity chapters in Detroit Lakes and Fargo, North Dakota. Being in the U.S.A. in those days was a bit surreal as the ratio of young women to men was way out of kilter due to the Vietnam war. Much of the talk centred around the draft and draft dodgers that had escaped to Canada. I was surprised to have met up with folks who knew guys our age who had been killed during that senseless war.

One TKE event that I attended forever changed my life – for the better!

How I Met My Wife

It was a Friday night. Brian had invited three of us North Enders to join him and his fraternity brothers at the Labatt's Brewery which was located in the Weston/Brookland's area of the city. Yes, we are talking "free beer" here!

About a half hour into the event, our small group was approached by one of the brothers:

Hey. We're looking for four volunteers to help out with an Ostrich Race at the Red River Ex tomorrow. Are any of you interested?

I immediately replied: *If it means I'd get into the Ex for nothing, I'd be interested.*

Of course, you'd have free admission.

With that, Brian, Gord Kraemer and David Condon also volunteered. Details provided were sketchy, so we really did not know what we had just gotten ourselves into.

The next day, we conscientiously reported for duty at the main entrance to the Red River Exhibition grounds which then were located near Polo Park Shopping Centre. The grounds incorporated the old Winnipeg Arena and Stadium as well as the Velodrome¹⁰. We were told to proceed directly to the Velodrome where we would be given detailed instructions.

David had invited his then girlfriend, Wanda Koop, to join us and witness the event. While I had heard of Wanda, and knew that she was taking Fine Arts at the University of Manitoba, this was the first time we met. Little did we know at that first meeting, that our lives would be so very much intertwined thereafter.

¹⁰ All three of these buildings have long since been demolished.

I had brought along my 8mm movie camera, which Wanda kindly volunteered to operate during the actual race. So, if while reading this you're thinking that this whole story is too outrageous to be true, thanks to Wanda, I have proof!

Again, it's important to note that we were given no forewarning about what we were in for. While I had a vague idea that ostriches were large birds that could be found in Africa, and that they could not fly, I had no idea that they were capable of killing a human being.

The organizers of the race failed to tell us that ostriches can grow up to 9' in height and weigh more than 150 kilograms. No one told us that an ostrich, with its extremely strong legs connected to two-toed feet with sharp claws can kill a person; even a lion! And forget about trying to outrun an ostrich. Capable of running at speeds of between 30 and 45 kms/hour, an ostrich can cover a distance of up to 16' in a single stride!¹¹ The important thing to me at the time was being able to get into the Red River Ex for nothing; so all of these facts about ostriches, though interesting, would have had absolutely no bearing on my participation!

We were introduced to two, high strung, seemingly wild ostriches. I can't remember their names. Each was connected to a two-wheeled contraption on which we were to sit while racing. It reminded me of sulky horse racing, except we were not given protective helmets in the event of an accident, nor reins to help guide the ostrich. No, all we were given was a broom. A broom!

The broom was to serve as a "steering wheel". But a bit more challenging to use than a steering wheel. You see, ostriches by nature are shy creatures. They literally will shy away from anything that surprises them or gets in their way.

Once sitting in the cart with broom in hand, we were given the following instructions:

"If you want to go left, stretch the broom out to the right of your ostrich's head and he will veer left. If you want to go right, place it out on his left side. It's simple."

Not so simple as we all discovered. There were two qualifying races. The winners of each would then have to race each other for first prize. We had no idea what the prize would be. I would have been happy with a red ribbon; just enough for bragging rights.

With hundreds of people in the stands, Gord and I took our places for the start of the first race. Sitting back, behind a wild-looking ostrich who was clearly ready to take off at any minute was a very weird feeling. Each of the birds was held back by animal trainers who seemed to know what they were doing. Fortunately, no starting pistol was used; which likely would have scared the hell out of the four of us as well as the birds. Instead, a third trainer, standing to the side, yelled out: "On your mark, get set, GO!"

¹¹ "Are Ostriches Dangerous To Humans: Can They Kill You?", Kavi Ranjan, www.backtobirds.com, April 26, 2021.

Turns out I had a knack for racing ostriches. A hidden talent. Evidently, I was very adept at quickly switching hands with the broom. The result? My ostrich ran in a relatively straight line. Gord's, not so much. He and his ostrich immediately ended up veering to the right – right up towards the spectators in the stands. It must have appeared very comical as everyone watching had a good laugh at what they had just witnessed. Apparently, there was no one from the Humane Society in the crowd!

Next up – David and Brian. David won. Just like Gord's ostrich, Brian's went straight up towards the stands. Was it the bird, or was it the driver? If it was the bird, I managed to pick the right one for the final heat, for I was the winner! But what had I won?

In front of the whole crowd, the four of us were presented with "Certificates of Participation". It was then announced that, as the winner, I would have the opportunity to fight a real live Bengal Tiger the next day. Again, where was the Humane Society?

I was shocked. Speaking into the microphone for all to hear, I exclaimed: "Are you kidding me? That's my prize?"

The crowd roared at the whole situation. I couldn't blame them. It was bizarre.

"Absolutely" replied the announcer. "Are you up for it?"

"Will I get into the Ex for free?" I asked.

"No problem" he said.

"Then sure, I'm in".

While I certainly understood that a tiger was more dangerous than an ostrich, I had no clue as to just how big and dangerous a Bengal Tiger could be. I was told it would be a male tiger. What I was not told was that a male Bengal Tiger can grow to be up to 10 feet in length and weigh between 386 to 573 pounds.¹² Equally important to know, especially if you're planning on wrestling a Bengal, is that at approximately 4 inches in length, a Bengal Tiger has the longest canine teeth of any living cat.¹³

I fully intended to be there the next day. After all, it meant getting into the Ex for free. That night, my phone rang. In retrospect, there's no question, I was "saved by the bell".

On the end of the line was a vaguely familiar voice, a radio announcer.

"Good evening, Harry. It's Jack Jones¹⁴ here. Congratulations on winning the Ostrich Race. Look, I'm calling to ask you a favour. It would be really good for my career, and

¹² "Bengal Tigers", Wikipedia.

¹³ Onekindplanet.org

¹⁴ Not his real name.

for the radio station, if I could fight the Bengal Tiger instead of you. Would that be okay with you?"

"As long as I can still get into the Ex for nothing, I'd be fine with that."

"No problem. The station will make sure that happens."

True to his word, the next day I found a free day pass waiting for me at the main entrance to the Ex. I proceeded to the Velodrome and got there just before the main event was about to start. There were way more people in the stands than the day before. Perhaps attracted by the celebrity, a radio personality/disc jockey? Or perhaps more macabre – i.e. wanting to witness the mauling of a human being by a real live Bengal Tiger!

There stood the radio disc jockey, next to the much shorter animal trainer. Though of relatively bulky build, the latter, who had to be no more than 5 feet in height, was holding onto the end of a thick, equally short chain; a leash. Both men appeared relatively miniscule compared to the wild animal which could be found at the other end of the leash.

The scene which was then played out before my very eyes was rather pathetic. I was very happy not to have been part of it. The "fight" was over in an instant. Once the human sacrifice said that he was ready to go, the trainer gave a command to the tiger who immediately stood up on his hind legs.

The radio disc jockey, standing right next to the tiger, slowly bent his head backwards as the creature proceeded to tower over him. Now perpendicular rather than horizontal to the ground, the Bengal looked even more imposing and threatening than ever! Without warning, this huge wild beast fell forward knocking his surprised opponent to the ground. There the tiger lay comfortably settled on top of the radio guy, while the trainer, now taking on the role of a WWF referee, loudly called out; "1, 2, 3" – game over - the winner by a long shot, the Bengal Tiger!

I was so happy not to have been the guy lying on the ground! I spent the rest of the day strolling through the Red River Exhibition, with the knowledge that I was still the undisputed champ, and winner of the ostrich race the day before. And two days in a row, not having to pay the price of admission to the Ex – what's not to like!

Months later I found out that Wanda had returned to the Koop family's home singing the praises of this new guy she met, Harry Finnigan, who won the ostrich race! What I didn't know was that she had decided that I was the guy for her older sister Elvira, my future wife.

Elvira Koop

I first met Elvira at David Condon's 21st birthday party which was held at Brian Barr's parent's house on Magnus Avenue in Winnipeg's North End. I was smitten from the moment I saw her.

She was inquisitive, had a great sense of humour, an infectious laugh, and exuded positive energy. Not to mention the fact that she was gorgeous! Relatively tall, at 5' 7", Elvira sported a shag haircut, which was all the rage in those days. She was wearing a brown leather combination tunic/mini skirt – also all the rage! And what legs! Long, slender and shapely.

I was only 19 years old at the time and certainly not ready to consider marriage to anybody. Though not having consciously made a list of attributes to look for in a life-long partner, I suspect that “beautiful, intelligent, warm and comfortable to be with” would have been at the top of my list. Those qualities would sum up Elvira.

Just over a year older than me, Elvira had gone through the public school system. Having registered a much higher than average IQ, she was placed in the “major work” program, skipping a grade in the process. Having completed high school at the age of 17, she then enrolled in a one-year teacher training program. By the time we met, she was just finishing up her second year of teaching grade 3 at Neil Campbell School, with plans to enroll in Interior Design within the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Manitoba.

While neither of us were ready for marriage, thanks to Wanda, the “match-maker”, we got to know each other as friends. One of Wanda’s tactics was for her and David to drop by my place on Boyd Avenue, inviting me to go for a car ride with them, usually for an ice cream or coffee somewhere. Each time, to my pleasant surprise, Elvira would be with them. Though Elvira and I were both quite embarrassed by these very obvious ploys at match-making, we went along with them. We had no choice.

I got to know the Koop family better and better over time, and eventually fell in love with the whole clan!

The Koop Family

Elvira was raised in a Mennonite immigrant family that valued the arts and fostered creativity. Both parents had been born in Ukraine to families of means, who during the Russian Revolution were forced to abandon all that they had built up. Creativity was in both of their genes.

Erika Koop (nee Epp) came to Canada in 1918 at the age of three. As an adult, she was a natural artist who enjoyed painting. Her own mother, Elvira’s grandmother, Anna Zacharias who died when Erika was only two years old, was also a painter and skilled needle worker. Elvira’s father, John Koop, came to Canada in 1928 at 14 years of age. His father had been a photographer at the turn of the century. When John retired in 1979, he spent much of his new-found free time as a folk artist, making wooden toy carousels, which were decorated in fanciful shapes and colours by Erika. Lovingly created, much treasured gifts for their many grandchildren.

Elvira was the eldest of the six Koop sisters; followed by Wanda, Kathy, Charlotte, Dorothy and Carla. All of the sisters, when eligible, became members of the internationally acclaimed

Winnipeg Mennonite Children's Choir. Their parents, John and Erika were stalwart volunteers for the choir, single-handedly creating all of the backdrops for the various performances. The family were also active members of the Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church.

I'll never forget the first Christmas Eve that I was invited to celebrate with the Koops at their home on 24 Leslie Avenue in Elmwood. More important than Christmas Day, Christmas Eve to the Koops, was like Christmas morning to my family - the time to open gifts. But gift opening was to happen later in the evening.

First off, all the family gathered around dressed in their best clothes. The girls, aged from 7 to 20 could not contain their excitement. Their mood was contagious. Everyone then hustled over to the Mennonite Brethren Church which was within walking distance of the Koop residence. The church service, which was all about Christmas, featured a Christmas pageant involving all ages – an enactment of the story of the birth of Jesus, with a real live baby lying in a manger. All of the 500+ people in attendance sang Christmas carol after Christmas carol with gusto, in four-part harmony, and absolutely on key.

Back to 24 Leslie for the opening of gifts followed by dinner. I was positioned near the head of the table to the left of my future father-in-law, who said grace. After dinner, everyone settled into the living room for more singing of carols. I had never experienced anything like it. Dorothy, a naturally gifted musician, pulled out her guitar to accompany the singing. Singing in four-part harmony; with the dad providing bass vocals. While I joined in as best I could, I was overwhelmed by the special scene I found myself in.

Pure love seemed to envelope the angelic voices of the Koop sisters, whose sweet parents had made them the centre of their lives. Their *raison d'être*. There and then, I fell in love with this family. I felt like I was in a movie theatre watching the Sound of Music when some how I managed to get up, walk through the screen and join the von Trapp family!

Wedding Bells

Elvira and I were friends for the longest time, finding ourselves together quite often as a result of our connections to David and Wanda. A turning point in our relationship seemed to happen around David and Wanda's wedding in 1970. We were both part of the wedding party – Elvira as the "Maid of Honour" and me as one of David's "groomsmen".

We began dating; though not exclusively. During that time, it was hard not to compare the other young women that I was dating with Elvira. Whenever a special occasion came up I usually would ask Elvira to be my date. I began to wonder: "Why am I spending so much time with these folks, when I would much rather be with Elvira?". Apparently, she was going through the same thought process about me.

We announced our engagement in September, 1971, with plans to get married before the end of the year. Some of our friends and family suspected that Elvira might have been pregnant.

Others thought that as a Commerce student, I was aware that getting married by year-end made sense (“cents”) from an income tax perspective. None of them were correct in their suspicions or assumptions. We simply did not see the need for a long engagement. It’s also true that though “the pill” had just recently come on the market, pre-marital sex generally was frowned upon within Canadian society. We wanted to be together with no restrictions.

We got married in the Winnipeg Mennonite Bible College on a very cold Winnipeg winter day - December 27, 1971. The ceremony was held in the chapel with Revered J. R. Reghr officiating, and just over 200 of our respective friends and relatives in attendance. Following the service, a reception was held in the lower-level hall of the Bible College. There was no drinking of alcohol nor dancing; very Mennonite. And a very unusual experience for most of my family and North End buddies who attended.

David Condon was my best man, while Brian Barr and Joe Knockaert were the groom’s men. Wanda was Elvira’s maid of honour, with Elvira’s friend Linda Voth and sister Charlotte as bride’s maids. My niece, Jodie Thiessen was the flower girl.

Elvira looked beautiful in the hooded wedding dress that she and her mother sewed for the special occasion. I splurged on a new blue suit.

By this time in our lives, Elvira had completed two years of Interior Design and I was in my last year of Commerce at the University of Manitoba. That fall, Elvira had taken on a teaching position at the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute (MBCI). We rented a one-bedroom apartment in the Golden Host Apartments located on Talbot Avenue adjacent to MBCI.

Jobs During University

We often hear about poor starving students. Well, I was never so rich, to that point in my life, as I was as a university student. The bursaries that I was awarded and student loans that I had taken out, were over and above the money that I was able to make through progressively more rewarding, and higher paying summer jobs.

First Summer

The first summer before entering university, I got a job at Wallace & Wallace putting up chain link fencing all around the city. The job had been posted at the Student Employment Office downtown. I was offered the job after a brief interview with the General Manager. At \$1.35 per hour, 50% more than what I had been making the two previous summers cooking chicken for the Colonel, I couldn’t believe my good luck. For years thereafter I could not resist pointing out to friends while driving around the city – “I put up that fence”. A point of pride; particularly if the fence was still clearly level and solid.

Second Summer

The second summer, I worked as a labourer with Polar Builders. The company was owned by my friend, Ray Halowski's dad, Mike. I had met Ray, and his good friend Nick Iafolla, the year before as teammates while playing football with the Winnipeg Hawkeyes. Both Ray and Nick were a year ahead of me in Commerce.

Ray managed to convince his dad to also hire our mutual friend, Brian Barr as well as another North Ender, Don Lamoreaux, who played defence for the University of Manitoba Bison's hockey team. Much of the work involved building maintenance such as fixing concrete floors and painting the outside of buildings. The pay was great – better than what I had earned the year before.

Best of all, after a few weeks Mike trusted us enough to handle jobs as a crew with little or no supervision. Painting the outside of the 9-storey apartment building, Valhalla Towers, just off Henderson Highway was most memorable. Among other things, since it required going up in a bucket, we all had to overcome any fear of heights we might have had. My unsolicited personal tours of the city now included: "I painted that building".

Third Summer

My job the following summer was considerably more exotic and financially lucrative. To get to it, on June 11, 1970, I found myself on an airplane for the first time in my life. It was my 20th birthday.

The four-engine DC-4 propeller plane left Winnipeg early that morning, landed in Churchill Manitoba for refuelling, and then continued on to Cambridge Bay, Victoria Island where I would spend the next 10 weeks within the Arctic Circle, working on the DEW Line.

It was the height of the Cold War. Cambridge Bay hosted one of the main radar stations which had been established to detect any potential incoming bombers from the Soviet Union and provide early warning of any sea-and-land invasion. The station was a couple of miles from the village of Cambridge Bay.

I was hired by ITT Arctic Services as a "Utility Operator", a fancy name for a labourer, and the lowest paid person on site. My job was similar to what I had done the summer before – i.e. building maintenance. Most of my time was spent scraping off old paint and spraying on new paint on the outside of warehouses and bunk houses where the staff slept. It was cold. As they said: "No sweat in the Arctic"!

We worked outside wearing the company issued winter parkas the first few weeks, until it finally warmed up a bit. Besides getting adjusted to living and working in such a remote part of the world, it also took some time to get used to the fact that the sun never went down. Going to bed, when it was still light outside, was very strange.

It was my first time living away from home. Wanting to stay in shape for the coming football season, most days after work I would go and push weights in the gym followed by a run to the village and back. The village, with a couple of churches and an old Hudson Bay Company store, was more of a hamlet; home to around 500 people, by far the majority of whom were Inuit (of course in the 1970s, the term “Eskimo” was used). There were very few vehicles, as most families had their own dog teams made up mostly of huskies.

I had never eaten so well in my life as I did that summer on the DEW Line. The food at the camp was amazing! On Sundays we always had roast beef and Yorkshire Pudding. I loved it. Over the ten weeks, in spite of working out regularly, I put on 15 pounds; most of which I lost, once back in Winnipeg and on the football field.

For two weeks I was posted to Lady Franklin Point, a small radar station (known as PIN-3), located on the southwest coast of Victoria Island. It had a small staff; fewer than 10 men. I was flown there in a DC-3, a two-engine propeller plane.

Upon arrival, I noticed a guy being evacuated. He seemed very distraught; disturbed. I found out later that the other guys at the site didn't like him, and literally drove him crazy. Kind of the DEW Line's version of “Animal Farm”. One of the things they did was over breakfast when at a predetermined time they all jumped up exclaiming: “What was that noise?” Of course, there was no noise. But the target of their derision would not have known that. True to the plan, he began to question his sanity and was eventually flown out.

Not only did I make a lot of money over my ten weeks working in Cambridge Bay. I saved a lot of money. I had no choice. I was provided with \$20.00 to spend each week, with the balance of my pay cheque deposited directly into my bank account back in Winnipeg. I wasn't much into drinking nor gambling (though I did buy an Irish Sweepstakes Ticket while there). While I did look forward to Saturdays when the school bus would drive us to the Hudson Bay store, I also was not much into shopping.

When I flew home to Winnipeg, having completed my 10-week contract, I had \$110.00 of the \$200.00 cash that I was given still in my pocket. Best of all, my bank account was big enough to enable me to buy my first car; a 1962 baby blue Volkswagen Beetle. Thanks to that car, my social life improved immensely! No more going for dates on transit buses.

Prior to leaving Winnipeg on this adventure, Elvira's mom gave me a parting gift, a book containing the thirteen letters attributed to Apostle Paul. I read the book from cover to cover. While I found the book interesting, it did not prompt me to get more involved in the church; any church.

Speaking of letters, over that summer I wrote five letters to Elvira. I got two letters back from her in return. Now mail to Cambridge Bay only came on Thursdays, once each week. A big day to look forward to when you're working in an isolated community over 2,000 kilometres away

from the woman with whom you're falling in love. I was hurt by her tepid response and apparent imbalance in our relationship. I was pissed off and decided that I would not be the first to get in touch when I returned home.

Once back in Winnipeg Elvira broke the impasse and called me. In response to my anger and disappointment, she told me that she was surprised by the sophistication of my writing. She explained that my writing was so different from how I spoke, she had trouble believing it came from the same person. She feared that I might have a split personality! Though I wasn't consciously aware of it at the time, I had to admit that Elvira was right (though not about the split personality part).

Growing up in inner city Winnipeg, one tended to speak "survival English". I got to be pretty good at this undocumented dialect, which most guys that I went to school with spoke fluently. We tended to use double-negatives, words with not more than two syllables, and a lot of 4-letter words. You did this to survive; to fit in. And fit in, we did.

Fourth Summer

I had the best summer job of all going into my last year of Commerce! I worked as a management executive, in training, at the Hudson Bay Company's huge seven storey, 650,000 s.f. department store in Downtown Winnipeg. A hubbub of activity, the store employed around 1,700 people at the time. I was one of only two third year Commerce students to be selected for the "Hudson Bay Company Service Award".

Through the Award, the company paid my last year's university tuition and enrolled me in their management training program. That program generally was viewed at the time to be one of the best management training programs in Canada.

The intent of the Award was to provide the Company with an opportunity to evaluate the recipient as a possible long term management employee, while at the same time, the recipient could determine whether retail management was something s/he would be interested in as a career. They would start you off as a sales clerk and then, depending on what the company determined you were capable of handling, promote you to successively higher-level positions.

I started off in Housewares and then the China Department. Given that I was still playing football at the time, at 200 pounds and somewhat muscle-bound, I no doubt looked out of place – like "a bull in a china shop". I was however very careful, and did not break a single plate as I walked around both departments offering to help customers who looked like they needed help.

But what did I know about houseware appliances or fine bone china tea sets? Zilch! However, apparently, what I lacked in product knowledge I made up for in my stellar personality. Being more of an extrovert than an introvert, I generally enjoyed connecting with people.

I quickly became friends with all of the other sales clerks, most of whom were women who had worked for the company for decades and had a thorough knowledge of the products being sold. When I would engage with customers, I would readily admit what I didn't know and then help get the information they required to make a decision – to buy or not to buy.

After three weeks on the job, I was promoted to the position of Assistant Manager of Men's Furnishings, located on the store's main floor. While never having been too concerned about fashion, I at least did know something about men's clothing.

Being on the main floor I witnessed first hand how many customers would arrive before the store opened in order to take advantage of various sale items or just to pick up something on their way to or from work. These were the days when sidewalks downtown would be bustling with shoppers, attracted by the offerings at the two huge department stores – Eaton's and the Hudson Bay.

A few times a year the Bay had "clock special" sales to entice customers to the store at opening. Departments throughout the store would have a number of products available at a fraction of the regular price beginning at 9:00 a.m. and while "quantities last". Not wanting to miss out on these incredible deals, by 9:00 a.m. there could be hundreds of customers at each of the entrances to the store. At times a mob mentality would emerge.

While working in Men's Furnishings I was on the front lines, a witness and almost a casualty of such a mob. Our featured product during one particular clock special sale were sport shirts at 75% off the regular price. Prior to opening the shirts were all neatly laid out on the display table. The doors opened at 9:00 sharp. The mob arrived and within three minutes all of the shirts were gobbled up.

Unfortunately, still standing there, empty handed were some 40 to 50 very unhappy bargain hunters. Some even snarling! To calm them, the Manager announced that we had more of the shirts in the basement. He then looked at me and told me to bring them up.

I got back to the main floor, holding a huge cardboard box of shirts above my head, when suddenly one of the awaiting customers noticed me in the distance. She quickly ran towards me, causing the other 40+ to join the pursuit. I never made it back to the display table.

I was swarmed! I lost control of the box which began falling to the floor. As the shirts spilled out, they were claimed by these frantic customers. Some of the shirts were caught and claimed in mid-air. None of them made it to the display table. We were sold out. And all of the customers walked away with at least one shirt. A successful sale thus was had!

A hidden talent? Having been a shoplifter at the Hudson Bay store during my juvenile delinquent days while growing up in Weston, I had an uncanny knack of being able to spot a shoplifter a mile away. The company's plainclothes security officers came to love me as I was able to assist them in making a number of successful arrests.

About mid-way through the summer, I was appointed Manager of Customer Services, filling in for two weeks while the regular manager took holidays. Because the Company's mantra that "the customer is always right" was strictly followed by front-line staff, the Manager of Customer Services had to deal with the most unreasonable of customers. Those who front-line staff, at their wits end, could no longer tolerate - "You can take this up with the Manager of Customer Services!". One such customer, that I had to deal with was Mrs. Smith (not her real name).

My second day on the job, Mrs. Smith called me out of the blue, stating that she had purchased a colour television set which was not working properly and in spite of her best efforts had been unable to have the issue rectified by the staff in the appliance department. I told her I would look into it and promised to get back to her the next day. I discovered that Customer Services had a thick, two-inch file on Mrs. Smith and her television. A television which she had purchased eight years earlier – well beyond the one-year warranty period.

Apparently, through her persistent complaining Mrs. Smith had managed to receive incredible service. Way beyond what any reasonable outside observer would deem to have been warranted. Half a dozen of the service calls documented in the file involved a serviceman going to Mrs. Smith's house and simply by using the buttons on the outside of her T.V., making an adjustment to the colour. Something that regular, normal customers would have no problem doing themselves. Yet she was demanding another service call.

I phoned Mrs. Smith back the next day as promised. I told her that I was surprised to learn that her television set was eight years old, something she had not mentioned to me the day before. I advised her that I had reviewed her file in detail and determined that while the Company over the years had provided her with excellent service, I simply would not approve any further service calls. She was livid, screaming into her phone: "Well, my husband is a lawyer and I intend to sue the Hudson Bay Company over this matter!". I replied: "I'm sorry to hear that Mrs. Smith, but I guess we'll get to meet each other in court". Turns out, she was bluffing as we never heard from her again. Case closed!

During August, my last full month on the job, I served as Manager of the Staples and Linens Department. I discovered that the products sold included bath towels, napkins, table cloths – that kind of stuff! What did I know? Not much.

I admitted as much to all the staff when I found out that the Division within the company, consisting of our department and three others, had just announced a contest. The Department that achieved the highest percentage increase in sales over the previous August, would be the winner. The prize? Dinner at the International Inn for all the staff within the Department.

The day before the contest was to start, I called all the staff together for a pep talk - something I learned on the football field.

Look, I obviously don't have a clue about staples and linens, but I know you do. And it sure would be nice to win and have a free dinner at the International Inn. How can we do this?

I was the only man in the department, and the second youngest member of the staff. Most had worked with the Bay for decades and were old enough to be my mother. They also knew their stuff – how to sell and how to win! Part of our winning formula was to not ring up returns until September 1st, the day after the contest closed. It worked. We won and got to enjoy a lovely dinner together compliments of the Bay!

I worked part time selling furniture at the Bay later that fall and winter during my last year of Commerce. Usually one night a week, a Thursday or a Friday, plus the occasional Saturday. When we filed our income taxes for 1971, Elvira and I were shocked to learn that I had made more money working four months and part time during school than she had made being a junior high school teacher for a full year at a private school. It got us thinking. Which jobs are more difficult? Which are more important to society?

While I enjoyed learning first-hand about the business, I could not see myself pursuing a career in retail. Working weekends and evenings when most of my friends were out socializing was not much fun. While I enjoyed working the floor during sales events when everyone was busy, working during slow times was deadly. I discovered I was not a clock watcher. I wanted to be engaged, busy. And the overall goal of making as much money as possible for a corporation and its shareholders was not inspiring enough for me.

University Courses

Most of the required coursework in the Faculty of Commerce was focused on “how to” – i.e. how to do things, how to solve problems, and how to make and keep track of money. Relatively little time was spent looking at the bigger picture – i.e. asking the questions “when” and “why”.

For instance, when did corporations gain personhood status in the United States? When in Canada? Why was that a good thing or a bad thing? On the contrary, much of the coursework seemed customized to train us, to prepare us for a career in business, and more specifically, the corporate world.

During the first term of my first year, I really enjoyed accounting. By the second term however, I found the subject matter too dry and not particularly interesting. I ultimately gravitated to the more people-oriented subjects. A team project that I worked on during a second year Personnel Management course was particularly memorable.

Personnel Management and Social Psychology

Brian Barr and I teamed up for a group project in *Personnel Management* with our mutual friend and fellow Sisler High School graduate, Wayne Chernecki. I had played football at Sisler with Wayne, who was a year older than me. An outstanding athlete, upon graduation he was offered scholarships to a number of American universities for football, baseball and hockey. Wayne declined all offers, choosing instead to remain in Winnipeg where he enrolled in Commerce as a fulltime student while at the same time playing Junior Hockey for the Winnipeg Jets.

For most players, with its grueling schedule involving lots of travel and many days away from home, Junior Hockey itself was a fulltime job. Wayne was exceptional – both as a star player on the ice as well as a solid student who managed to graduate with an Honours Commerce degree within the regular four-year study period.

Wayne's father was involved in commercial real estate, specializing in selling hotels. Given my family's history with C.N. hotels, we decided to conduct our personnel management study, looking at a cross-section of the hotel industry in Winnipeg. We developed a short questionnaire to guide our research and identified six hotels to investigate – two high-end ones for Wayne to study, two moderately priced ones for Brian, and two lower-end hotels for me.

As part of our methodology, I did a bit of research regarding the make-up of the surrounding areas in which the Brooklands Hotel and the Occidental Hotel were located, and then arranged to interview some of the staff and management in each. Of course, having grown up in the Weston/Brooklands area, I was quite familiar with the Brooklands Hotel (after all, they had served me beer when I was only 14 and the drinking age was 21!). The Occidental was another matter.

Late one afternoon, all alone, I walked into the Occidental Hotel, located at the corner of Main Street and Logan Avenue in downtown Winnipeg. I noticed there were quite a few patrons, quietly sitting at tables, enjoying a few beers. The owner/manager welcomed me and introduced me to one of the waiters as well as the hotel's bouncer, both of whom I proceeded to interview individually. When asked what kind of problems he experienced on the job, the bouncer, a Vietnam War Vet, responded:

“Problems? What do you mean problems? I aint got no problems. If there's a problem, all I do is bang a few heads together, and no problem!”

I discovered that the staff generally seemed to like working at the Occidental. They felt valued by management, which among other things sponsored a picnic for all the staff and their families every summer. While I was able to begin my interview of the owner/manager while at the hotel, a few too many interruptions prohibited me from finishing it. He invited me to continue the interview at his home in Garden City later that night – which I did.

Our study concluded that of all the hotels, the Occidental had the best, most staff-focused and effective personnel management policies and procedures! We dressed appropriately for our formal presentation to the class – Wayne in a three-piece suit, Brian in slacks, a collar shirt with a wool sweater, and me with tattered jeans and a T-shirt. We aced it!

Thanks to Wayne, the following term I also aced a second year Social Psychology exam. He had taken the course the year before. As he explained it, when he entered the old Bison Gymnasium to write the final exam he reached over to the desk behind him, grabbed the exam paper and shoved it down his pants. When he got home later that day, he went through each question on the exam, checking with the text book and his class notes to determine how many questions he got right. His confidence in knowing that he had passed the exam brought down his level of anxiety.

A year later, when he realized a number of us North Enders were studying for our final exam in the same course, with the same professor, Wayne gave us his copy of the previous year's exam. He did so to help us study. The entire exam consisted of questions with multiple choice answers. There were four of us. We each took 25 or 30 of the questions and researched the correct answers. Thereafter we got together to share the answers and to discuss other aspects of the course. None of us expected that we would be presented with exactly the same examination paper. And we weren't.

The first question on the exam paper was a tough one. It had not been on the previous year's exam. I doubt I answered it correctly. However, all of the remaining questions were the same ones which had been included in the previous year's exam, and in the same sequential order. Though it was a three-hour exam, I was finished within thirty minutes and immediately left. The exam was worth 60% of one's final mark. I aced the exam and got a B+ in the course. Thanks Wayne!

How To Make Money on the Stock Market

During my third year of Commerce, I took two optional half-courses dealing with the stock market. Unfortunately, neither sparked my interest. My main reason for taking these courses was that they were offered during the morning and I liked having all of my lectures completed each day by noon so that I could spend afternoons and evenings studying.

The first term's course was titled *Investment Analysis*. It looked at different criteria to use when evaluating different industries and specific businesses within them when considering short, and long-term investment decisions. The blue hard cover text book for the course contained hundreds of pages with small print and few (if any) photographs. Each time I opened that book, within two or three minutes, I found myself sound asleep. I just wasn't interested.

By the end of the term, I had only managed to read about 1/3 of the text book. With no term papers nor tests during the course, one's final mark was 100% determined by how well you did on the final exam. Exam day arrived. Cramming away in the study hall in the UMSU building

that morning, I reluctantly came to the conclusion that I was destined to fail the course. In all my years of school/university I had never had this feeling and had never failed any course. But with *Investment Analysis*, very little made sense to me. I decided to take a break, to get a coffee.

Walking through the nearby lounge on my way to the coffee machine, I noticed my buddy Bob Nicol comfortably seated, seemingly without a care in the world, and a coffee already in hand. Like me, he would also be writing the exam for the course later that day. I got my coffee and joined him.

Me: *Have you also given up on this course Bob?*

Bob: *What do you mean? It's a cinch!*

For the next two hours I sat there mesmerized as Bob explained the course to me. Finally it all made sense.

It was a 3-hour exam with open-ended questions (i.e. no multiple-choices) and everyone provided with booklets to write out their answers, long-hand. I wrote for two hours, pretty much just regurgitating what Bob had told me earlier. However, the guy directly in front of me kept writing, and writing, and writing! He wrote right up until the last minute, handing in three booklets to my two.

Weeks later when the marks were posted on the bulletin board for all to see – not surprisingly Bob got an A+. What was most surprising is I got a B+ while the guy who had been in front of me got a D. Lessons learned:

*It's not what you know, it's who you know! and
Less is more!*

Next up, next term was *Investment Portfolio Management*. Here I was on my own as Bob had not registered for this course. In fact, I found myself one of only a dozen students in the class.

In time I came to realize that the other eleven students all appeared to have money actually invested in the stock market. They were keeners, eating up the subject matter and fully engaged in class discussions. I was not. While not really interested in the course, I couldn't afford to fail. What to do? I decided that I needed some skin in the game; just like all my other classmates.

The only other North Ender in the course was Ted Charchuk, who had money invested in a company called *Arlington Silver Mines Ltd*. Ted shared with me that company's prospectus and convinced me that the future of silver and of that particular company looked very promising. Very promising indeed! I decided to bite the bullet, to invest. To do so I had to go down in

person to Richardson Securities, which was located in the underground concourse at Portage and Main.

I decided to combine my trip to Richardson's with a couple of cold calls that I needed to make; selling advertising for the upcoming issue of the Commerce students' newsletter – *The Enterprise*. Having dressed "business casual", sports jacket with a collar shirt, no tie, I approached the day with confidence.

Both cold calls were successful as I walked away from the one business having sold a full-page ad, while the other committed to ¼ page. I felt like a million bucks. My confidence was at an all-time high level as I entered the underground concourse and approached the front door to Richardson Securities.

To the left of the door was an illuminated ticker tape sign which used stock symbols and numbers to portray up-to-the-minute information about stocks and trades. Very high tech for the times. I noticed a few older guys seated on a ledge across the hall, eyes glued to the sign, apparently having more than a passing interest in what was happening in the markets that day.

I opened the door and approached the reception desk as though I owned the place. The young woman, about my age, sitting at the desk asked: *Can I help you?*

Me: I'm here to invest some money in the stock market.

Her: Do you have an appointment?

Me: No, I don't. Do I really need one?

At her request, I gave her my name. She then said: *Give me a moment and I'll see if Mr. Cohen can see you.*

She returned a few minutes later accompanied by a gentleman of medium height. Dressed in a well tailored three-piece suit, he opened the low-level door which separated the reception area from the back-office space. Then extending his hand he said:

I'm pleased to meet you Mr. Finnigan. My name is Lawrence Cohen. I understand you're interested in investing in the stock market.

Me: Yes, I am.

Him: Well, you've come to the right place. I'd be happy to help you. Please follow me.

He led me to his office and, as he lowered himself into his chair, motioned for me to take a seat on the opposite side of his desk. While the décor was not ostentatious by any means, the office was tasteful and very efficient in how it was laid out.

Mr. Cohen's desk, which was made of mahogany, did not have a scrap of paper on it – generally a sign of a well-organized person with a low level of tolerance for clutter. The desk held an in/out tray to help keep the paper flowing as well as a standard black desktop telephone. Behind the desk was a small bookcase containing a few books and manuals for easy access. That was it. Everything seemed well organized, under control.

Mr. Cohen, having pulled out his pen and a pad of paper to take notes, asked:

So, Mr. Finnigan, what kind of stocks are you interested in – common, preferred, growth stocks, income stocks, or Blue Chip?

Me: Well, in fact I have a specific stock in mind that I'd like to purchase. It's one that a friend of mine has been following for some time and we feel good about its future prospects.

Mr. Cohen: What's the name of the stock?

Me: Arlington Silver Mines.

At this point, Mr. Cohen put down his pen, looked me in the eye and with sincere concern offered the following words of warning:

Mr. Finnigan, I've never heard of that company. But I suspect it's a penny mining stock out of the Vancouver Exchange. I need you to know that those kinds of stocks are very, very risky, and we at Richardson Securities generally strongly recommend against investing in them.

Me: I understand that. However, as I said, I've been following this company for awhile and would like to invest in it.

Recognizing that I had pretty much made up my mind, Mr. Cohen reluctantly reached for the manual providing the most up-to-date listings available of all of the companies on the Vancouver Stock Exchange. In no time at all he found Arlington Silver on the second page, ran his finger across to the column on the right and advised:

Here it is. It's been trading at 38 cents a share. How many shares would you like to buy Mr. Finnigan?

Me: One hundred.

Mr. Cohen looked at me in disbelief. He immediately put his pen down on his desk, exclaiming:
Do you know what you're asking Richardson Securities to do?

Such a reaction I did not expect. I instinctively resorted to behaviour called for by the old adage that "the best defence is a good offence".

Me: I thought Richardson's was in the business of helping people buy and sell stocks. If I can't buy 100 shares of Arlington Silver Mines here, where can I?

Mr. Cohen: Don't get me wrong. We'll process this purchase. I just want you to know that what you're asking Richardson Securities to do, is to incur costs in the order of \$100 to ensure that your transaction is carried out properly and that you continue to receive annual statements from Arlington Silver Mines for years to come. In short, you're asking Richardson Securities to incur costs of up to \$100 so that you can invest \$38.00!

Me: I'm fine with that.

Mr. Cohen proceeded to dutifully fill out the necessary paper work. Once that was completed, he led me back to the front reception area where my payment could be received and a receipt issued. I had not brought along my cheque book, intending instead to pay in cash.

While I had expected to pay just \$38.00, the bill came to more than that as it included Richardson Securities' commission. As proof positive of how little I had learned in my university course, I had forgotten that a commission would be involved. Fortunately, I had just enough cash on me – including pennies from my pocket - to pay the total amount owing. I couldn't get out of that office quick enough!

Within two months, the price of Arlington Silver Mines' shares went from 38 cents to 16 cents. What's worse, it turned out that having money in the stock market did nothing to get me more interested in the course. At the end of the term, I managed to score a "C+" in the course – better than I expected.

True to Mr. Cohen's word, thanks to Richardson Securities, for the next 20+ years I continued to receive audited statements and various prospectus for Arlington Silver Mines. One thing I noticed was that having amalgamated with other companies over the years, its name changed numerous times. I also learned the true meaning of the term "penny stock" as the share price decreased steadily until my entire stake in the company was literally worth just a few pennies. In time, the company must have gone out of business altogether as eventually I never heard from or about it again.¹⁵

Next Stop – Faculty of Law?

It was the fall of 1971 and I found myself surrounded by corporate lawyers in one of the meeting rooms at the Westin Hotel at Portage and Main. All dressed in either gray or navy blue business suits. Not a smile to be had. Me in my blue jeans and casual sweater, wondering why everyone seemed so pissed off.

¹⁵ If it's any consolation to the shareholders of Richardson Wealth Inc. (one in a line of companies that succeeded Richardsons Securities) Richardsons has been managing my portfolio of retirement investments for over 20 years now, and presumably making money in the process.

The topic for discussion, Bill C256, The Competition Act, had been introduced that summer by Pierre Trudeau's government. The Act was intended to strengthen the existing combines legislation in order to restrict the predatory use of economic power. If passed it essentially would prohibit agreements, arrangements and concerted business practices which appreciably would prevent, restrict or distort competition.

One of the half-course options available during one's last year of Commerce was to write a Practicum. Since I was seriously considering going into law the following year, I thought that writing a research paper on such a contentious piece of legislation would work to my advantage and give me a leg up when applying for admittance to the Faculty of Law.

I went to the meeting with the feeling that what the Federal Government was considering made sense. Who could argue with any government that purports to want to encourage competition by maintaining a level playing field? Apparently, everyone else in that meeting room could. The main argument presented against the proposed Act was that it would result in the fragmentation of Canadian industry into small units which would then make it difficult, if not impossible, to compete internationally. It seemed to come down to two choices: "Big Government" or "Big Business"? Choose your poison.

In order to get a feel for the environment I might be entering, I went out of my way that term to spend as much time as possible in the Faculty of Law's library, completing my various Commerce assignments and to study. To me, the atmosphere at that library felt stoic and somewhat oppressive. I didn't like it.

Just as I was getting into it, my topic disappeared altogether that December as the Trudeau Government buckled under tremendous corporate pressure and dropped Bill C256 from its agenda. At the same time, I dropped the idea of being a lawyer, confident that there would be plenty of job opportunities awaiting me the following spring.

Checking Out The Job Market

There were all sorts of job opportunities for anyone graduating with an Honours Commerce degree in 1972. Most opportunities were in the private sector as companies from across Canada competed with each other to attract graduates to their respective work forces. Chances of securing a well-paying job increased significantly for anyone like me who was open to moving away from Winnipeg.

I found the process of being interviewed for jobs fascinating and educational. While I gained some insight into what life might be like in the corporate world, perhaps more importantly, I learned a lot more about myself. In this regard, one interview stands out in particular.

It was my second interview with Proctor & Gamble.

Him/Interviewer: *Harry, it's clear that you have an interest in marketing and advertising in particular. But what I'd like to know is what do you really think about the whole area of advertising?*

In retrospect I realize this was a great question. Nobody had ever asked me what I personally thought about advertising.

Me: *What I love most about advertising is the opportunity to be creative – to effectively communicate in a convincing way in as short an amount of time as possible. I've been accused by family members of paying way more attention to the ads on television than the programs themselves. At some point in my career, I hope to be involved in producing T.V. commercials.*

Him/Interviewer: *That's interesting. But do you have any concerns about advertising in general?*

Another great question. To this point in the interview things had been going along swimmingly. However, my reply this time went over like a lead balloon.

Me: *Come to think of it, I would be way more enthusiastic about work in advertising if it involved promoting a product, say like Crest Toothpaste, a product that I believe in. I also have a problem with advertising aimed at young children.*

For some reason, the interview immediately came to an abrupt and awkward halt. No debate, no discussion – but clearly the wrong answer. All I know is I was not invited to the final interview which would have taken place at P&G's head office in Toronto.

My experience with the Toronto-Dominion Bank was quite different (now known as the TD Bank). The TD flew me and three of my fellow Commerce students (including my friend Joe Knockaert) to Toronto for final interviews. It was a group interview. The bank at the time was forming a number of project teams to address different problems and opportunities in the industry.

I was being considered for a position as the marketing specialist on one of the teams that would be guiding the introduction of a whole new revolutionary way of doing banking. The concept would enable a customer to walk up to a wall, insert a plastic card, punch in a few numbers and voila – initiate various transactions. Even being able to withdraw cash from the wall! While this may seem like old hat and somewhat archaic given how much banking now is done via the Internet, the technology enabling the use of ATMs was just in the process of being introduced in Canada in 1972.

The night before the interview, Joe and I went for a walk around downtown Toronto. We confided in each other that the city seemed so big, we felt like country bumkins, coming from the hinterland. At that stage in our lives, we couldn't see ourselves living in the big city.

The executives and recruiters at the TD Bank were very professional and approachable. The interview, which was held on the top floor of the TD Tower went very well. Joe and I were both offered jobs with the bank, which we both turned down.

Coincidentally, Joe and I had a number of other irons in the fire at the time. Joe had just written the Public Service exams and was interested in joining Canada's Foreign Service. Elvira and I had begun the process of applying for positions with the Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO). Fully expecting that I might be offered a position teaching mathematics at a high school in a developing country, I took an extra course in mathematics (Introduction to Number Theory) during my final term in Commerce. Now all I needed to do was to graduate and get my degree. I soon learned that graduating is one thing, getting one's degree is quite another.

Getting My Degree

For me, graduating was not that difficult. I graduated from Commerce with just shy of a B+ average - not outstanding, but definitely good enough. Physically getting my degree turned out to be more of a challenge than expected.

Universities around the world hold convocation ceremonies at which degrees are awarded to students and to honorary graduates. The practice, which calls for much pomp and circumstance, harkens back to medieval times. Everybody is required to dress up in garb appropriate to their station in the life of the university. Professors must wear the formal dress of the universities from which they received their highest degree. Some wear round academic caps, called a "pileus", while others wear square ones formally known as "birettas" which are more commonly referred to as "mortar boards". Everyone wears long flowing robes over their regular clothes.¹⁶

My big day, my convocation, finally arrived on May 25, 1972! Our class of graduates met at a predetermined meeting room near the old UMSU gymnasium where all degrees would be handed out a bit later by the Chancellor, Peter Curry. We got dressed up in our black robes, black flat mortar board hats (with a tassel on top). I noticed my robe was a bit big for me as was my mortar board. We were also given a piece of paper with our names clearly printed on it. We were emphatically told not to lose the paper as when it was our turn to receive our degree, we would need to present it to the person near the podium who would then read out our names.

After a few minutes of visiting, we were instructed to line up alphabetically. Once in our correct places, we then marched single file to and into the UMSU gymnasium where we dutifully took our seats. Once seated, I looked to my left where I saw my beautiful wife, Elvira, sitting up in the bleachers with my mom and her mom on either side. The three of them looked so very proud. They were surrounded by hundreds of other adoring fans of the soon-to-be graduates.

¹⁶ Academic Regalia, McGill University website.

The old UMSU gymnasium was anything but a state-of-the-art building. If it had air conditioning, it certainly wasn't working that day. As more and more graduating students filed in, it seemed that the room became hotter and hotter by the minute. Once everyone was seated and the crowd quieted down, I became acutely aware of just how hot and stuffy the place was. I began to sweat, and sweat, and sweat.

I wished I was somewhere else. It didn't help that, like all the other graduates, I was sitting on a most uncomfortable gray metal chair. It was a long program. And the speeches seemed to go on and on. My apologies to Robertson Davies, a most revered Canadian novelist and playwright, who was granted an honorary doctors of law that day. I couldn't help myself, as the speeches droned on, I kept dozing off.

Suddenly I was awakened by the shuffling of chairs. I opened my eyes to see that the guy to my right was already up on his feet shuffling toward the aisle. It was time to receive our degrees! Now, quite aware that I was holding up everyone to my left, I jumped up and rushed to catch up and take my place in line.

As the line crawled forward I looked to the bleachers to see Elvira and my adoring mum and mother-in-law. While scanning the audience, I noticed that everyone else in line were holding their piece of paper with their names. I checked my pockets for the paper with my name on it. To my horror it was nowhere to be found. What to do?

I turned around and politely excused myself as I headed back to my seat. There under my chair was the paper! I suspect it must have fallen out of my hand during one of my unofficial nap times during the official ceremonies. Though I went back to the line as quickly as I could, I was too late to assume my designated place.

I ended up directly behind my buddy Joe Knockaert. While the announcer pronounced my name to perfection, Chancellor Curry ended up giving me Joe's degree. While receiving it my mortar board hat nearly fell off my head. The official photograph of this momentous moment (which I received in the mail a few weeks later) showed me accepting Joe's degree with my left hand while I desperately held onto my hat with my right. The skin on my face was glossy from all the sweating, and my black robe was askew, falling ever so slightly off my left shoulder. Needless to say, that photograph never made it into a frame, nor on the wall of any place I lived nor worked – ever!

Once I received Joe's degree, the mistake was corrected so those that followed were not affected. However, there were about ten of us (with surnames beginning with F through K) who had received the degree that belonged to the person who had been standing directly in front of them. An exchange of degrees took place at the reception following the convocation.

Was I embarrassed? Sure was! A few years later, having earned a Master of City Planning degree, I chose not to attend the convocation, preferring instead to have the University mail my parchment to me.

Next Up

A month later Elvira and I received a letter from CUSO confirming that we had both been accepted for two-year postings in Africa. Elvira would be teaching at a Teacher Training College in Botswana; teaching teachers how to teach art. While I was fully expecting to have been offered a job teaching high school mathematics, the letter stated that I would be working as a rural development planner.

Neither of us had heard of Botswana prior to receiving that letter. And I had no clue what planning was all about. Regardless, raised in the inner city of Winnipeg, never having even visited a farm in Canada, a Commerce degree in hand, “next up”, I was about to head off to Africa to take on a position as a rural development planner!

Though I have no regrets, I have often thought about my decision in the context of Robert Frost’s poem, “The Road Not Taken”. What would the trajectory of my life (our lives) have been, had I instead jumped at the opportunity to enter the corporate world? One thing is for sure - I would have earned a lot more money over the following three to five years. Instead, I took a job that would pay me less than 25% of what the Toronto Dominion Bank had offered.