Hot steamy summers and bitter cold winters

It’s a long story but worth telling.

The years 1968 to 1964, were the Wallaceburg years in south western Ontario. It was a time of adolescence that still conjures up a kaleidoscope of multi-coloured memories, some good and some bad. I will never forget the morning after our night-arrival. The whole family had been put to rest in a number of beds at the home of Jannie and Frank Bos. As I said previously, instead of customary linen, the sheets on the beds were flannel, a whole new experience in itself. But, I was determined to be up at the crack of dawn in order to get a first look at my new homeland. At last, a few rays of early light filtered into the small bedroom. I climbed on top of the bed and opened the curtains. I was stunned by what I saw. The 1945 Chevrolet was still parked in the Bos' driveway.

There were no Mounties or Rockies.

Instead, endless miles of flat emptiness at the edge of an unknown town that bordered the rich farmland of south western Ontario. A wave of disappointment washed over me. My mind raced to identify and comprehend what I was looking at. Questions formed on my lips. I had left my Dutch homeland for *this*? This was Canada?

There must have been a mistake.

Had we taken the wrong train?

I made a silent vow as I stood looking out the window, that one day I would leave this place never to return. Not that there was anything wrong with Wallaceburg. It was and still remains a thriving community, a wonderful place for thousands to call home. But, somehow, somewhere, I knew Wallaceburg was not my Canada. Six years later, I fulfilled my vow and left for Toronto. Yet, the big city was hardly the Rockies either.

Nevertheless, Wallaceburg was the time of my highschool years. I was fortunate that my older brother Beert prepared the way to school before me. Even though we had both enrolled in the same eighth grade at the Wallaceburg Senior Public School, Beert should have been in grade nine. The local school board deemed it necessary to put him back a year. He was old and wise enough to go directly to grade nine, but that was simply not allowed in Wallaceburg. Despite my father's legitimate claims and proof that Beert spoke English, that he had already completed a number of years of highschool in the Netherlands to become proficient in three languages including Dutch, English, and French, *and* completed studies in geometry, algebra, math, and science, regardless, members of the schoolboard decided to put Beert in grade eight, a place where most students were still struggling with basic math such as calculating percentages and counting apples. The curriculum of Wallaceburg's public schools was well below European standards. Needless to say, despite his great disappointment, Beert was a quick and eager student. He never did study for a single exam, yet he passed the entire eighth year with honours. I was content to follow in his footsteps hoping the schoolboard would think I was a genius as well.

When at last grade eight was finished, he had an incredibly high grade, but I was barely above passing mainly because of language difficulties. My father and mother continued their protest. However, amidst a flurry of words and stiff opposition, the schoolboard reluctantly allowed Beert to skip grade nine and go right to grade ten. I was passed into grade nine and so, in 1959, Beert and I became students at the Wallaceburg District Secondary School. Teachers and school trustees said Beert would never make it through grade ten and I would find it difficult in grade nine. It had never been done before. Decades later, I wondered if I had ever forgiven them

for such colonial thoughts. Beert not only succeeded in his highschool studies as an A student, he went on to become the school's only *Ontario Scholar* in his grade thirteen graduating class, an honour for which the school generously praised Beert. I remained an A student as well throughout my highschool years, except for my infamous grade thirteen marks. When in September of 1963, I began my final and fifth year in highschool, I also discovered Art College. What made my discovery so delightful was that admission requirements for the Ontario College of Art did not require grade thirteen. Only four years of highschool. However, I was already well into my grade 13 year. Did that mean I could quit early? The thought was tempting.

I waited three months before I made up my mind.

Eager at the prospect of going to Art College but still in grade thirteen, I applied in January, 1964, for admission into the fall semester. In March I received my answer. I was accepted at the Ontario College of Art. Grade 12 was sufficient and not Grade 13.

The only entrance requirements were my grade 12 honours certificate and a modest portfolio of artwork I had sent with the application. I was genuinely excited, yet there remained one challenge to overcome, that was, what to do with my grade thirteen? I admit, acceptance into the Ontario College of Art had also awakened a bit of a rebel in me. After all, I had nothing to lose. I was already accepted at college long before the usual rush of applicants at the close of a school year. My attitude became obvious when I discussed my plans with our highschool guidance counselor. Amidst a great deal of protest from her, I had decided to test the education system's real worth. I asked myself (and the guidance counselor) a profound question. Would I be able to pass all Grade 13 final exams *without* studying? Was the public education system a real system of learning or just a mechanical world of momentary memorization? Would I be able to rely totally on what I was supposed to have learned during the year, instead of cramming endless textbooks into my head during long nights before each exam with just enough recall to get a decent mark?

In June of 1964, I wrote nine grade thirteen exams without any preparation. I passed six exams and failed three. So, *technically* I had passed my year. At least, that was my conclusion but not according to the public school board. I failed grade thirteen. Six out of nine was not enough to pass grade thirteen. But, I was comforted by the fact that I didn't need grade thirteen after all, even though I had received a special award in 1963. The *Bending Art Trophy* for excellence in art. However, I was off to college. Not that it really mattered. Art College would be a whole new way of studying with a greater emphasis on creating artwork than on memorizing textbooks. I would become an honours graduate at the Ontario College of Art, complete with a number of prized scholarships and a bronze medallion after completing four years of fulltime in-depth study and practice in the arts. Years later I also completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

Needless to say, I stayed home from grade thirteen graduation celebrations, but somewhere in the quiet recesses of my mind I had resolved on a failed highschool graduation day to vindicate my decision not to study for any grade thirteen exams. My moment came ten years later. In 1974, I planned the ten-year reunion of our 1964 class. This immigrant boy from Wallaceburg did make it after all. I organized the date, the place and the entertainment, as well as local press coverage, guest speeches, everything. To top the event, I showed up at the reunion with my beautiful wife Alice at my side and a handsome business card that read Executive Vice-President, Folio Advertising Agency Ltd., a nationally accredited, Toronto-based, ad agency I owned with my business partner Joe Hatt-Cook.

I was a local celebrity at least for that one tenth-reunion night.

And everybody loved Alice.

In fact she stole the whole event, not as a trophy-wife but as my beloved lifelong partner, now of 56 years, and counting.

Did I mention I also won a *Certificate of Award* and *Honourable Mention* in 1961 and 1962, respectively at the Sarnia Science Fair? The annual fair was a popular event sponsored by the Chemical Institute of Canada. One award, in 1961, was in the category of Junior Science where I presented my entry of a superb collection I had built comprising Canadian ores and minerals. In 1962, I won the award for Intermediate Science with my artistic re-creation of ancient man, complete with fossils and a huge relic, a Mastodon tooth I had borrowed from a friend's father.

But then came the year 1962. And who would ever forget 1962?

During one of my Grade 12 exams in the fall of that year, I was stunned by news of the assassination of American president, John F. Kennedy. The school had kept the news quiet until we finished our exam that day. Like millions of others, I sat glued to our television as the world watched the events unfold. I have never felt "American" in any particular way, but that day I shared their pain. Amidst tears and silence, we sat and viewed the funeral procession down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC., when it slowly made its way to Arlington Cemetery. As Canadian highschool students, John F. Kennedy held a special place in our hearts. It had only been nine months ago when a small group of eager Wallaceburg highschool students joined the American president in his challenge to get America in shape. Kennedy challenged every citizen to walk fifty miles. In February, 1962, I presented that challenge to all highschool students, especially my classmates, and organized the walk-a-thon while taking advantage of a highschool teacher's convention. Eleven students accepted my challenge.

We left around 8 o'clock in the morning and decided to follow Highway 40 to Chatham, a distance of eighteen miles one way. The metric system had not yet been introduced in Canada and all distances were still measured in miles. I had calculated that the mile or so to get out of town, plus the round trip of eighteen miles each way would come close to meeting the president's challenge. Three students did not make the round trip. I was one of the remaining eight who did complete the walk. Together with a few extra miles tagged on in Chatham, the round trip was forty-five miles. It took twelve hours to complete. February in southern Ontario was and still is just like the Arctic. It was bitter cold that month and even colder the day we walked to Chatham and back. Our food was frozen by the time we made our first rest stop. Bone-chilling winds, below zero temperatures and fine snow, combined in force to drive across the flat farmland that lay on either side of the highway. Most of the time the black-top disappeared completely beneath drifting snow in conditions known as *whiteouts*. One time we walked right off the road because we could not see the highway. Determined, however, we pressed on. When darkness fell that cold day, eight brave survivors literally stumbled back into town. We ended our challenge jubilant but very stiff. We rested our nearly frozen feet in a tub of hot water at the home of Don Domanski. We were hailed as heroes in both local media and at school. I remember the cold more than I remember the distance we walked.

Weather had been a major influence in my life during the Wallaceburg years, those first years immediately after we arrived in Canada. Bitter cold winters were new to me, as were hot steamy summers. Having grown up in a temperate climate, conditions such as extreme humidity, long, hot, sleepless nights, and sweat everywhere, were unfamiliar to me as were frozen pipes, driving snowstorms, biting cold, and uninsulated bedrooms. They gave me an early taste of the real Canada. That taste was ever so strong on my first job. It was a paper route that began on a clumsy bicycle during an Ontario winter, not a small task for a thirteen year old boy. Fortunately,

The Chatham Daily News was a whole lot smaller than the *Windsor Star,* which was so bulky it was impossible to fold. My papers were a lot easier to fold ready for the traditional paper-toss from my bicycle to the front porch of a customer's house. I made enough to pay for a brand new CCM bicycle, complete with carrier. I paid for the bike and carrier at the local Canadian Tire store in seven monthly installments of five dollars each.

There was, however, a dark side to my adolescent years in Wallaceburg.

That dark side was my first experience of the miserly world of capitalism, a capitalism that appeared in the form of farm work. But my account is not a *slamdunk* criticism of farming which was and will always remain an honourable occupation and a great Canadian tradition. I hated working in the fields around Wallaceburg, Chatham, and Port Lambton, as well as Walpole Island, a large First Nations reserve just west of town. Not only did I hate the work, I hated the farmers. And my reasons were justified. These were the farmers who exploited immigrant workers. Many of these farmers were members of the church our family attended. Disguised as people of "brotherly love," the church-going farmers gave my father pittance work when he so desperately needed money to feed, house, and clothe his growing family of seven children. Not that there was little available work. There was plenty of work to be done in Wallaceburg. I can still picture my father toiling away in farmer's fields. My father was a big tall man and working most of the crops meant bending over at the waist hoeing and pulling with his hands close to the ground. It was very hard on his back but he did it faithfully for his family. I on the other hand was young and able. It did not matter if I came home with blisters, a sore back, and grimy clothes. A quick swim in Running Creek just up the street from where we lived or a quick hike to the railroad bridge over the Sny River, where waters ran deep and cool. I soon forgot those endless rows of soya beans, sugar beets, tobacco, and corn, choked with milkweeds and thistles. Especially those greedy eyes of landowners as they stood and watched their cheap labour slave in the fields. My father did not fare so well. I will never forget the look of pain in his eyes when he bent over rows of tiny sugar beet plants, wielding a short hoe back and forth to thin out the young plants, and leaving one standing about every foot. The sun was burning hot while the sons of church elders got easier and better paying jobs around town. Call them exaggerated childhood memories, but I can still feel the hot burning sun and stifling humidity.

We lived in the church basement that summer of 1958, after our arrival in Canada. Every Sunday we had to put all our belongings and furnishings away to make room for Sunday School. After a blistering week of hard labour, my father could not even afford the luxury of skipping church, because the entire congregation would end up in his basement bedroom, pointing accusing fingers at my tired dad. Many times I worked alongside him as we hoed beets, weeded soya beans and corn. Once a year there was a big tomato harvest. Back to back we competed with other Dutch families as we picked ripe tomatoes and piled them in large baskets. The full baskets were placed in long rows throughout the field. At the end of the day the farmer came with his tractor and flatbed wagon to pick up the baskets. Piled to precarious heights, these wagons then slowly lumbered their way to Libby's tomato processing plant in nearby Leamington. More often than not a wagon collapsed under the weight of its large load, spilling thousands of tomatoes on to the street. A hot sun, muggy temperatures, and millions of flies, made for smelly tomato "soup" on the streets of Wallaceburg. The fire department had to come to the rescue and hose the streets until only a red stain was left on the pavement. Proud tomato pickers boasted of one hundred baskets a day. At ten cents per basket, that meant ten dollars a day. Throughout the tomato season a hard-working family could earn enough money to send mom or dad back home on a trip to the fatherland, or maybe buy a *used* car, some furniture, or

much needed back-to-school supplies. I peaked at thirty-five baskets a day, spending generous time eating ripe tomatoes instead of picking them. With a salt and pepper shaker in my pocket they made enviable snacks for a growing young man. While the rest of the workers glared at me as if I were some apparition who hated the work, which in fact I did, I calmly sat between the rows of tomatoes sprinkling big, red, juicy ones with salt and pepper often accompanied by my regular lunch of sandwiches or a tin full of pancakes. I mean, how could I ignore such a bountiful provision growing right before my eyes? After all, a handful of tomatoes would not cramp the farmer's profits in any way. It was the farmers, however, who bought the *new* cars. Yet amidst the back-breaking work of farm labour there was always room for a good laugh, usually at the expense of my older brother Beert.

Beert was not a farmer by any stretch of our imagination. On his journey to become a leading Canadian and international scholar in classics, especially Latin and Greek, as well as professor Emeritus at *Acadia University* in Nova Scotia, he passed through the fields of south western Ontario for a brief season. Those fields will never forget Beert, nor will the farmers who hired him. His mind was nowhere near crops growing in a field. He was steeped in the glories of ancient Rome, classical languages, philosophy and literature. As a highschool student he was brilliant. He had a mind that never ceased to amaze me with endless reservoirs of knowledge. Beert knew everything, except he could not tell a weed from a soya bean. One day a number of us started at the far end of a large field. We each managed three rows of soya beans with one row between our legs and one on either side. With long strides we walked while pulling the weeds up by their roots. It was a slow walk as most fields were choked with milkweeds, mustard plants, and spiny thistles. Our wages were very low. This particular day, however, was a good day. We managed to make steady progress because the weeds were much easier to pull than the weeds in other, clay-filled fields. As we continued to walk, bend, and pull, we left a field of knee-high green soya plants gently swaying in an afternoon breeze. Behind us there were no weeds in sight. Neither was Beert.

Where was Beert?

Looking back we found him grunting and groaning about half a mile behind us. We marked our spot in the field with our garden gloves and left our place to see what Beert had been up to. Why was Beert so far behind? We found him near the beginning of the field right by the access road. There he was, bending over under a hot sun, pulling everything in sight from the ground and up by the roots. A trail of green everything lay at his side with weeds and soya plants piled and wilting on the dark brown soil. It was obvious why he was so far behind. In his blessed absentmindedness he had forgotten that he was supposed to pull the weeds and leave the soya beans standing. As luck would have it, the farmer showed up moments later and immediately fired my brother. I don't think he lost any sleep over the event. He was probably glad to be rid of such *plebeian* (a favourite word of his, meaning, *common*) work, wishing instead to return to his treasured books. We all had a good laugh and resumed our weary task. Perhaps this explains why I never became an avid gardener in my home-ownership years.

"Pave it or sod it," became my *green motto*.

As I write this venture and look out my studio window on Gabriola Island, decades later, I manage a big smile because I am looking at half an acre of wild undergrowth, tall cedars and firs, mindful of the annual threat of grass I am obligated to mow. But, my green motto has survived. There is no garden plot demanding vigorous combat with weeds, slugs, deer, and other unwelcome guests, even though I sometimes think we humans are the invasive species. The local fruit and vegetable market is just around the corner.

The dark side of labour exploitations also included an even darker side of life in Wallaceburg. Racism and discrimination; again, my father bore the greater brunt of it. We were white, European, Protestant, and a hard-working, law-abiding, church-going family. Yet, we were called "honkies," a name for those newcomers who came to town to take jobs away from Wallaceburg's more celebrated citizens. In fact, there was so much work available the shortage of labour was a very real problem, even though much of the work was seasonal such as farm work and the construction trade. Yet, my father had difficulty finding work and keeping it. No one extended any credit to help us get our feet and remain firmly planted in our new Canadian home. Because my father was such a big man he had some major accidents. Once, while working as a carpenter in the construction of new homes, a scaffold collapsed underneath him. Another time he split his thumb with one mighty blow of his hammer. Yet another time, the roof on which he was working collapsed. When cold winter storms raged or there was too much snow on the roof, construction of new houses ground to a halt, sometimes for months. Whether it was an injury or frequent unemployment that affected my father, there was no workman's compensation or unemployment insurance to ensure some form of income for the family. I don't know how and what my father felt in those days. He never let his emotions show. Being a "honky" immigrant was a tough row to hoe among a primarily English or at least English-speaking population, even in prosperous post-war Canada of the nineteen-fifties. Sure, as a teenager I could shrug off the jeers and taunts and even manage an occasional insult or a not-so-kind finger gesture in return, but I was not the principal bread-winner of an entire family. Needless to say, all the children contributed generously to the family's survival treasury with babysitting money, paper routes, and earnings from the farms. Most of the time we did so gladly and with no regrets. A special demonstration of the children's care was initiated by my younger sister Lida. It was she, after she obtained an enviable and much cherished, union-pay, full-time job at the Dominion Glass Factory, who bought the family's first black & white television.

In a world of hard immigrant times, television was a refuge. To her dying day, my mother watched General Hospital. My father loved concerts and Wednesday night boxing matches. Time would heal some of the wounds as my father grew to become one of Wallaceburg's leading citizens and founder of the *Wallaceburg Bookbinding and Manufacturing Company,* a thriving business that still employs many townspeople. My father's European trade taught by his father and when he grew older refined at a Dutch trade school, was the art of bookbinding for school books as well as the fine art of rebinding treasured volumes with ancient leather covers. My father was a master bookbinder with an exceptional knowledge of fine papers. When in the early sixties, some six years after we arrived in Wallaceburg, the bookbinding company reached special status in town, our "honky" immigrant status changed dramatically. My father was now a *citizen* of town and no longer an immigrant. Owning one of the larger and more prosperous businesses in town made him a welcome guest and coveted customer at every store in town. Store owners solicited my father's patronage. My dad could buy anything anywhere in town, with no questions asked, no credit needed, and a *"Yes, Mr. Verstraete, sure Chris, whatever you want sir, take it home and try it out, just pay me whenever."*

My father's word was as good as his reputation: a hard-working man whose business practices were of utmost integrity, a virtue he acquired from his father who was a businessman as well. My grandfather once lost his entire company in a huge fire. That was in the Netherlands right after World War One. There was no business or home fire insurance in those days and my grandfather was left with a large debt owed to suppliers and other manufacturers. He visited each of the creditors and on his word of honour alone, with no written and legally-binding papers he

promised to pay back each creditor the full amount *with interest*. It took my grandfather ten years but he paid every cent back with interest.

When merchants and citizens of Wallaceburg began courting my father's patronage, he may have felt a momentary satisfaction in "having made it," but it did not erase the years of rejection by the townspeople. My father became bitter towards the town. In 1967, he sold the company to his partner and left Wallaceburg to start all over again in Sarnia just a handful of miles north. He called it *Admiral Bookbinding Company,* after his mother's family name of Admiraal. Instead of binding large numbers of school and library books he returned to his original art form, that of master bookbinder and the fine art of carefully crafting beautiful covers on dusty old books and the careful restoration and rebinding of valuable volumes. He also created a specialty product in the form of handsome and strong three-ring binders which he sold in very profitable quantities to Sarnia's huge petrochemical companies. His binders were far superior to plastic binders and became the standard for all instruction and maintenance manuals in the petrochemical industry. All this my father accomplished and more in the basement of his new and large family home on Albert Street in Point Edward, a small village attached to the northwest corner of Sarnia in the shadow of a large span that "bridged" the St. Clair River between Canada and the United States. Locally known simply as "the bridge," this landmark began its slow way up wide ramps in Sarnia and crossed Point Edward high in the sky at "the point." To this day it remains a romantic spot where Lake Huron squeezes into the narrow opening of the St. Clair River. Under the bridge and at “the point,” a food struck sold fabulous French Fries. My father and mother, as did I when I visited them, spent many hours at “the point,” watching huge ore-laden lake freighters slowly plow their way up the strong currents of the river. It was always a majestic sight as the ships passed beneath the bridge downriver or into Lake Huron. A flotilla of pleasure crafts filled the gaps between lake freighters. I think the view reminded my dad of happy days in the Netherlands, where he often sailed his small boat along the IJssel River, a tributary of the Rhine as it flowed past Zwolle. He also loved sailing along a smaller nearby river called *Zwarte Water* or Black Water.

The Point Edward years became his happiest time right up until my mother's death in 1987, followed by his retirement a few years later when he retired both himself and the company he founded, until his death in 2003. Yes, they had been hot steamy summers and bitter cold winters, as I remembered them, but creature-comforts did come our way after many years of hard work and an essential characteristic of the immigrant legacy – “self-made.” It remained essential in lives of my brother and sisters.