

## Bridges

Audrey Cole

One of the somewhat mundane pandemic driven changes in my life has been the need for a different lunch time routine. Since finding myself living alone for the past nine years, I have felt a personal need to get out of the house for lunch. Once Ian, our son, was established in his own home, my late husband, Fred, and I, would do that a few times a week, for me, at this time, it is every day. I have a favourite local restaurant but under COVID-19 restrictions that was not initially available. I chose a "take-out" alternative but where to eat it?

Water is in my blood. I was born only a couple of blocks from the sea; tidal, flowing, salty or otherwise, I don't need to be on it or in it, just near it. My search for shady luncheon spots near water led me to the beautiful parks in Smiths Falls along the Rideau river and canal. One day recently, there were no available shady spots on the North side of the park surrounding the Detached Lock. I drove round to the South side. I was sitting in my car, the Detached Lock to my right. Dominating my view across the Rideau canal and almost over my head, was the raised Bascule Bridge, one of the two designated National Historic Sites of Canada in Smiths Falls. Although for nearly four decades I have appreciated living just a few kilometres away from this historic site, until now, I have never spent much time in or around it.

As I ate my lunch I was idly wondering what to write about. As I age, I feel a greater compulsion to write although writing has always been important to me. It was possibly what I did best as I grew up in the UK. It was probably what got me through High School. It was certainly what kept me in contact with family and friends as I served on farms hundreds of miles away from home as a member of the Women's Land Army (WLA) which I joined in WWII at the age of 17. Clearly and with sadness, I remember the scorn with which my constant reading and letter writing was greeted in one of the homes in which I found myself having to live for a considerable length of time. It saddened me to realise that the receipt of books mailed to me by my parents was a cause for derision. Whether by ignorance or innocence, I had simply not realised that although a tabloid newspaper was delivered each day, mine seemed to be the only books in the house. But on the upside, I have treasured responses to my letters from former teen aged friends serving elsewhere, some of whom, I am saddened to say, never returned home from those wartime duties.

Today, I believe I am known, at least in disability circles, for my writing on disability issues. My son has a significant disability. Since his birth in 1964, most of my writing

has related to society's abject failure to ensure equality for all people, particularly people such as my son who does not speak, read, write or appear to understand most spoken language, although we who know him suspect he understands much of what we say but is simply unable to respond in a way that we can understand – but that is another issue. Ian usually finds some means of communicating his needs. But we still have far to go in our Province and elsewhere in Canada, to fulfil the assurance of true equality for all citizens, irrespective of disability.

Although there is much to address in that context, I wondered as I sat there by the Canal whether I should try writing about other things. But, if so, what? Should I write about people? In my long life, I have certainly met, and actually know, some very interesting people but could I do justice to the tremendous contributions they have made to the betterment of society? As I came out of my reverie and looked around me, I realised that from where I sat and what I could see at that moment, I could probably write something related to bridges as connectors in at least two contexts. The first, with some help from Wikipedia and other sources, as a connector of lands on opposite sides of an otherwise impossible barrier, the Rideau Canal, water travel having preceded rail travel.

The Scherzer rolling lift bascule bridge over the Rideau Canal in Smiths Falls, is now permanently elevated. According to Wikipedia, this particular bridge is the "oldest surviving structure of its type." It was constructed in 1912-13 to carry the Toronto-Ottawa line of the Canadian Northern Railway. That company eventually became Canadian National Railways (CNR). In the mid 80s CNR transferred ownership of the bridge to the City of Smiths Falls for maintenance as a heritage resource. The railway line had been abandoned and the Bridge had been designated a National Historic Site of Canada. I remember the occasion well. Fred, Ian and I had recently moved from Ottawa into Lanark County to a place just a few miles from the site.

More importantly, at least for second context in this narrative, I had in the past crossed over the canal on the Bascule bridge twice on a train trip between Toronto where I then lived and Ottawa where I had old friends from my pre-Canada life. It was that train trip, that led me from increasing personal anxiety and the fear of impending doom to a very different and brighter future; a future based solely on connections made on that train.

The train trip was a week after 14,000 of us had been laid off from Toronto based AVRO Aircraft on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1959 when the Prime Minister, John Diefenbaker, cancelled all government financial support for the development of the AVRO Arrow. At the time, the Arrow was probably the most advanced tactical aircraft in the world ([www.rcinet.ca/en/2017/02/20/canada-history-feb-20-1959](http://www.rcinet.ca/en/2017/02/20/canada-history-feb-20-1959)).

I was a technical illustrator at AVRO, recently promoted to Section Leader after surviving an uncomfortable grievance by my colleagues against my promotion. They argued that I had been employed by AVRO only for a year - or was it truly, perhaps,

because, unlike the rest of my colleagues, I was a woman? We will never know.

The AVRO shut down resulted in too many skilled people looking for work in Toronto at the same time. I had, I think, six interviews (sometimes two a day) but it seemed that no-one was hiring technical illustrators, partly because of the devastating effect of the shut down on numerous local sub contractors. I was more than a little panicky about my future. I had a couple of hundred dollars of savings in the Credit Union but obviously at the time, I had no access to it. I received a phone call from Norwegian friends in Ottawa, friends I had made on previous holiday trips to Norway, suggesting that I visit them to see what might be available in Ottawa. At the time, I lived in a converted basement apartment. My landlord, very generously said "Please, don't even think about rent, just concentrate on finding work." I travelled to Ottawa on the old CN line, passing through Smiths Falls over the bascule bridge.

As I left Toronto that day, I had a window seat and was methodically searching through the situations vacant section in the Globe and Mail when I was joined by three men. As we pulled away from Toronto, the man sitting next to me commented on my search and asked if I was going to Ottawa to look for work. I said I had been laid off from Avro but needed to say little more since they were all well aware of the massive lay-off. The men introduced themselves. They were returning to Ottawa from a provincial Conference. Almost immediately, two of them suggested they might be able to be of help in my search for employment.

I look back over the past 60 years and wonder if the experience would be the same today for a 30 plus single woman travelling alone. At the time, I saw only genuine concern for my situation. We chatted all the way to Ottawa, exchanged contact information and said our respectful goodbyes at Union Station where I was met by my older friends and driven to their home.

My friend's husband worked on Parliament Hill where he very generously invited me most days to accompany him to lunch in the Parliamentary Dining room. Since he worked for a Minister of the party in power which had placed me so recently in my present predicament, the luncheon conversations with his colleagues were, to say the least, interesting. In those days smoking was allowed in such environments (I admit to smoking back then). I took wicked pleasure in offering a light from my stock of AVRO Arrow paper matchbooks!

Within a couple of days both my friends from the train contacted me. I joined my seat mate, J..., at his Government office and he escorted me to three other government departments in various parts of the city, that employed technical illustrators. Unfortunately, although interested, none were hiring. I was also cautioned that as an immigrant, I would have to accept that Canadian citizens would always have precedence in any government hiring.

The following day, A... who, on the train, sat opposite to me on my left, arranged an

interview for me with the company where he worked. My Norwegian friend drove me to the plant where A... met me and introduced me to the necessary people. I was offered and accepted a job and worked there as a technical illustrator for five years. Sadly, both A... and J... are no longer with us. They are not forgotten.

Would their spontaneous generosity happen today? I certainly hope it would but I wonder! Those two men, their colleague and I were total strangers who just happened one day to travel together on the same train. What I experienced was concern, sympathy, an immediate willingness to become involved and above all, respect! I would truly like to think it would happen today but, deep down, I am not sure. On my more recent train trips between Ottawa and Toronto, related to Ian's HR case, all I saw were heads bent over cell phones. Sadly, that seemed to be providing all the personal contact most people needed.

I sincerely hope that I am wrong!

Audrey

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