

"A Dream and an Honor" The Life Story of Dr. Alan J. Snider - Chapter 5

Chapter 5 - Summers of Work and Play

We spent countless years summering on the shores of the beautiful lake in Ignace, Ontario, from the time I was about eight years of age until my early teens. My Dad purchased a camp on the shores of this lake. It was a boxcar with a screened porch attached. He had a pump installed, but there was no electricity. It was very primitive.

The lake at Ignace was typical of thousands of lakes in that part of Canada, carved out by huge glaciers thousands of years before. The water was clear, shores were sandy and the population was scanty. My Dad would, on occasion, stay with us in our camp rather than the company barracks.

While not berry-picking with my Mother, my sister Helen and I had the exclusive use of a snub-nosed rowboat that we named Jiggs – named after that short, stubby character in the cartoons of that era.

Helen and I were completely on our own, at my tender age of 10 and hers of 6. We would row that boat and fish for hours. I wonder why we had such freedom, such unsupervised time. In retrospect, I realize that Mother, who really raised us, was kind and gentle, but tough Scottish stock. She just assumed we would be careful, and we were.

My mother was a jewel, loved by all, and a particular favorite of her grandchildren. I believe her greatest strengths were her ability to listen, reason and communicate.

She was my first booster, and never cast a doubt that I could and should have a hospital. Her confidence in me was a great help. We grew up in a period when mothers stayed home, or at least were always there when we returned from school. It takes a good mother to make a house a living home.

My older brothers, Gordon and Archie, at ages about 18 and 16, contracted with Dad to paint our two-story house in Fort William, and to receive a payment of a new canoe. The job being completed, Dad kept putting off the purchase of the canoe. My Mother stepped in and took the two boys to a local boat shop and purchased their canoe.

This was the finest addition to our family. The two boys practically lived in it.

On a camping trip, Archie, Gordon and a neighboring camper, Lorne Carson, collected several partridges, cleaned them and stuffed them for a little personal feast. They put them in Mrs. Carson's oven and went canoeing to an island for a swim. When they returned, they found Lorne's sister and a group of visiting girlfriends had eaten all the birds!

The boys held a bull session and decided the girls needed a lesson. They collected a whole bucket of frogs and toads, French-sheeted their beds, then loaded them with the captives. Imagine the screaming when the girls turned in! The girls never mentioned this in the morning. Everything was settled, at least momentarily.

The next day Archie, never one to under-do, made two pans of fudge. He put a strong laxative in one, then carried the pan to the girls to make amends, nibbling on the contents of the other. To make matters worse, he nailed shut the door of the outhouse. Confusion reigned, but in the end, everyone laughed.

During our summers at Ignace, Arch often teamed up with a bachelor friend, Chris O'Brien. They paddled in Chris's canoe across our lake, carried the canoe and food across a portage to another lake, and repeated this for a string of about 16 lakes, with portages in between. They slept under the canoe when it rained, used a slingshot unerringly and ate well of rabbits, partridges and fish. They would start with basic food, including cans of beans, a side of bacon, oatmeal, flour, sugar, salt, dried eggs, baking powder and tea. At the end of the 16 lakes, on White Otter Lake, sat an old log castle, built by a proud Scotsman.

It seems that James McClure was born and raised in a castle, a real one, in Scotland. He lost favor with his parents who said, "James, you will never be a success, you will never be able to make a good living, you will never live your life in a castle."

Well, now, James left Scotland, traveled across the Atlantic, railroaded to Ignace, Ontario (why, I guess we'll never know) and paddled a canoe, all by himself, as a young adult, from Ignace, along 16 lakes, carrying his canoe across the portages, until he found the site for his

own castle. He built a huge three-floor log cabin, all by himself, with a tower, also of logs. He lived there the remainder of his life!

How did he get by? It was a wilderness. There were no people within 100 miles. Just wild animals, wild fruit and fish aplenty! James had a garden, a root house, and lived in solitary comfort for about 50 years. The castle still stands and is a Canadian historical building now.

One day my brother Gordon said, "Arch, you've guided many parties from Ignace to White Otter Lake. Do you think I could take this trip with you and see the castle?"

Arch felt sorry for our older brother. "Gord, let me think this over, and if it is humanly possible, we'll do it!"

In the meantime, Arch went up to wonderful old Dr. Cook and inquired, "Dr. Cook, I've paddled and portaged our canoe hundreds of miles, but never dared to take my brother Gordon. Do you think I dare try it?"

"Archie, you take your brother on that trip, it will do him more good than harm, just be careful, don't let him get tired."

You can imagine the joy that Gordon felt when Arch broke the news to him. "Gord, we've been cleared by Dr. Cook to take that wilderness trip to James McClure's castle!"

Gordon sat proudly in the bow of their canoe and across the 16 lakes to White Otter Lake. They spent a few days living in the castle, then successfully paddled back to Ignace. That was the first of many trips that Gordon took, and he seemed to benefit by each and every one. Gordon lived a successful life, graduated as a certified public accountant and became manager of some good hotels in Canada – Niagara Falls, Sarnia, Windsor – he married, had 2 children and passed away at 52 years of age. Today Gordon would have been a candidate for a heart valve replacement.

Arch reached the age of 91. He had one incomplete ambition, to take his family to James McClure's castle on White Otter Lake, which was still uninhabited wilderness!

Arch was living in Thunder Bay, Ontario. I lived in Largo, Florida. He called me and told me of his ambition. I said, "Go ahead and do it. But first, go to your physician and get his approval."

Arch, stubborn Scot that he was, did not see his physician. He took his entire family on the wilderness trip. His heart decompensated, feet and legs swelled, breathing became labored. They got him home and into an emergency room. He was put to bed, and never left it.

I knew from his symptoms, related to me by telephone, that the end was near. I got an early flight out of Tampa airport, flew up to Thunder Bay, and visited Arch's bedside by the hour. We had our best and happiest conversations. All past doubts were erased, we talked freely.

One week later, Arch passed away. His last ambition, to show his family his childhood dream, James McClure's castle, was realized. He died peacefully at 92 years of age.

Our last summer at camp, Eddie Stonehouse, a neighboring camper and I went by train from Fort William to Ignace to open our respective camps. We were both sixteen years old. The highlight of any day was to walk two miles from the lake into town. We would buy an ice cream cone for ten cents, then to the railway station to watch the train pull in.

One day at the station we heard the fellows talking about job openings at a lumber camp. We hurried back, closed our camps, and got out a racy little canoe. It was five miles to the portage, so we headed out. We paddled across a second lake of a similar size. It was a balmy day and the waves were two feet high.

We found a very rustic tar-papered lumber camp and approached the tobacco-chewing foreman, Slim Howe. "Mr. Howe, we were in Ignace at the station this morning and heard you might need some workers, and we are applying for a job." Mr. Howe said, "You two lads paddled your canoe all the way across two choppy lakes to apply for work?"

"Yes, sir," we replied.

"Well, you are young, but obviously strong and healthy. You are hired," he said.

It was a good summer. Our job was to go out with a crew on a motorboat called an alligator. The prow of the boat could go up on the beach sand or rocks without damage. We would haul a long boom of chained logs and boom up the pulp wood along the shore and swamps from the prior winter's cutting. We were soaking wet all day long, working alongside rugged but kindhearted men. One of the crew would always go ahead, start a fire for lunch, and put on a big pail of water to boil for tea. By the time we got to the site, the tea was strong and black.

Our lunch was white bread, bacon, apple pie and tea. I wrote home to allay any fears they might have and told them how good the food was. Dad wrote back (it was one of two letters I received from him in my lifetime), "Don't tell too many people how good the food is. They will think we don't feed you well at home." Here I was trying to allay their fears! The food was plain, plain, plain!

One summer, while still in high school, I made a deal with my Mother. My parents had several building lots in a neighboring forest, and I

agreed to clear those lots of trees and shrubs, to sort of pay for my room and board. I would collect the axes and saws from a neighbor, jog out the five miles to the lots, spend the day felling the timber, then jog back to town, have supper and go out on a date. I did not know what fatigue was!

I had many jobs during high school. Another was a night watchman on the SS Lemoyne, the largest cargo ship on the Great Lakes. My next door neighbor, William Smythe, said to me. "Alan, I have a job on the SS Lemoyne sailing down the entire chain of the Great Lakes. I am quitting, but I could recommend you for the job."

He was a deck watchman and walked the deck. It sounded simple, except one part of the job: to run a winch that wound a steel cable around a huge drum. This pulled the ship to dock. The winch was also used to slide open the huge telescoping steel doors of the hold.

"You know I am very poor at mechanics. I would be terrified if I had to make a mechanical decision," I said. I was nervous I would operate the winch incorrectly, smash the ship against the dock or flip the steel doors into the water.

"Not to worry," he replied. "You can handle it."

The job description was six hours on and six hours off. I applied and got the job.

All went surprisingly well, but I was terrified, and I will never forget the terror. I handled it for eight weeks. When I told the gruff Scottish Captain I was leaving to go back to school, I received a good reaming out. He felt I was permanent and not a school boy.

Another summer I worked on a huge grain elevator being constructed at the edge of Lake Superior. This job was in the next town, Port Arthur. I traveled on two streetcars to get to work and two on my return home. I made forty cents an hour for a ten-hour day. More often than not, I would just take the one streetcar and walk home to save the ten-cent fare.

My main job was to dig pulpwood bark from around the pilings. I had to shovel the mud and muck into a wheelbarrow, and steer it along a narrow slippery strip of lumber, then dump the muck into the lake. Removing the bark peelings was necessary so the layer of concrete would be on a solid foundation.

One day, a big burly Ukrainian saw me struggling with the wheelbarrow up and down the narrow ramps. He said, "Here kid, let me take the wheelbarrow and you take my shovel."

He handled it like a baby carriage. It looked so easy in his hands the foreman told him to "Hurry up, show more drive."

"Nobody bosses me," he said, and dumped the wheelbarrow into the lake and walked off the job.

The grain elevator just recently slid into the lake! Evidently we did not remove all the slippery bark about the pilings. This weakened the foundation of concrete and it collapsed in time.

Another job I had was to hire and supervise about 30 young boys to sell magazines door to door. The boys got 2 ½ cents, I got 2 ½ cents, and the magazine got the balance, 5 cents for each magazine sold.



