

The Bergen Newsletter

This is our second Bergen Newsletter from Lakeside Dental here on the edge of Lake Ontario. As with previous newsletters, the first half has little to do with things dental.

The Farm

It is 11:00 at night in the summer of 1970. I have finished my eight-hour shift in the cold of the order fill department at Schneiders Meats, my summer job. The time was spent pushing racks of bologna and skids of luncheon meats, bringing them in from the far reaches of the factory, keeping the order fill line supplied so that Schneiders products can be shipped off to groceries and general stores across the province. But now I am free. I stride down to the locker room, get out of my insulated working clothes, grab my leather jacket and motorcycle helmet and head out into the welcoming warmth of a late July night. The motorcycle, a Honda 350, is in the employee parking lot. It fires up and I ride out toward the edge of town and then off into the waiting darkness of Waterloo County. I am headed to a farmhouse about 30 minutes away.

The bike's headlight leads the way through the black. You feel quite alone. The engine runs effortlessly, its steady sound a continuing comfort. At that hour, driving down those secondary roads, a passing car is unusual. You are immersed in the smells and feels of the night: the pungent scent of a freshly mowed hay-field, the coolness of the beginnings of a night fog pooling in valleys and the warmth of the hilltops. Small sleeping villages, Roseville, Washington and finally Plattsville, pass by.

Two miles past Plattsville I turn left onto a dead-end gravel road and take the last laneway to the left. There is a house up on a hill at the end of the lane. Its windows shine with incandescent light. I pull into the farmyard, extend the kickstand, turn the key and the engine goes silent. My friend Rudy and cousin Peter are waiting in the kitchen. We open some beers and begin the banter of young guys chuffed with the uncertainty and the wonderfulness of the beginnings of life, not yet adults, but no longer children. And here we are, in our own place, an island of friendship and light in the middle of a great rural summer darkness.

We are all students at the University of Waterloo. Peter is studying electrical engineering, Rudy honours pure math and I am the biologist. We have been renting the farmhouse for the last six months and for the last few weeks have lived out here full time.

Late fall, 1969

Two concessions out of Plattsville, a village 20 miles southwest of Kitchener, there is a road that heads off into a swamp. As you follow it, the road gets progressively narrower, less cared for and finally it disappears altogether into water and undergrowth.

The last, and probably only, set of buildings on that road belong to a farm. They sit on a hill above the road, connected to it by a laneway. Behind the farmyard the property

slopes down and ends up at the Nith River. The barn and sheds are in good repair, but the farmhouse has not been lived in for some time.

In early summer of 1969, my cousin Peter's brother-in-law, Michael, bought that farm at an auction for \$21,000. In my second year at the University of Waterloo, and mad with the optimism of that age and time, I got together with some friends and we came to an arrangement with Michael. We paid him \$30 a month and the farmhouse was ours. It had electricity, a pump with water in the basement and no heat beyond a wood fired cooking stove in the kitchen. We took possession in the late fall of 1969.

I have vague memories of the study of biology at Waterloo and what that involved, but have much clearer memories of our farmhouse. The first order of the day was painting. We got a good deal on some less used paint colours. Consequently, our living room and dining room ended up with black ceilings and yellow and orange walls. Furniture was constructed out of salvaged wood along with cast-offs from parents. We located two small coal fired stoves, bought stovepipes and installed them. In summer we had running water and even a functional washroom. In winter we had an outhouse.

There were four bedrooms on the second floor. Mine was at the end of the hall on the left. It had been painted white many years before. It was sparsely furnished: a rusted metal bed with a salvaged mattress, a small bookcase and a small framed black and white photograph of some willow trees hanging on the wall. There were windows on both outside walls. It used to be a great pleasure to lie in bed and luxuriate in the bleak minimalism of that room—the first space that was truly mine.

A typical winter weekend out at the farm began with a trip to Kitchener Coal to buy burlap sack of coal: anthracite, chestnut sized. Is there anywhere left in our part of Ontario that one could make this sort of a purchase today? I don't think so. The coal was thrown into the back seat of my 1959 Volkswagen and driven out to the farm.



The farmhouse, view from the rear at the height of summer.

An interesting incident: one time I had loaded the 80 pound sack of coal into the back seat and set off. On my way I was driving past the coal gas works in downtown Kitchener, a place that had been notorious for its pollution and fumes for years. And on this particular late winter afternoon I was struck by how bad that pollution really was.

I was breathing in seriously dense smoke. Then it dawned on me that there was no smoke outside my car, only on the inside. My final mental leap was to realize that it was coming from the backseat of the car, which was in fact on fire. Early Volkswagens had their battery stowed under the back seat. Mine had lost its protective battery cover long before. The heavy sack of coal had pushed the seat springs onto the battery terminals. This shorted them out generating heat. This heat now caused the cloth from the back seat to smoulder and then burst into flames. I tore out the sack of coal and the back seat, dumped snow onto anything that was burning, replaced the seat, placed the coal onto the non-battery side of the seat and continued on my way.

Generally the trip out to the farm was on Friday night. We arrived at the farm in complete darkness, turned on some lights and began the most compelling task: building fires in the two coal stoves and the woodstove. Coal fires, unlike wood, take considerable time to get going. Once going they keep burning for many hours, but they are frustratingly slow to get started. One particular night we arrived and it was bitterly cold: minus 25 Fahrenheit (around minus 30 Celsius). For some city kids, used to the mindlessness of central heating, this was indeed cold! We measured the progress of our heating efforts by observing the length of our breath. Initially it was visible well beyond arms length, a long time later to half an arm, and finally it disappeared entirely. By now a couple of hours had passed and the coal stove in the living room was glowing cherry red and we had the earned luxury of some serious heat. This could now easily be maintained until our departure on Sunday. The bedrooms upstairs, however, weren't part of this abundance of heat and it took a deep pile of comforters to provide the warmth needed for sleep. It was our place and it was grand.

Summer was the best time, the easy time. I remember sitting on the back porch with friends. It was late on a Sunday afternoon, hot and dry. The porch looked out to the west and we were watching the sun descend over an endless field of corn. We had the interior of an old tube radio, still working, tuned into an evangelical broadcast from some small town Ontario radio station. The cadence of the preacher's concern for our salvation washed over us as we looked out over our world and it was fine indeed. We were lost in the endlessness of our space and time and we were rich that late afternoon in a way that one is seldom rich again.

Four long weekends.

Now if you are a bunch of young guys and you have your place out in the country it seems fairly logical that you would probably want to have a few good weekend-long gatherings out at your country property. The reader will be pleased to read that we, in fact, didn't fall short in that department.

I grew up attending George Street Mennonite Church in Waterloo and by this time was past president, or perhaps past-past president of our youth group. Now Mennonite kids are pretty much like other kids, with parents that are like other parents, although overall there is probably a more restrained approach to life than might unfold otherwise. But still, Mennonite kids are pretty much like other kids.

Consequently we had four fairly serious retreats in the summer of the farm, one for each of the summer's long weekends (if you count Victoria Day weekend as the actual beginning of summer).

The details have become less clear, but generally kids, mostly but not all members of our youth group, would start to arrive late on Friday, transported by an assortment of cars and motorcycles. There were generally between 20 to 30 of us, and sometimes more.

The evenings were spent talking and listening to music. We were living in the age and spirit of Woodstock, which occurred in August of 1969, the previous summer. Cousin Peter, the electrical engineering student at the University of Waterloo, had created an amplifier that far exceeded the power of almost anything else that was available commercially in those days, and it drove two monster speakers, again built by Peter. These were set up on the porch. We were on the forefront of sound amplification in the early 70's. Fortunately at the end of our dead end road we had no neighbours and so there was no one to disturb. One of my fond memories is of walking alone through the forest to the end of our road (the one that ended in a swamp) and hearing the clear sounds of Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin filtering in through the trees from our farmstead half a mile away.

There was an organizational structure in that food was always there, but I no longer have any recollection of how this all occurred. Similarly sleeping arrangements are vague, but I think that it was a combination of tents and just sleeping on the floor. We proprietors had our own rooms with beds and that felt pretty good.

The day would consist of sleeping in, just hanging out or heading off on day trips. These daytrips would involve driving out to Pinery Provincial Park on Lake Huron, about an hour and a half away, or going to the dirt bike races at Copetown near Dundas. And all weekend long kids would come and go depending on their own schedules. Usually by late afternoon of the holiday Monday there were just a few of us left to take in the end of the day.

These weekends became an interesting study in human behaviour. The weekends were generally sold to the parents of the attendees as a sort of a Mennonite youth group retreat. We tended to be vague on the details. They almost sounded officially sanctioned, but they in fact weren't. They were what we liked to think of as parallel operations.

And so the first two weekends unfolded gently and peacefully, and the kids involved would have caused their parents great comfort. We were on our own and we appreciated and respected the trust that we were accorded. We fell well short of the worst fears that parents might have about such things under those sorts of circumstances.

The last two weekends, however, developed a different, less careful character, and we owe it all to the mother of one of the young women in our group. She got wind of the fact that these weekends were in fact not official youth group operations, but were independent actions. Even more importantly, to her very motherly way of thinking, they

were fully unchaperoned. This resulted in a general commotion among the parents involved and it became apparent that the last two weekends were not going to happen unless there was a married couple in attendance. There was some consternation: what to do? And then it became obvious: if we need a married couple, we will find one. One of my good friends and classmates was Steve Michelle, a bright biology student who was also a married biology student. And so we had our married couple to give us the appearance of respectability. This development, as it turned out, was a parental mistake of epic proportions. And this made all the difference.



View from the farmhouse roof looking out toward the river.

We weren't to be trusted.

The dynamics of the group shifted from a sense of a self-imposed need to act responsibly, to a feeling that, since we weren't trusted anyhow, we could now do pretty much what we wanted. This turned out to be remarkably liberating. The chaperones turned out to be exactly the catalyst that our first couple of weekends were missing. When I said that the first two weekends would have caused no alarm in the hearts of parents, I have to report that the second two would have. Everything was better: It's a bit like the expression that there nothing quite so sweet as a stolen watermelon. I've never stolen a watermelon, and don't even know anyone who has, but the sentiment resonates.

Our group is, to this day, greatly indebted to that very concerned mother who set us free from our great burden of acting responsibly. We had the rest of our lives to do that.

Dr A. G. Kempton

We acquired the farm in late fall of 1969. By February stoves, furniture and painting were complete, although we didn't start living there until summer. Since these renovations were occurring in the middle of my second year in biology at the University of Waterloo, they provided an excellent alternative to focusing on the usual things that I should have been focusing on, like my education. In a sense, it was a no-brainer: make your new farmhouse habitable or develop a clearer understanding of the comparative anatomy of some little known subspecies of invertebrates that spend their whole life submerged in the mud of stagnant ponds. What would be more compelling to you? And I was a fairly normal young guy in that regard. I got by, but some areas of understanding suffered.

In April of that spring we had final exams. I thought: what better place than the farm for quiet and for uninterrupted attention to the study of biology. And so I headed off to the

farm to do a bit of catch up in the world of things invertebrate and the like. All would have been well, except that it had been a very hard winter and spring was now singing its siren song and I was in the middle of it all: the last of the melting snow, that intoxicating smell of fresh, warming earth and the flooding of the Nith River in our backyard. Sure, studying got done, but probably not with that uninterrupted focus that I had envisioned. But I did get to spend a lot of time tramping about the fields alone, learning about the end of winter and the real beginning of a new year. It was a different sort of learning, but not one that can be directly applied to a three hour examination of your understanding of spineless organisms.

Dr. A. G. Kempton had been my faculty advisor for my three years at the university of Waterloo. We got on well. He was also my microbiology professor during my second year. I dropped in on him a few weeks after writing my finals to ask about some courses for next year and he told me that my average was hanging in a balance between an A and a B. I talked to him about my fine winter of being out at the farm, about getting things up and running, and about the wonderful distractions of spring while out there studying. And, I concluded, in looking at the whole picture, a B would be an entirely fair, appropriate and deserved mark. My report arrived in the mail a few weeks later. I opened it and discovered that he had given me an A.

The next fall, while in my third year at Waterloo, I applied to dental school and asked Dr. Kempton for a reference to accompany my application. He agreed. Letters of reference are confidential and are never seen by the applicant. In late spring both the University of Toronto and the University of Western Ontario accepted me into their dental programmes. I was a small town kind of guy and chose Western instead of U of T, London seeming preferable to Toronto. Early in the fall of my first term at Western I returned to the University of Waterloo and dropped by to say hello to Dr. Kempton and to thank him for all of his help. When I walked in the door he said, with some alarm, "David, what are you doing here?" I replied that I was now in dental school at Western and was here to thank him for his part in this. His response was, "I am so happy to hear that. I thought that you were still kicking around here at Waterloo. With the reference letter that I wrote for you, I couldn't see how they could possibly have turned you down." I'm not certain about this, but I think that our discussion about the farm and my microbiology mark played a significant role in setting the tone for his letter of recommendation. I have a clear memory of leaving Dr. Kempton's office and crossing the campus through particularly bright October sunshine.

It is an interesting reflection: if it wasn't for the farm and the subsequent development of an understanding with Dr. Kempton, his outstanding letter of recommendation may not have resulted. This could have made the difference between an acceptance and a rejection. So there may actually be a direct, although admittedly tenuous, link between those days at the farm and Lakeside Dental.

Our relationship with the farm ended early in that third and final year at Waterloo. We were all heading off in different directions and so some new tenants took over. Several

years later Peter's brother-in-law, our landlord, renovated the house extensively and has lived there since.

When I started writing this, my memory of our time at the farm was of an event that spanned most of my three years at the University of Waterloo. And yet when I looked into some records and journals to confirm dates and times I was surprised to find that it had lasted for only eleven months. And yet that eleven month memory is more vividly present to me than some entire decades of my later adult life. It's curious how these things turn out.

The Rest of the Newsletter

I am sitting in the lounge at St. Joseph's hospital in Hamilton. My wife, Deborah, is now presumably in an operating room having some difficulties with her spinal column corrected. It is a clean, quiet and well run hospital. The lounge has comfortable armchairs and a convenient outlet for my laptop. A highly regarded neurosurgeon, along with an anaesthetist and a support team, is doing the surgery. There are problems and concerns with our healthcare system, but I am currently thinking that things could be much, much worse and that I, and we, have much to be thankful for.

I also ponder that I run a health care facility as well, just on a vastly different scale.

We are now into our third year at Lakeside Dental and we are settling into the rhythm of what we do. The computer is far less mysterious and generally far less frustrating, and the high tech bits and pieces are all functioning as they should. Seeing one person at a time continues to be a great pleasure. With our previous operation with five chairs and fifteen staff I used to be reasonably good at multi-tasking. The current arrangement of focusing on one person and one set of concerns at a time is better.

It is also a good feeling to have incorporated my professional life into my personal life. When someone breaks a tooth on a Saturday and calls, it is not a great commotion to walk upstairs resolve the problem, or at least make it better until Monday when we can do something permanent. This continues to be the deal. If you, or someone in your family, have a problem outside of office hours, do call me at home (905-934-8598 - we are in the phone book as well). If I am around, I am happy to attend to things. When I am not around, call the office and you will get directions on reaching the emergency services that we have available.

Parking

Although we have lots of parking on the street, do continue to feel free to park in the driveway. I am practising in a residential area, which I am allowed to do, but I would

like to have the impact on my very nice neighbours be as minimal as is reasonably possible.

Open Contacts

An open contact results when two teeth are not together as tightly as possible. With your back teeth, the ones used for chewing, this results in food getting jammed between the teeth (food impaction), and in some cases, even with thorough and regular flossing can lead to a very rapid progression of the decay process. In the last while we have had several cases where food impaction has caused teeth that had no previous decay to rapidly (within months) develop cavities that ended up close to the pulp (nerve) of the tooth or right at it. In this case serious pain can ensue. Food impaction can occur if a new restoration isn't tight enough (we always check but even then it can occur), if part of a restoration or tooth breaks off or if two teeth drift apart.

In any event, if you do have an area where food is continually getting caught, do call us and let us resolve the issue in a timely fashion. It is easy to let things go for a while, but letting things go in this case often results in a very large restoration, a root canal or even tooth loss.

Referrals

We continue to have you refer your friends and family to our practice. We very much appreciate this vote of confidence. Thank-you!

Feedback

We are a small organization, and we all try to do things as well as we can. However, the last time I checked we still aren't perfect. If any of our policies or ways of doing things is causing you any frustration, please do let us know. Constructive comments and critiques are always welcomed and appreciated. We cannot be all things to all people, but within reason we will try.

Continued Learning

Discoveries and breakthroughs change the way we live much of our lives. The same holds true with dentistry: technology allows us to do things and solve problems in ways that were never possible before. It is a question of learning about it and sorting out which new techniques and materials will live up to their early promise and which won't.

Most years I end up taking about 10 or 15 days of courses. Last year was no exception. In addition to many excellent lecturers brought in by the Niagara Peninsula Dental Association and the Region of Niagara Academy of General Dentistry I spent a weekend in Montreal attending two days at The Canadian Association of Restorative Dentists and Prosthodontists (CARDP) a rapid-fire series of lectures by some of the fields leading thinkers.

This year is no different: shortly I fly off to Calgary for this year's CARDP meeting. Staying current is a responsibility, but it is also a great pleasure.

The End of the Newsletter

As always, those of us here at Lakeside Dental, wish all you out there the very best. And as we slide into darkness toward the shortest day of the year, let us be the first to wish you a great New Year.

David Bergen and Staff