

RECOLLECTIONS OF WHITEHORSE, YUKON

Sept 1944 – June 1946

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I was born in Chicago, Illinois on January 1, 1926 of Canadian parents. Mother had gone to Chicago to be with her folks who felt she would have better care there than at a small local hospital. Came to Vermilion, Alberta with my Mother at age six weeks. Was brought up on a farm north of Vermilion and attended a one-room school through Grade 9, and took a correspondence course for Grade 10.

At age 15 in the summer of 1941, I went to Amelia, Ohio (near Cincinnati) to live with an Aunt, my Mother's sister and her family---completed 11th Grade there.

World War II started in December 1941 (for the Americans, that is...Canada had been in since 1939), so I went back to Alberta in June 1942 at my Dad's Request (he thought that the United States was liable to be bombed!) The Vermilion High School didn't know what to make of my U.S. credits so put me in Grade 11 again!

In July of 1943 I went to Edmonton where the Northwest Service Command Headquarters was located at that time (Jesuit College Base as it was called). It was my Aunt Victoria's idea for me to get a job with "the Americans" for the summer, so I went for an interview for "position" of File Clerk in the Personnel office. A very nice Personnel Manager by the name of Enzi DeRenzi asked me what I could do and I told him "not very much of anything except a little High School typing!" He told me later that the answer was why he hired me. . .a "blank sheet"! Was then asked for my shot record---well, I had never had a shot or vaccination on my life, so that was all taken care of in one sitting!

Also, this was the end of my formal education as I did not finish High School until a few years later while living in St. Louis after returning from the North.

With a large raise to \$125 per month in the Fall of '43, I just had to continue this "career". The following Spring the Hqs. was moved from Edmonton to Whitehorse and the "Recruiting" began---many of the girls were apprehensive about the move (partly due to some wild tales coming down regarding living conditions, health problems, the terrible mosquito and "no-seeim" bites that could poison a person) so the management proposed a plan. They would fly us up there with a promise to stay at least 6 weeks and if it was just unbearable would return those workers to the "rear Echelon" in Edmonton and try to place them...(this office was located on Jasper Avenue in a large redwood structure known as the Bechtel-Price Building).

I was one of the ones who agreed to transfer---after going back to my folks at the farm and getting their permission (have thought many times that they could have very easily said "no" to the whole caper and look what I would have missed!) As it was, I "did my thing" and didn't even know it!!

It was mid-September of 1944 when I landed in Whitehorse. The billeting manager was in the barracks office when we arrived late at night, sometime after midnight as I recall. He was dressed in khaki trousers with a black & red checkered shirt, laced boots, and sporting a black beard! It was so appropriate, knew I was really in Robert Service country (my Dad had been a big fan of Service poems). They assigned us to barracks in the Standard Oil section on "the Hill" and we were bussed to the offices in an area close to "downtown". I remember how sparsely furnished these quarters were, and the common bathroom with no curtains on the windows and no shower curtains! Fortunately we were soon moved to the buildings set aside for women. First was Barracks 21, then Barracks 17 where I stayed most of the time. I was put in the Personnel office, given a raise and a new title of "Under Clerk-Typist" (an "ungraded" Civil Service category of the time, which meant you were subject to taking a Civil Service test at the end of the War and then placed on the regular CS register).

The Americans I met on the job were a surprising bunch to me---coming all that way (several were husband and wife teams) and leaving lovely comfortable homes back in the States! Years later I would understand it perfectly.....the gypsy blood takes over!

Being one of the youngest workers there was fortunate for me as I had many "wings" to be taken under and it was a wonderful association.

It didn't take long to be included in lots of activities and many "blind" dates ("my boyfriend has a buddy---would you go to the dance with him this Friday", etc.) Sometimes the blind date would result in a dating period of a few weeks or a few months, but it was a very transient situation for both civilians and the GIs, and an overwhelming ration of "boys to girls". For me it was a very temporary, unreal situation and I never did take things seriously---guess being 18 had something to do with that and the idea that there were so many things I wanted to do and places to go! Being 18 had another advantage too.....most of the young GIs I would meet were not married, whereas the girls in their late 20s and 30s would be much more liable to meet the married ones and that could get complicated!

The American Red Cross Center generated many parties, especially under the leadership of a gal named Lib Richmond (from Philadelphia, I think). In winter there was an area for tobogganing, and skating rinks were built---(no skiing that I recall but it could have been there somewhere). There were great places to hike, Miles Canyon, the old copper mines are a couple I recall. Because Miles Canyon was fairly close, it was a favorite place for a picnic and the beer would be kept cold in the Lewes River! The Corps of Engineers Special Services allowed the GIs to check out vehicles, mostly the jeeps, for trips to nearby lakes.....Ear, Marsh, Teslin were some I went to, and a trip to Lake LaBerge on the "Loon" was a special event (I believe it held 12 passengers, and a meal of steak and cowboy potatoes was served!) Another trip was to Lake Klaune by jeep with overnight sleeping bags at an RCMP lean-to next to the Lake. On about 3 occasions I went to Skagway on the WP&Y RR. We had to obtain travel orders to do this and guess it was through the Special Services office, so it was probably arranged by the Red Cross as an "R&R" event. It took 8 hours to go the 110 miles, so we would leave in early morning and stop at Lake Bennett for lunch, arriving in late afternoon. One particular trip was sponsored by the Red Cross who asked for "volunteers" to attend a Farewell Dance in Skagway for members of the 770th RR Battalion who were returning to the States. It was intended for the GIs and was

held in this huge barn-like building (have no idea where in Skagway). When we arrived we were met and escorted to our hotel, but what I did not realize was that many of the gals were “scooped up” by the Officers who met the train and taken to their Club for a dance they were having that same night! This created an even greater “ratio” at the GI dance, so every dance was a “cut-in” type.

I did get to meet a few local people due to the fact that one of the girls in my “Dorm” (actually Barracks 17!) was dating a Canadian fellow at the White Pass & Yukon RR office, and of course, he had “buddies” too! I remember a Christmas party held in the Depot one year.

The town of Whitehorse had a few shops, well patronized on Saturdays. I only remember one dress shop, and some jewelry and souvenir shops, and shops with mukluks and fur trimmed parkas, etc. that were very popular. Oprobably Murdock’s was there at the time, but am not sure.

The big treat was to eat at the Whitehorse Inn with its exotic menu of buffalo, bear, caribou, and of course, beef. The frozen meats for the Mess Hall (wehere everyone, civilian and military ate as a rule) would come in layers---days and days of chicken, then pork, then beef (with a few exceptions), then mutton. That’s when the local eateries would get the biggest flow of customers! Generally the Mess Hall food was very good (but what did I know!!) I think the food contractor was Metcalf-Hamilton-Kansas City Bridge out of Kansas City, MO. It seemed to me the Clubs (Cpls. Sgts. and Officers) all had their own Mess Sgts. who prepared food for various parties.

Having been raised in Alberta I was used to cold weather and don’t ever recall being cold in our Barrack “home” that was heated with an oil burning “space heater” located in the Common or Living Room at one end. Some people obtained small electric heaters for their rooms, tho’ the partitions between rooms were open at top and bottom so the heat circulated pretty well. During the two winters I spent in Whitehorse I believe the temperature never went much lower than 25 degrees below, tho’ other places (like Snag) would report 60 to 70 below.

Most of the photos in the album were taken my the Signal Corps photographers (wish I coudld remember some names). I had a friend who know a couple of the boys and he obtained at least 2 or 3 of the sets---the others were taken by friends who shared copies. Not many of the girls owned a camera at first (and I never did) but someone must have owned one later on, and taken some of those group pictures outside Barracks 17. It must have been a special event to “pose”, with even an attempt at some “cheesecake” by a girl named Kay with those old Khaki blankets as “backdrops”!

In 1946 the Alaska Highway operations and all that it entailed was turned over to the Canadian government. The last few months of the wind-up period was a time of decision for me. There was an opportunity for people to transfer over to work for the Canadian operations, but I decided to go back home to Alberta. After spending the summer of 1946 (July and August) with my family, knew that I really had to try my wings further, and take advantage of the fact that I had dual citizenship. So with my parents encouragement I went to St. Louis, MO to live with a cousin of my Mother’s and her family (I was very lucky with the relatives I encountered!).

While there I finished High School at University City HS at the age of 21! Next step was to take that Civil Service exam to be placed on the “real” register. I then obtained a job at the Goodfellow Blvd. Records Center where military and civilian records from bases all over the world generated during WW II were pouring into the Center for “warehousing”. Worked there from 1947 to February 1950 when I transferred to the Atomic Energy Field Office Personnel Section where I worked for 3 years and met my husband, Fred Chanatry, who was in the Air Force. From then on the “gypsy life” continued---first to Norfolk, England, to Syracuse, NY, Portsmouth, NH, Omaha, NB, Albuquerque, NM, Montgomery AL, Wiesbaden, Germany, Washington, DC, Al Khobar (Dharan), Saudi Arabia, and finally back to Albuquerque, NM in the autumn of 1980, where we have lived ever since.

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