

## 2018 Seasonal Story

Surviving in the Alberta Boom by Ernie Bies November 29, 2018

This year's Christmas story is a seasonal story harking back to our time living in Edmonton. In December, 1977, we had just moved from Ottawa into a developing new subdivision. Like most young couples starting out with a young child and a new house, we had to budget for everything. We had a pop can



system which consisted of a six-pack of empty cans in a carrying case. We allocated money for groceries, clothing, house expenses, car, entertainment and misc. into the appropriate can. Each week, we stayed strictly within the budget imposed by what was in the can. I think we allowed \$10 for entertainment and if there was not

enough to go to a movie or to go out for dinner, we stayed home. We didn't even buy a TV set for the first five years of our marriage, and then splurged on a portable black and white Hitachi that outlasted any colour Sony we have bought since. (As a cynical aside, I learned later that Sony built their TVs to last five years and then changed major components so the old TVs became obsolete and ended up in landfill.)

The move out west was very memorable as we took the train and shipped our trusty Ford Maverik, known as Blue Car, on the rails. It took just about as long to cross Ontario by train as it did to cross the next three provinces. We arrived on December 1 to balmy weather allowing us to unpack in our shirt sleeves. The next morning the temperature dropped to minus 40, which is the same in Celsius and



Fahrenheit, and stayed that way for two weeks. Our subdivision was on the South East end of Edmonton and we were one of the first families to move in. There was no bus or phone service and it was the pre-cell phone era. I had to walk about two miles to the nearest bus stop to go to work, leaving Sandy with the car. When she ventured outside, she found all four tires were flat and the plastic dash had cracked. Welcome to Alberta. Our son was just three years old so she bundled him up and went to the Show

Home a couple of blocks away to call me. I suggested she go and stand beside the car and look helpless and sure enough some good Samaritan construction workers came to her rescue. Winter driving in Alberta was a learning experience as they don't bother salting the roads when it is that cold since it does no good. They also don't clear the streets until the ruts in the snow are about six inches deep. Remember, most of them drive pickup trucks with four-wheel drive so it isn't a problem. It was a problem though, for transplanted Easterners who had to learn to drive on ice. Luckily, there was little traffic out our way so no one saw us slide through the intersections until we learned how to approach them. Even driving on a straight stretch was a skill because a slight turn of the wheel or a touch on the brakes, could send the car into a slow 360-degree spin.

Always on the lookout for ways to save money, we discovered that the many houses in various stages of construction offered free entertainment and opportunities. Construction workers have always loved their beer and no pickup truck in Alberta was complete without a case on the front seat. You could trace the workers' route home after work by the empty beer bottles in the snowbanks, sort of a reverse



GPS. On Saturday mornings, my son and I would take his wagon and go on beer bottle scavenger hunts. We made a game of it, as each week we'd try to top last week's total. He kept the running score and learning to add was an extra benefit. Alberta was ahead in the recycling game back then and there were many bottle stores that paid cash for beer, wine and liquor bottles. My son kept all the bottle profits and made more than \$60 that winter. He even found a frozen turkey that probably been thrown out after thawing in the back of a worker's truck. (No, we didn't bring it home!) Seems that the beer of choice for the workers was Lethbridge's own Pilsner, with its colourful

label. There were also a lot of bottles from cheap fortified wines called Cherry Jack and Apple Jack which I had to try once, just once.



My wife and I would visit the show homes in our subdivision, looking for design ideas that we knew we could not afford. We'd also walk through the partly constructed houses to see how they were being built. The model we had bought had an unfinished family room on the main floor which was a cost saving incentive on purchase. That first year, we did our research and started finishing the rec room, adding a three-piece bathroom. Our Christmas lists that year were heavy on carpentry tools and home construction, plumbing and electrical books.

We were happy to discover that Western Hospitality really does exist and it started at home. Being one of the first residents of the new subdivision we greeted every moving van and welcomed our new neighbours, usually with some home baking or a bottle of wine when we could afford it. Our first Christmas away from our families back east was very lonely but we found that many of our neighbours were in similar circumstances. We built friendships and have maintained



contact with many of them in the ensuing 40 years. Work bees were common as we all pitched in to help each other lay sod, build fences and garages. One day I came home from work and told Sandy not to put anything more on the Visa, as I had just bought a garage package. On Saturday morning my doorbell rang and about a dozen neighbours were standing there, hammers in hand. We put that garage up over a long weekend.

Getting back to the underlying theme of this story, which was surviving on a tight budget, we were appalled to see the sloppy finishing and the extreme waste of material at the construction sites. Alberta was in the midst of a building boom and speed was of the essence. Tongue in groove, three quarter inch plywood, finished one side, was used for subflooring and the excess was simply cut off with a chain saw. Sometimes pieces eight feet long and eighteen inches wide were wasted in burn piles. After 2"x12"x8' planks had served their purpose as foot-holds during roof construction, they were removed and tossed on the burn pile. They were not reused even though they were in near perfect condition, simply requiring someone to remove the nails. Union rules dictated that only a qualified carpenter could use a hammer or a crow bar, so it was more economical to simply waste the planks. I suggested to the foreman one day that they should hire students to salvage the decent lumber but he said unions would not allow that and the risk of injury to inexperienced kids was too great. The construction could be best described as rough. Drywall was slapped up in a hurry and even though the books I was reading specified in great detail how much gap to leave between sheets, there were visible cracks and holes you could put your fist through. When I asked a worker about that he said they would cover it all with drywall mud and a coat of paint and no one would be any the wiser. New homeowners were not encouraged to come to watch their dream home going up.

Seizing the opportunity, Sandy and I made many an after- hours run to salvage perfectly good materials before the morning burns. We even pulled the nails and straightened them for reuse, harkening back to my days on the farm when my Dad, who never threw anything away, assigned that task to me. I was only five or six years old then and it took some practice to learn to swing a hammer without hitting my fingers. I learned that if I gently tapped the head of the nail when it was laying on a board, I could set it so it didn't fly away when I tried to straighten it with the hammer.

After a few months we had a nice supply of lumber, planks, plywood and nails ready for the right project. Much of this scavenged material was used in finishing the rec room, which was a story in itself. We took great pains to install the drywall with the proper gaps, not relying on plaster to hide mistakes. Sandy will never forget one particular sheet of ceiling drywall we were attempting to install on Mother's Day using T-supports to hold it in place while we fastened it. The support on Sandy's end slipped and the sheet came crashing down on her head. We decided it was time to quit for the day.

When the Christmas holidays came in 1978, we were again left to our own resources as we could not afford to travel back to Ontario. We decided to spend New Year's Eve building a work bench in the basement using all salvaged materials. At midnight we toasted our labour with a bottle of champagne. This New Year's Eve tradition of doing little house projects continued for years to come.