

The Christmas Party Train and a Slovak Toast

by Ernie Bies, Ottawa, Ontario December 2012

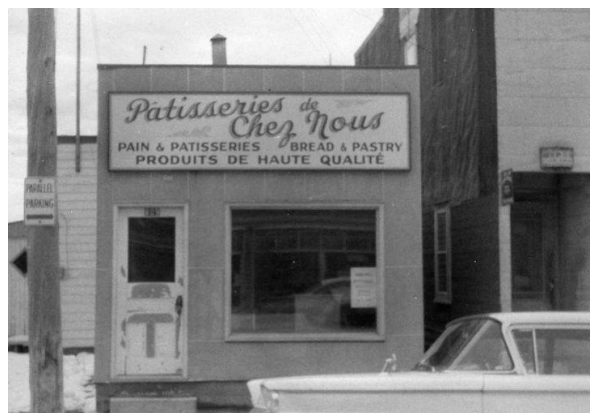
Northern Ontario kids who went south for University back in the 60s will remember those train rides home at Christmas time. The Ontario Northland of that era went all the way to Hearst and the conductor wisely put all the rowdies in the last car so the regular people were not bothered by the partying, impromptu sing-along's and jam sessions. We sounded better as the night wore on and people did not worry about knowing the words. Folk songs were the order of the day and before long everyone was belting out Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore, Puff the Magic Dragon and The Unicorn. If you shared your cheer with the conductor he was likely to be more tolerant, within reason, but we often had people depart along the way when they became too boisterous. The folks from Southern Ontario were joined by those from Ottawa at North Bay and a whole new party started, this time with French songs to add to the repertoire (and they were better singers). Not many people slept on this trip which could take up to 24 hours. On



Morel Museum, but the Beer Store is still there.

one trip there were only a few of us left heading for Hearst after Kapuskasing so I made a mad dash for the Beer Store that was on the fringe of the train station parking lot and got a schoolboy six which we shared with the conductor over the last hour. (Hair of the dog?). Note that the train station has been converted to Tourist Centre, home of the Ron

Though exhausted and hung over we were all happy to be home. My sister reminds me that I would normally walk home from the station, deposit my suitcase in the kitchen door and take off immediately to see my friends. My Dad would simply remark "Ernie's home". Renewing acquaintances, revisiting old haunts, Lumber Kings Hockey, Ski Dooing and partying were the priorities. There was also the obligatory trip to Le Patisserie de Chez Nous for a fill of those exquisite cream puffs, dates squares and butter tarts much to the chagrin of my poor mother who had a pantry full of Slovak pastries ready to serve. No one got much rest on these "Christmas" breaks as there were just too many activities and too many people to see.



Another Christmas tradition my father had was to keep a bottle of brandy near the front door with some shot glasses and every visitor had to toast the season on entering. He would have preferred Slovak Slivovica (Plum Brandy) but since it was not available in Canada he made do with regular Brandy. All of my friends soon figured out this tradition and suddenly our house was a popular stop when making the rounds. Years later I was at an antique show with my wife and spotted some of the same shot glasses that my father used and snapped them up so I could continue the tradition. Not wanting to spoil my enthusiasm she waited a while before telling me that they were not shot glasses at all, but egg cups, Manhattan pattern. My Brother Bill went a step further and scoured antique stores all over Southern Ontario till he could equip the whole family with a set of egg cup shot glasses with a picture of Dad in action.



Last fall my son arranged for a work colleague who was visiting Slovakia to bring back a real bottle of Nicolaus Slivovica so I can truly continue my father's Holiday tradition, egg cups and all. The photo on the left shows the bottle of Slovak Slivovica, (52% alcohol content) and a bottle from Croatia, (40%), which is available in Canada. Those egg cups only contain about a half ounce so perhaps that was a nod to the power of Slivovica.