

FRIENDSHIPS CAN BE DISCOVERED EVERYWHERE

Grandparents on both sides of my family were Doukhobor immigrants from Russia (now Georgia). Even the indigenous Canadians are apparent immigrants from Asia some 20,000 years ago. So we all comprise the “Cultural Mosaic” as our past Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, categorized Canadians when he repatriated our constitution from England.

I started my schooling in a small Village of Veregin, Saskatchewan in 1946. Much of the class came from the Doukhobor community where the parents all knew each other. It was a friendly atmosphere. I do not recall any discrimination nor “name-calling” and thus enjoyed school very much with my sudden immersion to many playmates.

Our family was able to change from a leased farm to a purchased farm in Pelly, Saskatchewan in November of my grade two (2) year. I was suddenly, immersed into a strange community and needed to create new friendships. I found this relatively easy but the students in a similar class size that I had left, came from diverse cultural backgrounds that included, Ukrainian, Anglo Saxon, Polish, German, French and a few Russian (including Doukhobors).

Children bring family attitudes with them to school. I was called a “Drunk’s son”, a “Dirty Douk” as well as other names that need not be mentioned here. I understood the “Drunk’s son” as I knew my father was a victim of alcohol addiction and soon everyone in the class knew that. I could not understand what “Dirty Douk” meant and so I had to ask my mother. The DD was difficult for me to understand since there were no incidents of Doukhobors disrobing in that part of the country.

Bullying was paramount as Pelly School was K12 so that older teenagers were intermixed with grade school students in one school yard. Many occasions, I was punched and pushed down but I grew up in a “conscientious objector” family and so fighting back was not an option. I was able to generate a few friends. It was a cold winter noon when a grade six (6) classmate rubbed my face with his cold leather mitt. I did not know that was an aggravation that I could not tolerate as my involuntary reaction was a quick “upper cut” that knocked my larger aggressor over into the snow. He lay there as surprised as I was because I had never reacted in that fashion before. We never questioned each other after but we became friends and respected each other right through graduation. I am not sure if this is a recommended solution to “bullying”.

There was a large outhouse for boys and that was where I received the most severe intimidation as the older boys talked in low tones as to what they could do to me. As a young boy, I did not realize that they were “joking” and the school student code in Pelly was that “no one ever squealed on anyone otherwise there would be serious repercussions”.

So, I developed a character that trusted no one right through high school. Times changed in the later 1950s, attitudes became more socially tolerant as we respected each other more. Those students that were the worst perpetrators of violence also had difficulty passing their grades and “filtered way” we might say along with their “problems”.

There were enough residents, in Pelly, that a Doukhobor community was existed, and I learned to sing hymns and songs in the traditional Russian language. I also created cultural friendships that seemed to indicate that my Doukhobor culture was a “protection zone” for those all of us participating.

I prepared this introduction to identify the social impact on a farm boy who grew up not having close neighbors; however, my grades were surprisingly sufficient that my Principals and Educators encouraged me to carry on my education to a university level.

Also, I had spent three (3) summers working with my brothers and their house-building construction company in the Kootenays of British Columbia which provided me with a broader understanding of Canada and the diverse people living in this country.

In my graduation year, I was elected President of the student council which was a complete reversal of my relationship with my classmates in grade two (2).

So the “stage” was set for my transformation from “farm boy” to “city dweller”.

I had heard of a Doukhobor Youth group in Saskatoon that was comprised of students and young people from all parts of Saskatchewan, and I was attracted to join these young people. Again, it was likely that I was trying to find a “protection” and “comfort” zone as the sudden immersion into seven (7) thousand



students (1958) at the Saskatoon campus of the University of Saskatchewan was frightening from the one hundred and thirty-five (135) students in the entire Pelly School.

Although there were three (3) students from my Pelly Class, with which I carried on with friendship at U of S, I created a special friendship with the Saskatoon Doukhobor Youth (SDY). *For the purposes of my story, I will choose this foursome of friends for my comparison of friendships.* Keith Tarasoff on the extreme left, had a family in Saskatoon and invited me to board at their house. I was extremely honored to accept and my “starving student” changed dramatically, to a member of the Tarasoff family. Keith completed a degree in Agriculture and then carried on to a second degree in Education. Keith taught for two (2) years and found that the classroom was not his future and went back to the family farm to apply his knowledge of university Agriculture.

Next to him stands Alfred Kabatoff who came from Blaine Lake and achieved a degree in Education and taught all his working career.

Michael Ozeroff “finished” school in grade eight (8) at a country shook near Langham and immediately went into farming with his father. Michael was a choir leader of our youth choir and eventually became a director. Michael was very community minded and served for over ten (10) years as a Director of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool which later sold their cooperative to Viterra.

I, Elmer Verigin, achieved an undergraduate year in Chemical Engineering before “switching” and then graduating in Civil Engineering.

This foursome intermixed with about another ten (1) Doukhobor Youth to form a very “close circle” of friends.

Yes, I did have Engineering student friends but the “closeness” to my Doukhobor friends was genuine and treasured.

The four (4) Doukhobor boys married four (4) Doukhobor girls from within the SDY and remained married to the same partners for their lives. Keith, Alfred, and Michael have all passed on leaving Elmer and the four women friends to continue the friendship we enjoyed throughout the years.

Elmer had many opportunities offered to him upon graduation which included a scholarship to continue with a master’s degree in Sanitary Engineering while teaching at U of S; however, the plan always was to work together with his two brothers Lawrence and Russel who had already assisted with summer employment and earnings to complete his education. After careful consideration, it was decided to accept an offer from Columbia Cellulose Co. Ltd. (CCCL), a Sulfite Pulp Mill at Prince Rupert. There the mandatory two (2) years of internship with practicing Engineers would qualify Elmer for Professional Engineering status. A working challenge in a strange city where we did not know anyone was part of the decision-making to expand my world.

Elmer was already married with a daughter in the family and so family became part of the decision criteria. CCCL moved our young family to Prince Rupert and found us a place to live in that community.

Marilyn, Nona and I travelled by car through unknown highways and Highway 16 which was under construction in a new car that we had purchased on my first loan.

Our adventurous experience made me a bit nervous as we found the Pulp Mill on a map and were firstly apprehended by guards at the gate who then directed me to Human Resources followed by my first visit to the Engineering Building within the Plant. Everyone was surprised as they did not expect me until after my graduation ceremonies which I skipped because I just could not wait to start earning “real salary”.

CCCL had hired eight (8) graduating Engineers in 1963 as they prepared to soon expand their operations with an additional pulp mill that would produce Sulfate Pulp. This is how I met this group of guys. *Again, we seemed to fit together and so I will define these young men for my story.* This photo was taken at our reunion at Whatshan Lake Retreat some forty-five (45) year later.

Jim Holloway at on the left, was a graduate Civil Engineer from UBC. He later continued courses in Metallurgical Engineering after two (2) years at CCCL.



He eventually owned his own Metallurgical Plant that manufactured Anodes for the Pipeline industry.

Next is Robert (Bob) Miller who graduated in Mechanical Engineering from the U of M. Marilyn accepted Bob as a Boarder because there just was not too many places in Prince Rupert to obtain R & B at that time. Bob stayed at CCCL for a few two (2) years and decided to take a Masters in Business Administration. His first position was at Southern Institute of Technology of Alberta located in Calgary. He advanced to Assistant President until he continued as a Residential Developer on Vancouver Island

Then we have Elmer with Ron Ross on the outside, an Electrical Engineer graduating from the U of A. Ron was the first to leave CCCL to an Engineering position with Cominco at Trail, B.C. He was enticed to join Mickey Thomas Engineering in Vancouver. He later returned to Trail, B.C., to incorporate an Engineering Consulting firm EMCO Engineering Ltd with Elmer and two others. Later Elmer, Les Kitchen and Harry Soloveoff, left the organization. Ron continued as an Electrical Consultant with EMCO. Ron passed away a few years ago.

Engineers do not discuss religion too much and so this was a drastic change in friendships for Elmer as well as his environment. There was a “draw” for us all because the situation and conditions in Prince Rupert were such that we “needed” each other for our own comfort because we were new employees and just starting out in our future careers. We were possibly a good selection by the CCCL Recruitment group in that we “jelled” as we were all enthusiastic to apply our education to advance our Employer. It appeared that Management was not able to satisfy this activity and soon all the eight (8) graduate Engineers moved on to other careers.

From a social standpoint, the four (4) in this photo, were well suited to each other and soon:

- Fishing in the creeks and rivers located from Prince Rupert right through to Smithers, Terrace and Kitimat
- With Sid Corbett (a First Class Steam Engineer) and his 22-foot Yacht, deep sea fishing in and around the Prince Rupert Harbour
- Crab trapping
- Clam digging
- Hunting
- Curling
 - Competed in bonspiels From Smithers right through to Terrace and Kitimat
 - Won the Grand Aggregate at the Marine Bonspiel in Prince Rupert
- Celebrating any excuse from birthdays to new babies
 - The predominant rainfall did not dampen these “spirits”
- Most events included the subject four (4) but the populace at Prince Rupert was very friendly and social events were easy to organize.

Although the profession of Engineering is such that those who follow that career will be recruited by competing firms that employ Engineers as this is a method by which competitors are able to advance their operations and the Engineers their experience.

From Elmer's association with CCCL, I was offered the Assistant Project Manager position to construct the new Sulphate Pulp Mill as well as three (3) rival companies. I had "moon-lighted" with a local Architect to gain that knowledge and was offered a partnership. Despite all these opportunities, Marilyn and I left Prince Rupert to join my bothers in the formation of a Building Construction company.

The main purpose in writing this story was to compare friendships from a "cultural community" to a "professional group". My intent was to prove that friendships that are created have common denominators:

- Compatibility
- Companionship
- Trust
- Sharing
- Freedom from prejudice
- Acceptance of each other

I continue to live my life as a Doukhobor, together with my family. Doukhoborism is perhaps better described as a "Way of Life" rather than a religion.

I was accepted in both foursomes without conditions and thus enjoyed the true meaning of Friendship.

I was able to carry out these experiences from age twenty-five (25) through the rest of my life.

I continued to enjoy the friendships that I accumulated up to end of my teenage years and through my young adulthood at twenty-five (25). This became my basis to enjoy friendships in:

- Business
- Construction Industry
- Doukhobor Organizations
- Communities

In all instances, I accepted them as friends.

Written January 23, 2023.

Elmer Verigin

