

Impressions of Canada by Wyndham Samuel

Sergeant Wyndham Samuel from Swansea, South Wales, U.K. was among the Advance Party of about 250 RAF personnel to come to Penhold in August of 1941. He was part of the Headquarters staff that looked after Pay, Stores, Accounts, and general administration of the base. Sergeant Samuel was part of the Accounts staff. The following are his first impressions of Canada. Both photos are from him as well. Bill Mackay (editor), 2019

“It was a bright and sunny afternoon in August of 1941 that I and a number of fellow-members of the R.A.F. had our first glimpse of Canada, otherwise known as the “land of the Maple Leaf”. The ship steamed slowly into the port of Halifax in Nova Scotia, and it was a great relief to all when the ship finally docked, as six days on the Atlantic at the height of the U-Boat peril was not a comfortable feeling by any means. I had never imagined that there could be so much water in the world. Nothing but water for six whole days. It reminded me of the old saying – “water, water, everywhere, but not a drop to drink”.

Halifax seemed to me to be situated in very pleasant surroundings. Even from the ship I noticed that it had several magnificent buildings, which I later discovered were the Hotel Nova Scotian, Lord Nelson Hotel and the City Hall.

As soon as I disembarked I walked along to the main part of the city. I was amazed at the abundance of fruit, amongst which, some of the R.A.F. boys almost “ran amok”. At first, the Canadian money seemed very strange but I soon understood its value. I found it to be a far simpler money system than our own complicated sterling system. One of the main things that struck me as funny were the wooden houses. Most of the houses in the residential areas were made of wood, but in the business section of the city, stone or brick buildings were more in evidence.

Barrington Street was the name of one of the main streets in Halifax, and along this streamed a never-ending line of cars, taxis, and trams (called street-cars in Canada). All the cars were driven on the right-hand side of the road, and, at first, this was very strange to me. The Canadian cars were very powerful, and made an occasional British car which passed-by resemble a toy. Most of the streets in Halifax were very wide, and were lined

with trees to form charming avenues which gave the city a clean appearance.

Since the war, Halifax has become world famous for its port facilities, as the docks are well situated, and accommodate the largest liners and cargo ships. It is an ideal terminus for both rail and sea transportation.

Well, time soon rolled by, and once again I had to start traveling – this time over land. The railway station was a great contrast to the usual British Station, although it had one thing in common – drabness. The station was quite open – no steel fencing, etc., or ticket collectors at the gate to prevent people from sneaking through to the platform. The platform was at ground level, and consequently there was no fear of falling off in front of an on-coming train. When the train finally pulled-in I held back slightly in awe at the monster of the “iron road”. It was a very powerful engine with a huge lamp at the front which cast a piercing beam along the track at night time. The coaches were “Pullman”, and although I had often seen them in the films, I had never realized that they were so massive until the moment I caught the rail and climbed aboard.

The coach was quite luxurious and was supplied with all modern conveniences. There was an aisle down the centre of the coach, and along this the passengers passed to and fro, often to the annoyance of some people who wanted to dose. Along this aisle traversed the ever-popular newsboy with his papers, magazines, fruit, chocolate, and almost anything else digestible. He went along the whole train, from coach to coach, advertising his wares in his inimitable drawlish tone. He came along wearing his little peaked cap calling “Oranges, cigarettes, chocolate”, and the lengthy accent on the vowel “a” was a source of secret amusement to me. Finally the train began moving with a sudden jolt, and I was off on a five day trip to Alberta.

It was amazing how fellow-travelers became so friendly to one another in a short space of time, and I immediately thought of the vast difference in Britain, where people often travel for hours together and hardly a word be spoken the whole time if they happen to be total strangers.

After leaving Halifax the train traveled due north, and I was informed that the first stop would be Truro. As the miles began to fly past and Halifax left in the distance, I passed through very thickly wooded country which was

broken occasionally by a glistening lake. The miles went by and some idea of the vastness of this country began to dawn on me. I had often glanced at a map of Canada but I had never imagined its actual vastness. Now and again I passed a wooden house or a scattered farm, and I was sure that the inhabitants in those desolate spots greeted the coming of the train with great excitement, as it broke the monotony and seemed to bring them back to civilization for a few brief moments.

Onwards puffed the train until Truro was reached. Here there was a short wait while the engine replenished its huge water tank. I stepped off the train onto the platform, then over the road to a street of wooden shops and cafes. I managed to have a hasty snack before the whistle of the engine warned me that it was ready to depart. All the engines in Canada were fitted with a large bell at the front, and when entering a city, town, or village, this bell tolled ceaselessly to warn people and frighten animals off the tracks. This was explained to me by a fellow-traveler as I had been under the impression that the tolling bell was being rung at a church, and that Canadians went to church at all times of the day!

The food on the train served by French chefs in the dining car was simply delicious, and there was no doubt in my mind that the Canadian Pacific Railway Co. served its passengers excellently. In the evening the Sleeper Attendant came around and made the beds ready for the night's rest. I managed to sleep alright except when the train went round a sharp bend which caused me to roll from side to side.

In the morning I discovered that we'd traveled quite a distance in the night, and that I'd passed through Moncton and that I was now headed towards the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Along the shores of the St. Lawrence I passed numerous holiday resorts with charming little chalets amongst the trees, and; people enjoying them selves by basking in the sun. At last, after traveling along the St. Lawrence for about 220 miles I crossed the famous Jacques Cartier Bridge and finally Montreal was reached.

Unfortunately, I was only able to spend half an hour in Montreal, but it seemed to me that the French element was very predominant in that city. From Montreal I traveled north of the Great Lakes to Champlain, although I had an occasional glimpse of Lake Superior from the train window. On the way, the Canadian people showed all RAF personnel great hospitality and kindness. It seemed to me that immigrants from European countries had

settled in batches all over Canada and formed their own community. It was on the journey of Champlain that I passed numerous lumber camps, and I saw the logs shooting down the chutes into the lakes, and men skillfully jumping from one lot to another.

It was night when the train reached Port Arthur, but it was a wonderful sight to me as the whole place was illuminated. Neon signs were flashing, etc. and it all seemed so unrealistic to me having come from a blacked-out Britain.

From Port Arthur I traveled westwards towards Winnipeg, and this stretch proved to be a wonderful although slightly monotonous sight. It was very flat and bare of trees. Golden wheat fields stretched for miles and as far as the naked eye could see. An occasional puff of wind seemed to transform the fields into a sea of gold as the wheat swayed gently in the breeze. This was the start of that world-famous part of Canada called the "Prairie".

Finally, Winnipeg was reached, and I managed to spend a few hours in that fair city. The railway station at Winnipeg was a magnificent affair, and could be used as an example for all stations in Britain. Outside that station stood the "Royal Alexandra", one of the largest and most imposing buildings in Winnipeg. Winnipeg has huge granaries, and is regarded as the heart-beat of the Canadian Prairie. I also found that it was a manufacturing town, and that most of the farming implements had been developed there. Due to plentiful supply of milk being available, chocolate-making was fast becoming one of the city's chief products.

It was with much regret that I had to leave Winnipeg where the population was mostly British, but the engines having been changed the train was ready to move off once more. Portage La Prairie, Brandon, Moose Jaw, Regina, and Medicine Hat were passed, and I finally arrived at what was sometimes called the bad town of the West – Calgary. Alongside all of the railway stations from Winnipeg to Calgary were huge granaries from which wheat was transported to all parts of the world. After a brief stay in Calgary I traveled due north and passed through the small towns called Didsbury, Olds, Innisfail and finally to the end of the trail – a little remote place called Penhold situated about 85 miles north of Calgary with a total population of about one hundred inhabitants. The R.A.F. station itself was about four miles from Penhold, and I felt "rather blue" at the prospect of being on the advance party with the job of opening-up a flying school under the British Empire Air Training Scheme, and situated "out in the wilds".

The aerodrome was situated about one and a half miles from the main Calgary-Edmonton highway. Consequently, it was soon discovered that the town of Red Deer was only a few miles further north. The road from Calgary to Edmonton was a hard-surfaced road, from the United States to Alberta, and since the war had become a very important highway, especially since the opening of the Alaska Highway which commenced at Edmonton.

During my first road trip to Red Deer I noticed that the road had a ditch equally as wide running along on both sides. These, I found out later, were constructed to drain away the heavy flood water which succeeds the great thaw in Spring. Another thing that I noticed was the absence of those neatly-trimmed hedges so familiar at home. The townsfolk of Red Deer (population about 4,500) accorded the R.A.F. chaps with a great welcome, and were anxious to know which part of the "Old Country" we came from, as a majority of them had emigrated from Britain to Canada during the depression period in Britain about twenty years ago.

Red Deer was a prosperous little town, and prospered more after the R.A.F. boys arrived there. Most of the buildings were made of wood with the exception of one or two of the hotels and stores (called stores and not shops in Canada). Even the cinema was built of wood, and during performances no smoking was allowed. The town boasted of five churches, two small cinemas, three hotels, a high school, and a number of stores and cafes, all of which were accommodated in the two streets; one running due south to north, and the other east to west. Running parallel with these streets were the residential areas. The roads in these parts were terrible as they had no hard surface; they were called "gravel roads".

I found most of the houses very neat and of the single story type. Although made of wood, they were very strongly built, and did not resemble a wooden house which I had imagined. Most of the houses had a basement in which there was a stove which provided central heating for all the rooms in the house. This was not obtained by the use of radiators and pipes, but by an hot air system. This heating, I soon found, was very necessary in the severe Winters experienced in Canada. The housewife did all her cooking either by gas or electric stove, and it was only on a few rare occasions that I ever saw an open fireplace in Alberta. Ample use was made of all modern conveniences which I found were comparatively cheap compared to prices in Britain.

I soon discovered that the average Canadian diet was far in advance of the average Britisher's. Fruit juices from California were part of the Canadian breakfast, and after that there was a choice of a dozen wheat cereals, before partaking of the usual bacon and eggs. There were only three meals a day, - breakfast, lunch and dinner. But if one felt hungry out of meal times a snack or an ice-cream soda in one of the ever-popular drug stores would soon remedy that complaint. These drug stores were not where drugs were obtained but a combination of confectioner, newsagent, and chemist, all" rolled into one".

As myself and my fellow-members of the R.A.F. were the first R.A.F. boys to be stationed in that part of Alberta, an invitation was extended to all Welsh boys to visit Edmonton as guests of the Cymric Society in that fair city, which is the capital of Alberta. I along with fourteen other Welsh boys made the trip one week-end about six weeks after our arrival at Penhold. It was 110 miles by road to Edmonton and we only passed four small towns during the whole journey. After leaving Red Deer we traveled due north passing through the small towns of Lacombe, Ponoka, Wetaskiwin, Millet, and finally Edmonton. The country north of Red Deer is one of the richest mixed farming lands in Alberta, and Lacombe had a large government experimental farm. It was while passing through Ponoka that we had our first glimpse of some real Indians who lived on a reservation at Hobema, about eight miles from Ponoka. They were attired in ordinary clothes, but the men wore their hair long and formed it into plaits. The Indian women were short and stout, and it was funny to see the way they carried their little "papooses" around on their backs..... "

Editor's note – Originally there appears to have been another page which was subsequently lost or misplaced.



Accounts staff in front of their accommodations. None appear to have the insignia of a Sergeant, the rank Wyndham held. Note one soldier in the shadow to the right whose head is at hip level of the others in the front row.



Inside of accommodations for Samuel Wyndham and other staff at RAF No. 36 S.F.T.S.