

D.F. van Laren
Dutch Immigrant
Groote Beer
October 28, 1953



The OCEAN CROSSING on
the GROOTE BEER
October 20-28, 1953

Tuesday Oct 20th departure day finally arrived. My fiancée had the use of her father's car for the trip to Rotterdam and Dad, Mother and my sister came along for the waving out ceremony. The final goodbyes had to be said in the departure hall just before I went through customs and check in. Dad thought that it would be a final farewell and was a bit down. I had no such thoughts and said some thing like see you in three years. The well-wishers were allowed on a section of the quay and they waved me out from there. Conversation was really not possible. At 4:00pm the ms Groote Beer cast off and we were underway.

First stop was Le Havre where we arrived the following morning to pick up some more passengers, bringing the total to 839 (according to the passenger list). On board were a large number of farmers from the province Zeeland leaving for a new beginning in Canada after the February floods. Most spoke practically no English and had large families with them quite an undertaking but no doubt they all did well. The accommodation was like on a troop ship, which it was, with dorms for the men and women, cabins for families that could afford them. My dorm was in the bow of the ship and had 2-tier bunks. Here the ship's rocking was more pronounced and weak stomachs had a bit of a time luckily it did not bother me. In the forward smoking lounge was a bar and some tables and chairs not an unpleasant place but not much frequented by most. It was also the place for the nightly entertainment organised by the crew or by comedians and musicians among the passengers. The latter was usually the best one of the comics was a returning missionary from Africa on his way to Quebec a real character with a seemingly unlimited repertoire of jokes, mimics, comical stories and songs. Time went quickly.

This was our first view of Canada in the morning, the city of the Halifax harbour front. The Groote Beer moored off at Pier 21 the large immigration shed - now a museum - where all emigrants arriving by boat went through to be processed and cleared. (Pier 21 is located just left of the stack in the picture); 524 disembarked in Halifax the remaining 315 went on to New York. On entering the shed we were welcomed by a

number of people, many belonging to the order of The Sisters of Service in their grey habits, inquiring if you needed any translation or other assistance, and they would direct you to the proper clearance area. Being single and OK in English, I was processed quickly. Others sat in rows of long benches waiting for their turn. Then I had to clear my trunk and confirm the shipping arrangements to Toronto by noon I was a landed emigrant.

The special immigrant train for Montreal and Toronto would not depart for some hours, so a few of us walked into town and climbed to the Halifax Citadel, which at that time afforded a magnificent view of the city and harbour. The climate was sunny but already quite cool. Eventually we boarded the train for the 2-day trip to Ontario. The steam-locomotive driven train comprised a number of rather old 2nd class coaches and a couple of restaurant/snack bar cars. There was a designated section for Ontario and another for Western Canada that would be shunted off in Montreal. It soon became dark and there was little to see, except when the train rode through a small town. Typical of those days train tracks often ran along the main streets. It reminded me of scenes in old Wild West movies, not exactly what I had come to expect from the brochures a bit of a culture shock. The trip went over Rimouski, following the shore of the St Lawrence River to Quebec City. In the crisp morning hours of October 29th, we enjoyed the magnificent scenery. At Levis, on the opposite shore from Quebec City, there was a rather long wait and we had of plenty time to take in the scenery in the morning sun. Quebec City had no high-rise office buildings then and its Chateau Frontenac Hotel and the Citadel stood out in all their glory.

Note: The CN tracks along the shore have since been removed and VIA rail now follows Hwy 20, allowing only a glimpse of the city in the distance.

The trip to Montreal was very slow with frequent stops on sidelines to let scheduled freight and passenger trains whiz by. Then another long wait in Montreal, to allow the coaches for the West to be shunted off, and finally we were on our way to Toronto, arriving at Union Station close to mid-night. My friend Ted who had arrived a few months earlier was waiting for me. He had arranged for a room at 50 Asquith Ave (near Bloor and Yonge) a typical rooming house of those days. My room on the third floor rented for \$10.00 per week and included housekeeping services.

We checked my big trunk at the station for later delivery and were off on the Yonge St. streetcar another culture shock. These streetcars were the oldest in Toronto and dated from the 1920-ties. Although electrically driven the heating was provided by a coal-fired stove in the middle of each car, which the conductor proceeded to fire-up with a poker. I could

not believe my eyes and still don't understand the underlying logic! Ted explained the Yonge street subway, then under construction, was going to replace these ancient things by 1954 he promised better cars on other Toronto lines.

The following morning, Friday Oct 30th, I reported to ACME Electric, where I had been promised a job, and became a working member of society, earning \$1.00 per hour.

DF van Laren
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