

Eric Wicherts
Dutch Immigrant
Groote Beer
April of 1954



Arrival via Pier 21

The spring of 1954 was not particularly nice. I left Rotterdam at end of March on the immigrant vessel the Groote Beer (meaning Big Bear, not large beer) operated by the Holland America Line. The crossing took 9 days, two of which being hove to in Atlantic storms. That did not bother me since I have been sailing at sea since I was a young boy. It did however supply the well stocked dinner tables with even more items due to the sea sickness of quite a few passengers. We met in mid ocean the Queen Mary on opposite course. Running with the wind she seemed to have an enormous speed; an impressive sight. A stark contrast with the 10 knots or so out converted Liberty ship could manage bucking the west winds.

Finally the Canadian coast came into view through rainy clouds. We thought we could see some white patches in the distance but the visibility was poor and only inside Halifax harbour could we see the buildings and docks. We were guided to an enormous hall (On Pier 21) where immigration officials first checked our passports and papers, then, walked along some stationed health officials (but there was no Ellis Island health inspection since that had all been done in Rotterdam). Next along tables marked with 'destinations' where helpful ladies gave out information on Canada and our journey to the destination. Many of the immigrant families carried ident cards but I came as a 'professional' (geologist) and was more at liberty. I had made contacts from Holland by mail and could travel to Saskatchewan (Dept. of Mines) via Toronto.

On the backside of the Pier were several tracks on one of which our train was parked. To us, used to the somewhat smaller European equipment, the train looked enormous. On our landing documents we were also given a coach number for the train. We, that is myself and some other younger people befriended on the crossing, found two adjoining sections and installed ourselves. First impression: the much overheated interior of the train; way too warm! We thought about opening windows but that was not as easy as the turning crank operations on the Dutch trains. The latter were already highly electrified but here we were impressed by the enormous size of the CN steam locomotive. Since we had some time before the departure we wandered into the neighbourhood of Halifax.

Second impression: streets choked with automobiles! Cars, even in 1954, in Holland were not rare but certainly not as numerous.

Back at the train, which by now had well filled up, we waited for the departure which, I think, was late afternoon. The CN track winds its way from the sea level location at the Pier to the highlands of Nova Scotia and at first we did not realize that there was something on the lakes but then we realized it was ICE. The further we went, and higher, more snow appeared and clearly now the over-heating of the coach became obvious. Then it was getting dark, the lights came on and the porter, a black person, came around to make the beds in upper and lower berths. It was very comfortable and even special blankets were covering the lower half of the windows. Next morning we were in Quebec, blue sky and temperature somewhere near minus 30 C. Third impression: Snow! And, for this story, last impression, oddly unpainted farmhouses. Near Montreal I watched with interest the taking over of our train by the electric locomotives for the last part of the journey into the city. My entry into Canada via Pier 21 will, as long as I live, be in my memory.

Post Script

Next day in Toronto I was offered a job by Imperial Oil. My wife and first daughter came in July by KLM (a 26 hour flight). We bought a small farm house in Unionville and I had a career in the exploration business. But also was president of the Colonist Rail Car Society and we operated our private exCPR sleeper over tracks in Western Canada. I was as well a director of the first Canadian shortline the Central Western Railway in Alberta. My family expanded and with three daughters and seven grandchildren the adventure into Canada turned out to be a success. As Canadian citizens we are concerned about the future of our magnificent country with the threat of climate change, pollution and pressure from our neighbour to the south about our resources.

Eric Wicherts

Member Alberta Association Professional Engineers
Member Am. Association Railroad Superintendents
Member Honorable Guard Military Museums

