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Removed from the hubbub of the big tourist trade in Alberta, the whole aura changed on the Canada trip.

Before nightfall, the damp mountain air settled in the small outposts of British Columbia to chill the outdoors and burn off the next day by noon. Living rooms in the bed and breakfast inns crackled with fireplaces burning sappy logs. Menus emphasized thick vegetable soups and crusty French rolls. The proximity of the salmon runs provided several excellent grilled salmon steaks, brushed in dill and butter. Angus beef served in a wild mushroom sauce at one inn brought back bitter memories of the degeneration of the meat markets and steakhouses at home. I blanched at the thought of a Canadian rancher seeing good Texas cattle along the highway, then for dinner eating a steak unfit for a Second Class Scout to use in a stew for his First Class merit badge.

The side roads south of Canada One pass through a series of small towns connected by ferries. Lake country settled before the railroad by using paddleboats to come in from the Pacific Coast on the Columbia River. The only trace of Americans was a road sign outside a small town proclaiming, "metric free zone." An artist in a shanty of a propped-up studio said a few U.S. exiles from the Vietnam War draft protest might have put up the sign; however, he added, "We rural folks are pretty independent, living off out here so far from the rest of the country."

From the looks of the cracks in the floor and walls of the studio, it looked like come winter the artist was going to need a snow broom and a shovel to throw out the sweepings. We talked a long time. No sense in hurrying on roads linked by ferries. Takes awhile to realize that unless you are driving an amphibious craft, you aren't going to cross the big lakes and rivers in B.C. any faster than the ferryboat runs.

All along I met people to visit in the bed and breakfast inns. One characteristic of the couples running bed and breakfasts is that they seem to be burned out from a busy career in the big cities. Perhaps the sale talk from the trade journals convinces people to change to innkeepers. I've met all kinds. One man up in Maine had represented an engineering firm in the Orient. One couple in South Carolina quit the big track in Chicago selling bonds and stocks to put their children in small schools. An old sister over in Georgia was an exception. She required her guests to sign in at night. I suspect she might have been intended to be the dean of an oldtime girl's college.

In Revelstoke, B.C., I registered in a three story mansion called "The Piano Keep," run by a guy who restores pianos. The "keep" part must have meant "museum," or "depository." The bottom floor was filled with pianos in all stages of disrepair, from water stains to missing keys. I mean 30, maybe 40 instruments from uprights to grand pianos. The whole house had a musical atmosphere. Even the cuckoo

clock in the kitchen harmonized with the canary singing in the hall, who took his beat from the grandfather clock.

After dark, the place was spooky as a Halloween show. I scurried up the steep staircase to my third floor room. The reason I scurried so well up the creaky floorboards was from the dummies sitting on the piano benches, casting shadows as ominous as the images from the Frankenstein movie.

At Crawford Bay, B.C., my room was the old library at a handsome place called "Wedgewood Manor." I scooped up a handful of postcard pictures of the house at the desk. Quite a step up socially for a bitterweed sheep rancher from Mertzon to write from a manor once belonging to a granddaughter of the founder of the Wedgewood china family in England.

Off the library, a formal parlor furnished a writing table perfect to hold a book or tablet and glowed with a soft light from fringed lampshades. Steady rain kept the guests indoors, but didn't keep a party quiet on the second landing. About 11 p.m., a rotund gentleman dressed in wet tweeds and carrying a drink walked up to the desk. Short of an opening so close to midnight, I chose, "Good evening, sir." He nodded, and asked in a clipped British accent: "I beg your pardon, sir; but have you by any chance seen my wife, or my wife's pillow?" He peered in his glass, and continued, "I seem to have plenty of whisky here, but am low on ice." He then turned and left the room.

At breakfast, a short hefty lady, carrying a big fluffy pink pillow under her arm, marched through the reception. Her escort, the gent from the night before, seemed quite willing to attract as little attention as possible to their departure ...