

TREK of a LIFETIME

Former scouts reminisce about an incredible hike they took more than 50 years ago.

BY ELIZABETH WHITTEN



All photos courtesy David Day

THE YEAR WAS 1962 and David Day, Frank Janes and Bob LeMessurier were hanging on for dear life outside Deer Lake, Newfoundland. They clung precariously to Grand Lake’s bridge as a train barrelled past just a few feet away. The trio had been making their way across the bridge when they heard the locomotive and had to think fast.

“So we had to get off the bridge kind of and almost hang off the bridge while the train came through,” Bob says, laughing at the memory more than 50 years later. “That was a fairly long train, too, as I recall.”

“So here we were, literally hanging on off this bridge above the lake,” he continues. “If we had to, we would have fell into the water; but we didn’t have to, as it happened. We managed to scramble back on after the train went through.”

Recently, Bob and David reminisced with *Downhome* about their hike from St. John’s to Port aux Basques, which they embarked on 55 years ago. (Frank, the third hiker, passed away earlier this year.)

As young men, they were involved with the Sixth St. John’s Boy Scout Troop when they read about William Eppes Cormack and his Mi’kmaq guide, Joseph Sylvester, who walked from Milton, Trinity Bay to St. George’s Bay in 1822. The guys wanted to follow in their footsteps, but due to the passage of time and ongoing construction, they had to adjust their route.

The trip “became a combination of an endurance challenge and an exploration experience,” says David, who was 19 at the time. At 21, Bob

was the eldest of the group.

They set off from St. John’s on September 2 and arrived in Port aux Basques on the 30th, having walked more than 900 km. They travelled on the roads, along the railway tracks (which still operated at the time), straight through the interior, including going over the Gaff Topsails.

Seeking Shelter

At first the men carried 50-lb packs each, but quickly found they didn’t need that much stuff – including the tent they’d packed. “It was too small to start with,” Bob says. “I mean, the three of us were bulging out through it and our feet were out through the door, so we gave that up pretty early in the game.” Instead, they used their scout training (plus the skills Bob developed during his time in the Canadian Forces) to make their own shelter at night, using a poncho or evergreen boughs to make a tilt. If the weather was clear, they would recline outdoors.

David remembers there were nine days when they had to stay put and wait out the weather. “We were unable to walk at all because of torrential rain and, in one instance, on the west coast near Wreckhouse, very heavy winds, which made it

Left: Dave, Bob and Frank were all inspired by the 1822 trip across the island made by William Eppes Cormack and his Mi’kmaq guide.

imprudent to walk. So consequently, we found shelter and waited out the storms."

Of course, the trek took place at a time in Newfoundland's history when trains were an integral part of life. Sometimes the men crashed in section-men shacks, and once they spent the night in an abandoned caboose in the Gaff Topsails.

"Occasionally, during the walk when we were on the rail track, the locomotive engineers would signal to us, give us a warning, so we could step down from the track while they passed," David recalls.

The journey wasn't without its risks. Besides dodging trains, David required hospitalization at one point.

"David nearly lost a toe; he didn't tell you about that," Bob says. Out near Come By Chance, David's toe became badly infected, requiring medical treatment. When he recovered, he refused a ride and forged ahead to catch up with Frank and Bob instead.

Over the course of the hike, Bob went through no less than four pairs of boots and still ended up walking from Badger to Deer Lake with just a bit of felt protecting his feet.

When they required supplies (like footwear for Bob or freeze-dried food), they'd find a phone in a community along the route and call family back in St. John's, who'd load packages onto the train with directions to drop off the caches.

One of the more memorable moments from the trek, says David, was the lone person they ran into in the middle of nowhere. It was a late afternoon near the Gaff Topsails Station when the scouts spotted an



September 2, 1962: The team gathers on Kenmount Road in St. John's to begin their journey

illuminated tent.

"We went down off the track and paid a visit, and inside we found a gentleman who worked in New York and came annually to Newfoundland to hunt wildlife with a bow and arrow," David says. "And we spent a number of hours with him. I remember he prepared us a meal of Irish stew and we had a marvellous discussion with him. He came up alone; he camped alone. The rail service would drop him off midway along the Gaff Topsails...and he would hunt for a week and then he would go back to New York."

The End of the Road

It first happened around 2 a.m. The trio was between Deer Lake and the south end of the Codroy Valley when they heard the sound of applause. The trio kept on their path and never saw those who were cheering them on. David figured people from the nearby community must have heard they were going to be in the area and stayed up to welcome them. "We

never saw them, we never identified them, but we heard this sustained applause," says David. The strange occurrence happened on three different nights.

It remained a mystery until December 2016, when David met with a visiting lawyer who asked David if he'd been one of the scouts who'd walked across the island in the '60s. The lawyer had lived on the west coast as a child and remembered his small community waiting in the dark for the scouts to come down the highway so they could applaud. "What a remarkable coincidence," David says.

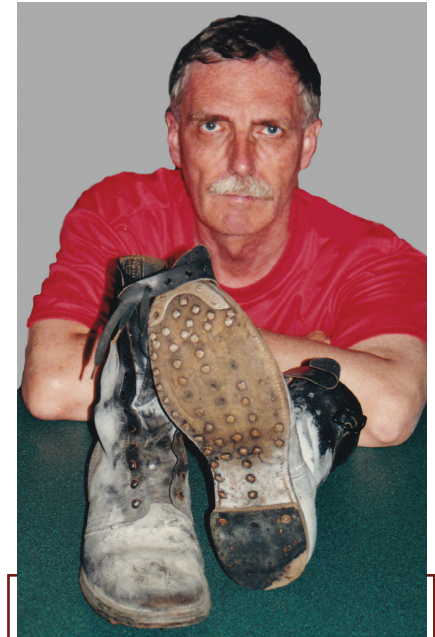
On the night of September 29, they were approaching their final destination: Port aux Basques. They were about to make the final push into town when someone invited them to spend their last night in a lodge. "I think so that we could properly do our hygiene so we'd appear respectable, reasonably respectable, when we walked into Port aux Basques on the 30th of September," David says. "And we did avail of that."

The next morning, as they were making the last leg of their journey along the highway, they were met by the people of Port aux Basques and the local boy scout troop. Bob recalls, "We had the whole scout movement – cubs, scouts, leaders and so on – that persuaded us to stop about 10 miles out...And they made us go right out the channel, as far as you can go, and dip our feet in the water."

This past September, David and Bob reunited to recount this incredible trip for the 24th annual meeting and dinner of the 44th Baden-Powell Guild, an organization for former scouts and guides.

"I didn't think much about it after

the walk was completed," David says. "We set out to attempt to cross the island, we were fortunate to do so, and then we went on with our lives. And as a matter of fact, Frank and Bob and I never had a reunion."



Over the course of their trip, Bob went through four pairs of boots. While David only used the one pair, he did keep them.

When they arrived back in St. John's via airplane, they'd all missed the first month of the university semester and were soon working to catch up. Frank was in a pharmacy program, David was working on an arts degree that would take him to law school, and Bob was planning on a career in education.

"So we went on with our lives, really didn't give it a lot of thought, subsequently," says David. "But now we find ourselves 55 years later reminiscing about it." 📖