

DEPARTMENTS

RECALL OF THE WILD

Bears, Bergs and Bonding: Verna Siga's Life in Jasper

By Ian Urquhart

Sometimes within seconds of meeting people you know how special they are and that the time you spend with them will be memorable. Verna Siga is one such person. Verna, now 92 years old, is the person today who has lived in the mountain town of Jasper the longest. With eyes as lively and blue as the waters of Lac Beauvert, Verna is a wonderful window on what life was like in Jasper three generations ago.

In 1922 Hal Bowen, Verna's father, left the family home in east-central Alberta very near the Saskatchewan border to join the company of workers hired to build and expand Jasper Park Lodge, Canadian National Railways' bid to compete with Canadian Pacific Railways' Banff Springs Hotel for railway tourism dollars. The family joined him in 1924 just after Verna had turned five years old. When she got off the train her eyes strained to see what I hope any five year old would want to see – bears. "The first thing I wanted to see was the bears," she chuckled, "but there weren't any bears at the station that day." If Verna wasn't impressed by the fact no bears greeted her at the train station she was certainly struck by one difference between Jasper and the central parkland she had called home until then – she now was in a land of Christmas trees.

As we talked in Verna's apartment it struck me that some of the excitement of her youth was tied tightly to failures of the region's resource development ventures to deliver the good livelihoods people gambled for. Pocahontas is a case in point. Carved out of the wilderness near the eastern boundary of what was then Jasper Forest Park in 1908, Pocahontas became a booming coalmining town of nearly 2,000 people during the First World War. When the war ended the demand and prices for the coal mined there fell sharply. The mine closed in 1921.

By the time Verna and her family moved to Jasper "Poco" was a ghost



Verna Siga, 92 years young, is joined here by a photo of Mount Robson – the site for many adventures in her youth.

PHOTO: I. URQUHART

town. But the old railway grade became a local road and the drive to Pocahontas was a popular family day trip in part because it afforded the chance to visit Punchbowl Falls. But, the ghost town and the abandoned mine had a real appeal to the children too. Verna recalls how the company houses simply had been abandoned; time cards, hard hats, stands for washbasins were all left behind. The opening to the coal mine also was still accessible and added an element of risk to the visit – at least as far as Verna's father was concerned. "Don't go near there" she said authoritatively, doing a good job of affecting both her father's deep voice and his warning to his children.

Verna's early years in Jasper were ones when transportation routes and connections between settlements were both very different from today and were changing dramatically. Few visitors to Miette Hot Springs today, for example,

may realize what Verna told me about how popular the hot springs were to the miners in Mountain Park – just southeast of Jasper Park – who came to the springs over Whitehorse (Fiddle) Pass. Verna describes the hot springs pool that the miners crafted out of logs. It sat further up Sulphur Creek, closer to the source of the hot springs, than where the pool is located today.

Arguably Verna grew up while a transportation revolution shook Alberta's mountain National Parks – the building of the Icefields Parkway. This highway, a Great Depression public works project completed in 1940, also plays a part in some of Verna's memories of growing up in Jasper. Verna's father, who became the Imperial Oil agent in Jasper, supplied fuel for the highway construction crews and their equipment. One day Johnny, her older brother, took Verna and their sister Edna with him south in the Bowens' fuel



Verna climbing Mount Rearguard.
PHOTO: V. ARSENAULT

delivery truck. Their destination was a highway construction camp south of the Athabasca Glacier. When Verna recounts that trip today her voice still is full of the excitement she felt in the 1930s when she saw the icefields for the first time. “It was a thrill to see it (the icefield) you know. I thought it looked like a cupcake with icing on the top.”

If that was how she saw the icefields her story makes it very clear that “cupcake” was not a word to use to describe other parts of the trip. The tote (supply) road they had to take once they were off the highway got steeper, skinnier and more treacherous the further south they went; eventually Edna had had enough: “Edna wanted to get out of that

truck when she could see straight down about a thousand feet I guess. And so he stopped and let her out.” Verna, however, stayed in the truck with her brother... “I said... so if Johnny goes over then I’m going too!”

That adventurous spirit may have found its best outlet some years later when Verna started to work during the summers at the Berg Lake Chalet in Mount Robson Provincial Park. The Hargreaves brothers (Roy, Frank, Jack, George and Dick) all homesteaded at Mount Robson and started a guiding and outfitting business from Robson Ranch. Roy took out a five-acre lease on Berg Lake and built the Berg Lake Chalet there in 1927.

In the early 1940s, Sophie Hargreaves, Roy’s wife, had offered a job to one of Verna’s sisters to work at the chalet, but she couldn’t accept it. Verna delivered the news. Mrs. Hargreaves asked Verna if she would like to try it: “Dear, would you come out for a few days and see how you like it? Well,” Verna laughs, “I went out and stayed for about four months, most of it up at Berg Lake.”

Verna loved it out there as you can infer clearly from the look on her face in the accompanying photo of one of her climbs up Mount Rearguard. There she formed a lifelong friendship with Ishbel Hargreaves who eventually came to manage Mount Robson Ranch with her husband Murray Cochrane.

At the chalet Verna was really a “Jacqueline of all trades.” She helped cook for the hunters, climbers and other adventurers the Hargreaves catered to. She tended to the horses that were vital to the outfitting operation.

And, she helped deliver ice to the chalet’s ice house. The source of the ice? The ice that calved from Berg Glacier into the lake. A rowboat would go out onto the lake and tow the ice back to the chalet where it provided the refrigeration.

One of the real pleasures of my early afternoon visit with Verna and her daughter Vonna was watching the two of them pour over and reminisce about dozens of photos from various limbs of Verna’s family tree. One thing that experience taught me about was the bonding possibilities nature offers. Here I don’t mean when you or I feel closer to, or more a part of, the natural world. I mean instead family bonding. Nature and activities in the outdoors may be a catalyst for bringing families closer together. In Verna’s life Jasper’s natural amenities, whether in the guise of a trip to a hot springs, or a ski race through the townsite, or a skate on a frozen pond or lake, strengthened many branches of her family tree.

Verna told me how, as a kid, she couldn’t wait for the ponds to freeze so she could go skating. This passion was one she then tried to instill in her children. It worked. Vonna says that she is still one of the first ones out on the ice in early winter. Both women celebrated how special it is to be out on a lake such as Lake Edith when the ice surface is like glass and trout tease you from the water below. I wish you could have

heard the excitement in Verna's voice when she offered to pull out another album of photos recording her family on the ice. When Verna was too old to skate this didn't stop her children and grandchildren from taking her out on the frozen playground she loved dearly. A toboggan replaced her skates and the younger generations pulled her around on the ice.

By the final minutes of our interview I thought I had learned enough about Verna's love for the Jasper area not to be surprised when I heard she was nearly 70 when she had taken her last 20 kilometre ski trip into the Tonquin Valley. Nor was I surprised to hear that this excursion was a family event. Nature, love, family – I think they are inseparable in Verna's world.

I think, if there's a thread running through all the interviews we conduct for "Recall of the Wild," it's a thread with continuity at one end and change at the other. Most times, the changes are easy to recognize. Today bears, for example, are not the perennial squatters and beggars in the Jasper townsite, in Jasper gardens and on the verandas of Jasper Park Lodge bungalows that they were decades ago. Probably few people today feed deer at the backdoor like Verna and many of her contemporaries did. She showed me a photo of a magnificent mule deer buck at her backdoor – no more than an arm's length away from the camera – and anticipated my question when she offered: "I think he would have come in the house but I got a little nervous then." The multi-day or day trips of years ago Verna described to me may just take us minutes or at most a few hours now.

But certain continuities often animate these recollections as well. And, if sometimes we express concern about changes over time we should think about whether we should be concerned as well about some of these continuities.

Verna's memories, for example, speak volumes to the desire in days gone by to make nature conform to our expectations. She gave big and small examples of that desire. The smaller expressions of the desire to shape where we live and play according to our norms may strike some as trivial in the greater scheme of things. We should smile good-naturedly at some examples. For instance, Verna was talking about just how rocky the townsite of Jasper was. By rocky she



Verna and her brother Chess on Jasper's main street.

PHOTO: V. ARSENAULT

didn't mean pebbly or gravelly. She meant "boulderly!" Her parents' yard on Connaught Drive exemplified this. Her father had what appeared to be a good solution to the boulder's clash with societal norms of what a backyard should look like. "We had a great big stone... in our backyard with a sledgehammer beside it," Verna said. "When the boys started fighting Daddy would say, 'take your muscles and go out and hit that stone'." The boulder eventually disappeared.

Other examples are neither small scale nor light-hearted. Verna told me that much of the soil for the Jasper Park Lodge golf course came to Jasper, not courtesy of local geological forces, but courtesy of Canadian National Railways (C. J. Taylor states that the CNR brought in 40 freight car-loads of topsoil). Those

nasty local rock outcroppings, one that the Bowen boys were urged to hit with a sledge, were blasted away to aid Stanley Thompson's efforts to make a fabulous golf course that well-heeled railway tourists would come to play.

This attitude, to make Jasper a playground that will appeal to certain types of visitors is just as much a part of Jasper today as it was generations ago. The current debate over Brewster's Glacier Discovery Walk affirms this continuity (on the Brewster plan see page 24 and 25 in this *Advocate* and pp. 25 and 26 of the February 2011 *WLA*). I think I know what Verna must think of this absurd proposal – just that, it's absurd. I also know that, for me, Brewster's madness is an affront to the values pioneers like Verna stand for. Let's hope her values triumph in the end. 🍂