

VALLEY HISTORY AND THE WINDERMERE VALLEY MUSEUM

BOX 2315, INVERMERE, V0A IK0 250-342-9769 November 2015



Vreni Zehnder

How amazing it seems that a little valley like our Valley can be home to so great a variety of interesting people from so many parts of the world. Name almost any country you care to and the chances are that someone from this district has been there.

Take Afghanistan, for instance— who would have thought that..... Well, if you doubt it, visit a little house on Waterway Drive in Invermere. Walk into the small entrance porch and right in front of you in a well spaced row on the wall are nine colorful hats called Kula which the Afghans wear under their turbans. (Made of six or seven yards of material.)

The house is small but it contains a wealth of treasures from India, Afghanistan, and Switzerland. The rug on the living room floor has a rich pile and vibrant color and the sofa, a hand-woven cover delightful in texture and design. Both came from Afghanistan. There are hand woven squares on the coffee table and on a wall a large portrait of an Afghan tribesman.

I was greeted by a tall, slender woman wearing a most attractive waistcoat embroidered in shades of orange on lambskin, lined and trimmed with caracul.

My hostess was Mrs. Fritz Zehnder. Vreni. I explained my errand and found her most willing to show her treasures but doubtful of her ability to explain them to me in English. She suggested French and I had to admit my halting high school French would be far more painful than her English, which proved to be no problem at all.

Mrs. Zehnder speaks four languages. German, French, Italian and Farci (the most common language in Afghanistan.)

Vreni was born in Bern, Switzerland. When she was 18 she wanted to train as a nurse. She was told that she must wait until she was 20 and that she must let her short hair grow and fasten it closely to her head while she was in hospital.

She went to Italy for a holiday and while there received word that because of the great shortage of nurses , she would be accepted for training , short hair and all. So for the next three years she studied nursing in various Swiss hospitals because the system there is to have student nurses work under different doctors in different hospitals to widen their experience. Nurses there, she told me, work from 6:00 am to 8 or 10:00 pm. At the end of three years she received a diploma from the Lindenhofspital at Bern.

During one of her vacations she had spent six weeks in India with friends.

Sometime after , she saw an advertisement stating that the Swiss Consul in Afghanistan was looking for a nurse for his children. Hospital training was not a requisite but no doubt was an added qualification in her favour and her other qualifications are quite evident. She spent three

years in Afghanistan. She showed me some of her treasures. Children's waistcoats, miniatures of the lovely one she wore, embroidered on velvet or lambskin and trimmed and lined with lamb's wool; a carved beggar bowl on a chain which she uses as a planter; a brass chain which she uses as a planter; a brass "abi potar", a water jug and bowl from which water is poured upon the hands of a guest, a traditional ceremony in Afghanistan which she explained is carried on even in the homes of the poorest people where the jug would be native clay pottery; an etched copper teapot and a slender vase-like container in which she said Afghan men keep their red eye cosmetic with which they "make-up" their eyes. This was a habit she found strange at first.

She told me many details about her life in that wild, intriguing country; of the poverty of the common people; the dreadful prevalence of TB, smallpox, cholera and dysentery; of the king, who, educated in Germany and France, tried to enforce modern civilization on his people too quickly and was deposed; of the paved roads that the Russians are building into Afghanistan and the a great bakery they have built to satisfy the constant need for the people for bread.

She said the World Health Organization is doing fine work and so is UNESCO, but Russia is supplying the first need of the people whose stable food is bread and tea.

Vreni said education for the common people is virtually unknown, that in a population of 16 million, the only children's hospital has 40 beds. And although the King only has one wife, and is trying to establish monogamy, a man may still have as many wives as he can afford.

There are many American cars, and an airport, but no Afghan pilots. There is no railway. Water is bought daily at the bazaars.

In that wild and desolate country there is little agriculture. Mulberry trees are cultivated to feed the silkworms which produce the fine silks for the wealthy; there are vineyards and the grapes are dried for raisins but not used for wine because the people are Mohammedans and never touch alcohol.

Vreni lived at Kabul, the capitol of the country. I asked what the population of the city was and she said it would be impossible to guess because in taking the census they do not count the women and the number of wives varies according to the wealth of the husband.

She returned to Switzerland in August 1959 and was awaiting a visa to Moscow which she had an urge to visit when she decided to accept Fritz Zehnder's invitation to come to Canada to renew their friendship, and if she liked it well enough (and him well enough) to marry.

Fritz had been in Canada ten years. He had lived in a neighbouring village to Emental (tal meaning valley of the River Emental) in which Vreni Schuerch lived. They did not meet until grown-up at the home of Vreni's sister-in-law, who is related to Fritz.

Vreni did not go to Moscow— she flew to Canada instead. She arrived in early November 1959. She arrived here at night and next morning awakened to mountain scenery which was much like her own country. This was a land in which she felt at home. This feeling was accented by the friendliness of the people she has met.

Vreni Zehnder is herself a friendly person as is natural with one who has visited many people in many countries. She has brought with her many things besides her lovely Afghan and Indian treasures. Her friendship is a treasure that would be valued in any country.

Editors note- Vreni and Fritz had 4 sons. Chris, Mark, David and John are still living in the Valley. Vreni passed away September 24, 1996.

(Winn Weir files— 1959)

November 3, 1933

With the death of W.C. Wells, the Columbia Valley has lost another of its old time pioneers. The late Mr. Wells was interested with others in mining ventures here, especially the old Ptarmigan Mine, and the present village of Wilmer was called after him, his Christian name being Wilmer.

Billy McNeill

January 17th, 1912

I was yesterday talking with Mr. E. Johnston, Rancher in this neighborhood, who has been living here since the year 1882. Referring to other subjects, I spoke to him relative to the naming of Horsethief Creek along the lines of my memorandum of January 12th, 1911, re: G.A. Starke. Mr. Johnston said that the following circumstances: Namely, that in 1885 a man by the name of James Kane was camped on Canyon Creek and that some roustabout-wanderer whose name he did not remember had come along and, it is alleged, stolen two of Mr. Kane's horses; that he had taken them south up the Valley; that a posse comprising some Indians and having the Honorable F.W. Aylmer as one of its members had started in pursuit of the alleged thief and had been able to track him along the Valley and that he had turned to the West up what was then known as Number One Creek. The pursuers continued up the creek with the result that the man was captured about 13 miles West of where it empties into the Columbia River, and was taken prisoner and conveyed to Wild Horse Creek where he appeared before a Mr. Kelly who was the Gold Commissioner. As fully as Mr. Johnston remembered, the trial turned out to be a fiasco, most of those taking part in it getting drunk, and that it resulted in the acquittal of the alleged thief.

Mr. Johnston said that after that episode this creek which had once been known as Number One Creek, bore the name of Horsethief Creek.

(B.G.Hamilton files.)

Justice David J. Brewer, Supreme Court whose name appeared in " True West" February 1957 was my father's brother (Sam Brewer). Other men that my father knew were George Maledon, the Hangman and Judge Isaac Charles Parker.

(Hope Brewer files)

Billy McNeill was a nephew of James McKay, an early day settler in the Valley. His sister, Miss Pearl McNeill, was the first telephone operator at Wilmer.

Mr. McNeill first came to the valley in 1890 via Golden. He recalls that there was only one hotel at Golden at that time, owned by Johnny Connors. He came up the Columbia River on "The Pert" captained by Frank Armstrong. He lived for a time on the McKay Ranch, near Edgewater, then returned east to attend school at Boston. He returned in 1903 and worked with his uncle on the ranch.

In 1905 the Stony Indians had left their encampment at Morley, between Banff and Calgary and had come to the Windermere area to trade. They were accustomed to doing this periodically. They would hunt on their way through the mountains, camp at Stoddart Creek and trade with the local Indian bands.

But when the federal government proclaimed that the forest lands of the Banff and Kootenay Parks were protected areas for game the Stony Indians were deprived of one of their favorite hunting grounds. They came to the Windermere Valley and declined to return to their reserve. The authorities decreed that they must return. They said they couldn't, that they didn't have any grub.

Billy McNeill was appointed a special constable to accompany the Indians returning to their reservation. The other deputy accompanying him was George M. Willard (a brother of Francis A. Willard). They bought two tons of grub at Joe Lake's store and said " Here's the grub, now let's get going." But the Indians said they didn't want the grub.

Nevertheless the Indians, who occupied about 30 tipis, were rounded up with their 150 head of horses and escorted back by Billy McNeill and George Willard. At least they took them as far as the Alberta boundary where they were met by four Mounties who took over the escort duties from there.

Ted Egge

Old copies of the “Wilmer Outcrop” the first Windermere District newspaper, yield many tales of old times and old timers. Among them is the pathetic story of the boy who came back. The tale is told in the February 22 issue, 1906 as below.

Ted Egge, nephew of Mrs. J.S. Barbour, evidently started for his home in Iowa last Friday evening and he has not been heard of since. Poor little Ted is about 15 years of age and has been a very homesick boy for sometime past and no doubt his longing to go home and see his friends is accountable for his silent departure.

“It is about three years since he came to Wilmer with his aunt to live on the ranch six miles up Toby Creek. He was brought here for his health, which had improved wonderfully and also because his mother had just died. He appeared contented until last fall when he received word of his father’s death and ever since he wanted to go to his brother, but Mr. and Mrs. Barbour thought it best for Ted to stay here. Ted rode down to school every day and when he did not return Friday night Mr. Barbour, fearing he had been thrown off his horse and injured, came to town very distressed but no information could be obtained of Teds whereabouts until he went to the stable where the horse was kept. He found Teds school books and saddle and fastened to the saddle a pathetic little note which read something like this: “ Tell my aunt not to worry. I’m going away. When I get far enough away I will write to her.”

When Mr. Barbour read this, he shouted, “ He’s alive. He’s not hurt. He’s alright ! ”

Ted is a good boy and a favorite with every person who knows him and anyone who meets this orphan, homesick boy and will aid him will receive the hearty thanks of this community.

(Museum Files)

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Movie Night at the Museum

This winter we have two movies scheduled for 7:00 pm on their respective Sunday evenings.

January 24– Mantrap-1926

This is a non-talkie with English intertitles. The wild lakes and woodlands of Ontario are not a place you would expect to find a girl like Alverna. From the Library of Congress preservation collection.

February 21– South Pacific-1958

This is set in war time but clearly is more about romance and native customs that battles.

2016 Meetings

January 21-

Guest Speaker is Megan Peloso . Lake Windermere Ambassador. Very fitting as the 2016 Summer Theme is “ The Uses of the Lake”.

February Heritage Week– 15th-22nd.

Theme: Distinctive Destinations.

Watch for specific dates.

(Compiled by Sandy McKay)