

Hi Samantha

September 18, 2013 (My July Letter)

I got your lovely and detailed August letter. What a busy life you lead! For my July letter I will continue with some stories relating to the jobs I had as a boy.

As I told you in my last letter I worked in a bowling alley and a butcher shop. At some point in high school I got a job in the grocery department at Woodward's at Oakridge shopping centre near my high school. It had just opened and at that time it was one of the first shopping centres in Vancouver.

My job (along with many other teens) was to pack groceries, stock shelves, take groceries from a conveyor belt and load them into cars, clean up spilled goods, and be a general go-fer. It was a nice job - as long as I was moved from one job to another during a shift but it could be boring if I got stuck on one job all the time. I didn't mind packing groceries so long as there was someone interesting on the cash - or sharing the packing job. Some of the girls were especially nice, but I was too shy to follow up with any of them.

I worked there for a few years - eventually getting more responsibility. At times I would be asked to help out in the produce section or prepare the chickens for roasting in the delicatessen. It was also a reasonably good wage so I would be happy when I was asked to work the occasional weekday as well as the weekend.

The year I graduated from high school I wanted something different for a summer job though. Somehow I heard about a job with the forest service that sounded interesting so I applied and was accepted on a "fire suppression crew". I discovered that this was a group of about 8 or so young guys like me who would live together in a camp and be ready to fight any forest fires that arose. We were the quick-response team that would try to keep the fire under control until the major crew could be assembled and transported to the fire. I added a photo of the camp in this letter. You can see it was taken in 1962 when I was 18 years old.



While we were waiting for fires we trained using the pumps, hoses, and other fire-fighting equipment that we would use. We also spent plenty of days clearing logging and fire access roads and helicopter landing sites all through the mountains around Nanaimo.

Our camp was just off the highway that goes from Victoria to Nanaimo. About 10 km from Nanaimo there is a road bridge that crosses a lovely river. Our camp was a short walk downstream from that bridge. You can see the bridge in the background of the photo I have included here. Fran took the photo when we visited the site a couple of years ago (on our way to Comox to see Zach).



The area sure looks different now. When I worked there the camp had about 6 or 7 little cabins and a bigger cookhouse and mess hall. You can see them in the photos below - along with one of the crew at the front of one cabin. The one with Fran walking down a country road is in the spot where the camp was. The cabins are all gone and only the concrete foundation of the cookhouse can be seen among the brush and trees that have grown up.

One of my most memorable times at the camp was when I was selected to take over for the fire lookout operator when he had his vacation for a week. I was driven by a jeep up a road on Mount Benson (overlooking Nanaimo) and deposited in a tiny cabin with cliffs on three sides.

The cabin looked very precarious - and it didn't help to see the 2 huge metal cables strung over the complete structure to keep it from being blown off the cliff!

Snug up against the cabin were four enormous wooden poles with a tiny shed-like structure perched on the top.

This was the lookout tower that I would have to climb about 6 times a day to check for signs of fire and take readings on some of the weather instruments that were there. Once a day I would radio in the readings to the local forestry office in Nanaimo. That was the only human contact I had for the week I was there.



It is very interesting to have such an isolated experience like that. I remember anticipating that it would be wonderful to have such a nice long time to relax, read, write, and go for walks but I discovered that much of the time I just felt lonely. I wonder how someone like you - who is so connected to others all the time - would fare during such conditions. Would you like to try?

On our time off we would walk up the river by our camp to swim in the swimming hole near the bridge. Someone had tied a rope to the bridge so we loved swinging out over the water then letting go. Some of the more courageous (or foolish) guys would climb up on the steel beams of the bridge and jump down from there. I never had the nerve!

I only worked in this type of job for one summer. After that I went to university and had different opportunities for summer work - like working in a mental hospital, a 7-up bottling plant, and a Kraft Foods warehouse. But those stories are for another letter.



Love,
Bill