

Towards a rebranding:



The recent news story about HitchBOT, the hitch-hiking robot, was both illuminating and darkly amusing. Designed at McMaster University in Ontario, the robot relied on the goodwill of drivers to pick it up, recharge its batteries and drop it off further down the road. While being carried along, the robot engaged its drivers in a friendly 'chat.' Its progress was tracked and its interactions recorded. HitchBOT's creators hoped the experiment would shed light on the question: *'Can robots trust human beings?'*

HitchBOT successfully crossed Canada twice and 'hitchhiked' extensively through Europe. Yet soon after setting off in 2015 to cross the USA, its journey ended on a dark street in Philadelphia. Photos showed mutilated bits of the robot scattered on a curbside. Seconds before the robotic head was decapitated, its camera recorded human feet stomping out a response to the research question...

The kid with backwards baseball cap tromping the robot in the night-vision video looked vaguely familiar... In my native village in New Brunswick back in the 1960s, he would have been among the local boys who ensured that any experiment in public trust was dealt with as the future HitchBOT would be in Philadelphia.



Coming to mind is the public notice board that was once erected across from the village mayoral office. Typed papers proclaiming dog license ordinances and the like were tacked up behind a glass panel. The original glass was smashed within a few days. It was replaced only to be smashed again—with the notices therein ripped up and strewn about. Within a few months, the board was taken down—the 'experiment' in public trust having failed.

Around the same time, the telephone company erected a payphone booth on the village main street. It wasn't long before it reeked of urine. Soon after, the handset was stolen. When replaced with another attached to a steel cord, the earpiece was torn out. Then the panels of the booth were kicked out. Repairs were regularly made until an attempt was made to gouge into the coin box... The public phone booth was taken away—another failed experiment...

Such vandalism may seem petty compared to offences against public property common today. Back then neither fire, bullets nor explosives were employed. In fact, vandalism was probably no more of a problem in that village than it was anywhere else at the time. Yet then as now—the impact of destruction of public property in communities where everybody knows everybody is much more *personal*...

As for the perpetrators of the offences described, I have no doubt that my long-haired ilk were among the suspects. The village cop (who doubled as a Pentecostal preacher) did not grasp that dope-smokers were not usually inclined to kick out windows... The truth was that vomit on the handset of the public payphone was no less appalling to my ‘hippie’ cohort than it was to most villagers...



The real culprits, I suspected (rightly or wrongly) were the duck-tailed boys who wore hobnailed boots. They were the “tough enders” who dropped out of grade school, joined the army or wound up in jail—unless saved by Jesus... If there was any real target of the hijinks of those bad boys in the dark, it was those villagers who had a way of looking down their noses in the presence of supposed inferiors. Crudely put, the message of the village vandals was: ‘*Don’ think yer piss smells any sweeter ‘n ars!*’

Although not given to political awareness, what those boys despised in their guts was the pretentiousness of the self-appointed high and mighty. It was the village’s pious nostrils which the piss in the payphone booth was primarily meant to offend...

No one now under sixty could possibly remember the unspoken—yet implicit—distinctions of the social order in that village in that era. While hardly as rigid as Indian caste or even British class distinctions—for a population of largely blue-collar workers, there was a curious pecking order. It was partly based on jobs. Railroad engineers, civil servants and teachers—while not comparable to ‘Brahmins’—were higher in status than the local version of ‘Sudras’, who worked in the woods... Those on welfare were not quite ‘Dalits’—relegated to untouchability—but observing the manner in which their vouchers were handled in the grocery store—one might have supposed so...

Perhaps these implicit distinctions could be traced to old world rivalries of tribe and clan. In any case, it seemed that the social hierarchy was acknowledged only within the village and neighbouring environs. Outside the village, like almost everywhere else in the country, status depended on the usual determinants—money being foremost.

Yet within the little community what seemed to matter almost as much as one's job was the smell of one's name. The shabbiest street in the village was jokingly referred to as "pig's ear" by the same villagers who wrinkled noses in even pronouncing the names of that street's inhabitants. Indeed, in certain noses, some surnames smelled like church pews while others stank of sweat and sewage...



Yet such smells disappeared when it came to defending village honour... Curiously, it was the same boys who shat on public order who were the village's most pugilistic defenders against supposedly disrespectful outsiders...

Even when drunk at local Saturday night dances, those rowdy boys were ready for action. Any outside male who showed up uninvited—especially one with the gall to dance with someone's sister or cousin—would be lucky to leave town with testicles intact...

On the other hand, most youth at the same dances, although usually too intimidated to intervene in the fights, were embarrassed by unprovoked attacks on visitors. Such meanness was a stain on their hometown's reputation. While the ruffians' instinct was to beat up strangers—many other village youth were keen to demonstrate their generosity. Hitchhikers picked up in the vicinity were often invited to stay overnight. In one instance recalled, the village host did not get too upset when his hitchhiking guest seduced his younger sister...

Indeed, like nearly everywhere in the Maritimes, there was an eagerness to be liked by outsiders. Yet in the sometimes over-the-top friendliness there was (arguably) a little insecurity. If there was even a hint of condescension by an outsider, behind the grin would be an unspoken warning: *'Don't think this is some backwater. We are a proud people with a proud history. Don't dare look down on us!'*

Perhaps the 'toughenders' at the local dances were expressing the same sentiment—only in cruder form. If the impetus for hind-brain aggression could be put into words, their message to outsiders might have been stated thus: *'Mess with us in this ole town and we'll kick yer fukin' teeth down yer fukin' throat!'*



The 1950s-1960s was a time when village children, even from primary school, received conflicting impressions of their province's reputation in the world. They heard of a storied past when New Brunswick was renowned for staunch Loyalist pioneers and the source of the timber for the ships of the royal navy that bested Napoleon..... Yet, according to the Ur-story, it was all downhill after Canadian confederation. Power concentrated in the center and the Maritimes grew dependent on the national dole... Children learned that the Maritimes' chief export—after fish—was people... Indeed, no family was without a relative in the wealthier provinces if not in the USA... At the same time, little New Brunswickers were assured that no other province could boast of such friendliness and charm...



Through the 1960s, the 'golden past' narrative was especially resonant in the village itself:

Older villagers never tired of speaking of the bustling era (1940s- to mid-1950s) when the railroad tracks that crisscrossed at the village station, daily moved trains in all four directions... But with the retiring of the steam locomotive (*circa* 1960), the village repair shops began winding down... Through transfer and attrition, demise was gradual. Yet within the decade, local businesses were largely dependent on railroad pensions and government cheques. Through the 1960s, population continued to shrink.

At one point, the village made a feeble attempt to rebrand itself. A new sign was put up at the highway facing cars coming eastward from the US border: '*Welcome to the Lakeland of New Brunswick.*' A few new jobs were generated in the ongoing rape of provincial woodlands. Yet at the end of the 1960s, the village was still waiting for salvation by some new industry. Neither prayers nor appeals to government were heeded. The population of the village cemetery began to overtake that of its living inhabitants...

The Maritimes is not like the north or the west where boom towns gone bust soon become ghost towns. Like residents of towns in Appalachia, natives of New Brunswick villages hate to pull up stakes—let alone pull up roots. So it was, that in the village where I grew up, a diehard core clung on like foundlings to a breast...



For decades after my departure from New Brunswick, phone calls with my late mother would often follow a similar pattern:

She would tell me of some (vaguely remembered) villager who lost his local job and “had to” leave the province ... The lucky villagers, she implied, were not those earning big salaries in the Alberta oil fields but those who had steady jobs close to home. They enjoyed the easy-going New Brunswick lifestyle: hunting and fishing or a lakeside camp minutes from the dooryard...

As for those deprived of both good money and the laid-back Maritime ways, my mother would wonder how anyone would possibly choose to live on the west coast. She cited a litany of attendant woes: exorbitant cost of living, long commutes and perpetual rains. “And you put up with all that—” she would tsk “—just to look at some mountains?”

She would then speak of former villagers, moving back to New Brunswick after long years of separation. That was often followed by a question: “Ever think of comin’ home to retire?”

It was certainly true that in semi-rural New Brunswick one could live at half the cost of renting in Vancouver. Living frugally there on a modest pension, one might even be able to regularly get away to the tropics for the coldest months...

I have always assumed a congenital absence of the Maritime ‘homing instinct.’ Still, I cannot deny that on particularly dreary workdays, I have indulged certain fantasies: For example, in crawling along in traffic—I have imagined buying a snug little cabin within earshot of the Ste. Croix River... Yet within a few seconds, I would snap back to reason. Why would I possibly choose to spend my final years 5500 kilometers distant from my children? More sobering was the reminder that the location of retirement is very likely to be the location of one’s final exit...

In that thought, I often recall the comic reaction of Charles Bukowski at a reading in east Vancouver a few years before his death. When showered with pills by an audience of punk rockers not satisfied to see him perform merely drunk, he held up his hands in protest:
“Bukowski dies in Paris—no problem. Dies in London, Vienna, Rome? No problem... Bukowski dies in Vancouver? No fucking way!”

As for me: Paris? Very Unlikely. Rome? Ditto. Vancouver? Quite possibly. New Brunswick? Over my dead body!



Once in the summer of 1972, I briefly sat in on an informal discussion on ‘regional underdevelopment’ on the lawn of a student residence at the University of New Brunswick. It was led by an elderly visiting scholar who introduced himself as a “a social activist.” He sat cross-legged in the center of a semi-circle of students, mostly in sandals and bare feet...

The goat-bearded old gent spoke of his association with the Coady Institute of Antigonish, Nova Scotia. He described how back in the 1920-‘30s, the activist priest after whom the institute was named, helped coal miners and fishermen set up community cooperatives in Cape Breton. The old activist spoke of a cycle of “fatalism, passivity and dependence” that a community needs to break through in order to improve its lot...

The miners apparently first met in small gatherings in kitchens. The activist seemed to imply that the meeting on the lawn might serve a similar purpose.

During his lengthy introduction, a few listeners came and went. Some listened intently while others picked at the grass as if searching for four leaf clovers... Unfazed by an audience that was less than rapt, the activist finally opened the discussion.

“So, you guys are the young and educated people of this area. What do you plan to do with your future?”

At first guarded, the students gradually warmed. Around the circle in turn, every student gave a short response. Among the group, as recalled, there were a few would-be teachers, a couple of social workers, a forester and a journalist. Several students expressed their intent to continue in graduate school with hopes of discovering a career later. To each who shared his/her future plans, the social activist nodded approval... Then came my turn.

“Soon as I finish my studies,” I said flatly. “I’m getting out.”

“Ah-ha!” said the old activist, delighted with the made-to-order teachable moment. “That’s what young people here have *always* done—got out instead of staying on and making the Maritimes a better place!”

Sensing I had fulfilled my role, I waited for an appropriate moment to quietly steal away.

2016, August

Postscript:



Between Googlins and occasional phone chats over the years, I have gathered that my boyhood village abides...

Not that it hasn't taken blows. It has never escaped the cyclical pattern of small industries starting up then shutting down as soon as their government subsidies run out... Also, contrary to the impression on its village website, it is not quite the oasis of safety and neighbourliness that jaded city dwellers can only dream about. Like almost everywhere else in semi-rural North America—the village has its share of poverty, addiction and petty crime—not to mention deadly boredom...

Still, even in the failure to attract a new mainstay employer, the promotion of the village as a retirement destination has seemingly boosted morale. Some older natives are returning—even from the Alberta oil fields. They are sprucing up old houses bought on the cheap or even building bigger ones.



Meanwhile, the signature railroad station has been refurbished and opened for visitors. During the summers even buses roll up on daytrips from retirement homes. The guided tour apparently features a talk on village history by a 'conductor' in a *Shining Time Station*-like uniform. That is followed by a slice of 'railway pie' in the dining room, restored to the style of its 1940s' heyday... The draw is hardly in the league of Noah's Ark Encounter in Kentucky, but the station is now on the provincial tourist map...

Over the last few years, the village has even had a few turns in the spotlight of national media:

In an article in *MacLeans* magazine, the village was featured as a typical maritime community impacted by the migration of workers to Fort MacMurray ("Fort MacMoney"), Alberta. A few former villagers among the diaspora were interviewed. It was plain that along with earning big-bucks, they had long-escaped the smell of their grandfathers' names...



A longer turn in the media spotlight came later when an episode of a popular CBC show was filmed on location. I watched a segment of in which the camera panned the audience assembled in the school gymnasium. I did not recognize a single smiling face... Without any slighting of a similar resilience in Omemee, Ontario, Pilot Mound, Manitoba or in Mabou, Nova Scotia (other places featured in the series) I could not disagree that few villages in Canada could have been more appropriately chosen for a series titled: '*Still Standing*'.

More recently, a CBC news story highlighted the village's scheme to attract new residents by selling building lots for \$1. Touting the program, the village mayor (himself a returned native son) described the "overwhelming" response:

"I had one couple come up from Texas... They said New Brunswick is very similar to the way people in Texas think..."

Hearing that, I had to wonder whether the village council's next scheme would be to build a *Shining Time Station* playland. But resoundingly different from a Texas approach—a big government grant for such a project would be expected... In any case, my impression was that the rebranding underway in the village is certainly not in the spirit of the Antigonish Movement...



If a new hitchBOT were to travel through the tertiary roads of the Maritimes, there is no doubt that it would be warmly received on the main street of my old native village. One could easily imagine the mayor and his council posing hunched around it grinning with thumbs up. The photo would then be eagerly posted on the village's Facebook page.

One proviso: There may be still dwelling in the village, a few young men who have inherited the rowdy genes of a grandfather. Those same youth may not have yet opened their hearts to Jesus... That being the case, one would strongly advise that a HitchBOT not be dropped off without notice in the middle of the night...

2020, October
