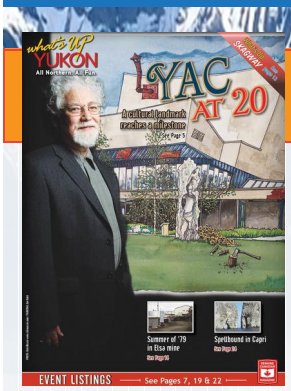

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By Tim Falconer

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THAT SUMMER IN ELSA

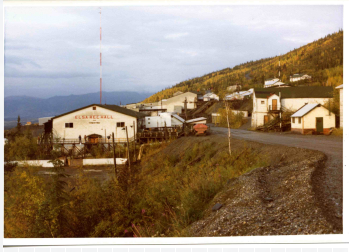

Photo by Gerd Sutter

One morning in the mess hall, the man sitting across from me took a sip and—as much to himself as anyone else—said, "I think this is my last cup of coffee here." By the time I'd finished my shift underground, he was gone, his musing over caffeine his only goodbye. Lots of people left Elsa that way.

In the summer of 1979, I spent four months working in that Yukon mining town. I've thought about my time there a lot—especially recently because I spent a few months back in the territory and even drove through the old mine site—and I now see that summer as a brief, but crucial, interlude between the first part of my life and what followed.

Recently, a friend scanned one of my letters from those days. "Elsa, Y.T., pop 600 (approx) company town," I'd written.

"Find it oppressive to eat in the company cookhouse, sleep in the company bunkhouse and work in the company mine, although I am really starting to enjoy it up here. The best way to describe Elsa is to compare it to a remote penal colony. Sadly, for many here, it is."

That seems ridiculously over-dramatic in hindsight, of course, but I do remember thinking that most of the guys I met there seemed like refugees from the South—or "Outside" as we referred to everything beyond the Yukon borders.

They were escaping from relationships or debts or the cops. (One day, as we came out of the mine and into the dry to change out of our work clothes, two RCMP officers were waiting to hand a summons to my friend Tom, who'd missed a court date after a bust for a chunk of hash.)

And if they weren't actively running from something, some of my new pals just didn't seem to fit in where they came from.

Many of these refugees didn't stay long, though. Employees—almost exclusively male—came and went so frequently that by the end of August, I felt like a seasoned vet.

Sure, there were lots of lifers, men who had just stayed. Or who kept returning. But most came, made some money, split.

Working underground did mean good money. Plus, I loved it.

Although it was against the rules, when no one else was around, I would turn off the head lamp on my hard hat so I could thrill to the complete absence of light: I'd let my

eyes adjust to the darkness, then hold my hand in front of me and try to make out the outline of it.

I never could. But I never tired of trying.

I started out as a general labourer, moved up to trammer—which meant driving lokis (little train engines that towed strings of one-ton ore cars)—and even did a short stint as a miner's helper at the end.

As a single worker, I lived in one of the big wooden bunkhouses on the slopes of the South McQuesten River valley, overlooking the tailings ponds. Some nights I'd sit outside reading by sunlight until 10 p.m. That was one of the benefits of the long days.

The downside was that by the 3:30 a.m., the sun assaulted me through the small window of my spartan bunkhouse room. The early morning blitz of light sure didn't help the insomnia I suffered that summer as I tried to figure out my life.

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Come Friday, the sleep deprivation didn't matter. I hankered for some fun. "Try not to spend too much time in the company bar," my letter continued in its weirdly impatient clipped style.

"Go to Keno on weekends. Keno City (aka Hippie City) pop 60 (approx), mostly hippies... Has a good bar."

I was into punk music then and punks sneered at hippies. And it's true that Keno's "second-generation hippies," as we called them, did seem a little lost in the past.

But I had a soft spot for them. Besides, a good bar is a good bar and we always had a good time in it.

If no one with wheels wanted to go, Luigi would drive us. Along with his taxi service, he owned a diner called the Keno City Café.

When I stayed overnight in Keno, especially after my friend Wes snagged a house there, we would clamber out of our beds and off our couches in the morning and then call Luigi to ask him to open up so we could address our hangovers with some breakfast.

One time, he plopped a plate down on our table and said, "I didn't break the eggs. That's an extra 50 cents."

The Keno City Hotel employed a bartender named Janice who, according to my letter, "every guy who goes in there falls in love with."

I'm sorry to say I now have only a vague recollection of what Janice looked like, but I do remember the sky the first time I came out of the bar at closing time: as we piled into the back of someone's pickup, I was amazed that it was still just dusk.

No stars. In fact, I didn't see any until the end of the first week of August. Obviously, I wasn't the first visitor to be struck by this—though it wasn't just the light because Northern skies are pretty much always doing something cool—but seeing that night sky outside that bar my first weekend was the moment I fell in love with the Yukon.

Of course, even the blithest tourists marvel at the light, the skies, the landscape, the wilderness and the remoteness, but the territory's real magic lies in the people.

That's another cliché, I suppose, though one I took a while to grasp.

I was an upper-middle-class kid from a big city, but I wasn't snobby about people who weren't. I'd worked underground in a northern Ontario mine and spent three summers doing exploration in the bush during high school, so I'd met lots of folks from other backgrounds.

Although most of them were fascinating and friendly, some were difficult and unpleasant, as is true everywhere.

In Elsa, I made some friends quickly: Big Tim—he was such a tall, strapping guy that I was dubbed Little Tim—was also a college kid from Toronto and arrived the day I did.

Jules came from a small town in Quebec and made me laugh because he'd gleefully declare, "Start good time" in his thick French-Canadian accent when he wanted to have some fun.

Photo by Gerd Sutter

Dave was small and wiry with long, scraggly hair and I met a woman who said that whenever she saw him she wanted to give him a bath. When he could get his hands on a bottle of prescription cough syrup, which was often enough, he'd chug it, puke five minutes later and then enjoy a great high, or so he told me.

But he was a total sweetheart—a refugee for sure, but a sweetheart.

As the summer wore on, I made many more pals, especially as I became more confident and less reserved. But forging new friendships wasn't always easy.

Tom and I, for example, did not get off to a promising start. Far from it, in fact. He arrived after I did and treated me as if I were a pampered college boy (not that he was necessarily wrong).

I thought he was an arrogant prick and avoided him as much as possible. But that's hard to do when you work together, live together and regularly find yourself in the same bar.

We developed a grudging respect for each other and eventually had fun together. I just couldn't dislike anyone for long in the Yukon.

I learned a lot about people—and myself—that summer. I guess I just needed to go somewhere without a lot of people to do it.

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My one regret was that I didn't see more of the uncrowded territory. My only journey beyond the regular shuttles between Elsa and Keno was to Dawson City in mid-August for the annual Discovery Days festival.

We thumbed, though not as quickly as we'd hoped. Just about everyone stopped to see where we were going. But because cars didn't come along all that often, we waited by the side of the gravel road and sang songs.

Big Tim had a stereo with oversized '70s-era speakers that took up a sizeable chunk of his cramped bunkhouse room and our summer soundtrack had Neil Young's Comes a Time in heavy rotation.

So there I was on a dusty, carless road doing a carefree jig and wailing, "In the field of opportunity/It's plowin' time again."

I was seriously tempted to stay on at the mine, make some more money, be a refugee from the South. Despite all the Yukon had to offer, though, I no longer wanted to run away from what wasn't working and I was excited about the opportunity that awaited me in Montreal.

I was going back to school at McGill but switching out of mining engineering and into English literature—a move that generated considerable skepticism at the time, but one I have never, ever regretted.

Since I'd made this decision in the spring, I can't really say that summer in Elsa changed my life. But it did change me and helped convince me my choice was the right one.

So shortly after my trip to Dawson, I left Elsa. When I did, I said my goodbyes the proper way. I'd had way too good a time and made too many good friends to just leave.

Even if I never saw any of those guys again—and the only one I did see later was Big Tim—I knew I would return to the Yukon. For the night skies, the people who live under them and the sense of myself the place gave me.

Tim Falconer is the author of three non-fiction books and the co-author of

the just-published **Drop the Worry Ball: How to Parent in the Age of Entitlement.** ***He finished a residency at the Berton House in June.***

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