

Mission Possible: 85-Year-Old to Walk 700 Km? Reflections on our fundraising trek around PEI



By George Biondic

On the road at an ungodly hour, the car stuffed to the roof, and feeling optimistic about this bold endeavor. In Ottawa the radio announced PM Carney was in Alberta to meet the G7 leaders. Clearly, a veiled attempt to avoid Erlinda and me.

?That's OK, Mark,? I shouted out the car window. ?Just get the economy growing. And show the world we are a decent, determined and democratic nation. If Quebec City separatists held any resentment towards Anglophones, we sure didn't witness it ? three different people helped us find the Chateau Frontenac. ?Thanks Donald!?

Next stop, the food bank in Charlottetown, PEI, where enthusiastic volunteers stacked shelves with food donations. This was what the mission was about. With no time to waste we picked up the U-Haul cargo van (the bedroom) barely big enough for two cots and personal items, and finally pulled into the first beautiful, by-the-water provincial park campground run by helpful staff.

Back in February, we had selected a beach site in part to reduce my scourge: mosquitoes. What a pleasant surprise: the spotless bathroom was well stocked with paper towels.

Our goal was to do the Island Walk (700 km around the island) on a fixed schedule in a month.

In hindsight, we should have taken a day to organize the bedroom and kitchen (car).

Not learning to use Google Maps, as the Island Walk website recommended, was another major mistake. So, instead, I pored over incomplete paper maps leading to much frustration and getting lost! In short, we were ill prepared.

The daily routine started at 4 a.m. with a quick breakfast and a visit to the washroom; Dropping off the vehicles at the end points of the walk; Walking 20+ km ? backpacks loaded principally with food, water and clothes; Collecting the vehicles. Back at the campground, Erlinda cooked supper while I planned the next day's route. (Although we ate well, it didn't compensate for the huge amount of burnt calories). Then Erlinda made sandwiches and I the drinks for the next day; Showering off insect repellent was skipped occasionally; Communicating with the outside world belonged to her. Finally, sweet blessed sleep to the sound of nearby

waves.

Although the trail often used shoulder-less roads, the oncoming drivers always moved over. I saluted them. Only twice did we meet other island walkers and so boredom crept in.

After a CBC radio interview, excited locals offered lunch at their place now that we were 'celebrities'. If only there was time. But we had re-discovered CBC radio. No boredom. No stopping. Except for the distressingly scarce washrooms. One time I asked a local and he replied, 'Only 5 minutes away.'

'Walking'?

'No, driving.'

'Aha,' my eyes scanning for a bush.

Erlinda had reminded, 'It's easy for men.' True, but not always. Our salvation appeared as a recently-fertilized farmer field, ah, conducive to our need.

Nevertheless, we became edgy. Morning affection and understanding slipped into impatience and misunderstanding, so heavy was our burden; Made tolerable by the sunshine, quaint fishing villages and photogenic lighthouses.

One day, bitterly cold rain and wind buffeted our skinny senior bodies. After cooking supper in an exposed shelter, Erlinda returned shivering. My heart sank as I silently rubbed her cold shaking hands. Soon, the steaming-hot shrimp meal and white wine healed everything.

Overlapping the Island Walk is the Confederation Trail: flat, easy to navigate and forested; So the next day it was infested with frustrated, furious mosquitoes. Not a problem thanks to our new bug jackets.

Days passed. Progressively, Erlinda became sleepy midmorning. I offered often to carry her pack but she refused: pride stood in the way. On Canada Day, it was exceptionally hot. Weaving from drowsiness and dehydration, she relented. But days later, she noticed my anguished face from damaged disks. She grabbed the pack never to relinquish again.

One memorable day, finding the start had been extra tedious. And the forecast called for heavy rain 'my poncho was drying back in the van. Because of age, the mission was becoming tougher than our great 19-day Californian mountain adventure. My lips moved, 'this is too much. Should we consider going home?' A first for a guy who told everyone never to give up.

'Like today'?

'Aha.'

The reply was instant. 'We can't. It would be too embarrassing. Please do not think about it.'

I liked what I was hearing.

She continued, 'We had promised no wimping out.'

At the time I had just nodded in agreement. It was her 85th birthday.

'Sometimes at the end of a long extra-difficult day I feel like doing nothing. Just lazy, I guess.'

She looked deeply into my eyes. ?We are NOT lazy. We never will be.?

That was enough for me; still, she suggested a stroll on the beach, our first ? not long like in the movies, yet effective. She was stooped, grey haired and wrinkled; and deep inside ? what really matters ? the same woman I married 44 years ago.

What lies in store for the second half of the mission?