

Shilling a Night

Inspired by an article by David McVey in the Scottish outdoor magazine "The Angry Corrie."

Many thousands of young people from all over the world, including Canada, were first introduced to Scotland thanks to the economical accommodation provided by the Scottish Youth Hostels Association, currently celebrating its 70th anniversary.

In recognition, we have reprinted this excerpt from Alastair Borthwick's 1939 outdoor classic, "Always a Little Further" which captures the essence of hostelling in its early days. Wonderfully evocative of a searching innocence, it describes how the hostellers while away a night with music and song after a wet day in the hills. It is all the more moving and poignant because most of those present were either Scottish or German, and some would not survive the savage conflict soon to engulf their respective countries.

The Scottish Youth Hostels Association, a society administered by its own members and designed to build as many hostels as possible in the Scottish countryside, was formed in 1932. I did not hear of it until the following year; but since then I have been a member, a privilege which has cost me -- the sum has varied with my age -- between three and five shillings a year. The number of hostels has grown slowly; but today my membership card entitles me to walk into any of sixty-odd hostels scattered up and down the more remote parts of the country, and there obtain a bed and blankets to sleep in, a kitchen and pots to cook in, and a common room to play, talk, sing, and argue in, all for the charge of one shilling a night.

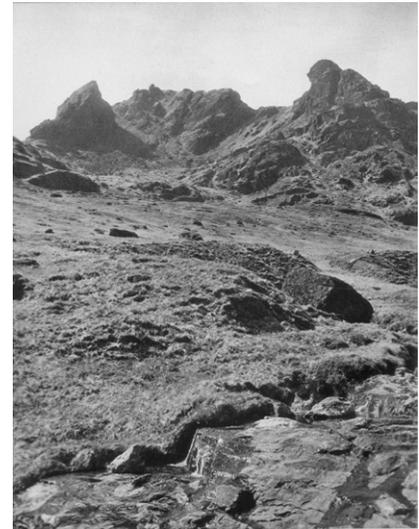
Being interested in such matters, I am biased in their favour; but, even when trying to think of them in a detached way, I cannot rid myself of the conviction that the youth hostel movement is one of the more

important social innovations of this century. It has opened up thousands of Scotland's deserted square miles; but that is relatively unimportant. What is important is that the Association numbers its members by the tens of thousands, and that the vast majority of these people have so little money that they could not, without the help of the hostels, spend their week-ends in the country and in the fresh air. What was once not even within reach of a summer holiday has become a weekend playground.

Throughout that year when I first learned of hitchhikers and caves, barns and bird-watchers, the Youth Hostels formed a solid core of experience. These other things were aspects of the truth that a new weekend society was growing up; but they were offshoots and perversions of the central fact that the hostels were the basis of the movement. During that year I slept in many hostels, meeting doctors and bank clerks, barbers and typists, students and labourers, office boys, grocers, insurance agents, shop assistants, engineers. There appeared to be no class of society to which the appeal of the hostels did not extend; and so they were, and, to my mind, still are, the greatest library of ideas and human experience in Scotland.

I argued about the three-colour process in films with a cinema projector salesman in Glen Clova two years before the process reached the screen and the public knew anything of it, about the relative merits of Rangers and Third Lanark in Arrochar Hostel, about the poetry of Chesterton at Langholm in the Borders with two Edinburgh journalists. I was preached the Douglas Credit System at Inverbeg on Loch Lomond by a budding chartered accountant, and modern methods of road construction by a surveyor at Ledard Hostel on Loch Ard. I learned Boer folk songs from two South Africans in Glen Nevis; and at Arrochar, early in the year, four German girls taught me the most exquisite volkslied I know.

That was a night. We had all been caught in a downpour of rain which had started early in the afternoon and grown progressively worse ever since. By early evening, sixty drowned rats were crammed into Arrochar Hostel common room, with more arriving off



Ben Arthur, known locally as "The Cobbler" is located near the village of Arrochar, the site of the 1930s hostel described by Borthwick. The hostel movement's objective... "To help all, especially young people of limited means, to a greater knowledge, love, and care of the countryside, particularly by providing hostels or other simple accommodation..."

the hills every few minutes. It was a big room with unvarnished pine walls, solidly built tables and benches, and, at one end, two kitchen sinks, shelves of pots and pans, and a vast array of pigeonholes where each person kept his or her food. In the centre of the room -- was a huge cast-iron stove; and above it, stretching from wall to wall, was a rope laden with a sodden, steaming, and fantastically mixed collection of garments. They were the clothes of most of the sixty.

We were all decently clad; but some had had a struggle to preserve an air of respectability. I, having been washed out of the Cobbler corrie and being blessed with a leaky rucksack, was wearing a kilt and a scarlet bathing costume; John, making the most he could of blanket and a pyjama jacket, had a bed-ridden look about him; and William, swathed entirely in brown blankets, looked like a cross between a Roman senator and a Franciscan friar. He appeared to favour the former part, for he was striding about declaiming the more popular sayings of M. Antony as reported by Mr. Shakespeare. And everywhere were people in coarse shirts and jerseys, short trousers, kilts, breeches, frying their sausages and ham, and making tea on the stove.

When we had fed, we were at that replete stage of tiredness when conversation lapses and the tendency is to stare at the stove and dream. Then a curious thing happened.



Loch Ossian Youth Hostel. Located in the wild Rannoch Moor, it is one of Scotland's most remote hostels. Other than by hiking in, it is accessible only by trains running on the famous West Highland Line.

A lad with fair hair and a very brown face was sitting on the floor near the stove with his back to the wall; and he started to play a mouth-organ very quietly to himself. No one paid much attention. Then he played a tune I had not heard before; and I noticed he was staring over his mouth-organ at a girl who was writing letters on the other side of the common room. And another thing I noticed was that, although she was obviously too busy to notice that a tune was being played, she was beating time with her foot.

The mouth-organist frowned and started the tune again, a little louder this time; and when he had played it half through the girl sat up with a jerk, stared at him for a moment, and then gave him such a smile as would have made a misogynist delirious. After which, she sang.

The lad must have discovered that she was German, for it was a German folk-song he had played; and she, hearing without hearing, had not realized immediately that the song, in Scotland, was unusual.

Now she sang, clearly, beautifully...
"Wenn komm, wenn i komm, wenn i weider, weider komm..."

"...weider, weider komm" chimed in three other German girls who were with her, and the bumble of conversation in the common room hesitated and died. People turned round. Dirty dishes were left dirty.

"... weider, weider komm kehr ich ein mein Schatz bei Dir..."

Song is so common in the hostels that it seldom interrupts the business of the day. One goes on with one's job, singing but not pausing. But this was different. The girl was beautiful, and sang like a lark; and so intense was the silence that the mouth-organist, who normally would have been blasting to make himself heard over the din of singing and small talk, was playing softly and well. I felt as if I were not breathing. She held those sixty people, cyclists, hikers, all sorts, to the last note; and then the cheering must have been heard halfway up the Cobbler. It was an extraordinary business.

They made her sing it three times, and gradually caught a few of the words.

"Wenn i komm, wenn i komm" . . . that was easy! "Weider, Weider komm," sang the girl. "Weider, Weider komm," bellowed the mob, enchanted by the thought that they were singing in German. They stamped their feet and roared at the rafters. It was a great success. "Wenn i komm . . . !" Marvellous!

That started it. Would we -- she smiled again -- sing some Scottish songs, please? Would we! And there was, too, a lad with a good tenor voice, the Gaelic, and a chest like a barrel. We sang all night. We sang "Die Lorelei" and "Banks o' Loch Lomond," "Stille Nacht" and "An t' Eilean Muillach," "The Cockle-Gatherers," "Die Wacht am

Rhein," "Deutschland Uber Alles" and "The Eriskay Love Lilt."

Hot faces yelled by the stove. No one heard the mouth-organist, swamped now by the crowd drawn in from distant draught boards and games of whist. The atmosphere was thick, a compost of cooking, bodies, and steaming clothes; but no one cared. Every one sang, so that dripping travellers arrived at the door and were amazed. Sixty people, far gone in song, can make a great deal of noise.

We were still writing out the words for each other at lights out that night; and I still have a postcard headed "Swabisches Volkslied" with the words of that first song scribbled on it in a curious spidery handwriting.

Next morning everyone had gone. ■

Raise a Glass to the Cape Breton Highlands

by Rod Currie Canadian Press

GLENVILLE, N.S. - A modern distillery tucked away in this tiny community amid the leafy Cape Breton Highlands is producing an exotic amber-gold whisky that its creators think of as Scotch. Trouble is, they're not allowed to label it as such.

In the same way that the only true champagne comes from France's Champagne region, so real Scotch whisky is distilled only in Scotland. Thus the local product, although it follows the ancient Scottish methods, is marketed as Glen Breton Rare Canadian Single Malt Whisky, the only single malt produced in North America.

The distillery, a major component of the 120-hectare Glenora Inn and Distillery development begun in 1990, can't keep up with demand. This despite prices that range from \$74.98 for a 750-ml bottle in Nova Scotia to as much as \$99 in Ontario, where several posh Toronto hotels complain they can't get enough.

"We never really anticipated going into mass production," says master distiller Daniel MacLean, an engaging Cape Breton native who came to his job somewhat by chance.

"As a micro-distillery we're going to keep it at around 2,000 dozen-bottle cases a year," he says. "We couldn't really come out with, say, 10,000 cases and still maintain the quality."

But whisky is a chancy business, and the Glenora operation has gone under twice, the original owners bankrupt before it opened.

Now the distillery is supported by a complex that includes a modern, nine-room inn with cosy restaurant and adjoining pub, six hillside chalets in the Swiss style and convention facilities.

The setting, just off the famed Cabot Trail, is midway between the villages of Inverness, where a former railway station now houses a mining museum, and Mabou, the Celtic fiddling and dancing heart of Cape Breton.

Set in a highlands area a few kilometers from the sea and excellent beaches, the surroundings, which abound with ancient Scottish heritage implanted by immigrants arriving in the 1820s, also offers fishing, skiing, horseback riding and scenic drives.

Aside from overnight guests, the inn attracts many day visitors who take the modestly priced distillery tour, stop for a meal, taste the whisky to the accompaniment of local musicians or simply stroll around the charming grounds.

MacLean, who says the distillery business "is easy to learn but hard to gain experience in," still longs for his first trip to Scotland, hoping to pick up some valuable tricks of the trade, knowing only too well that the canny Scots might be a bit tight-lipped about it.

(Editor: Thanks to Christine Boyle for sending us this article.)

How does the Glen Breton single malt compare to a Scotch single malt? For the answer, we called on our resident whisky expert, Ed Patrick, a long-time member of SSF and currently a member of the board of the Society.

He is also the founder of The Companions of The Quaich, Canada's premier Scotch single-malt whisky appreciation society with more than 700 members across Ontario.

Ed points out that while Glenora Distillery uses the same traditional methods and ingredients as Scotland's distilleries - malted barley, yeast, and water - the key difference lies in the water. Many countries have tried to duplicate the taste of Scotch, notably the Japanese, who even shipped water from Scotland to use in the production of single malts, but without success. Also, no other country can match the effects of the local Scottish atmosphere on the maturation of the spirit, so the distinctive "scotch" taste doesn't come through.

He says Glen Breton is a pleasing, flavourful single malt but at eight years is still showing its youth. It doesn't have the gentleness of a Lowland malt, the dry peatiness of the Highlands, the floral fragrance of Speyside, the robustness of Islay nor the briny seaweed of an Island whisky.

Enjoy it for its own, unique Cape Breton Highlands character. Slainte!