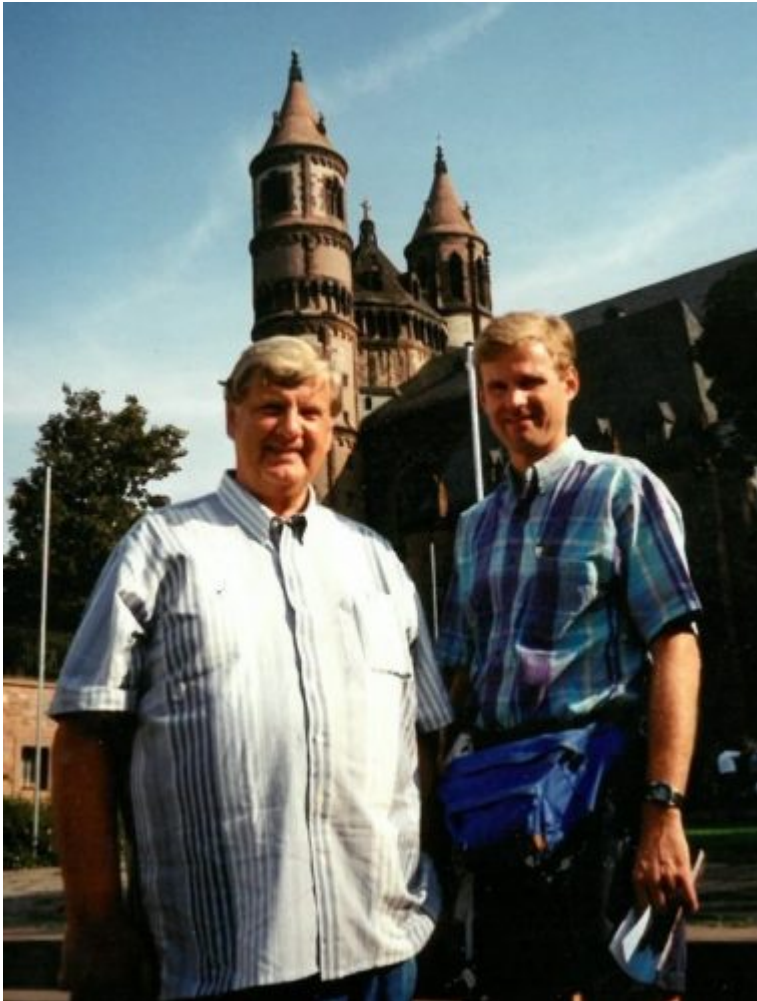


By Dan Friesen

In 1992, I left my job as a CPA - it was not a great sacrifice! I had learned a lot about life and business in accounting but eventually realized that my brain was not wired to track with the abstract intricacies of tax, audit, and finance. So I accepted Dad's offer to work with him at Walking Tours, Inc.

We rented a tiny, windowless office at the end of a dark hallway and I started the process of organizing and computerizing dad's business. He was appreciative and amazed and mystified.



Dad and I in Worms, Germany with the cathedral behind - 1992 Alpine Europe

That first years went great - dad had two Scandinavian tours full - 40+ walkers each, one Alpine tour, and our first foray into the USA with a trip across the country to New England and a trip to Hawaii.

My initial experience as a guide came assisting Dad on the Alpine Europe tour. He had an awesome young Austrian driver name Seppi who could maneuver the bus like a sports car and had a fun and winning personality everyone loved.

As we drove, Dad would sit in the "jump seat" that folded down after passengers were all

loaded and I would sit on the step between Dad and Seppi. I spent a lot of miles in that position, listening and learning as Dad and Seppi mapped and navigated and planned, in German. It was a great way to learn and Seppi and I quickly became friends.



Our first Walkin' the Heart o' Dixie tour - 1993

That fall, Dad had promoted our first trip in the USA with a tour to see the fall foliage of New England. Surprisingly, the trip started in Portland, Oregon, NOT Portland, Maine. Dad was serving walkers in the volkssport world who were collecting walk stamps, trying to log a walk in all 50 states.

He took the bus from Portland to Washington, DC, where I joined him with a subset of travelers who wanted a shorter, 10-day version just on the East Coast. The group then returned across the upper Midwest on a different course allowing them to rack up walks in 21 states in 21 days! The husband of a new traveler recounted to me later that his wife had called home during the trip with the declaration that "These people are serious!"

I was soon impressed with what I knew all along - Dad was not really interested in the details of a matter. He was not one to go by the book. He shot from the hip. I was all about bringing order to the myriad details that go into planning international travel. Dad was a big picture guy. Therein lay the seeds of a looming conflict between us. For me, it was a bit like dancing with a 6'5", 320-pound teddy bear, and sometimes the dance was a bit awkward!



George getting directions from a bobbie on the London walk - Walking the British Isles 1993

In attempting to bring structure to our tiny enterprise, I challenged him one day, asking him how he could justify taking a customer as a companion on a tour-planning trip to Europe. Dad looked at the ground sheepishly and then simply said with a grin, "Because I like Vince."

Dad was accustomed to planning an entire 21-day tour on a single piece of paper - an 11 x 17 spreadsheet on which he logged, in pencil, all data he thought he might need. He was not intimidated by uncertainty and was a master of dealing with unexpected consequences.

Once he mistakenly booked a bus to pick up a group in Amsterdam a day later than they arrived (we all flew together as a group in those days). Upon arrival, the group claimed their luggage but there was no bus, a guide's nightmare. After coming to a realization that would have been mind-numbing to most of us, Dad simply organized to have the group ride the train, with luggage, for about 30 minutes to the stop nearest the hotel, then drag their luggage to the hotel, mercifully close by. One traveler shared with me later in respectful tones that such a problem "would have crushed a lesser man!"



Dad and Vic Shaff on the London walk - Walking the British Isles 1993

My first year with Dad ended well, but 1993 held a looming surprise. After planning a full schedule, the silent telephone and empty mailbox signaled that many of our new clientele faithfully attended the convention of the American Volkssport Association every other summer. That was their trip of the year. The impact was devastating. I took a providentially-provided part-time job as controller for a small company that needed emergency help while dad worked his proverbial butt off all year long without taking a salary.

But 1994 brought the travelers back with it and we were a bit wiser by the time 1995 rolled around.

Dad and I worked together in this way for a couple more years before making significant changes that transformed Walking Tours, Inc. into Walking Adventures International and led to Dad's second retirement, the story for my next post.