

By Dan Friesen

I mentioned in the last post that 1993 was a tough year for Walking Tours, Inc. financially. We learned that many of our travelers attended the AVA Convention every other year in odd years. Things improved in 1994 and 1995, which became pivotal years for me and Dad.

Fall Foliage of New England in 1992 was our first US tour. Two years later, in '94, interest was very strong, far stronger than we could meet with just one bus, even though we were taking 40 walkers on a group in those days. We made the fateful decision to take two buses at the same time - 40 people on each bus. The logistics were daunting - 80 people to coordinate for walks and hotel check-in and meals...and bathroom breaks!



Dad having lunch at the Nonantum Resort before his “Old Man River” performance (check out his lobster hat!).

This was also the tour of the infamous hotel fire in Alexandria, Virginia! At about 4 am, a fire broke out (arson by a disgruntled employee), and it was serious enough to evacuate the hotel. After rousing one of the bus drivers who slept through all the alarms, tense moments ensued as we assembled everyone on the bus in the dark to counts heads... all present!

We were unable to reenter the hotel until firefighters had everything under control, so we took the group for an early breakfast, many of them in their pajamas!! One bus went to Denny’s and the other to McDonald’s. Back at the hotel, travelers needed a firemen’s escort to collect belongings from their rooms so we could relocate to a different hotel.

A couple things came to light on this trip; 1) I was the admin/logistics guy and Dad was the

cheerleader and people person and 2) American bus drivers couldn't hold a candle to our Austrian driver, Seppi!



Dad in Athens, Greece at the IVV Olympiad with Julia. They were quite a pair!!

Navigation was nearly a full-time job for the guide, and after the second day, we decided I would switch buses each day and navigate on the lead bus to avoid wrong turns and wasted time. The impetus for this decision came on our second night in DC when we tried to take the group to see the Iwo Jima Memorial all lit up after dark.

These were the days before GPS, of course, and the tangled web of freeways between Alexandria and DC made the Memorial hard to find. The miscues were embarrassing and the joke for the rest of the trip became that, in our futile search for the right exit, we had seen all five sides of the Pentagon!

Managing 80 walkers on two buses placed a premium on timing throughout the day; there was little margin for error. With that many people on a typically tight WAI schedule, it required constant vigilance, and was exhausting. But Dad was loving it - he was energized by all the interaction - and people were loving him.

One of my enduring memories of my father was standing at the back of the room and watching Dad on the day we had a group lunch at the Nonantum Resort in Kennebunkport, Maine. An engaging local pianist provided background music during lunch in a lovely old inn set on the Kennebunk River. Impromptu is what Dad did best and after the meal, he asked

her to accompany him as he sang “Old Man River” from the Broadway musical, “Showboat”. Dad nailed it - I’ve never heard him sing more powerfully! It was Broadway quality! People had tears in their eyes.



Dad on the '95 Alaska Midnight Sun trip with our first Canadian travelers, who joined us for many subsequent adventures!

In 1995, the big event of the year was the AVA Convention in our home town of Portland, Oregon. After losing so many of our travelers to the 1993 Convention, we looked for ways to be more involved and, since the '95 Convention was local, we had the opportunity to offer the optional Convention bus tours.

After Convention, we offered a trip to Alaska. This was Dad’s stroke of genius; many people were still chasing walks in all 50 states and Portland was one of the closest jumping-off airports to “way up North”. So we planned a 24-hour, 1-night, trip to walk at midnight in “the land of the midnight sun” in our 49th state! We took 100 people! It was crazy!

Once again, I was running logistics. There were too many moving parts, too many bodies, and not enough guides. Things did not go off without a hitch. We got everyone home - with a fair amount of behind-the-scenes drama. The experience convinced me that something needed to change.

Dad was content with this level of chaos and miscues but I realized that I could no longer manage tours this way, especially since we were planning to develop new trips in parts of the world in which we had no experience or language skills. That Fall, Dad and I had a good talk and agreed that he was soon ready for true retirement and that I would buy him out at

the beginning of 1996.

Later in 1996, while on a planning trip with Sean, who was helping carry the administration load in the office, we had an ongoing discussion about the name of the company. We both thought "Walking Tours, Inc." sounded formal and a bit sterile. Sean was the one who came up with the idea of Walking Adventures International.

Dad could not have been more gracious and supportive! He continued to help me operate WAI. Computerizing the office and my more detailed style of planning added levels of difficulty for him. But he was a champion and was always there, always supportive, and ultimately amazed and proud to see the company spread and grow to encompass more than 70 countries on all seven continents.

Dad gradually reduced his involvement in WAI. His health was in decline and as it turned out, the timing of the transition between us was perfect. Dad took the bus microphone for the last time in 1997.

For those who are interested, I would like to finish this story of my father, George Friesen, founder of Walking Adventures International, with one more short post commemorating his life and his impact.