

Dating Years

One of the best things about being a teenager, I think, is how hilarious life can be sometimes. We would laugh until our stomachs hurt and giggle uncontrollably at the least provocation. All down through the years I've noticed the same trait in younger teens everywhere. May it last forever, annoying as it may be at times for some adults. Life gets too serious soon enough.

Gladys and I decided it was her and me against the world, and we were best friends, sharing secrets and discussing very important topics, such as which boys were the best looking and what clothes we were going to save our money for (top priority in our lives just then). We could earn the odd dollar babysitting and splitting wood for my dad. Then we would get out the Eaton's mail-order catalogue and spend hours daydreaming.

"Hurry up, I can see the smoke now!" Gladys was balanced precariously on the top railing of the fence, eyes squinting against the sun as she gazed toward the Yukon River, just barely visible from her vantage point. She had been waiting for a glimpse of the SS *Casca*, which was due to arrive at the White Pass dock in about ten minutes.

"Well," I answered, "if you'd get off your butt and give me a hand here I'd be finished sooner." Splitting the wood in our backyard for the morning's kindling was my job after school, a way to earn spending money. Just as I raised the axe above my head one more time, three blasts from the steam whistle of the paddlewheeler sounded loud and clear, piercing the hot summer air. A little shiver of excitement ran up my spine and the woodpile was forgotten as I pulled Gladys off the fence.

"I'll finish it later. Come on!" We ran the three blocks to the river, where the boat was just pulling up to the wharf. The year was 1941, and we were both fifteen years old, a fact that we kept to ourselves as much as possible. We were sure we could easily pass for sixteen. We jostled our way through the crowd on the dock in order to get a glimpse of the young deckhands on board.

"Look," Gladys said, "there's the same two who waved at us last time. I think they're looking at us." The thought was enough to keep us daydreaming for the rest of the day. The boys at school were so immature, we decided, and we wouldn't date them if

they were the last ones on earth. We ignored the fact that they had not asked us to anyway.

Actually, we could pass for a year or two older, and some of the young deckhands on the paddlewheelers would bend over backwards to get our attention, while we would feign great indifference. Eventually we got acquainted with two fellows on the *Casca* and two more on the *Klondike*. The movie theatre in town was our major source of entertainment. As long as we were home by nine-thirty our folks were reluctantly tolerant.

Because all the steamboats on the river arrived and left on different days, Gladys and I were going to quite a few movies, which we really enjoyed. Luckily, the “moccasin telegraph” never caught up with us, so the fellows all thought they were the only ones taking us out on dates. After a month or two of this, though, we settled for the two we liked best and never bothered with the others.

We never tired of watching the boats come and go, and many of the Whitehorse folks seemed to feel the same way, as there was always quite a gathering of people standing on the White Pass dock in the summertime. It was an end to cabin fever until next winter rolled around. There was something about the thrust of that paddlewheel, as we watched the ship back away from the wharf. The pilot up there in the pilot house, one hand on the big steering wheel and the other reaching up to blow the whistle, held us spellbound. The smokestacks billowed out a white plume of steam and smoke that trailed along behind the vessel as it slowly pulled out of town on its way to Dawson City. The rivers were our only highways in those days, and the White Pass train that ran from Skagway to Whitehorse was our only link to the outside world.

All too soon the season ended, and it was time for the crews to leave for the “Outside” again. The year was now 1942, and that fall, our girls’ basketball team rode the same train that the boat crews were taking, going back to their homes in B.C. We said goodbye to our friends when we reached Skagway and rushed to the school to practice for the upcoming games.

On our trip back to Whitehorse I met a tall, handsome man. He started a conversation, and all too soon the train was pulling into the station, where I said a reluctant goodbye, never dreaming that this was the man with whom I would spend many years of my life.