

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Lake Kluane: Traveling with Beau

**Author's Note:** This is the eighth in a series of stories<sup>1</sup> reflecting on a 2007 trip to Alaska with my dog, Beau. During that trip I began a personal journey to an expanded understanding of One Health, the implications of which would unfold over several years.

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
November 6, 2014

### Day Nine (Whitehorse)

Though Whitehorse was built on the quest for gold, it was memorialized by the poetry of Robert Service, the Scottish bank worker who traveled to British Columbia and then was transferred to the Yukon during the 1900 gold rush. Every Canadian school child of my generation has some familiarity with the poem, '*The Cremation of Sam McGee*' that tells the story of a hapless man from Tennessee whose hunger for gold took him to the frigid Arctic where he froze to death, but not before making his buddy promise that his remains would be cremated. The poem starts ominously,

*"There are strange things done in the midnight sun  
By the men who toil for gold;  
The Arctic trails have their secret tales  
That would make your blood run cold;"*

As Service told the story, Sam was cremated by his prospecting friend on the banks of Lake LeBarge in a furnace in the hulk of a grounded river boat. As the inferno crackled and burned hotter, the prospector beat back the heat to open the furnace door. Peering out from the center of the fire was a smiling Sam, urging his comrade to shut the door and keep out the winter storm because, "*Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm*".

Beau and I took the short drive to the shore of Lake LeBarge where we sat together on the bank of the lake as I recited from memory the cremation story, all 15 stanzas. It brought back wonderful childhood memories of rehearsing my school-assigned poetry to the calves as I fed them their milk or to the cows as I sat under them, one by one, adjusting the milking machine.



*Monument to the role of dogs in opening up the Yukon (Whitehorse)*  
(Photo by the author, 2007)

Whitehorse was built on the backs of working dogs and sled dogs that were more reliable and able to withstand the frigid winters than horses. The name of the city that was founded in 1897 refers to the white, frothy rapids that were an image of a horse's mane.



*Reception desk at the Gold Rush Inn, Whitehorse*  
(Photo by the author, 2007)

For two nights we stayed at the Gold Rush Inn, enjoying accommodations more luxurious than anything we had experienced along the route to this point. Beau was as kindly received as any weary traveler and his presence provided a welcome memory of pets back home for many

stopover guests. "*Oh, I wish we had our dog with us, too*" became a common refrain as we met people in the lobby or on the elevator. Beau loved the attention, though in his inimitable way he would only comport to a stranger's attention for a few seconds before returning to my side.

Though Whitehorse is the capital of the Yukon, a walk along the streets gave me the impression that all the working-aged males have left town. Here in the subarctic, the men spend most of their summers in the nondescript place called *up north*, where they harvest energy for use in southern Canada and the lower 48 states. One sage with a long, grey beard spit his tobacco juice in the dust, then cleared his throat and opined, "*The men are gone all summer, returning when they have a long weekend just long enough to impregnate their girlfriends or wives, then they head back to the gas or oil fields.*"

During the afternoon, I was drawn to a middle-aged man who appeared out of place. Beau and I saw him as soon as we got off the hotel elevator. He was awkwardly drifting around the Gold Rush lobby, dressed in khaki jeans and a white T-shirt on which were clustered an array of colorful pins that represented obscure places in eastern Canada. The one that intrigued me the most and caused me to introduce myself was a small ornamental pin for Nunavut, an Inuit territory with which I had some familiarity. "*Have you been there?*" I asked. "*yes,*" he said, "*I just flew in from Iqaluit last night.*"

Thinking that he may be an ambassador or something—he was obviously an American—I inquired, "*What do you do?*" "*I'm a traveler,*" he said, "not a travel agent, a traveler, a professional traveler." Someone who spends the majority of his time visiting obscure and hard-to-reach places around the world. "I am one of the world's 'most traveled people'," he said in a somewhat condescending tone while leaning over to inspect Beau.

Then he described some of the interesting people whom he had met on his travels:

- A Spaniard living in the Congo and traveling the "Voodoo Trail" to learn about medicinal plants and herbs;
- Two cowboys from Amarillo who were on a posse to rope in souls for Jesus;
- A South African woman, schooled in London and Los Angeles, whom he met in Djibouti, and is a publisher and concerned member of a club that supports national parks throughout Africa.

I was hoping he would tell me about the Inuit with whom he might have travelled in the Arctic, but his stay in Iqaluit had been so brief that he had not ventured far from the airport. The length of his stay in Whitehorse was no greater, for when I inquired of him early the following morning, the young man at the desk said he had already departed for the airport.

### **Day Ten (Kluane)**

We encountered breathtaking scenery west from Whitehorse. The Kluane National Park and

Reserve is home to some of the most majestic mountains in North America. Tucked far off the highway and well beyond our sight was Canada's highest peak, Mount Logan. Only a few hundred meters less height than Mount McKinley, this and other mountains in the area are reported to be amongst the most challenging for climbers.



*Kluane National Park and Reserve, Yukon*  
(Photo by the author, 2007)

Unfortunately, Beau was having a bad day, his second of the trip. The inciting cause during our trip through North Dakota had been the smoke of wildfires. Here it was the unusually rough road.

Many parts of the Alaska Highway are smooth and you can comfortably travel 60 miles per hour or more. However, long stretches of highway, especially in the more westerly parts of the Yukon, are poorly maintained, and the constant freeze-thaw cycles cause huge chunks of asphalt to be broken asunder and cast onto the shoulders by the battering of large trucks. One driver pounding through at a teeth-chattering rate told me this was his 70th trip from Whitehorse to Fairbanks. *"It's so much easier to drive fast in the winter,"* he said, *"because the ice and snow fill in the pot holes and make the road much smoother."* All that came to my mind was swirling snow causing reduced visibility and slippery roads.

Beau was unable to relax on the rough road. He circled in his seat, looking anxiously at me, sighing, then crumbling in a ball. He shivered uncontrollably, his long rust-colored hair shaking like a mass of fall leaves in a heavy breeze. When we stopped, which seemed like every 10-15 minutes, he would leap from the jeep and tug against his leash pulling me away from the road. He refused water and at one point, even chicken. When it was time to move on, he would be unwilling to jump into the jeep and I would have to lift his shaking body back into the seat beside me.

I tried everything: I cradled his neck in my hand as we drove; I put him in the back seat braced by extra cushions. I talked to him, sang to him, told him stories, even recited poetry. He just shook and looked miserable. Since we needed to meet Doris at the airport in Anchorage in just two days, stopping or turning back was not an option so we slugged onward, mile after slow mile. Early in the afternoon, and by now way behind the schedule I had planned for the day, we took an extended break. Beau slept for over an hour in a soft clump of grass far from the highway. I curled up beside him but couldn't find rest.

Shortly after we got back on the road, the broad expanse of Kluane Lake came into view. My Dad often told me about this lake and the adjacent mountains by the same name. In 1979, when a \$2.00 Canadian postage stamp featuring Kluane National Park was published, he sent me a first-day cover with a note inside saying that he had always dreamed of seeing this park. Like the evening four days earlier when we had slept in the field of birds-foot trefoil, seeing this lake had a special meaning for me and for my memory of my father.



*By the shore of Kluane Lake, Yukon*  
(Photo by the author, 2007)

At the first convenient spot, we left the highway and drove down a long slope towards the shore. Unfastened from his leash, Beau charged down to the lake, ebullient. For the next thirty minutes, we cavorted on the shore of the magnificent Kluane. Beau raced up and down the shoreline, whipping past me, then circling and racing back. I ran with him until I was exhausted, but he kept going. Two hundred yards away, the plaintive call of a truck horn occasionally broke

through the peace and quiet, but mostly the only sounds were the intermittent splash of the water on the shore and Beau's deep panting. I had my boy back, and he was perfectly happy.

I lay down on the edge of the damp pebbles as they merged with the sand, and gazed out at the ripples on the lake. A loon landed far away and bounced along on the surface where it dipped below my line of sight then reappeared like a mirage on a desert. Beau wandered among some thorny bushes, occasionally snapping at a fly or a twig that ensnared his foot. I rolled onto my back with my head on the wet uncomfortable surface, thinking how very peaceful was this place. Sometime later, I felt Beau nudging my face and awoke with a shudder.

He was a mess of tangles and burrs. His feet were wet and dirty. I spread out a blanket over the passenger seat for him and he spent the remainder of the day untangling his unkempt fur. Though the road was every bit as rough, and the potholes as deep and numerous, gone were his episodic fits of trembling and anxiety. He became obsessed with grooming and barely looked out the window.

From there to the US border, the Alaska Highway had some of the most moth-eaten road I've ever driven upon, and I was relieved to finally pulled up to the quaint border crossing in the middle of nowhere. A young agent looked at my passport. He checked his computer and conversed with a more senior colleague also crammed in the little cubicle. He asked politely for my driver's license. More conversation, more checking the computer. Then, in a most pleasant voice, he said something to the effect that I was probably okay, and he welcomed us back home. "Home," I thought in confusion, "*but isn't Canada home!*" as confusion gave way to confliction.

We arrived in Tok well after dusk. At an outdoor BBQ serving salmon and ribs, Beau sat up tall on one side of a bench and I on the other. It was to be our last night on the road together on our outbound journey – a thought that caused me to become emotional. We had crossed most of North America, just the two of us.

There was really something to this bond that unites people and animals, and enhances the experiences of both. But I was beginning to sense that there was more to the human-animal bond than I had imagined. The concept of One Health was beginning to take on expanded meaning, and in a very personal sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Donald F. Traveling with Beau: My 34-day Trip to a Deeper Understanding of One Health. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, Sept 9, 2014.

Smith, Donald F. Returning to my Canadian Roots: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, Sept 11, 2014.

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TOPICS:

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LEADING QUESTION:

What North American mountains are almost high as Mount McKinley?

META-SUMMARY:

The author continues his journey across America with his dog.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.