

White River

The bear facts on the captain and Winnie

Winnie-the-Pooh has an Ontario connection

Orphan cub was discovered on a station platform

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WHITE RIVER, ONT.— You know you're in friendly territory when your train arrives four hours late and the mayor is still waiting at the station to greet you. And your meal, prepared by the senior ladies of the community, is still warm, even though it's well past 10 p.m.

We're not VIPs. We're just 39 tired travellers — an assortment of rail buffs, leaf peepers and tagalongs — mostly on the senior side and mostly from southern Ontario. We're on a rail tour of the Algoma region, north of Lake Superior, and the townsfolk of White River are simply treating us as they would any visitor — with a warm and genuine welcome. That's the way people are in the North.

White River is an overnight stop on a rail tour themed "Superior Colours of Ontario," a five-day trip in early October taking passengers by rail from Toronto to White River and back. The rail journey is another story, which we will get to in future, but for the moment, we'll concentrate on this community on the Trans-Canada Highway, mid-way between Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay.

First, meet White River's mayor Angelo Bazzoni, who took the

time to show me around this community of 1,000 residents. Frankly, I was impressed. It has its own hospital, fire department, community centre, school, municipal offices, everything required to make it a self-sufficient community. And, Bazzoni is a working mayor in the truest sense. He and wife Christine operate the Continental Motel and Dining Lounge out on the Trans-Canada (Highway 17). The coffee shop and Husky station across from the motel are also family-run.

You'll see no fancy chain of office draped around the neck of mayor Bazzoni. The morning he drove me around, he was wearing a jacket with an "Albert and Sons Towing Service" logo across the back, at the ready to change a neighbour's tire if need be. And, how often do you find a municipal leader delivering a cake for strangers celebrating their 50th anniversary, which was the case with the Pickering's, a couple from Kingston travelling in our group.

Bazzoni is proud of White River's new park and visitor centre on Highway 17, a welcome stop after a long drive. In fact, you may have driven right by White River on previous trips, perhaps passing it off as just another insignificant northern outpost, but Bazzoni and community are doing everything possible to change that, making sure that you make a stop next time you're in the region. Because White River boasts a claim to fame that you may not know about.

For starters, it's an historic community, being a major stop on the main line of the Canadian



Pacific Railway. The region also gets its share of snow, more than 300 cm annually, making it perfect for snowmobiling and other winter activities.

Which brings up some interesting trivia: When William Van Horne was building the CPR link from coast to coast in the 1880s, the community was called Snow Bank. But Van Horne, having a head for marketing, couldn't see people travelling to a place named Snow Bank, so he renamed it White River. Heck, you might even have heard that White River once recorded the coldest temperature in the country, a bone chilling reading of -72 F.

But it's neither its historic past nor its record temperatures that put this hamlet on the map. Its biggest claim to fame is that it was the birthplace of Winnie-the-Pooh.

It was Aug. 24, 1914 when Harry Colebourn, a young Canadian Expeditionary Force veterinarian, was travelling from Winnipeg on his way to England, to duty in World War I. His troop train made a stop at White River, where Colebourn spotted a black bear cub tethered to the station platform.

He learned that its mother had been killed by a hunter and that the orphan cub had been picked up by a trapper who brought it to White River. Colebourn, smitten by the cub, paid the princely sum of \$20 for her and named her Winnipeg after his hometown in Manitoba.

Winnie, as she was soon nicknamed, travelled with Colebourn's regiment to England, entertaining the soldiers with her repertoire of tricks. Her antics endeared her to all who came in contact with her and she served as the loveable mascot of the Second Canadian Infantry Brigade. She would make her bed under Colebourn's bunk each night and was often spotted arranging her blanket and fluffing up her pillow.

When Captain Colebourn got word that he was to be shipped to France, he made arrangements with the London Zoo to look after Winnie until his return.

The Canadian bear immediately became a novelty at the zoo and, owing to her sunny disposition, she soon became one of its favourite attractions. Considering her completely trustworthy, her attendants allowed children to ride on her back and feed her from their hands.

Colebourn visited Winnie whenever he got leave and planned on returning to Canada with her in 1919. But when he saw how much she was loved by the children and how she enjoyed being the centre of attention, he had a change of heart and decided to leave Winnie at the London Zoo.

► Please see Winnie, M21



CATHERINE GEORGE PHOTO

Statue of Winnie-the-Pooh with his honey pot stands in a special place in the gardens at White River's visitors centre. The community celebrates Winnie at its annual Hometown Festival in August.