

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, June 23, 2008

Northern Latitudes and the Summer Solstice: I always liked the long days of early summer. Since I first took geography, I was much interested in places far to the north (and to the south in the southern hemisphere) and in those who lived in them. I had heard of the Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis), seen in the summer sky at northern latitudes, but was surprised to learn that these are often most vivid at about 45 degrees latitude, rather than farther north. New Hampshire and Vermont touch Canada on the 45th parallel.

In 1936 on the family's trip to Nova Scotia and the Gaspé Peninsula, we reached 49 degrees on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River after rounding the Gaspé. In 1941 at Lake Louise, Alberta, we were at 51.5 degrees. On the earlier trip everyone spoke French in the tiny fishing villages, there was a covered bridge of about nine spans at Cap Chat, Quebec, and we had a blow-out on the big '34 Packard near the northernmost point. On the later one, although Canada was in World War II in the summer of '41, tourism seemed to be normal in the Canadian Rockies, and my parents, Meta Shallcross, and I enjoyed the area immensely.

In 1988, Ruth and I ventured to Alaska, and our northernmost point was just north of Fairbanks at about 65 degrees, some 100 miles south of the Arctic Circle. Our visit was in July, and it got dark shortly after midnight, and early dawn came before 3 A.M. Although Fairbanks is considered a very cold place, I had learned in meteorology school that the summer temperatures had been known to reach 100 degrees Fahrenheit. During our stay, it was pleasant summer weather, with the thermometer reaching the low 80s with low humidity. We got to know a young Eskimo from Nome who was attending the University of Alaska.

Finally, in 1990, we reached the farthest north we will venture when we took a tiny Norwegian Coastal vessel from Bergen to Kirkenes, well over 70 degrees north latitude. This is nothing to Norwegians who live here and know little of life south of 60 degrees. I had known of Hammerfest (71 degrees), one of Europe's northernmost cities, the Lofoten Islands (Edgar Allen Poe's "Descent into the Maelstrom"), and Norway's North Cape. When I was a travel agent, the Cunard Line ran a North Cape Cruise from New York in late June each year, but they usually had cool, damp weather. Our little coastal vessel in 1990 had 30 ports of call plying its way from Bergen to Trondheim to the Lofotens, then to Tromsø, with 68,000 people, home of the only university north of the Arctic Circle, and around the North Cape island to Kirkenes, a few miles from the Russian border, and about 150 miles from Murmansk, Russia's primary port on the Arctic Sea, destination of much of the World War II Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union. We made the trip in July. We didn't see the midnight sun because it was cloudy, but for two nights it didn't get dark. Ports of call were often at 2 A.M. or 4 A.M., but it didn't matter as it was light anyway. These coastal steamers run all winter, as many of the tiny towns and villages along the way have no other connection with the outside world. I would not enjoy the trip in December, when darkness would prevail for 24 hours each day. The organist on our vessel was from Hammerfest. While not a highly educated city girl, she seemed as normal as anyone else. To visit the North Cape, we had to dock on the other side of the 20-mile-wide island on which the Cape is situated, then take a bus across the island, dodging reindeer, until we reached the tourist facility on top of the Cape. The weather that day was cold and breezy, with temperature in the low 50s, and we learned that 100,000 people a year visit the Cape. The tourist info center, complete with a modern large-screen theater, was carved out of the top of the rock that forms the Cape. Back on board our little steamer that night, we were served reindeer stew prepared by a native Laplander, who hated the Germans. It tasted like beef stroganoff.

We thought we were adventurous in going so far north, but young people were water skiing around our little ship at 11:30 P.M. in a small fjord in the Lofoten Islands, and we saw travel posters advertising tours to Spitzbergen, a large island owned by Norway at 80 degrees latitude. Several countries mined coal on Spitzbergen before it became a tourist attraction, but in the summer of 1990, there were frequent air flights and a few cruise ships called there. We will probably spend our last days in northern Delaware at just under 40 degrees north, but I can say "we've been to the northland," and like everywhere else, we met some very nice people.