

In the spring of 1927, I travelled north by passenger train through Ontario forests still piled with snow between the evergreens, yet on the sides of the tracks I could see green shoots poking through here and there. I was so optimistic, I discounted the fact my new direction was taking me off the path leading to my goal of becoming a farm manager. I had been thinking only of the promised increased money on payday.

I stepped from the train in Marmora, the closest railway station to my new job. There I was picked up, along with others, and transported to Deloro, a village owned and managed by the Deloro Smelting and Refining Company. This experience haunted me for years to come.

I'd been told the name "Deloro" meant "Valley of Gold,"<sup>1</sup> a name given during the time when twenty-five mine shafts in the area produced \$300,000 worth of this gold plus valuable arsenic.<sup>2</sup> Before 1900, a mill was built there, the first in Canada to extract gold from ores by leaching them with cyanide.<sup>3</sup> After the gold was removed, the remaining material was roasted to remove arsenic. By 1907, because this place was already equipped to handle arsenic, the Deloro Mining and Reduction Company was contracted to process silver ores mined in Cobalt, Ontario. In 1914, a year before its name was changed to the Deloro Smelting and Refining Company, the plant produced the first commercially

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Notes to chapter 4 are on pages 239–40.

viable cobalt metal in the world, a metal worth even more than gold at that time.<sup>4</sup> But on the day I stepped down in Deloro, thoughts of gold became quickly tarnished.

As we neared the place, the green of the countryside ended. Everything appeared in shades of grey and the country quiet was filled with the ear-damaging noise of the machinery. *Jesus, I thought, this place is ruined. How can such ugliness be?*

Later, I learned the complete reason for the destruction, though at first, the tall, smoke-belching chimneys dominating the sky providing a clue. (The combined assault of years of cyanide leaching and the burying of crude arsenic waste in the early years, then more recently the continued depositing of tons of white residue—composed of 60 percent lime and 40 percent arsenic—ruined both the land and the Moira river in Deloro.)<sup>5</sup>

As we entered the town, I passed rundown buildings, paint smeared grey by emissions from the plant. A double row of about forty houses sagged together on either side of a road, bordered by dirty, melting snow and muddy ground. I recognized bunkhouses, a big warehouse, a company store, and a school. Close to the Moira River, several huge plant buildings squatted. In contrast with the beauty of Macdonald College farm, this place looked to me like a garbage dump.

In the plant buildings, ores were refined into pure substances like silver, or combinations like stellite (a very hard metal made of cobalt mixed with tungsten and chromium), as well as other metallic combinations. I'd been told that this place also produced arsenate of lead, used to spray weeds along railway tracks, and arsenate of lime, used to make "Paris Green," a pesticide used on potatoes. To me, pesticides were interesting because they were relatively new, rarely used in Canada until just four years before I went to Deloro.<sup>6</sup> This awful place was actually considered progressive, in its time.

At the smelting plant, I saw huge metal pots containing a repulsive-smelling liquid, bubbling and steaming. As condensation from the pots hit the ground, it melted into the late snow. The runoff looked slimy, leaching down into the mine area where I

could see miners getting their drinking water. The more I saw of this town, the more certain I knew my move here was a mistake.

Company policy prevented unmarried persons from living in company houses on their own, so I boarded with the Browns, a family made up of the father—the son of the old janitor of Macdonald College—the son's wife, and his two sons. Most of the five hundred or so labourers lived in shared bunkhouse rooms provided by the smelter, but I had the best deal. Mrs. Brown came from Northumberland, in England, and Jesus! she made the best Yorkshire pudding. Served it with roast pork, every week. For me as well as all the single men in town, privacy was hard to come by, but we were used to that.

Of course, the smelter manager's home was the biggest and fanciest in town, befitting the fact that, as manager, he was also automatically the village reeve. His home was fronted with a lawn-bowling area, which everyone who belonged to the bowling club could use for enjoyment. Even I bowled there once or twice by invitation. There were also tennis courts and a tennis club. The manager lived in style, having a chauffeur to drive him through town, and several automobiles.

One of his company cars was an expensive McLaughlin Buick, a touring car about eight years old, with a top that folded down. He allowed the company baseball team to use it. This may seem a strange thing for the manager to do, but members of the Deloro Smelters were given first-class treatment because they were the village's chief source of entertainment and even fame. They played in the Trent Valley League, against the small towns of Madoc, Marmora, Tweed, and Havelock. The Deloro Mining and Smelting Company hired very talented amateur players, often university students, from Ontario and Quebec.<sup>7</sup> Though officially on the company payroll, baseball players were required to do very little work at the plant. The company's investment in the team paid off, because eventually, the Deloro baseball team won the Ontario Intermediate A Championship, then went on to the Senior Central Ontario League, challenging teams from Oshawa, Kingston, Peterborough, and Belleville.

However just before I arrived, it seems the baseball players were making a habit of getting drunk, damaging the boss's car when they drove it. In conversation, a garage man, who worked next to where I kept the horses, tipped me that the McLaughlin Buick was up for sale. He said, "You should buy it, because the boss is selling it for much less than it's worth. He just wants to end the worry of it."

I made an offer and bought the car for three hundred dollars, a very good price. I proudly polished and drove around in it for about a week, my very first automobile. But a week was all it took for me to realize I wouldn't need it for long. Other than the car and my pay, I knew there was little to hold me in Deloro, so I returned it and got my money back.

The only women in town were the wives of the office workers, foremen, police, and other company men. Though the married women organized bridge and musical evenings, Deloro had little to attract single women; not even prostitutes lived here. The closest whorehouse was in Marmora, about two and a half miles away. The three women in it were visited mostly by single men fortunate enough to arrange transportation. This wasn't difficult, because it seemed every married person in the town had a car, needed if they wanted to get around on holidays.

Deloro had little indoor plumbing, so I bathed in a tin tub, like most everyone else. With no sewers, many toilets had buckets attached. Saturday night was the time most people chose to dump the damned things into the surrounding fields, digging the stinking contents into the ground. The overwhelming smell of the Saturday night bucket brigade in Deloro is a powerful memory, one of many I wish I could forget.

As I got to know the people of the village, they seemed congenial enough. I knew the long-term residents must have been tough, struggling in years past through plant closures and hard economic times without any government assistance. But it seemed to me they had a strange way of expressing themselves, sort of "out of it" or "bushed." Sometimes they didn't even recognize how funny they were. The local newspaper, The Deloro

Once-A-Week provided examples of their humour, but it was the people themselves who entertained me the most.<sup>8</sup>



Deloro Smelting & Refining Co. Ltd., circa 1912

One day I hitched a ride on a cart driven by one of the local farmers who delivered wood to the houses. We commented about spring being a poor season for transport on village roads. Our horse-drawn wagons were fitted with sleigh runners on snow or ice, then refitted with wheels on hard-packed ground. During this particular northern Ontario spring, road surfaces were changing from mud to ice, then back again in no time at all. Neither runners nor wheels work in mud, and soft mud was our problem this day.

As we rode slowly behind the struggling team, we passed a farm woman, a customer who called out to my local acquaintance, “John, when will you be coming?”

Dead serious, he called back, “Don’t worry. If it stiffens up in the night, I’ll slip it in in the morning.” He didn’t qualify what “it” was, but my randy mind quickly provided its own interpretation. I started laughing so hard tears came into my eyes. The driver and his customer just stared at me as if I was crazy, neither one realizing the joke they had created.

Another time it was the policeman who made me laugh, but not quite so loud and a little more carefully, to be sure. He was a big fellow named O'Neill, who revelled in his tough-guy reputation, yet he could be tricked with only a few words said at the right time.

It all happened because a fellow named Johnson and I started tussling in fun, as we waited in the gathering at the carpenter's shop, where we regularly received our morning work orders. I gave him a nudge and Johnson slipped on the ice, falling to the ground and spinning around. Everybody laughed, but one of the other men decided to use the incident to bait O'Neill.

He went to the policeman and said, "You know that Caldow? He's one tough bugger. Strong, too. I just saw him pick big Johnson up, toss him, and spin him around." This was a bloody lie of course, but O'Neill took the bait and came looking for me later.

On my way home he sidled up and said, "Caldow! I hear you're a bit of a wrestler. What about if you and I have a go some time?"

I said, "If you like. Where?"

"How about if we use your horse stall?"

I nodded in response.

"But you'd better bed it down with some straw, first," O'Neill said.

Up close and quiet I said to him, "If you want it bedded down with straw, you'd best find some. I have no need of straw because I don't intend to be hitting the ground. If you need padding, get it yourself."

"I'll get back to you," he said, walking away.

But I never heard any more from him. I guess he found out I was a bigger bullshitter than he was.



For men, year-round entertainment consisted of billiards, in the Single Men's Recreation Club, also called "The Hub." It had eight billiard tables, plus poker. On pay night, poker was played for big money. When the plant manager bet, the kitty was hundreds of dollars, a fortune to me. I watched, but playing poker for myself was of no interest.

I'd been turned off it since I was fourteen, when I was challenged to play poker by the hired men back in Scotland. I'd gambled and lost the few shillings I'd earned snaring a hare and selling it. This loss killed any joy in the game for me. Besides, if the loss hadn't killed it, my father would have killed me, if he'd found out. I made a vow then, "No more bloody poker for me!" So in Deloro, I'd watch the betting until I got bored.

It was boredom helped lengthen my already long work day. To fill time, I worked an extra job from six to eleven in the evening, dumping ore into the ball mill, a machine that crushed the ore to powder before it began the smelting process. For hours I dumped ore sacks, about two feet by ten or twelve inches round, weighing about a hundred pounds each. Very heavy work as the hours wore on.

My regular job was driving and caring for a team of big Clydesdales, hauling heavy loads with a large work wagon. Sometimes we transported gravel, or limestone required for the blast furnace. Often in two-in-the-morning darkness, accompanied by a security guard for protection against theft, I hauled up to three loads of numbered, insured silver bars down to the Marmora train station for shipment to London, England. Every day, I'd to feed, brush, and otherwise care for the Clydesdales and their equipment. The harsh demands of my new job in Deloro quickly eliminated my dream of a healthier existence, of having the same pay for shorter hours.

It surprised me that the people who lived here didn't mind having the smelter for a neighbour. It proved profitable for most of them. Nobody anywhere worried much about pollution in those days. Some farmers in the surrounding area had gravel pits, making money selling gravel to the smelter. I was beginning to learn, neither the people nor the smelting company were all bad, like most things in life.

The company, in its own way, took care of us to some extent. Our pay was pretty good and, because the office organized the twenty-five cents a month deductions, anyone who needed it had access to a sizable fund for needy cases, with money dispensed by

a five-person relief committee (three from hourly rated employees and two from staff). There was a company doctor available to residents of both Marmora and Deloro, paid for by a dollar-a-month deduction from single men and a dollar twenty-five each month from married. British subjects, like me and the local farm labourers, all could find extra work at so-called easy jobs assigned to us. In comparison to the work given "Europeans," our jobs were damned easy, believe me.

The hundreds of isolated, homesick, and probably poisoned Europeans in Deloro were legally contracted in Montreal, then made to work in the most dangerous jobs in the whole polluted village. The company claimed they always had three crews at the ready—one crew to work, one on the way up, one crew recruited and waiting for their turn.

These were the men who retrieved the arsenic. Members of some work crews spread the thirty tons per day of crude arsenic over the hearths of the reverberatory furnaces.<sup>8</sup> Other crews cleaned the hearths, removing the residue after much of the arsenic was heated into gases and smoke. (This poison-laden smoke—initially with temperatures at or above 295°C—was then forced through three massive chambers, each divided into thirty-nine condensing "kitchens,"<sup>9</sup> where heavier dust particles settled into different grades of arsenic. As the smoke left the last "kitchen"—at the rate of 18,000 cubic feet per minute—it carried with it extra fine arsenic dust that would not settle out. To capture the last of the arsenic dust, the smoke—with a temperature of 90-100°C—was fan-forced into the "bag house.") This was the worst place of all to work, but it wasn't just the heat that made it bad.

The bag house held about two hundred circular woollen bags, each thirty feet long and eighteen inches in diameter. The fibres in the woollen bags collected the extra fine arsenic dust from the smoke as it was forced through them. These bags were mechanically shaken into hoppers once per shift, then workers removed the arsenic from the hoppers.

In spite of the heat, the Europeans working in the bag house covered themselves from head to foot with clothing, tying collars



tightly around their necks, rubbing a brown, protective paste—provided by the company—on their exposed skin. They also wore breathing apparatus.

These crews were told, “Work slowly, be careful not to work up a sweat.”

In spite of the clothing precautions, the protective paste, and slow pace, the extra fine dust filtered through, collecting on the men anywhere there was moisture—their eyes, the sides of their mouths, their genitals.

Furthermore, the dust sometimes contained more than arsenic, as if arsenic wasn't enough. (Arsenic can be a volatile gas that condenses into a fume that can coat everything.) When pesticides—such as arsenate of lead—were being manufactured, other components probably were added to the mix.<sup>10</sup> Caustic soda, lead, and nitric acid could have been included in the process, producing a dust not only poisonous, but also caustic.

No wonder the Europeans, as they came off shift, were made to shower carefully and told, “Put on more brown paste to burn the arsenic out of the damp places.”

In the showers one day, I watched the bag house men jump and hold on with pain as the brown cream touched their skin. I could see they were faced with a terrible choice between the immediate pain of the cream or the even greater pain of the deep burn that would surely follow from their exposure to untreated smoke residues. I couldn't believe what my eyes were seeing. Naked, except for the brown paste, they looked like pictures I'd seen of Indians in war paint, but in Deloro the war paint was painful. The sight of the men in the showers made my skin crawl with horror.

From then on, I couldn't forget them working in that foul smoke and dust. I wondered why the Europeans didn't all leave. Then someone explained that even if they saved enough, the company wouldn't allow them to pay for their transportation in a lump sum. Only small payments were accepted, keeping the men working longer. If they ran, O'Neill and the RCMP brought them back because they had broken their contracts. I heard of only one man who made it clear away. I was told he ran far enough to

reach a tall cornfield, where he hid until it got dark. Try as they would, they couldn't find him.

Even though there was a "safety committee," it didn't take me long to figure out that company attempts at "protection" weren't enough for these men.<sup>11</sup> Many workers looked weak, pale, with swollen bellies too big for their sickly bodies. It was an eerie feeling when I realized these people reminded me of the Scottish horses I'd seen treated with arsenic when they had worms. At that time, arsenic was considered a conditioner for horses, but big Clydesdales were given only as much of it as could sit on a ten-cent piece, that's all. I remembered my father telling me that the relatively tiny dose was the reason the horses appeared fat, with swollen bellies, just like many of the poor workers in Deloro.

As I became fully aware of the potential for horror there in that smelter village, I was convinced arsenic was seeping through every crook and cranny in the place. Proof came when I cut myself shaving and got the damned arsenic dust in it, sending me to the makeshift company hospital for treatment. There I saw a man, one of the Europeans, who'd had his genitals almost burned away. The nurse explained that poisoned dust had caused the burn because this poor fellow didn't know enough English to learn how to properly apply the protective paste.

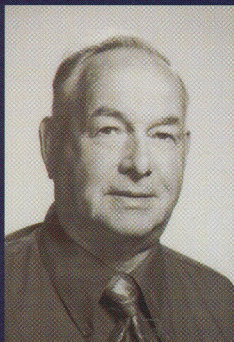
Seeing this man in his agony, knowing the draught horses I'd given the best of care were sick with something similar to bronchitis in humans (called "heaves" in horses), I made up my mind. No matter that mining paid more—give me a farm any day. I'd paid for my own transportation, so I had no contract to break. I got myself out of Deloro and on a train for Montreal. Mining and smelting were not for me.

As I rode back through those Northern Ontario forests, further and further from Deloro, my spirits lifted. I planned to go West . . . see the rest of Canada . . . work the farms along the way.

*Maybe I'll just keep on going, all the way to Australia,* I thought.

But I was changed by this town, made older—maybe stronger—maybe more capable of accepting the challenges to

come, on the Canadian prairies. The images of Deloro and its workers are etched in my memory. In spite of its golden history, to me the name "Deloro" means the saddest place I've ever been. A true hell on earth.



"**DOUR SCOT**" is the wrong description for David Caldwell, who leads readers on a romp from the early twentieth century to the present, from an insular Scottish village to modern-day, multicultural British Columbia, from boyhood to old age. Throughout the tour he shares decades of laughter, tears, fears, and growth.

In 1910, the certain path of David's life in Scotland is disrupted by the visit of an awe-inspiring comet. This brilliant visitor inspires the boy to dream of circling the world, like the comet, even though his life's

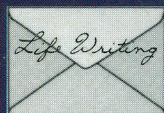
goal is to become a farm manager, like his father. As a young man seeking to fulfill his dreams, he travels to Canada and works his way from Quebec to British Columbia, guided by the lessons of his father and his memories of Scotland.

During his travels he grows in his understanding of himself, of the nature of love, of the ways of the world and its peoples, and of the poetry of Robert Burns. As a worker for the Farmer's Institute and as farm manager for Colony Farm and Tranquille, two extensive BC government-owned farms, David contributes to raising the standards of Canadian agriculture. At seventy years old, he broadens the scope of his world even further, accepting a two-year Canadian federal-government position teaching farming in Tanzania.

*Chasing the Comet* is a true story that reads like fiction. David's candour and Scottish humour help him survive and thrive. In the book's epilogue, David ponders the meaning of all his years of living, addressing questions such as: What is love? What is success? And how does one achieve them?

**DAVID CALDOW**, now ninety-eight, lives in Surrey, British Columbia.

**BIOGRAPHER PATRICIA KORETCHUK** has ensured that this personal tale provides accurate details of both the physical and social environments surrounding the events in David's life. Toronto born, she moved with her British-immigrant parents to British Columbia when she was eleven. This background, and her marriage to a Ukrainian Canadian, instilled a curiosity about why people immigrate and the benefits of this immigration to Canadian society.



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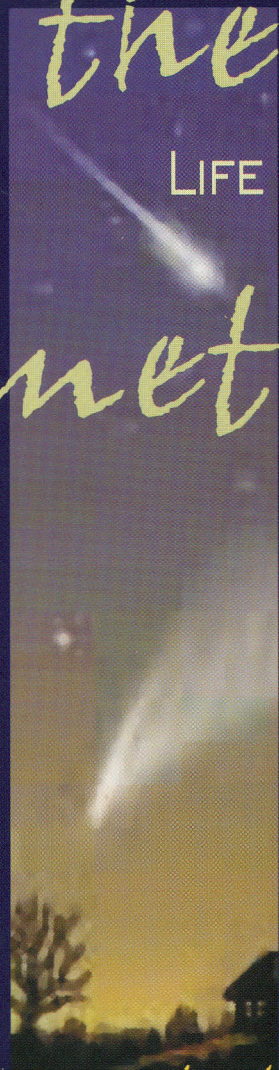
*Chasing*

A SCOTTISH-CANADIAN

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*Patricia Kovetchuk*