

Bacon, Beer and Music

Reflections on Isolation - Greenland 1971 and California 2020

by Ian Walton, July 2020, Santa Cruz, California

Shelter-in-Place Lockdown seems like a good opportunity to reflect on isolation, then and now.

In 1971, our merry band of Greenland explorers had never experienced prolonged social isolation beyond a couple of nights in a wet, wintry tent in Knoydart or a week in the “wilds” of Glenbrittle. So, it was interesting to see how we reacted. Of course, we were not actually alone in south Greenland, since there were ten of us. But the long and expensive journey via progressively smaller planes and boats certainly made it feel like we were isolated, with no easy way back to normality. And we planned to be gone for ten weeks – an eternity in the social whirl of university life at St. Andrews. And with no communication, friends and relationships just went on hold.

What did we miss the most back then? I remember many discussions about favourite foods, and bacon seemed to top the list of immediate cravings. On later Sierra Club expeditions to Alaska that particular problem would be solved by amazing little cans of cooked bacon. They now seem to have vanished from the local supermarket but are still available from Amazon as specialty Tactical Bacon for “end-of-the-world scenarios.” We did of course have actual beer in bottles, thoughtfully donated by Tuborg, because weight was not an over-riding problem getting to base camp. I also remember a much later incarnation of travel beer on a 1993 backpacking trip to Ellesmere Island where weight was crucial. Dried, instant, just-add-water-and-stir beer was a complete fiasco!

Paradoxically the first isolation in South Greenland took place in the midst of the thriving settlement of Nanortalik. We ten had arrived there safely – but only with what we had carried on our backs from Scotland. Our food supplies and our tents and our climbing gear were all on a KGH (Kongelige Gronlandske Handel) ship stuck somewhere in the pack ice off Cape Farewell, and would not show up for three long weeks. So suddenly we had to negotiate for food and a place to stay – not exactly homeless in a pandemic but you get the idea. We worked at mixing concrete to earn enough credits for dinner in the Danish workers’ canteen, and we squatted in an empty bungalow.

Then we progressively explored our surroundings in finer and finer detail. Did I mention that Nanortalik is located on a very small island? So, from Hills 1, 2 and 3 we moved on to explore top 3.5 and eventually bumps 3.9 and 3.95. At first, we rambled as a group, and then in twos, and soon alone.

I remember the immense reassurance and pleasure we experienced when the local doctor and hospital staff invited us to dinner and social evenings involving conversation and music. That broke the isolation, with music putting in its first appearance in this soothing role. We had records at the doctor's house and we sang the folk songs that graced StAUMC (St. Andrews University Mountaineering Club) pubs and bothies back home.



Finally, in the mountains we generated our own “live” music and each person had one cassette tape recorded back in St. Andrews. Mine included three live songs from our mountaineering club guitarist/songstress.

*Author, Base Camp
Greenland, 1971*

Now switch to shelter-in-place retirement lock-down in the small coastal university town of Santa Cruz in California in 2020. It's a comfortable, pleasant existence, but with a strange sense of isolation. Bacon is not an issue. But the most immediate loss is live music, both as a performer and an audience member. Bottled beer is not a problem, but the delightful social tapestry of local microbreweries is suffering badly – just as are the pubs in Scotland.

Technology has come to the rescue in several interesting ways. For beer it's the availability of cost effective micro-canning lines. And it's easy and cheap to communicate with friends and family – unlike the price-gouging international telephone rates when I first emigrated to California.

For music, a long-standing listserv for former StAUMC members is suddenly alive with songbooks and recordings of the old songs – including a remarkable resurrection of the three songs from that 1971 cassette tape. Then there are creative new recordings with multiple players and voices located across the globe - lovingly re-creating the sound of a Scottish pub sing-along.



Here in Santa Cruz music has migrated to Zoom Open Mics with participants in California, Nevada and France as well as live-streamed performances coordinated by the Cork and Fork, a local wine boutique that used to host live musicians every week.

*Author at home in Santa Cruz
Zoom Open Mic
May, 2020*

In a perverse way, the local isolation is promoting increased virtual contact amongst old friends, including a monthly Zoom reunion of the ten participants in our 1971 Greenland expedition. The feasibility of a live, in-person 50th anniversary reunion in 2021 looms large in the online conversations. Curiously though, the closer you live to St. Andrews, the less you want to travel for a reunion.

Am I more or less isolated now than I was in 1971? Perhaps, as then, it all depends on what happens next.