



LAKE "O" - A HISTORY

In November I had the privilege of attending a pot luck supper at OKM Secondary through the courtesy of teacher Michael Ross. The intent was to provide me with some information about a little hike that the students take part in every year, affectionately known as Lake "O" (Lake O'Hara in Yoho National Park). A compilation slide show was the feature of the evening, but what became increasingly apparent was that the pot luck supper event was more like a giant family reunion. The "family" was created in September when 137 of them completed a week-long task that many adults would have difficulty with.

In the beginning

1976 was an exciting year in Okanagan Mission. While the country was celebrating the success of the Montreal Olympics, teachers and students at OKM were on shift at KLO Secondary and longing to move into a new school being built on Gordon Drive, which was to be completed in early 1977.

One afternoon the discussion in the staff room centred around motivation, and keeping kids focussed. "How do you stimulate teenagers to be creative, self-motivated, and interested? How do you get them to write poetry with meaning?" Law 11 teacher Doug Gillett volunteered a possible solution, "Put kids in a new en-

vironment that overwhelms them to such a degree that they must interact with it."

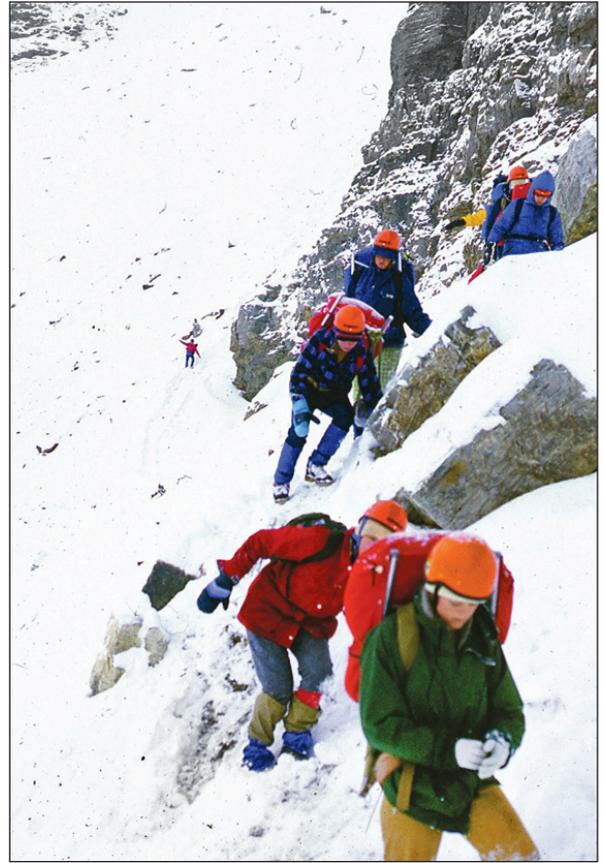
The place he had in mind was a climb from Lake O'Hara, up to Abbot Pass and a night in the Abbot Pass Hut. The rationale was to challenge them with a voluntary removal from their comfort zone by placing them in a totally foreign environment and thereby providing an opportunity for an awakening. For Doug's Law 11

students it could provide an awareness of the necessity for Environmental Law. English 11 students could similarly be stimulated to wax poetic on the beauty of nature.

In early 1977 OKM Secondary opened its doors and Mr. Bernie Monteleone, the first principal, fortunately

shared Doug's vision. By June of that year the first expedition was on its way to the Rocky Mountains in a Rent-a-Bus with 20 students and three chaperones on board. The cost to the kids was \$20.00 each.

It was anyone's guess whether the trip would be successful as the challenges were great. The first day was



The group of 1981 cling to the side of Mount Victoria on the final leg of the ascent up to Abbot Pass. Helmets are mandatory due to the risk of falling rock.

a long drive to Yoho National Park plus a 12 kilometre hike up to Lake O'Hara at 5200 feet above sea level. They were carrying food and supplies to last a week and there was still snow on the ground at the higher levels.

On the second day they had to face a climb up to the top of the saddle between Mount LeFroy and Mount Victoria (hidden from view in the photo on the facing page) to Abbot Pass at 9585 feet above sea level. It is not reassuring to learn that the pass is named after Philip Stanley Abbot

who fell to his death after climbing LeFroy in 1896. They would spend the night in the stone hut at the top of the pass.

"We had to be up there before the sun warmed the slopes," says Doug Gillett, "in order to avoid the notori-



Doug Gillett in 1977



Doug Gillett in 2008

“Put kids in a new environment that overwhelms them to such a degree that they must interact with it.”

ous avalanches off the surrounding mountains.”

They set off the next morning at 5:00 am in order to beat the clock and to complete the steep 4400 foot climb. It would be treacherous at this time of the year due to the snow and ice and if a rock is dislodged it has the potential to fall several thousand feet.

“The students performed amazingly,” says Doug, “as they pushed through the physical and mental walls of exhaustion, cold, blistered feet, and altitude headaches.”

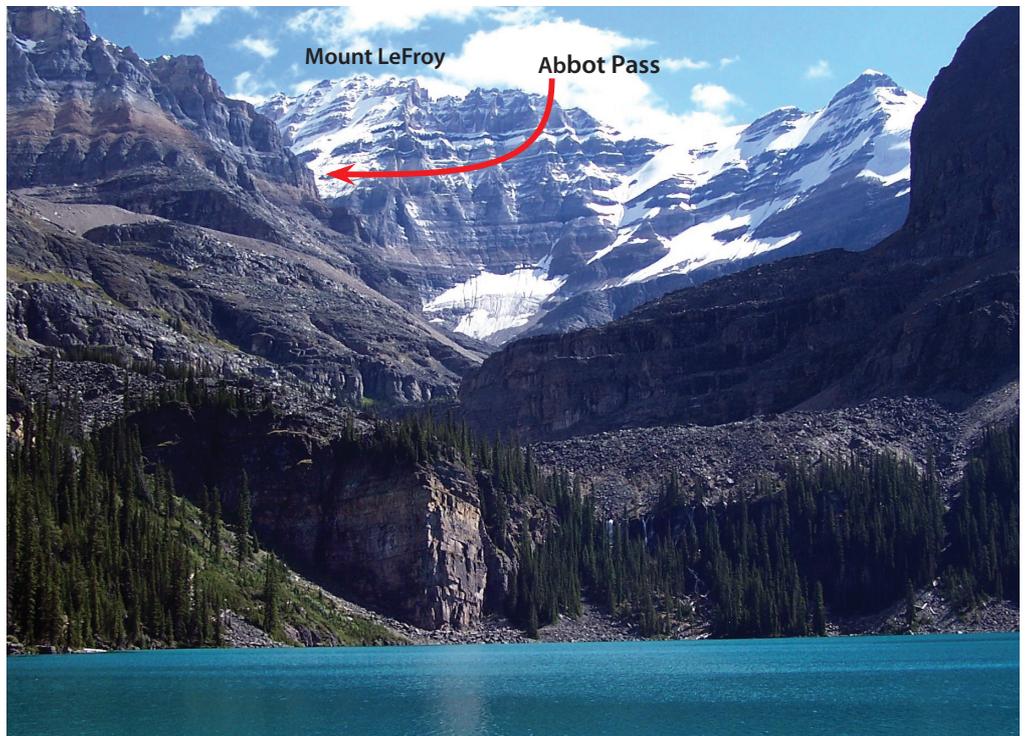


John Arnold at 16

Tired, sore and hungry, they all made it to the top to enjoy the overwhelming view below. “With just a turn of the head you can look east down into the Lake Louise Valley of Alberta,” says Doug, “and to the southwest into the Rockies and Kootenay Mountains of B.C.”

“The experience created the desired result, a new respect for the environment and an awareness of the astounding beauty of our Canadian landscape.”

Even the outhouse offers poetic opportunities as it literally straddles The Great Divide.



Lake O’Hara (foreground) is only one of many Outdoor Ed locations for today’s OKM students.

“The next day,” says Doug, “all students made it safely down the mountain and the remainder of the trip was spent hiking the trails around Lake O’Hara. All in all students put on an average of 60 to 70 kilometres with a total change in elevation of approximately 10,000 vertical feet.”

One of the students that week was 16-year-old John Arnold, “It was a magical time for me,” he says today, “I can not overstate the influence it had on my life.” After high school he went on to an Outward Bound program then studied conservation reclamation in college. He later worked in environmental protection as a fisheries officer at various locations throughout B.C.

“It also opened up a whole new world of exploration for me,” he says, “I’ve been on climbing, cycling and kayaking expeditions as well as paragliding and sailing adventures around this beautiful globe of ours.”

The experience of this first group did not dissuade future students. In fact by 1979 there were so many who wished to

participate that they had to make two trips back to back.

Over the years

It became increasingly difficult to accommodate all students with the Lake O’Hara - Abbot Pass experience, so the trip expanded to the trails in Kootenay National Park, Banff National Park and Glacier National Park.

The large number of students also created transportation hurdles as the availability of drivers with Class 4 drivers licences became

an issue along with the steady increase in the cost of fuel. Other challenges included the training of sufficient chaperones with first aid certification, the rising costs for national parks camping fees, hiking permits, vehicle permits and increasing Alpine Club of Canada



John Arnold at 51



This was a life-changing moment for these OKM students and chaperones on the top of Abbott Pass in 1981.

fees for the use of their huts.

It is only through the dogged perseverance of teachers like Doug Gillett, and the outstanding support from parents and administration staff that this program has been so consistently successful.

Today

Despite Doug Gillett's retirement in 2009, the Lake "O" pilgrimage to the Rockies lives on. Students now graduate in grade 12 and provincial exams have necessitated moving the program from June to September.

"There are no signs of diminishing support for Lake O", says Mr. Ross. "The grads of 2012 were the largest group ever with 137 participants. There were 17 different groups with 38 chaperones."

Bri Little (17) was one of this year's participants. "I was part of a small group of eight with six students and two chaperones," she says. "We climbed to the summit of the Floe Lake Trail in Kootenay National Park." With a grade elevation of 696 metres including some very steep sections this was one of the more difficult routes. "I loved it," she says.



Bri Little in 2012

As remote as these trails can be, it is not unusual to meet hikers from around the world who have travelled great distances to enjoy the beauty and ruggedness of our Rocky Mountains. "We met one elderly couple who had been hiking together for many years", says Bri, "They couldn't get over how young we all were to be taking on such a difficult trail."

On a separate occasion they came across an Israeli soldier who had heard about

the Floe Lake Trail through a Vancouver firefighter. "He was there to challenge himself," says Bri, "and expressed his shock when he discovered that there were over a hundred of us from the same school."

Encounters like these are not uncommon. "We learned a lot about his home country that day," says Bri, "and an appreciation for our good fortune in living where we do."

Looking ahead

"We have already begun preparing for

Outdoor Education 12 - Lake O'Hara

Course objectives

- #1 - To gain real world experiences.
- #2 - To learn about the environment and human impact on that environment.

the 2012/2013 trip," says Mr. Ross. "Meetings with our grade eleven students and parents (over 100 students have already signed up) are underway and we will soon be holding information sessions on gear, mountain safety and menu planning plus getting them started on route planning, fitness hikes and first aid training."

Meeting the Costs

A large part of the preparation is in the organizing of fund raising, since costs have risen so dramatically, and with the recent loss of lottery funding and provincial government travel programs parents must come up with approximately \$300 per child.

Everyone agrees that it is fundamental that no student be denied participation due to costs or the availability of equipment. Fund raising has therefore become a critical factor in the success of the program.

"We ask that you save your recyclables for our annual bottle drive," says Mr. Ross. "Please keep a look out for our flyers in May for more details." The organizers have great pride in knowing that no student has been denied the "Lake O" experience due to lack of funds.

The program is also accepting used sleeping bags, sleeping mats, backpacks,



Mr Ross in 2012

Outdoor Education 12 - Lake O'Hara

Course objectives

- #3 - To enhance student leadership skills for the remainder of their lives.
- #4 - To enhance and further develop students' interpersonal communication skills.

camp cookware, stoves, tents, outdoor clothing and boots. If you wish to make a cash donation, please contact Mr. Michael Ross at mross@sd23.bc.ca or through the school office at 250-764-4185 during business hours.

Len McFarlane is an Okanagan Mission resident and publisher of The Okanagan Mission Review.



With a week's worth of food and supplies on their backs a group from this year's grad class manoeuvre over a precarious creek crossing .

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