



Fall 2002

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Recommended Citation

Coulter, Diane (2002) "Charting New Waters," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 11 : Iss. 3 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol11/iss3/1>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Charting New Waters

Larry Anderson '71 gave up a successful stateside insurance business to open one of Canada's premier fishing lodges.

By Diane Coulter

Photos by Sandi Wilson

All it took was a single trip to Canada's salmon fishing capital in the spring of 1978 and Larry Anderson's Scandinavian soul was caught in the spell of British Columbia's glacier-carved fiords, majestic coastal mountains and plentiful salmon stock. "Sport fishing on B.C.'s west coast is on a grand scale—so is the scenery and the wildlife," says Anderson '71. "I knew instantly that I'd be back. This is salmon angler's paradise—only a couple other places in the world can match it, and they're not too far from here."

While his initial tangle with Canada's western fringe was love at first sight, it would be two decades before Anderson finally traded in his insurance business and city lifestyle for a 25-foot cruiser, a slower pace, and a rewarding connection with nature.

"It's said you should find a career where you can do what you love and get paid for it," says the Nordic fisherman. For Anderson, the decision to pursue his life's passion was made mid-life, at the height of a successful career that began while he was an undergraduate insurance major at IWU. "While I was studying at Illinois Wesleyan I began working part-time for Campbell Evans, my insurance professor, who also owned an agency. The day after graduating, I started there full-time at 6 a.m." Within a year, Anderson and his close college buddy and fellow business major Steve Ketcham '71 moved to Colorado, from Champaign, Ill., ready for scenery with fewer hogs and cornfields.

With his Illinois Wesleyan degree in insurance, finding a job wasn't hard. But by 1975, Anderson faced the reality of being transferred out-of-town, and found the idea of starting his own agency more appealing. Personable and intelligent, Anderson had no trouble attracting customers. Before long it seemed the business was running itself, and Anderson took advantage of that fact with frequent fishing trips to British Columbia's Inside Passage, the name given to protected inlets running from Washington's Puget Sound, up through Canada's western flank and terminating in Alaska.

"I began bringing my best insurance clients up to B.C. to experience its world-class fishing," he divulges. Along the way, Anderson developed a reputation as more than just a guide with a knack for landing the Chinook salmon that are native to the region. He was equally adept at introducing his wide-eyed clients to the area's wildlife wonders: pods of Orca, porpoise, grizzly bear, and bald eagles, as well as a bounty of seafood, including clams, oysters, crab, mussels, and prawns. Local fishing lodges noticed him too, and soon he was in demand as a professional guide. "Starting in 1990, I was spending May to September in Canada getting paid to take people fishing. What a racket!"

By the time Anderson's two children, Nicole and Sam, were completing high school and beginning college respectively, the clamorous congestion of Denver was taking its toll. "It was a gradual process—I already kept my boat up there [in British Columbia], but I wanted something more permanent," shares Anderson. In



In search of prized "Tyee," an Indian name for Chinook weighing at least 30 pounds, Larry Anderson (above) ties on the hook, lure, and line.

February of 1998, he was ready to leave the insurance business for good. He flew back to B.C. and found four acres of strategically located waterfront property on Stuart Island, a small island in the Inside Passage, about 125 miles north of Vancouver, B.C. “Thirty days after finding the place on Stuart Island, I was the owner. Sold my business. Sold my house,” he says with a shrug. “Luckily my family and friends were really supportive—even if some of them thought I was a little crazy.”

On March 1, Anderson loaded up a barge with his possessions as well as the construction material needed to build a new lodge and began the trek north. Undaunted by winter’s persistent palette of rain, sleet, and clouds, Anderson built a handsome lodge and christened it Nanook, native for “white polar bear.” Surrounding the lodge is over 1,000 feet of deck, built from old-growth cedar. “This guy across the bay has rights to a cove that was used for logging around the turn of the century,” says Anderson. “He’s in his 80s, but he manages to pull out these perfectly preserved, sunken cedar logs. We’re really into recycling here at Nanook, so it was perfect.”

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Flying low over the Pacific Ocean in a seaplane from either Seattle or Vancouver, Nanook’s guests arrive dockside, ready to wrestle with a prized “Tyee,” the Kwakiutl Indian name for a Chinook weighing at least 30 pounds. Some guests are true fishing fanatics like Anderson; others are just looking for a little peace and quiet. As they arrive at the wharf, all are greeted personally by Anderson, his son Sam, 24, daughter Nicole, 22, (if she isn’t away at college) and Nook, the Bernese mountain dog, who insists on carrying whatever luggage he can get his chops around.

Most of the lodge’s guests are Fortune 500 corporate executives and regional businessmen who are entertaining clients or rewarding top employees—

although, after realizing all the lodge’s opportunities for recreation and education, most guests come back with their spouses and families, says Anderson. What’s more, women’s groups are signing up for exclusive retreats, leaving their husbands at home.

The fishing day starts early, which suits Anderson fine. He wakes up before daybreak to turn on the generator and rouses his guests at 5 a.m.—or earlier, depending on their eagerness to be first out on the water. Equipped with bait, lunch, and thermoses of coffee, guests head out with their guide in groups of two or three.

The waters are glassy and calm as the boat cuts full-throttle through the damp, early-morning air, weaving up Johnstone Strait between graceful evergreen islands toward a shady cove with a rugged shoreline and a pebble beach. Resident porpoise and sea lion pop up to welcome visitors, while a bald eagle keeps watch from a towering cedar.

Drifting closer to shore, mysterious pictographs indelibly marked on a craggy rock face come into focus, reflecting the area’s rich First Nations’ heritage. Here in this cove, the top eight feet of ocean are freshwater—pale jade in color and the result of run-off from the snow-capped mountains in the backdrop. In the icy fathoms below, the salmon, big and small, congregate. It doesn’t take long before the line quivers and the boat is awash with action, heaving as the excited anglers plunge to reel in the rods and claim their reward.

What if big fish just don’t bite that day? “It happens,” says Anderson. “But the guys who have fished before—or hunted—they understand you don’t always come home with a limit of ducks, for instance. A lot of these



Nanook visitors arrive by sea plane (above).

execs need to learn how to relax and get down to island time.” That’s when the big fish come. “Yeah,” confirms his son Sam, a Prince William look-alike. “That’s why it’s called fishing, not catching.” Joking aside, the Andersons and their skilled squad of handpicked guides are renowned for landing the big fish. “The record here at the lodge is a 48-pounder. Steve Fox [’70] pulled that Tyee up while it was still pitch-black outside. It was an hour-long fight.”

Nanook, however, is not all bait and fish guts. If you’ve already caught your legal limit or you don’t have a piscine bone in your body, there is plenty else to do on the island. Sam has taken his father’s advice about doing what you love and is now partnering with his dad to bring a veritable menu of eco-exploration activities to the Nanook experience. Eagle sighting and whale watching, overnight kayaking trips, inner tidal tours, bear tracking, and even extreme mountain biking are popular with those who want to interact intimately with nature. “Some people take nature for granted,” says Sam. “When you’re remote, you have to be self-sufficient. I’ve learned so much from the people who make this area their home, and I really want to share this with our guests. That way, when they get back to the office, they’ll have learned something about the world and maybe even about themselves.”

Anderson and his two children all find a sense of purpose and greater significance in their involvement with the salmon enhancement program on nearby Phillips River—proving, as Steve Ketcham states it, “their commitment to the fish is as strong as their commitment to the fishers.” Working closely with Fisheries and Oceans Canada, two local hatcheries, and the Pacific Salmon Foundation, the Andersons and their team of volunteers have helped to invigorate local efforts to build up the salmon stock. “Even if we only get a 2-percent return,” explains Sam, “that doubles our Chinook population.”

In August and September, the Andersons begin an involved process of capturing spawning salmon and transporting them to holding pens where they are checked every other day for roe (eggs). The roe and milt (sperm) are collected in sterile bowls and mixed together at the hatchery. Once the fry hatch and develop over the winter and spring, they are corralled into bags and transported by helicopter back to their native river. Last June, the Andersons—along with volunteers who are guests at the lodge—helped tag and release into the wild over 120,000 juvenile Chinook. “Most of our guests love the experience. They come in for dinner, and it’s all they can talk about. They’ve handled big fish and done something that most people never get a chance to do.”

After a day on the water fishing, watching for Orcas and eagles, pulling up traps, and digging clams, guests are drooling when Nanook’s head chef whisks out a five-star dinner based on the catch of the day. There are no culinary short-cuts at the lodge. Salmon, of course, Dungeness crab, clams, oysters, and prawns are regular fare and supplemented with organic produce and herbs from the lodge garden. The table is set with fresh flowers, a view of the Pacific in the soft, evening light, and a quirky house staple: solid sterling silver cutlery that was among the prizes Anderson’s mom won during a four-day streak on “The Price is Right” T.V. game show. Above the dining table is a large Gyotaku, a Japanese fish print, depicting Sam’s prize Tyee—a piece of art which invariably provokes tall and entertaining tales among the guests about their own “big fish fights.”

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Anderson admits that it took him awhile to adapt to the isolation and challenges of living so closely with nature, including providing his own water and electricity. But while you can't call for room service, Nanook's comfortable accommodations are immaculately kept and the lodge has all the necessary conveniences (including an open bar). Anderson and his guests keep connected to friends, world events, and various business details through satellite television, the Internet, telephone, and fax. "Actually, I've seen some pretty big deals go down on the boat during a day of fishing," shares Anderson. "Then we'll go back to the lodge, pop into the hot tub, and wait for the agreement papers to roll in by fax. We have all the essential corporate tools here at Nanook."

In fact, with his insurance degree and entrepreneurial background, Anderson is just as comfortable talking about stock options and mergers with his high-powered clients as he is discussing whether to bait the rod with a blue hootchie or an anchovy. One of Anderson's virtues as a host is his sincere interest and ability to relate with guests despite divergent interests or backgrounds. Ketcham comments that "Larry is equally a good student of nature and human nature."

Even after moving to the remote Canadian wilderness, Anderson manages to keep in touch with college pals Ketcham, Gary Johnson '71, and Steve Pike '71. The four get together at least once a year to fish, golf and reminisce about memorable events, professors, even pranks. Apparently, some college habits are still alive. Last year, when his brother brought up 10 friends to the lodge, Anderson secretly pre-loaded a crab trap with Atlantic lobsters and beer. "I told their guide to take them to check the traps. I guess they were a little surprised—neither lobster nor beer are indigenous to these waters," jokes Anderson.

A single dad, Anderson speaks of his children as his biggest blessing. "I think any parent would say it's satisfying when your kids like the same things you do," he says. "I would have never guessed my kids would work right alongside me one day." While they were growing up, Nicole and Sam were allowed to decide whether or not they wanted to spend their summers in Canada, but half the time they wanted to come—and bring friends. A lot of those friends now find their summer jobs at Nanook, helping out in the kitchen or on the dock. "This is a great environment for teenagers to learn a sense of responsibility," Anderson shares. "And with all the chaos out there, I think it's healthy for them to experience nature untainted."

Now in its fifth year of operation, Anderson admits that the only difficult part about running the lodge is earning an entire year's salary between May and September. The Andersons seem to have the right mix of activities and hospitality, though, as they enjoy a loyal following, with many of their corporate guests booking the same week every year. "This year hasn't been our best," confides Anderson. "9/11 has hurt us. But you don't go into guiding for the money, anyway."

Over the winter months Anderson can be found swinging his clubs anywhere from San Francisco to Tucson, taking reservations for Nanook on the green by cell phone. But before he heads south to warmer climes, Anderson likes to take a little time to enjoy the lodge for himself—without any guests. He sleeps in past seven and eats pork chops instead of salmon. He'll sit on the dock and chat for hours with a neighbor who motored over from across the bay. He might even visit another local resort and play a game of softball with the staff. But mainly—when he has spare time—he fishes.

