

Op-ed: Ride the trail for Elizabeth: My journey to honour my wife and her dream

By Edmund A. Auger, Edmonton Journal August 25, 2013



Edmonton's Edmund Auger, whose wife, Elizabeth Sovis, was killed last summer while cycling in PEI, is calling on the Alberta government to keep its promise to build the Trans Canada Trail. He spoke at a rally at the legislature grounds in Edmonton on Sunday, August 25, 2013. Photograph by: Bruce Edwards , Edmonton Journal

In the beginning, it was simply an act of love. Not love for cycling certainly, but love for me, her husband.

Elizabeth was extremely reluctant to take up cycling. Scared really. She had never cycled as a child and fifty seemed an unlikely age to start. Moreover, her balance was not strong and she was afraid of falling.

Still, she loved me. And since I thought it would be fun to travel together on our bicycles, she agreed to give it a try — in spite of her misgivings. She was gutsy that way. And generous.

We started with weekend trips in the Edmonton region, particularly the Multiple Sclerosis Bike Tour — riding from Leduc to Camrose on Saturday, returning on Sunday, 160 km in all. Then we organized our own trips, travelling to Devon or Bruderheim or Morinville, all within easy reach of our Edmonton home, and staying overnight in a Bed and Breakfast. Sometimes we loaded our bikes on the car and went farther afield: Peace River or Cold Lake or Rocky Mountain House or Kananaskis.

Then our first big trip: three weeks cycling in the English counties of Devon and Cornwall, home of my Aunger ancestors. This was balanced, of course, in a subsequent summer, by a cycling tour in Slovakia, the birthplace of Elizabeth's parents. (They had immigrated to Alberta in the 1920s.)

Usually, though, we did our summer cycling trips on the Trans Canada Trail, most frequently in British Columbia, but also in Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec.

Initiated in 1992, the Trail is a 25-year project supported by all ten provinces and three territories and slated for completion by July 1, 2017 — a fitting centrepiece to Canada's 150th anniversary celebrations. When finished, the Trail will be an 18,000 km greenway and a 5,000 km waterway that will link Canadians from West to East and from North to South, from the Pacific to the Atlantic and from the Arctic Ocean to the American border.

Like many Canadians, Elizabeth believed passionately in the Trans Canada Trail, sometimes called the "New National Dream." (The original "National Dream" was a railroad that would bind our diverse communities into a new nation stretching from Sea to Sea.)

In recent years, as rail travel waned, some provinces have shrewdly purchased these historic transportation corridors — originally constructed at enormous public expense — and converted them into walking and cycling trails. With a modest capital outlay, they have revitalized a profound national legacy.

British Columbia, for example, has acquired more than 2,000 km of rail corridors and developed many as recreational trails, including the spectacular 500 km Kettle Valley Railway between Hope and Midway, now an international tourist attraction.

Driven by a desire to preserve green space, to foster healthy lifestyles and to encourage active transportation, the Trans Canada Trail is truly a vision whose time has come. (Active transportation is defined as modes of travel, such as walking and cycling, which require physical activity.)

But for Elizabeth, the Trans Canada Trail meant safety. She was afraid to ride her bicycle on roads where there was motorized traffic. Too dangerous. Not safe for cyclists. So we kept to the designated cycling paths and, for this, the Trail seemed ideal. Or so we thought.

In 2005, however, when we were cycling on Vancouver Island — and diligently following the official BC guide to the Trans Canada Trail — we suddenly found ourselves pedalling down a

treacherous section of the Malahat Highway. It was an utterly terrifying experience, trying to dodge the road debris, with a rock cliff on our right and high-speed traffic on our left.

And then, a few years later, when we were riding north of Winnipeg, the Trans Canada Trail came to an abrupt and unexpected end. The map and the guidebook said it continued — but it didn't. So we dragged our bikes down an escarpment and rode to our destination on a two-lane highway with no shoulders.

"I've had enough," Elizabeth announced. "I'm not doing this ride anymore. I'm going home." She was right of course. Why should we put our lives at risk? I cancelled all the vacation plans made so meticulously three months earlier. It was disappointing.

Alberta was the last straw. "Why don't we take summer holidays in our own province?" Elizabeth had asked. "Why do we always have to go somewhere else for our three-week cycling trips?"

"Well," I explained impatiently, "Alberta hasn't made much effort to build the Trans Canada Trail — it's battling Saskatchewan for last place — so there's really nowhere for us to ride. Unless we intend to spend our vacation in Calgary or Red Deer or Edmonton, and then ride round and round in circles."

Ironically, Albertans, as individuals, are the biggest Trans Canada Trail supporters in the country; but Alberta, as a government, has simply off-loaded responsibility to voluntary groups, community associations and municipal districts. Consequently, Alberta has completed only 44% of its proposed 2,100 km land-based Trail.

Moreover, large parts of its completed Trail are not very user-friendly. The Bow Corridor Trail, leading to Kananaskis Country and Bragg Creek, proudly described as Alberta's first designated Trans Canada Trail segment, is rated "double black diamond" or "extremely difficult" — for mountain bikes. Not ideal for Elizabeth and me on our heavily-laden touring bicycles.

Elizabeth refused to believe that Alberta could be that backward and she decided to prove me wrong. As a speech-language pathologist, she had worked for several years in the Lakeland District and had heard talk about the new 288-km Iron Horse Trail. In 2005, some 166 km of this former railway — stretching from Warspite to Heinsburg — had been dedicated to the Trans Canada Trail.

So, on July 16, 2008, we headed out from Edmonton with our friends Margaret and David for a five-day cycling holiday on the Iron Horse Trail. The trip was not a success. We could barely pedal on the many patches of loose gravel and sand and ballast. After a gruelling 16 km ride we gave up — and switched over to a lightly-travelled township road.

We never did see any other cyclists or pedestrians, but between St. Paul and Édouardville we counted eight ATVs. What were motorized vehicles doing on a greenway? And why was this classified as an "operational" segment of the Trans Canada Trail?

Much later, to my utter bewilderment, I learned that had it not been for the hard work and dedicated efforts of ATV owners there would not be any trail at all. They had persuaded ten municipal governments to purchase this historic right-of-way and develop it for public use.

Elsewhere, community-minded trail-builders were not so successful. In central Alberta, for example, plans to build the Trans Canada Trail on a 324-km railbed stretching from Irricana to Camrose were thwarted by private landowners and municipal governments. This corridor, passing through Drumheller, Rumsey, Big Valley and Stettler, had great potential as a link between Calgary and Edmonton. But it has now has been appropriated for other purposes.

Several weeks after our failed attempt to cycle in the Lakeland District, Elizabeth made a startling announcement. During the first few years of her retirement, she intended to work for the development of the Trans Canada Trail in Alberta. A trail that would be usable and accessible and safe. Where ordinary people could walk and cycle.

I was skeptical. The problem was political and what did she know about politics? In spite of all its promises, the provincial government had no action plan to build the Trail. And what could she do about that? It would be much easier to convince the politicians to build a half-dozen new highways.

Elizabeth ignored my skepticism and went about her planning. She began recruiting friends who would support her project. "I'm going to take my retirement on July 1, 2013," she told them, "and I'll be looking for your help."

Last summer, I suggested that we take our annual three-week cycling holiday in New Brunswick. Elizabeth disagreed. Much too dangerous. New Brunswick, like Alberta, is still not very far along in building the Trans Canada Trail, and we would have been forced to cycle many kilometres on the highway.

Prince Edward Island, on the other hand, had completed its segment more than a decade ago and was reputed to be the safest cycling destination in Canada. The department of Tourism published a detailed cycling guide and its website featured pictures of young families on bikes. Even a ten-year-old boy, accompanied by his grandmother, had pedalled the whole Trail one summer. What could be more reassuring?

On Saturday afternoon, July 14, 2012, Elizabeth and I crossed over the Confederation Bridge to Prince Edward Island and cycled along the Trans Canada Trail, heading to our evening destination, Hunter River. When we arrived, we were astonished and dumbfounded.

The recommended cycling route — and the only route — to our Bed and Breakfast was a two-lane highway with no paved shoulders. Had Elizabeth known in advance, she would have refused to cycle in Prince Edward Island.

We had only gone two and a half kilometres when Elizabeth was struck and killed by a full-sized van. It was absolutely horrific. Terribly and cruelly unfair. How could someone so adamantly opposed to cycling on the road die this way?

Three days after her death, I phoned the Trans Canada Trail Foundation in Montreal and asked that a memorial fund be set up in Elizabeth's name to further the development of the Trail in Canada, and most especially in Alberta.

A week later, I declared my intention to ride the Trans Canada Trail from Victoria, BC, to Charlottetown, PEI, in an effort to raise funds and increase public awareness.

I also wrote to my MLA, David Dorward, explaining my desire to honour Elizabeth's life and her commitment to safe cycling, and asking him to raise this question in the Legislative Assembly. And I copied the Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation, Christine Cusanelli.

In my letter, I observed that the Alberta government publicly promotes the health benefits of cycling and urges its citizens to participate: "Whether it be a leisurely ride with the family, an energetic ride on a biking trail, or a practical trip to the grocery store or the library, cycling is the way to go." But the same government has done little to make cycling a safe activity — it has not built the necessary infrastructure.

Sometime later, Minister Cusanelli graciously wrote back and offered her condolences — although to my puzzlement, she asserted that the highways in Alberta were safe for cyclists. Nevertheless, she reassuringly reiterated the government's promise to complete the Alberta section of the Trans Canada Trail by 2017. Then, in an apparent contradiction, she declared that the new Recreation Trails Act would give priority during the next few years to "motorized recreation by off-highway vehicles as this is the greatest pressure on our trail system use."

Until the provincial elections, a few months earlier, Minister Cusanelli had been an elementary school principal in Calgary, and it seemed obvious that she was not well informed about her government's policies and priorities. So I obligingly drafted a briefing note for her summarizing the relevant legislative resolutions and ministerial pronouncements.

The Alberta government has a long-standing commitment not only to the Trans Canada Trail, but also to active transportation. In fact, its cornerstone Active Alberta Policy has established the development of walking and cycling trails as a strategic priority for the decade 2011-2021.

On September 18, 2012, through the good offices of Mr. Dorward, I met with Minister Cusanelli and presented my case. Elizabeth, I explained, had tried to cycle on the Trans Canada Trail in Alberta, but it was still very incomplete and inaccessible. If the Alberta government was to finish building this Trail by 2017, as promised, it would have to dramatically step up its efforts.

I was genuinely grateful that Minister Cusanelli heard me out; that she was patient and attentive. But she continued to repeat that the real need was not for cycling trails but for ATV trails. Indirectly, this would help cyclists by reducing the ATV traffic on the Trans Canada Trail.

Nonplussed, I replied that her own department had conducted studies showing that Albertan's were 5 to 2 against building any more trails for ATVs — but 9 to 2 in favour of developing the Trans Canada Trail.

The minister seemed unconvinced. But she did say that she would consider my views and share my briefing note with others. She would also keep me up to date on her department's efforts to develop the Trans Canada Trail and even join me for a part of my ride in Alberta. "You have a very compelling story," she observed.

On October 24, 2012, in Alberta's Legislative Assembly, both Mr. Dorward and Minister Cusanelli made moving tributes to Elizabeth and her dream, and expressed their heartfelt condolences. Minister Cusanelli repeated the government's commitment to the Trans Canada Trail and advised assembly members that she was working "to find collaborative ways in which we can raise money to complete the Alberta portion by 2017." She also noted: "We look forward to continuing the progress along with many of the contributors here in Alberta and, hopefully, to being able to carry on the legacy that Dr. Aunger's wife would have liked us to carry on for her."

On February 4, 2013, Richard Starke was appointed Minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation, and I immediately wrote him, attaching my briefing note, summarizing his predecessor's promises, and asking for a short meeting. I concluded: "My sincere hope is that you will establish an Action Plan to enable Alberta to meet its commitments by 2017."

He never replied.

On August 8, 2013, I launched a petition, addressed to Premier Redford, Minister Starke and Minister McIver, calling on the Government of Alberta to publish an Action Plan that would ensure the completion of the Trans Canada Trail by July 1, 2017, and that would give special priority to getting the Trail off dangerous roads and highways between Canmore and Calgary and Edmonton.

Details on this petition, on my cross-country journey and on the Trans Canada Trail are posted on the website www.ridethetrail.ca

The first leg of my cycling trip is now nearing an end. I will be arriving home in Edmonton on Sunday, August 25, 2013. At 3 p.m., I will stop at the Alberta Legislature to give a short talk about the Trans Canada Trail, my petition and my objectives. Inevitably, I will speak about Elizabeth and her dream.

I have invited Minister Starke to share the podium and explain the government's plans to finish the Trans Canada Trail in Alberta by 2017.

He has not replied.

When I first began planning my journey across Canada, my son Richard looked apprehensive and concerned. "I hope you won't be too disappointed," he said, "if after all that work, nobody reacts and nothing changes."

"No," I replied, "I could live with that. And maybe that's what will happen. But I have to try anyway. I could never live with myself if I didn't at least try."

In the end, it is simply an act of love. Not love for cycling certainly, but love for Elizabeth, my wife.

Edmund A. Aunger fell in love with Elizabeth Sovis when they were twelve years old. They are the proud parents of three sons, Edmund Jr, Gregory and Richard. His website www.ridethetrail.ca describes his journey to honour Elizabeth and her dream.

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