

Go west young man!]

By Brian Lockhart

In the two or three years after I graduated high school, there was a mass exodus of Ontarians heading west.

Thousands of people from the province decided the grass was greener at the foothills of the Rockies.

I'm not really sure what started it all, although at the time, the local economy was pretty bad and jobs were scarce.

Where I grew up, I recall factories and business putting out signs that said "we are NOT taking applications for employment."

Several guys I knew told me you could go to Alberta and make big bucks working in the oil fields. Working on a dirty drilling rig had no appeal to me at all. But thousands of people headed west.

Plenty of people from my high school made the trip and tried to make a go of it out there. They mostly went to Calgary with some going further north to Edmonton.

I finally decided to head out there myself to see what was going on. My plan was to visit a friend and stay for a couple of weeks.

When I got off the plane in the middle of January at the Calgary airport, I was expecting some pretty cold weather, however it was around 60 F, degrees. There was a Chinook Wind blowing down from the Rockies that made Calgary rather balmy considering the season. I wore only a light jacket for the first week that I was there.

The second week, things were back to a more normal temperature.

I was impressed with the city. It's big and modern, and there is a lot of things to do.

One night I decided to go to a local club to see a band. The waitress came to my table, and she was a girl I had gone to high school with.

The next day, I was walking along a downtown street and met another girl I knew from my hometown.

One friend of mine was visiting the city and he saw a newspaper advertisement that said a band from our home town "five guys we all knew" were playing at a local venue, and he decided to go and see them perform.

When he arrived, he said it was like being at a high school reunion. Many people from my high school, now living in Calgary, had turned out to see the band.

I'm not sure how many of those people stayed out west, and how many came back. The guys that I knew well, all stayed out there and still live in Calgary and Edmonton.

One friend returned a couple of years ago when his mother passed away. I went to the funeral and spoke with him for a few minutes.

He said that after living there for so long, the town he lived in was now home to him. He also married a girl from Edmonton, so he had made a lifelong commitment.

Now, Alberta is calling Ontario again. There must be a labour shortage or declining population, because Alberta is now advertising in Ontario asking residents to pack up and move west.

A Toronto radio station is currently running the ads.

One advertisement features a guy saying how life is so great out there, with plenty to see and do, great restaurants, and plenty of space.

The other ad I heard has a guy talking about making the move from Ontario and how it is more affordable and how he bought a house for only around \$400,000.

Alberta is a big place with lots of open land and a population of around 4.5 million ? less than Metropolitan Toronto.

The only drawback I can see when it comes to moving west is the winter weather. I'm not sure I want to live in a place where you have to plug your car in when you go to work to make sure it will actually start when it's time to go home.

It seems a lot of people are moving out of Ontario. Many are heading to the east coast where houses are cheap ? well, cheap compared to Ontario ? or maybe west to the wide expanses of the prairies.

More people live in the strip of real estate between Windsor and Ottawa, than anywhere else in the country. There's still a lot of wide open space out there.

Maybe for some younger people who see a bleak future in a province where housing prices have made home ownership almost an impossible dream, a trip west might be worth it.

The thing is, our province shouldn't be operating on a trajectory that makes people want to leave.