

An American Toasts the Queen by Don Benda

In the summer of 2022 during the time of the Platinum Jubilee celebration of England's much-loved Queen Elizabeth II, I experienced one of the most remarkable evenings of my life. I was working as a driver/guide for Holland America in Alaska and the Yukon Territory of Canada. I narrated the Klondike gold rush story as I transported cruise ship passengers from their disembarkation point at Skagway, Alaska, five hundred miles north through the Yukon to the gold field discovery town of Dawson City. I frequently had days off in Dawson and I was befriended by the kind, gray-haired women at the Dawson City visitor center; they thought the tall, slender motor coach driver with the flat midwestern accent who came in so often with questions was indeed a curiosity.

One day in June my visitor center friends were talking about the "soiree" to be held that evening at the city's magnificent old two-story museum. Knowing how much I loved Dawson they said, "You should go, Don. You should go." They said the commissioner of the Yukon Territory would be there, and it would be a grand event. Being an adventurer—and at almost seventy years old certainly not wanting to miss the chance to go to my first soiree—I arrived at the museum that evening expecting something special.

I quickly learned that the true purpose of the event was to honor Queen Elizabeth's unprecedented seventy years of service. She was the longest reigning sovereign in the history of the British empire. I realized I was an interloper—likely the only American in attendance. And I wondered if those sweet older ladies at the visitor center had set me up!

At the museum front door, we had all been given a ticket for the evening's food and wine, along with a beautiful stick pin medallion in a design created especially for Canada's celebration of the queen. Feeling at least a little like a party crasher, I put on my very best manners and summoned all the charm I could muster as I cautiously began to mingle. It was a happy, lighthearted crowd. Summer had just begun, and life was good. I had mistakenly thought the event was in honor of the visiting territorial commissioner. And she *was* there in her lovely purple dress, accompanied by (and no doubt protected by) an officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in full regalia. But this was the queen's night not the commissioner's.

As the evening progressed, I began to feel like I was fitting in quite well. Comfortable in my own skin. I was making new friends left and right. I realized I not only loved the one-of-a-kind town of Dawson City, but I really liked its people as well. I concluded that a soiree was just what the doctor had ordered.

At the end of the evening, a gentleman in a tuxedo with long tails called for everyone's attention. *He must be the mayor*, I had thought to myself earlier. He announced that we should all proceed to the foyer to toast the queen. That seemed like a great idea to me. A pretty young woman standing in our little group, who perhaps had been sampling the wine liberally, said, "Do you think it's pronounced "foy-YAY" or "FORE-yuhr"? I said, "I think it depends on whether you are French or English." The commissioner and her handsome Mountie escort nodded in agreement. With a twinkle in her eye—and knowing my nationality full well—the young woman smiled at me and said, "Or maybe it depends on whether you are Canadian or American."

We gathered for the toast, we all raised our glasses, and the mayor said simply, “The queen.” And then of course in French, “La reine.” As I took a sip of wine, I felt warm and good inside. After all, how could you not love Queen Elizabeth?

Later as I sat in the courtyard alone breathing in the magnificent far north summer air and contemplating the mysteries of the universe, I felt like the luckiest American alive.