

GANDER INTERNATIONAL

A miscellaneous history

“In one of my earliest memories, I’m in the backyard, looking up at the underbelly of a jet flying in low over the town. All the kids would stop and have a look, and then we’d go back to whatever we were doing.”

—**Jamie Fitzpatrick, former Gander resident**

“Because of all these head offices and Air Traffic Control it was a very transient town. Every year a third of my class would be new.”

—**Margaret O’Dea, former Gander resident**

“When I was, I don’t know, between ten and 16 I used to go up to the airport very, very regularly with a friend on our bicycles. It was something to do. Go up to look at the aircraft that were there. Sometimes there was something exotic.”

—**Jeff Webb, former Gander resident**

Construction of the Gander Airport began in 1936. It was first known as Hattie’s Camp—Hugh Hattie was a Nova Scotian lumberman who logged in the area (though he didn’t have a camp). It was then called Newfoundland Airport, before it and the community that ensued were named Gander (although one Ottawa bureaucrat dreamed of calling the town Airlandia). When it opened in 1938 it was the largest airport and had the longest landing field ever built. Runway 03/21

would later be extended to 10,500ft and was designated an emergency landing site for the Space Shuttle.

It was the Crossroads of the World.

Early construction contracts included detailed food menus—and the Newfoundlanders were served different meals than the mechanics and foremen. The Newfoundlanders’ fare, which cost 75 cents a day for three meals, consisted of:

- Rolled Oats or Farine with Milk
- Baked Beans with Tomato Sauce, Pork, Onions
- Bologna Sausage, Eggs (2), Bacon
- Fish & Brewis or Hash
- Jam or Marmalade
- Bread, Butterine
- Tea or Coffee, Milk

And the mechanics and foremen’s, which cost \$1.10 a day for three meals, consisted of:

- Fruit or Fruit Juice, Apple Sauce
- Hot or Dry Cereal & Oat Meal with Milk on table
- Bacon or Ham & Eggs
- Liver & Bacon
- Kippers or Fresh Sausage
- Coffee or Tea
- Bread, Rolls or Toast
- Fresh Butter, Marmalade or Jam

Of course, many of the mechanics and foremen were also Newfoundlanders and presumably could choose whichever they liked.

—**with notes from Frank Tibbo’s *History of Gander***
(This self-published volume is available in digital form in exchange for a \$10.00 donation to Central Northeast Health Foundation.)

The Gander International new terminal opened in 1959. “At that time, Gander was the most important airport in the world. Futuristic, avant-garde, [it is] still one of the most beautiful, most important Modernist rooms in the country, if not the world.” There is a 72-foot mural by Kenneth Lochhead (1926-2006), a terrazzo floor, seating designed by Robin Bush for Herman Miller, Charles and Ray Eames’s Aluminum Group chairs upholstered in Alexander Girard fabric, and Jacques Guillon furnishings in orange leather.

From 1946 to 1961 the airline companies operating out of Gander included BOAC, Pan Am, TWA, AOA, Air France, Air Canada, KLM, Aer Lingus, TAP, Loftlied SAS, Swiss Air, Aeroflot, Cubana, and Aramco.

Their passengers included Bob Hope, Maureen O’Hara, Ingrid Bergman, Frank Sinatra, John Kennedy (then a Congressman), Clarke Gable, Douglas Fairbanks, Edward G Robinson, Yuri Gagarin, Charles de Gaulle, Nelson Mandela, The Beatles, Jackie O, the king of Sweden, and the empress of Iran.

—with notes from *The New York Times*, “Gander Airport: When the Going Was Good,” by Adam Gollner, March 20, 2005.

“The airport was close enough that you could ride there on your bike. I remember the crack of footsteps echoing off the polished floor of the terminal. The gift shop sold little toy airplanes and had the best selection of comics and magazines. There was a restaurant, where we rarely went. Only on special occasions.

My favourite part of the airport was the road that curved all the way around to the old EPA hangar. From that road you could see all the way across the tarmac. The horizon was broad and the sky was huge. It’s just an industrial site, really. But as a kid I was awed by it. I guess it embodied an idea of limitless horizons.

From that same road, opposite the airport, I could take my bike down the old, abandoned streets where families used to live in the 1930s and 1940s, before the town was built. The street signs were still there, and if I went down Chestnut Street I knew that one of the

overgrown concrete slabs was the foundation of the house where my parents first lived. We all called this area ‘the Army Side,’ I think because the airport site was all military property when it was first built. When I got older, ‘going to the Army Side’ meant taking a girl out there in a car.”

—Jamie Fitzpatrick

“We’d go into the Terminal and maybe have a Pepsi. At the time, in the 1970s, they hadn’t yet separated the international and the domestic passengers. Sometimes the Terminal would be quite empty and at other times there were people from all over the world. German soldiers on their way home from some training exercises, American soldiers coming back from Europe, exotic-looking European and African and American travellers. French-speaking, European-speaking. For a kid that grew up then it meant just being immersed so often in a really multi-cultural setting. Much like Heathrow now, you feel like it is the centre of the world. Gander was a different scale but a little like that. Later they built a wall and they separated the international and domestic travellers and that brought an abrupt halt to that. But it was a really cosmopolitan environment.”

—Jeff Webb

“Just after I got my licence I would drive to the airport and the soldiers going to Vietnam would be coming though and we would talk to them. They’d been drafted, had had three weeks to get themselves together, they had just said goodbye to everyone they loved. I remember so many of them being from the rural southern US. And they had no idea where they were. ‘No, you’re on an island in the Atlantic.’ ‘We’re in the ocean?’ That’s what really haunts me about the airport, the Vietnam draftees.”

—Margaret O’Dea

“A friend phoned me, his father had called him and said Muhammad Ali was at the airport. We rode our bikes very quickly, afraid he would be gone. It was in between his losing the title to Leon Spinks and getting it back again. He had travelled to the Soviet Union, probably on Aeroflot. All of the Russians did not get off the plane; at the time it was probably visa restrictions or something. Muhammad Ali and a woman I assumed to be his wife and some other people, his entourage, got off, stretching their legs. So there were six or seven people in the Terminal, one of whom was Mohammad Ali. We felt intimidated, we took a few photos, and I worked up the courage to ask for his autograph, which I still have. He loomed over me. His wife loomed over me, I wouldn’t have wanted to box with *her*. He was a very, very large man with huge big hands. And he did a little bit of his schtick. He leaned over me and said in a raspy voice, ‘Do you want to box?’ It was one of the things he did with kids. I was never a big boxing fan but he was one of the best known people in the world.

I met well known people once or twice but never anyone that much of a celebrity. In an earlier period that would have happened a lot.

A friend’s wife is on a first name basis with Tom Cruise because Tom Cruise has his own private plane and he comes through all the time.”

—Jeff Webb

“I think people generally would be surprised to know that Gander Area Control Centre controls so much airspace. Not only all the airspace over NL but also half of the North Atlantic (to 30 west); that aircraft cannot depart St John’s, as an example, without clearance from Gander Centre; and that Gander controls a thousand aircraft daily through its airspace.”

—Former aviation industry worker and Gander historian Frank Tibbo

THOSE OTHER FLYING MACHINES

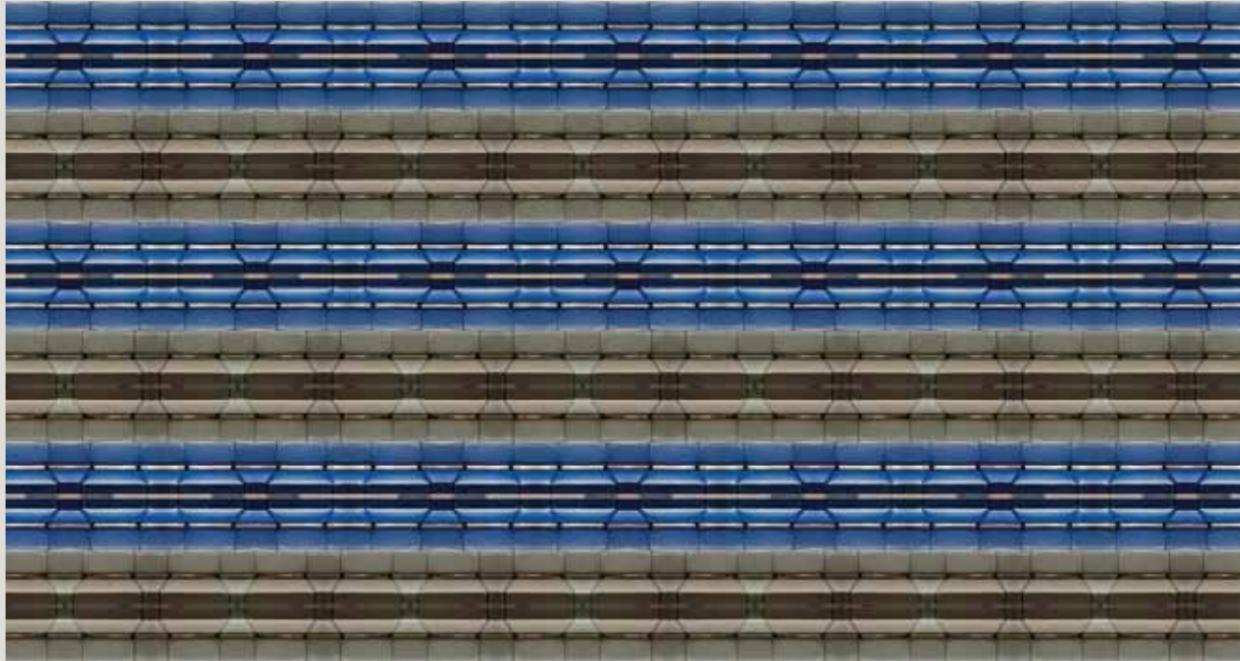
July 25, 1978: Don Cameron and Christopher Davey lifted off from the baseball diamond at Bannerman Park, to the cheers of about 1,000 spectators. They hoped to be the first to complete a transatlantic flight, but a leak forced them down about 110 miles west of France. (Just three weeks later the *Double Eagle II* flew successfully from Maine to France.)

July 2, 2007: British Adventurer David Hempleman-Adams lifted off from the Feildian Grounds in a helium balloon with a basket just large enough to hold him and a clutch of sandbags for ballast. He wanted to set the record for the smallest balloon to make a transatlantic crossing and had no particular destination in Europe. He made it about three days later, setting down a little south of Dijon, France.

September 13, 2013: Jonathan Trappe, an American IT Manager who was trying to cross the Atlantic in a small boat suspended by 300 helium-filled balloons, left Caribou, Maine, but was forced down the next day in a remote area on NL’s west coast just south of Lark Harbour. He was rescued by a CBC news crew sent to interview him. “We set out on this expedition for the adventure, and we got the adventure,” he told them.

Five people have died trying to cross the Atlantic in a balloon.

(The Atlantic has also been crossed by dory, and kayak, and maybe even by the *MV Lyubov Orlova*.)



“I’m not sure, but I think my parents came to Gander separately, because there was lots of work, and that’s where they met. Among my friends, nobody’s parents were born and raised in Gander. They came from all over Newfoundland. The place was full of kids.

My Dad worked for Aeradio—‘Signals’ they called it—sitting at a big radio set and talking aircraft across the North Atlantic. My Mom was a public health nurse who might be called to the airport. Uncle Jack worked on ‘Transmitter Hill.’ The next-door neighbour was an EPA pilot.”

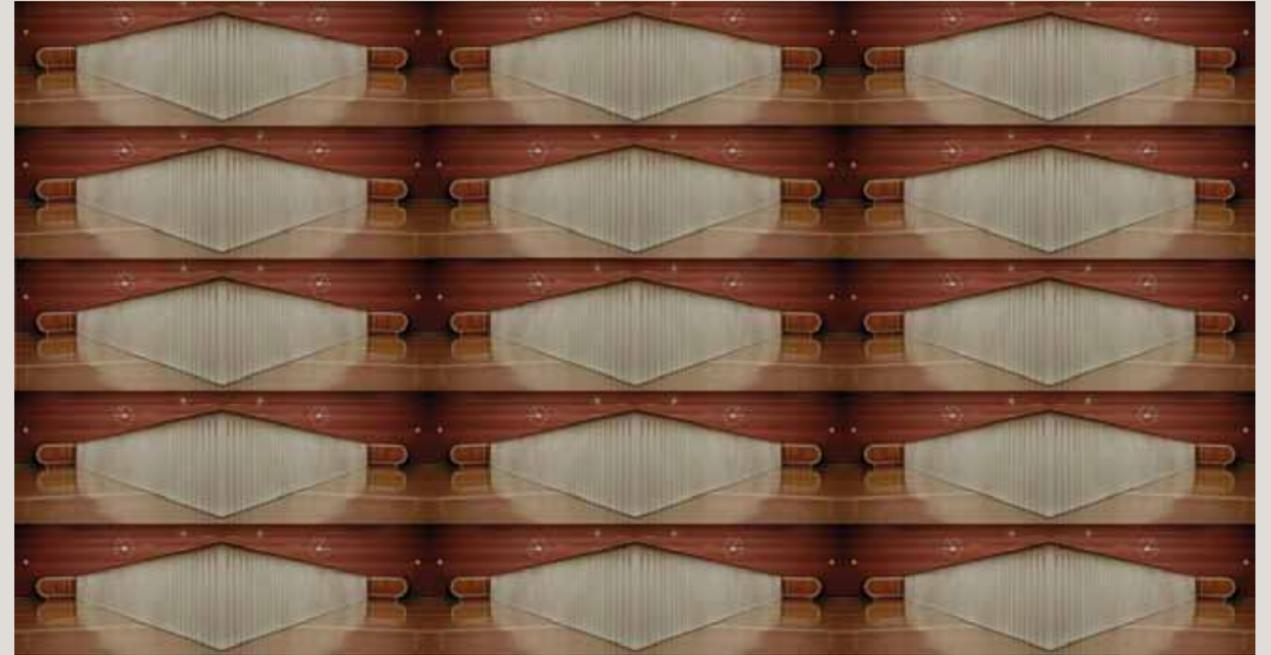
—Jamie Fitzpatrick

“The people came and went, which is not like rural Newfoundland. There was no unemployment, everyone was employed because if you lost your job then you went back where you came from.”

—Margaret O’Dea

“The people that lived there were from all over the island and other provinces.

One of my first jobs right after high school in 1979 or 1980 was working at Air Traffic Control. It was my job to take the position reports—the pilots report to the radio operator where they are, and the radio operator types into the telegraph machine these position reports, what time the aircraft reached certain points. Then they were handed off to whatever air traffic controller was handling that section of the Atlantic. At that time ATC was in the building. In the 1980s it was moved about a mile away and updated technologically. But at the time some air traffic controllers were looking at radar screens. The room was always dim. Dark curtains. The walls painted a military colour. It was like a WWII submarine movie, the line sweeping around, the little marker of the aircraft. It was kind of interesting how the process worked. People have the impression that air traffic controllers see the aircraft on radar, but that’s only when they’re very close. Most often they know the position from the pilot’s reporting of the plane’s position and when they’re crossing lines of latitude and longitude.



Now I gather it’s very, very different, it’s really computerized. But in the summer of 1979 or 1980, they had the computer to do part of the work, but a large part of it was almost post-WWII, 1950s, with strips of paper, in people’s heads. My father, Gary Webb, told me of a serious computer problem and how the older men remembered how to do the job with pencils and paper. Now it’s so completely different and no one could reconstruct that. It would be like you and I taking a flint and a rock and making a spear and killing a caribou. We know people did that, but the skills are lost.”

—Jeff Webb

“It was a melting pot, a good one. People left their prejudices behind.”

—Eleanor Baird, Margaret’s mother

“No one else in Newfoundland had mixed religion Girl Guides.”

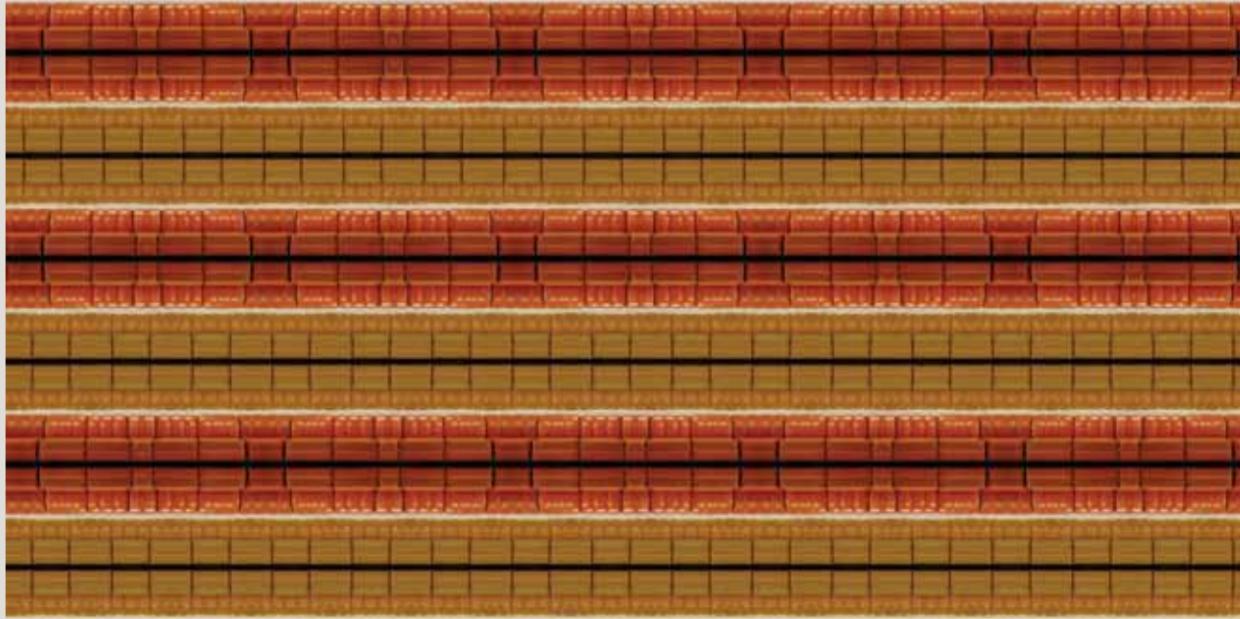
—Margaret O’Dea

“It really was cosmopolitan. The only rivalry was between Gander and Grand Falls.”

—Eleanor Baird

“ATC was almost exclusively men. There was also a real kind of bravado about the job. Not showing to take the job seriously. If you sat there thinking, ‘If I make a mistake, 1000 people will die, if I make a mistake, 1000 people will die, if I make a mistake, 1000 people will die,’ then you couldn’t do your job and 1000 people would die. It’s mathematical. I remember mentioning to my father about some exotic aircraft that had been at the airport that day and he had not looked out the window to see it. It was an abstract exercise. One of the guys had a camera and would take pictures of the airplanes and the other men made fun of him.”

—Jeff Webb



“Also, the Concorde did its trial runs in Gander, thanks to the then Chief of Air Traffic Control, Mr Cyril Rowsell, DFC.”

—Frank Tibbo

“There was a hierarchy. The people who worked in the tower. The people who worked in air traffic control from Deer Lake to Gander to St John’s were a grade up. Then there were the Trans-Oceanic flights. That was the most prestigious. Instead of dozens and dozens of flights you had hundreds or even thousands.

They had five eight-hour shifts in four days. They were staggered in a strange way. My father was sleep deprived for all of my childhood. Later in his life he blamed this for all kinds of health problems.

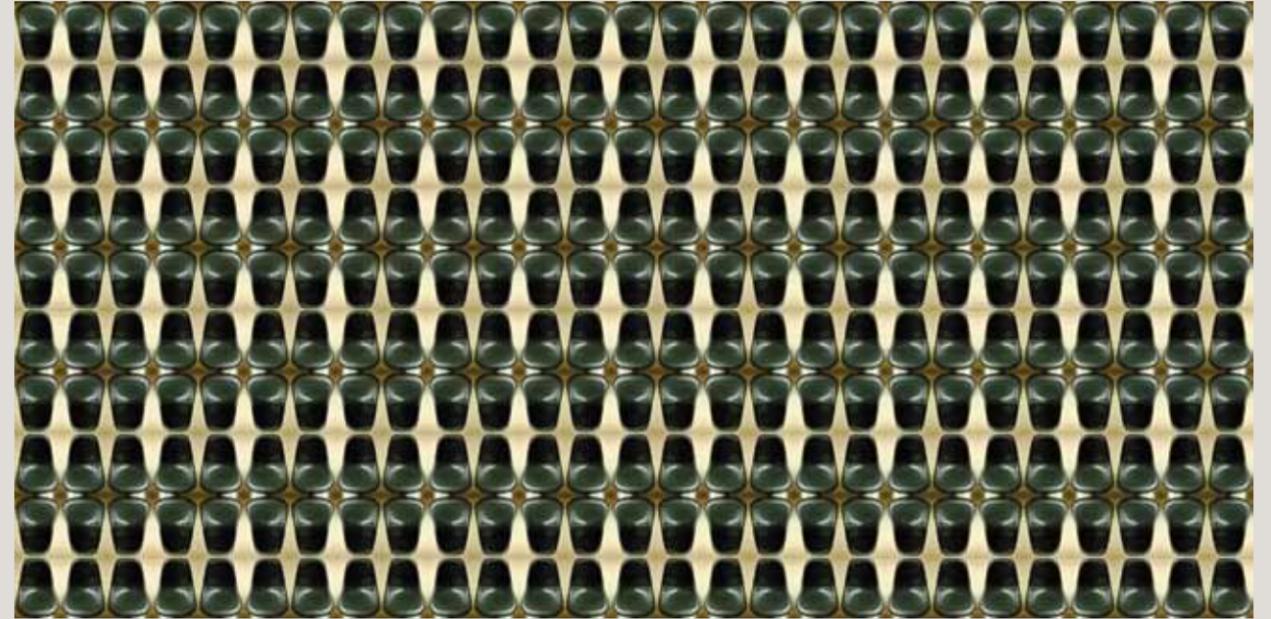
Think of the Trans-Oceanic traffic as sloshing back and forth, and everybody goes across about the same time, and everyone comes back about the same time. So four times a day there’s this big slosh. Everybody is extremely busy. And maybe four times a day they’re

talking, playing cards, they’re bored. You need 12 in at 4pm but you can’t just have them come in at 4pm. So the shifts overlapped. 6pm to 4am, midnight to 8am, another shift starting at 8am, another shift starting at 10am. It was tough on people but ingenious because the overlap gave you the redundancy you needed.”

—Jeff Webb

“In one eight-hour shift we might have 52 flights.”

—Elmo Baird, Margaret’s father. Baird served in the RAF during WWII, and then came to Gander to work with Customs and Immigration in 1946. When Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949 the department was split and he worked with Immigration. Gander was the point of entry for many, many international flights and Baird was often first contact. A very brief list of the people he met includes Yugoslavian President Josip Broz Tito, Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro, the Dave Clark Five, and a group he thought might have been called The Beatles, or something like that.



“My father had a pattern. The phone would ring. He’d pick up the phone and put it to his ear. He’d light a cigarette. He’d take a draw, place it in the ashtray. He’d make his decision, and put the phone down. It was almost a physical ritual.

Most air traffic controllers retire very young. Or they move to administration or teaching, but they don’t do the job past 50, 55. At about that age my dad got a job writing a technical manual that had to be negotiated between Gander and Ottawa and the Americans and he spent a lot of time at the Pentagon and Norfolk. It took him, I don’t know, several weeks or months to write the manual, and it took two years to get it approved. He was amazingly patient. His whole career had been yes or no. Can I move to a higher altitude? Yes. Can I move to a higher altitude? No. Take Track C. Then to have a job that required diplomacy, that was a completely different way of working for him.”

—Jeff Webb

“The thing about the job I really enjoyed was reuniting families.”

—Elmo Baird

“My brother became a pilot, too, with Gander Aviation. He was 21 years old when he died in a plane crash. He was the co-pilot of a small twin-engine that left Gander one morning in June. Flew to Torbay, then crashed on takeoff leaving Torbay. I was 17 years old, and a couple of months later I’d be leaving town to go to university. I remember having this weird feeling that my parents’ grief was slightly remote to me, probably because I just couldn’t process the whole thing. But I think about it as I get older. How my parents came to Gander because of this burgeoning, global industry of passenger aviation, and the prosperity it promised. In many ways it delivered on that promise. But in the end it broke their hearts in the worst possible way.”

—Jamie Fitzpatrick

Gander was the site of the worst air disaster in Canadian history, when, on December 12, 1985, Arrow Air Flight 1285, carrying American troops from Cairo to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, crashed shortly after takeoff, killing all 256 on board. It was also Canada's most generous and welcoming host on 9/11, when 38 planes landed at the airport and the people of Gander (with a population then of 9,651) and surrounding communities cared for the stranded 6,122 passengers and 473 crew.



"I'd sooner travel by air than any other means. Just stick your head in a corner and fall asleep."

—Elmo Baird



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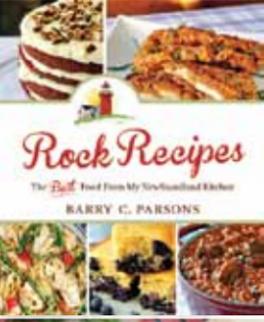


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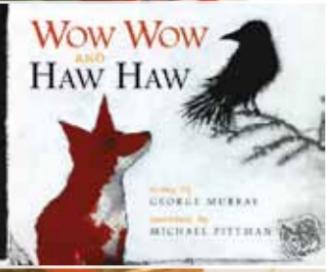





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