

A child of two time zones:

Unlike most children who grow up mostly oblivious to time, my two younger brothers and I grew up in a household where time was an important and constant factor. My father was a railroad engineer with the Canadian Pacific Railroad and because the railroad did not observe daylight saving time, for approximately six months out of each year our family lived in two time zones. Like all freight train crewmen, Dad was on call 24/7. This meant that he went to work and came home at all hours of the day or night, regardless of what day of the week it was, Sundays and holidays included. The phone would ring and our mother or one of the three of us brothers would take the telephone call, calling Dad to work. In summer he would be asked to report at a time that was one hour later than we were observing and in winter it would be the same time. Being a “railroader”, Dad also operated on a 24 hour clock and we soon became familiar with that system. We had to learn to add and subtract quickly so we could convert times between the 12 hour and the 24 hour clock. There never was any confusion in summer or winter and I cannot recall even one time when we got the time for him to report incorrectly even though we each in turn started taking the calls at a young age.

A few years after I had left home and finished a post graduate agricultural degree in plant and wildlife science at the University of British Columbia, I got a job as a wildlife biologist with the provincial government in Cranbrook in the East Kootenay Region of southeastern BC. Once again, time became an important factor in my private life and in my work. As it happened, the East Kootenay was set in the Mountain Time Zone whereas most of the rest of the province including the city of Nelson in the West Kootenay Region where my headquarters office was located some 150 miles west, was in the Pacific Time Zone.

To complicate communications and travel planning even further, the farming community of Creston situated in the West Kootenay in the intervening area of lower Kootenay Lake refused to acknowledge daylight saving time, preferring to remain year ‘round on Mountain Standard Time.

Timing the approximately two hours of travel to catch the ferry across Kootenay Lake where the switch is made in the two time zones between East and West Kootenay was only slightly less complicated than calculating the trajectory of a satellite to engage the Mars orbit. There were several times when I miscalculated and arrived at the ferry terminal for a one-hour wait.

One particularly frustrating and time wasting activity was trying to communicate with someone by telephone during regular office hours in the rest of the province outside of the East Kootenay region. The Provincial Government Union Contract specified a seven-and-a-half-hour workday. Accounting for the differential in arrival and departure times, and coffee and lunch breaks there was a maximum 2.5 hours in any workday when I could talk to someone by telephone or when someone could contact me. As a consequence the head of the section, hardly a day went by for nearly 30 years that I was

not found in my office making telephone calls to headquarters long after the regular staff had left for home.

Of course, being an hour ahead of the rest of the province did have its benefits when it came to watching the news or a sporting event. Being an hour earlier than the rest of the province for example, East Kootenayites had the option of enjoying an extra hour of sleep. For many people however, getting up and going to work early took on a sort of special status and often became a friendly but serious competition between friends, neighbours and colleagues.

I have traveled both nationally and internationally in conjunction with my profession as a wildlife biologist and experienced the usual time changes and impacts of jet lag. When I retired from government after 33 years of service, I moved to a quiet rural community on the shores of Cowichan Bay on the east coast of Vancouver Island-a place where time, for a high percentage of its population who are retirees, is a casual affair. I left many of my family and friends in the East Kootenay. I also married a woman whose parents live in Auburn, Alabama. I found it rather curious that while the East Kootenay was only a few hundred miles away from where I now live on the coast of British Columbia that it is a full hour ahead while Auburn is a few thousand miles away and is only two hours ahead.

Time continues to shape my life and I admit that I have become a bit obsessed with this business of time zones. My experiences with time differentials are what brought me to develop this Website. I suppose in some small way, my experiences with time zones were unique. These experiences revealed to me the waste in time and energy and the inconvenience of excessive local, national and international time zone differences.

It is well over 120 years since the adoption of Standard Time throughout the world. It is long past due that they are brought into the modern era. I strongly believe that reforming our time zones will contribute to the efficiency of the economy including the conservation of time and energy. Bringing attention to this issue of wasted time is not new. After all, a proposal was made more than 120 years ago to create one time zone for all of the contiguous USA. Even today China which spans four time zones, the same number as the contiguous U. S. operates under one single time zone while Australia which barely spans three time zones labors under one of the most complex systems of regional time zones in the world. I would not propose that we adopt the former or the latter but that we at least rationalize the current time zones with a view to reforming them.

Whether this work will be taken seriously and result in a reformation of North American time zones only time will tell. In the meantime, if I have increased my readers understanding of time and time zones, I will have at least accomplished part of my goal.

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