

Over the Back Fence
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Border crossing blues
By Alva Wood

When the Canadian dollar soared above the American buck, Florence and Ollie Armitage decided it was time for a shopping spree in Spokane.

They drove down and got back with nothing worse than a warning for travelling too slow on the Interstate. Ollie failed to translate the U.S. miles-per-hour signs into the kilometres on his speedometer.

They found lots of bargains in Spokane's shopping malls. In spite of the Canadian dollar's astronomic rise in value, Canadian prices were still way higher than U.S. prices.

In a bookstore, Florence found a beautiful volume with color pictures called "Garden Plants Have Souls." Although it came from a Canadian publisher, its suggested list price was \$8 cheaper in the Excited States, and the store had discounted it still further.

Ollie found a pair of leather cowboy boots.

"What do you want those for?" Florence demands.

"I've always wanted cowboy boots," Ollie sulks.

"What for?" asks Florence. "You don't ride a horse. And if you try walking in those high heels, you'll fall over and break your neck."

"Then you'll get my life insurance," retorts Ollie. "I'll take 'em!"

He also finds a real fur Stetson hat. With real sweat stains. Normally \$94.88, reduced to \$39.99.

With their VISA card whimpering gently, they drive back to the Canadian border.

"Anything to declare?" asks the customs officer.

"That's a stupid question," snaps Florence, who has never tolerated fools gladly. "You think we went to Spokane for two days just so we could eat breakfast at Denny's?"

"Don't get smart with me," retorts the officer. "Open your suitcases."

The officer rummages through their purchases. Most of them are duty free under the North American Free Trade Pact. He flips open the gardening book.

"Aha!" he says. "Printed in Singapore!"

He finds the cowboy boots. "Where were these made?" he wants to know.

"They're cowboy boots," Ollie says. "All cowboy stuff is American, isn't it?"

Apparently not. The officer finds a tiny "Made in China" label.

In addition to federal and provincial sales taxes, they pay 17 percent import duty on the book, and 18 percent on the boots.

The officer searches vainly for a "made in" label on the cowboy hat. "Probably made in China too," he decides. "That'll be another 17 percent."

Florence is still fuming when they get home. She checks the hat. The company logo says "Alamo Hats." She gets onto Google. Sure enough, there's an Alamo Hats. In Texas, of course.

She calls them, long distance. She waits patiently through the voice mail menu and the assurances that her call really matters to them and may be monitored.

Eventually, she gets a sales representative. She gives him the hat's description and model number.

"Yup," the sales rep agrees, "that's one of ours."

"Where was it made?" Florence asks.

"It's American," says the rep, "so it was made in Mexico."

Mexico belongs to NAFTA.

Florence makes Ollie drive down to the border again. She confronts the customs officer. She demands a refund of the \$6.80 import duty they were unjustly charged. The officer doesn't believe her.

"I'll give you the company number, and you can call them yourself," Florence splutters.

"We don't do research," says the officer. "We make rulings. If I say it came from China, it came from China."

"Suppose I appeal your ruling?" Florence rages, sucking all her cellulite up to full height.

“Fine,” the officer agrees. “The appeal board meets in Ottawa. You’ll have to make your case in person, or hire a lawyer to represent your interests.”

So far, the discounted hat has cost them \$2 in GST, \$2.80 PST, \$8.37 for long distance, and about \$40 in gas for the trip back to the border post. Florence is starting to wonder how much more she’ll have to spend to get her \$6.80 back.