

# Thomson TRADEWINDS

DAVID & MARY THOMSON C.I. ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

AUTUMN 2005

## It's the Titans!

For Tradewinds readers, left in suspense when our Spring edition announced the contest to design and choose a new team logo, but went to press before the decision had been made, it's the Thomson Titans, a blazing scarlet-black-and-white design with sword, shield and flames motifs. You saw a version of it in the Spring newsletter, along with a



*The icing on the cake! The new Thomson team logo in edible form, eagerly devoured by participants in the unveiling ceremony, May 19.*

Hawks design, which lost out in the final votes, although not in the Alumni ballots, which, understandably, constituted a rather small minority. Younger voters preferred the more powerful alliterative name and the simpler strong design.

The winning designer was **Alicia Comtais**, a Grade 10 student at Thomson. Professional artists with the Toronto Board of Education modified her draft to the more commercial version you can see on the cake in the photo. Team uniforms, t-shirts, and even the walls, floors and mats in the gymnasium will now feature the new name and logo.

A special unveiling took place at the school on May 19. First, students attended an assembly at which principal **Denise Martins** and other staff and student members of the Logo Committee outlined Thomson's athletic

history and our somewhat mystery-enshrouded adoption of the proud Redmen name and the sad necessity of replacing it. A spirited student-and-staff "choir," led by Girls Phys-Ed Head, **Sandra Nikou**, with **Stan Farrow** at the piano, taught everyone the school song. Then piper **Andy Brown** (Thomson Vice-Principal 1972-1976) marched the whole school out to the playing field, where the

logo was unveiled with appropriate pomp and ceremony (and refreshments, as shown in the photo above).



*Andy Brown, Denise Martins and Stan Farrow at the logo unveiling*

# Seven Months in China

*David Banks (Class of 1966 and a former SAC President) reports on a post-retirement sojourn in the land of mystery.*

Thirty-eight years after graduating from David & Mary Thomson and over two years after retiring from a thirty-one year career as a high school chemistry teacher, I began the greatest adventure of my life as I packed my bags and headed for China. Not since 1872 had a member of my family travelled to the Far East. My great-grandfather, as a member of the Royal Navy, had sailed from Plymouth to Shanghai aboard the HMS Curacao. Upon his return, he presented his wife with some vases which have remained in our family ever since and now sit above the fireplace in my living room. All my life they had stirred my curiosity and now I was going to see that strange and mysterious land for myself.

I had been hired to teach English for six months in a private school in Chengdu, a city I had never heard of despite its population of 11 million. I was being provided with an apartment, a monthly food allowance, a monthly salary only one third of what I could be making as a supply teacher in Ottawa and half my round-trip airfare. I spoke not one word of Chinese and had no idea how I was going to get by in a population that spoke no English. Despite this I was very excited. All my life I had been looking for a place that was different, exciting, stimulating and yet safe and welcoming. Was China going to be that place? On December 29, 2004, I left my family at Ottawa International Airport and set out to answer that question.

It certainly is intimidating to arrive in such a strange environment late at night after a 20 hour flight exactly half way around the world, but when I was met at the airport by a young man holding up a sign that simply said "David Banks," I knew I was going to be okay. I was whisked through the city by an insane taxi driver to my brand new apartment only a ten minute walk

from my school. Okay, it was only a one-room bachelor with a tiny kitchen and an equally small bathroom, but I had a real toilet and a shower, a double bed, a couple of chairs, a TV, a small fridge and a portable clothes washer. This was to be my home for the next six months.

Next morning I was escorted to the school where, despite my state of senseless stupor, I was given a quick orientation before having three days off for the New Years weekend. Then, after only two days of teaching, I completely lost my voice because of a throat infection and found myself in the hospital at the end of an intravenous tube receiving several bottles of "traditional Chinese medicine." After two three-hour treatments, I was cured and was back at work the next Monday.



*David and a friend on Emei Mountain in Sichuan Province*

After that, things went quite smoothly. I had two classes of 14 and 19 students and had to teach only 15 hours each week. I ate breakfast in my apartment, lunch in the school cafeteria and dinner at a restaurant about four times a week. Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan Province and the food is absolutely fabulous – tasty, spicy, unusual and cheaper than you would ever imagine. Dinner for two in a great restaurant with better service than I had ever experienced in Canada cost about 50

yuan or \$8.00 CDN. Dinner in an average restaurant cost about 15 yuan, and a four-course lunch at school would be 4 yuan or 60 cents. My meagre Chinese salary allowed me to live like a king without any worries about what things might cost. I couldn't spend my money fast enough; so it began to pile up in my apartment closet. At the end of June, I had 25,000 yuan or \$4000 CDN in cash saved up.

Over the next seven months, I ate goat, rabbit, rabbit head, rabbit ears, turtle, several varieties of fish, pig brain, jelled duck blood, snake, snake skin, duck, duck tongues, eels and a variety of internal organs including stomach, intestine, heart, liver, kidney and spleen. I also think I ate rat once in Beijing when I bought a snack from a street vendor and found a suspicious-looking foot wrapped up inside the ball of stuff on a stick I was chewing on. I'm not a picky eater but the rat and the pig brains really turned my stomach. Everything else was fantastic because of the way it was cooked.

Once I had settled in, I began to make new friends. Some were at school but, incredibly, most just walked up to me in the street and began talking to me. Chinese who do speak some English love to practise it whenever they get the chance and the ones that seemed to feel most comfortable approaching me were female university students. Hey, what's a guy to do? This hadn't happened to me in Canada in over four decades; so I loved it. In addition to this, I was constantly watched by everyone around me as though I was a movie star. This would bother some people, but I knew I would never blend in with the homogeneous Chinese population no matter what I did; so I took the attention in stride and, most of the time, enjoyed it. Chengdu is not on the tourist trail; so I was one of only 5000

# The Adventure of a Lifetime

'foreigners' in a city of 11 million. Of course I was going to be a curiosity. However, there was absolutely no hostility. On the contrary, I was always treated in the most friendly, hospitable way as long as I kept a smile on my face and made an effort to be polite. Being Canadian didn't hurt either. I was amazed at how many adults mentioned Dr. Norman Bethune and how much he was loved by the Chinese people for saving the lives of so many Chinese soldiers and for giving his own life in the process.

I always did my best to distance myself from being classified as American by wearing a Canadian flag on my jacket. It's not that Americans are mistreated but every Chinese assumes they are rich; so the prices automatically skyrocket when an American comes into view. I tried to convince them that Canadians are not rich and, after hiding almost all my money in my pockets, I would show them my empty, moth-eaten wallet as proof so I would usually get a break in the bargaining that goes with every purchase you make. I didn't feel bad using all kinds of tricks to get the best price because if they weren't making a profit, they wouldn't sell it to you. In Beijing, on a sweltering 40°C Sunday, I was accosted by a young woman at Silk Alley who was determined to sell me a winter jacket. Now what is that? It was the last thing I wanted to think about at the time; so I played my "I don't want it." role and, after 30 minutes of trying stuff on and trying to walk away, I got a \$300 North Face double-lined, rip-stop winter jacket for \$24 CDN. How can you turn that down?

Another thing I liked about China was the price of beer. They sell great beer in 630 mL bottles for 3 yuan or 45 cents. In a bar you might pay 10 yuan or \$1.50 tops. If you smoke, cigarettes

are 75 cents a pack. There's a lot of poverty in China; so the price of beer and cigarettes is kept low so that everybody can afford to smoke and drink if they choose. However, Chinese people turn bright red in the face if they drink; so most women won't even touch beer out of fear it will permanently damage their complexion as well as giving a clear signal they are a bit tipsy. The other popular drink is baijiu which is a clear, colourless liquid made of fermented rice. A "26er" of this stuff, which is about 80% alcohol, costs as little as 80 cents but it tastes like gasoline. When I was invited to people's homes for dinner, many shots of baijiu were poured, and toasting by the men went on throughout the meal, resulting in many pink-faced Chinese and one staggering Canadian guest.



*David dressed as a Tibetan shepherd at Jiuzhaigou*

During my stay in Chengdu, I took every opportunity to explore the city and each attraction within 100 km. Chengdu is home to the Giant Panda Research Centre, which cares for over 60 Giant Pandas and several Red Pandas. My visit to see these incredible creatures was one of the highlights of my entire trip. I also visited the holy mountain of Emei Shan, which is also home to hundreds of wild monkeys; Leshan, where I saw the world's largest Buddha, a 71 metre tall statue carved right out of a mountain; Sanxingdui, where bronze and gold relics of a 3500 year old civi-

lization were recently unearthed; and Dujiangyan, where a 2200-year-old irrigation project is still in operation, preventing flooding of the Minjiang River and making the Chengdu basin the most productive agricultural region in the world.

Another highlight of my trip was the week I spent in Lhasa, Tibet, which is as different from China as China is from Canada. I have never seen as many old, wizened, toothless people in my life. Those faces alone make the trip worthwhile, but the temples, monasteries and the ancient shops are great fun to explore and photograph.

My photographic career began in grade nine when I joined the Thomson Camera Club. I spent many after-school hours in the darkroom developing and printing pictures for the yearbook after taking them on the school's 35 mm camera. Since then I have never lost my love for photography and have taken tens of thousands of photographs all around the world. Now I use a Nikon Coolpix 5700 digital. During my seven months in China I took 6800 photos and have had 850 of them printed. Never has my photographer's eye been so stimulated, and never have my subjects been more cooperative or thrilled to see themselves displayed on that tiny screen. China is a photographer's paradise.

During my time in China I also kept a journal which consists of 124 entries totaling over three hundred pages. If anyone is interested in reading some of these or viewing a few of my photos, they are found at my websites which are:

<http://groups.msn.com/DavidBanks>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/davidcbanks>

If anyone is interested in teaching in China, please contact me at <davidcbanks@msn.com> or call me in Ottawa at (613) 692-0833.

