Like Us?

A LOOK AT THE BORDER, HISTORY, AND CULTURE THAT CANADIANS SHARE WITH AMERICANS—AND WHAT SETS THEM APART

JUST LIKE US?

BY IAN AUSTEN IN OTTAWA, ONTARIO

The traditional symbols of Canada are well-known. The beaver commemorates the fur trade that was the country’s first industry in the 1600s, and the maple leaf is a fitting symbol for a nation with a vast wilderness. And of course there’s the national sport—hockey!

In recent years, however, those symbols have been upstaged. “Unfortunately, we define ourselves somehow by a doughnut chain,” says Rick Mercer, a popular Canadian comedian. Mercer, who pioneered fake news long before Jon Stewart, isn’t joking. He’s referring to Tim Hortons, a restaurant chain named for a popular hockey player who died in a car crash in 1974.

When the chain recently changed how its doughnuts are baked, the news made headlines across Canada. A portable Timmy’s, as the shops are known, even followed Canadian troops to Afghanistan, where the soldiers have been fighting alongside U.S. troops.

Residents of Beebe Plain, Vermont (left), and Beebe Plain, Quebec (right), get together along the border that runs through their town.

A Canadian soldier leaves a Tim Hortons in Afghanistan.

Americans, who taught the world about fast food, would find nothing strange in a national obsession with doughnuts. Indeed, Americans and Canadians have a great deal more in common than many realize. From the cultural similarities to the military conflicts to the friendship that seems to run across the border, there’s much to know about what sets them apart.

Words to Know

- psyche (SY-kee) [n]: the human mind, soul, or spirit
- referendum [n]: a bill passed by a legislature that citizens approve or reject by a direct vote
- surveillance [n]: close watch kept over a person or thing, often with suspicion of wrongdoing

A Canadian soldier leaves a Tim Hortons in Afghanistan.

SOURCES: The World Factbook 2010 (CIA), 2010 World Population Data Sheet (Population Reference Bureau), and Statistics Canada
great deal in common, as a result
of their shared border, history, and
culture. But there are real differ-
ences. Somewhere along the way,
Canadians developed a sensibility
that is unlike that of their neighbors
to the south. To a large extent, that
sensibility is a reflection of what
they are not—American.

Common History
Except for Quebec, where most
people speak French, Canadians
speak English pretty much the way
Americans do. Turn on a TV, and
you'll find Canada's own Rick
Mercer Report, a program that may
remind you of The Colbert Report
and The Daily Show just a few
channels away.

Although the differences
between the neighbors may be
subtle, they do exist. They began
during colonial times, when the
two nations took different routes
in their respective relationships
with Great Britain, and began to
drift apart.

The U.S. gained independence
from Britain through the American
Revolution (1775-1783). Canada's
government, by contrast, was
established by Britain's Parliament.

It didn't help matters that the
U.S. attacked the future Canada—
because of its anger at Great
Britain—during the War of 1812.

Life at the Border
The two countries have long
enjoyed friendly relations along
the border, as the photo above
shows. The 5,500-mile dividing
line between Canada and the U.S.
was once described as the "world's
longest undefended border," and
crossing it was a routine matter.

That changed somewhat after
the September 11, 2001, terrorist
attacks on the U.S. Since then, the
border has become increasingly
monitored, often through the use of electronic surveillance systems. Swaths of forest on the American side have been cleared to prevent anyone from sneaking across the border, while armed U.S. officials patrol border rivers in boats.

"Since 9/11, I've sometimes been treated like a criminal by U.S. Customs," says Clara Hughes, a cyclist and speed skater who has won Olympic medals for Canada. Married to an American, Hughes lives in a Canadian village close to Vermont, where she trains on her bicycle several times a week.

"It's a bit funny to be asked [by Border Patrol guards] when you're on your bike if you're carrying $10,000 or more on your person," she tells JS.

This is a sad development for many Canadians, whose ideas of the border were nourished in childhood imaginations—including my own. I grew up in Windsor, Ontario, during the 1960s. Back then, it was a well-established "fact" that the real Santa Claus held court at the Christmas Village at J.L. Hudson department store, just across the border in Detroit, Michigan. Canadian Santas were imposters!

Pride—and "Smugness"

Indeed, the U.S. has often been seen by Canadians as a consumer's paradise—and a land of greater economic opportunity. "I felt that the U.S. was the promised land," writer Miriam Toews tells JS. "Even just crossing the border from Manitoba into North Dakota was magical and exciting." Toews's novel A Complicated Kindness tells the story of a girl who dreams of leaving her small Manitoba town for New York City.

That magnetic pull southward has lured many entertainers in recent decades. Mercer understands why top Canadian comedians such as Mike Myers and Dan Aykroyd left for New York or Hollywood. "There's no bigger big-time than the U.S.," he says.

That doesn't mean, however, that Canadians feel inferior to Americans. Many of them believe that although Canada may not offer the same opportunities, it has fewer problems—and does many things better—than the U.S. "There is very much a smugness" among Canadians, admits Hughes.

Take health care, for instance. Canadians were baffled when American politicians portrayed Canada's government-run system as a disaster during the recent health-care debate in Washington, D.C. Canadians overwhelmingly support their public system.

Something shifted in the Canadian psyche that allowed us to feel pride."
They are also appalled by the large gap they see between the rich and poor in the U.S.—and the assumption by Americans that they should always be able to tell the world what to do.

Good health care is only one reason some Americans have found Canada a much more reasonable place to live. In troubled times, Canada has also provided a refuge for America’s rebels and outcasts (see sidebar, p. 15).

But Canada has its own dramas and divisions. Quebec has provided plenty of both. Originally colonized by France, the lower part of the province continues to guard its French language and identity.

In recent decades, separatist Quebecois (kay-beh-KWAH) have pressed for independence from Canada. A 1995 referendum to secede only narrowly failed, and no one expects the issue to go away.

Traditionally, Canadians have avoided overt patriotism. They weren’t likely to wave flags as they saw Americans do. That changed, however, when Canada hosted the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, British Columbia.

The stakes were high for a nation in which ice hockey is bigger than the NFL, the NBA, and MLB combined. Commentators jokingly feared for the country’s sanity if the men’s hockey team didn’t win the gold medal.

They did, edging out the U.S. team for the gold, 3-2. That result, along with the success of other homegrown Olympic athletes, made Canadians less timid about cheering for their country.

“Something shifted in the Canadian psyche that allowed us to feel pride,” says Hughes, who carried the Canadian team’s flag in the opening ceremonies. “We need to feel proud, because I think that Canada represents a whole lot of good and a whole lot of giving.”

Now, it seems, Canadians have even more in common with their American neighbors.
Canada - Just Like Us?

Article Questions:

1. What are 2 traditional symbols of Canada?
   
2. Which country is larger in land area than Canada?
   
3. What languages are spoken in Canada?
   
4. Where were the 2010 Winter Olympic Games held?
   
5. Describe the relationship between the United States and Canada along its border. How has the relationship changed since 9/11?
   
6. Describe how Canadians feel about their country.
   
7. What is one thing Canadians think is better in Canada than in the United States?
   
8. What are some reasons United States citizens have left the US and moved to Canada?
9. Should Canada have closed its borders to any or all of the American refugee seekers? Why or why not?

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