

Far from the maddening crowd

by Jim Middlemiss

Reasonable hours, friendly colleagues, community involvement, great quality of life. Does practising law in a small town sound too good to be true? Thousands of satisfied Canadian lawyers can tell you all about it.

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The 1966 Piper Super Cub float plane banks to the left, exposing for the rear passenger the land 1,000 feet below, a vast expanse of dark green forest pocketed with dozens of lakes, featuring a range of bluish green to silty brown waters.

"No wheels here," chortles the pilot, 67-year-old Peter Burns, referring to the fact his plane has float pods and not rubber. (Actually, to the uninitiated, the Piper looks like an oversized Cigar container with an engine, but Burns assures me that it's a fully functional plane.) It's safer having floats than wheels in the North, he says, pointing out that there are more lakes to land on than open fields in the event of an emergency. In northern Ontario, if you can't make an airport runway or highway, which are few and far between, then you opt for either the water or a tree. Burns is a principal of McAuley & Partners, the largest practice in Dryden, a town of about 8,200 that sits between Thunder Bay and the Manitoba border. It's your typical northern Ontario town, surviving on a range of forestry, mining and tourism services. At 67, Burns is one of the oldest lawyers of the 40 or so counsel who practice in the district of Kenora. He jokes that "downtown (Toronto) lawyers have more partners than I have competitors." For Burns, who got his pilot's license at 16 – shortly after receiving his driver's license,



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Peter Burns
Dryden, Ontario

the Piper is more than "my chief recreation." It's also how he visits a number of his clients, outfitters who run fly-in fishing and hunting camps on the lakes north of the city. They're lucrative businesses that cater largely to American sportsmen from the Midwest.

Burns and his son Brian, a teacher and commercial pilot in Guelph, are scheduled to visit three or four of Burns' clients in about a week. They'll drop in for a coffee, he says, adding it's his way of providing a personal touch when it comes to client service. It makes the clients feel that the McAuley firm takes an interest in their business. At five lawyers, McAuley & Partners pales in comparison to its urban counterparts, where lawyers tend to specialize in different disciplines. In small-town Canada, lawyers don't have that luxury. Burn's firm provides a range of real estate, business law, estate and family law, eschewing criminal because the courts are a couple of hours away in Kenora. "It's about as general as you can get."

Such is the practice of law in a small-town environment, where the competition can be sparse, the challenges no less demanding than a city practice, and the work as equally

plentiful. And the opportunities seem to be growing. According to a May 2001 *Statistics Canada* report, *Rural and Small-Town Canada: An Overview*, the rural and small-town population overall is actually growing. In 1996, 31.4 per cent of Canadians lived in "predominantly rural regions." In Atlantic Canada and Saskatchewan, more than 50 per cent of the population lived in such regions, while the number was 24% for Ontario. In Alberta, it's about 10%, and about 15% in British Columbia.

Between 1991 and 1996, predominantly rural regions reported stronger employment growth in producer services – including law, accounting, finance and real estate – than predominantly urban regions. However, rural families do have lower average incomes. Just how many lawyers practice in small-town Canada is not clear, but the number is likely substantial. According to the Federation of Law Societies' latest figures (2000), Canada has about 50,000 insured practising lawyers. They're spread out in firms of varying size, but almost half work in firms with ten or fewer counsel. There are about 11,700 sole practices, while 4,569 firms feature two to ten practitioners and employ about 12,700 lawyers.