

Memories of the Old Family Cottage

George Matheson embraces the memories of his youth and time spent at the family cottage in Muskoka, Ontario



Chopping firewood at Mary Lake, c. 1930s.

In 2007, when my sons inherited the old family cottage from their grandmother, it was pretty much the same “rustic”, run-down place I had always known.

My first trip there had been in the summer of 1948 when I was barely 3 weeks old. By then ‘going to the cottage’ was an already long-established family ritual and this cottage had absorbed 20 years of memories.

My grandfather had purchased the land in 1927 and arranged for an abandoned lumberjack shack to be moved on to it. He was a Baptist minister whose salary was small. The state of the building didn’t matter to him; what did was finding an affordable way for the family to spend summers up north.

Since the 1880s, the well-off, social elite of southern Ontario had been traveling north to Muskoka during the summer months. For some it was just an

annual holiday – a pleasant escape from the noise, congestion, pollution and heat of the cities. But, for many, it had come to be understood as a personal necessity.

In 1881, psychiatrist George Beard had identified a medical disorder, *neurasthenia*, the result of modern, urban life. Initially defined as a disease of “exhausted nerves,” he explained how, just as a battery could run out of power, so could the body run out of energy leading to migraines, poor digestion, fatigue, anxiety, depression and even total mental collapse. Neurasthenia quickly became a popular, even fashionable, disorder attributed to the hectic, fast-paced life led by those who were putting a huge effort into achieving success. The recommended cure was to get away from the pressures of the city and allow oneself to rest and enjoy a simpler, healthier lifestyle.

And what better way to do this than to vacation in one of the new Muskoka resorts. By the turn of the century, a number of these, including Deerhurst Lodge and Windermere House, were up and running, offering, to the wealthy and the emerging middle class, luxurious accommodation and cuisine in the midst of the peaceful Canadian wilderness.

Over time, visits to these wilderness resorts would become less a cure and more an elixir improving and prolonging life – what today we might think of as “a return to nature” or a way to “beat stress”.

My grandfather was one of the many hard-working people who felt such pressures but couldn’t afford these fashionable resorts. The best he could do was occasionally “splurge” and rent a basic cottage.

But acquiring some land on which to build a cottage was becoming a possibility. Many of the local landowners had acquired their land through the Free Grants and Homesteads Act of 1868 but, having found it unusable for farming, were eager to take advantage of the nascent cottage market, seeing it as their chance to eke out some profit.

So it was that in 1927 my grandfather heard of land for sale



LEFT: The Rev. Loney in city attire, and with Mrs. Loney in their cottage casual attire at Mary Lake in 1938. RIGHT: The author's grandparents and travelling party journey to the cottage, c. 1930s.



on Mary Lake near Huntsville. The landowner, Bert Olan, had tried, and failed, to make a go of his own budget resort, Breezy Point, and was offering five lake-front lots at \$50 each.

On first seeing the land, my mother, then 13, wrote: "When we children saw the place where we henceforth were to spend our summer holidays we were not too impressed. The shoreline was a mass of old logs and stumps and rough bushes..." But what my grandparents saw was the long-term potential.

One immediate, practical issue to be faced was the challenge of getting there. For those staying at resorts, the journey north was an exciting part of the experience usually consisting of a 6-hour train ride on the Northern Railway, followed by an hour or two of pleasant sailing on one of the resort launches. But for my grandparents it was an 18-hour journey that began well before dawn. Since their Gray-Dort had no trunk for luggage, all of their clothing and bedding had to be bundled into rolls and stowed between the engine and the fender. Other necessities, at first mattresses, deck chairs and a "Jerry Pot", had to be strapped onto the roof.

With most of the roads beyond Toronto still unpaved and the speed limit set at a generous 30 mph, progress was slow. Engines would routinely overheat, tires would blow out and, on the many steep hills, the car had to be turned around and driven backwards so that the gas stored in the tank under the front seat could reach the engine. As my uncle once said: "You never had to worry about the traffic, you almost hoped there would be some to keep you company." And they had to be 'respectfully' dressed in case they met 'proper company'.

Once there, life was different. Gone were my grandfather's

morning coat, starched white shirt and stiff celluloid collar. Instead, out came the rough denim trousers and cotton shirt casually undone.

As their notes and letters describe it, life at first was primitive. A stove was set up in one corner of the one room shack. Curtains were hung as partitions for bedrooms. Improvements were gradual. A hole was dug and an outhouse built over it, a "convenience" that remained well into my childhood. Partial walls were constructed to create bedrooms although curtains still functioned as doors. Another room was added on the back to create a kitchen where my grandmother,



Washed out Muskoka road, c. 1970s.

rising early, would light the stove to "take the chill off". Along the shoreline, roots were dug up and a beach cleared. And with a rickety dock, a canoe for exploring the lake and a rowboat for fishing were acquired.

As time moved on, the highways were widened and paved reducing the drive to 7 hours. But the side roads remained rough and challenging particularly after rainstorms. At the cottage, an indoor toilet was hobbled together, hydro lines were run and with that came electric lights replacing the kerosene lamps, an electric stove and refrigerator, and a radio for news and weather.

Over the years, only the most essential repairs and makeshift alterations were made; faded curtains continued to hang in the doorways and the ceiling above the toilet always leaked when it rained.

My grandfather had kept a detailed record of each year's expenditures and my parents had "watched their pennies". So, I'd always assumed that keeping the cottage the way it was had to do with saving money.

It wasn't until my sons (quite wisely) made the decision to raze it to the ground and replaced it with a new modern structure "with all the comforts of home", that I realized it was about saving memories and came to appreciate their unwillingness to risk the loss of all the recollections that old cottage had absorbed.

I'm finding myself missing the screened-in porch on those rainy, buggy days, the sound of chipmunks racing across the ceiling, the uncomfortable couch with its broken springs, the door frame with its pencil marks showing my height at different ages, the loose window

that could be jimmied when one forgot the keys; even the primitive bathroom with its leaky ceiling.

The old canoe still bobs at the new dock, chipmunks still scurry down the hill and the sun still sets behind the hills across the lake. But now, something new stands on that old footprint.

Today a fourth (and fifth) generation travel there in less than three hours and this family cottage belongs to their future, absorbing their memories. ☎☎

All photos courtesy of author



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