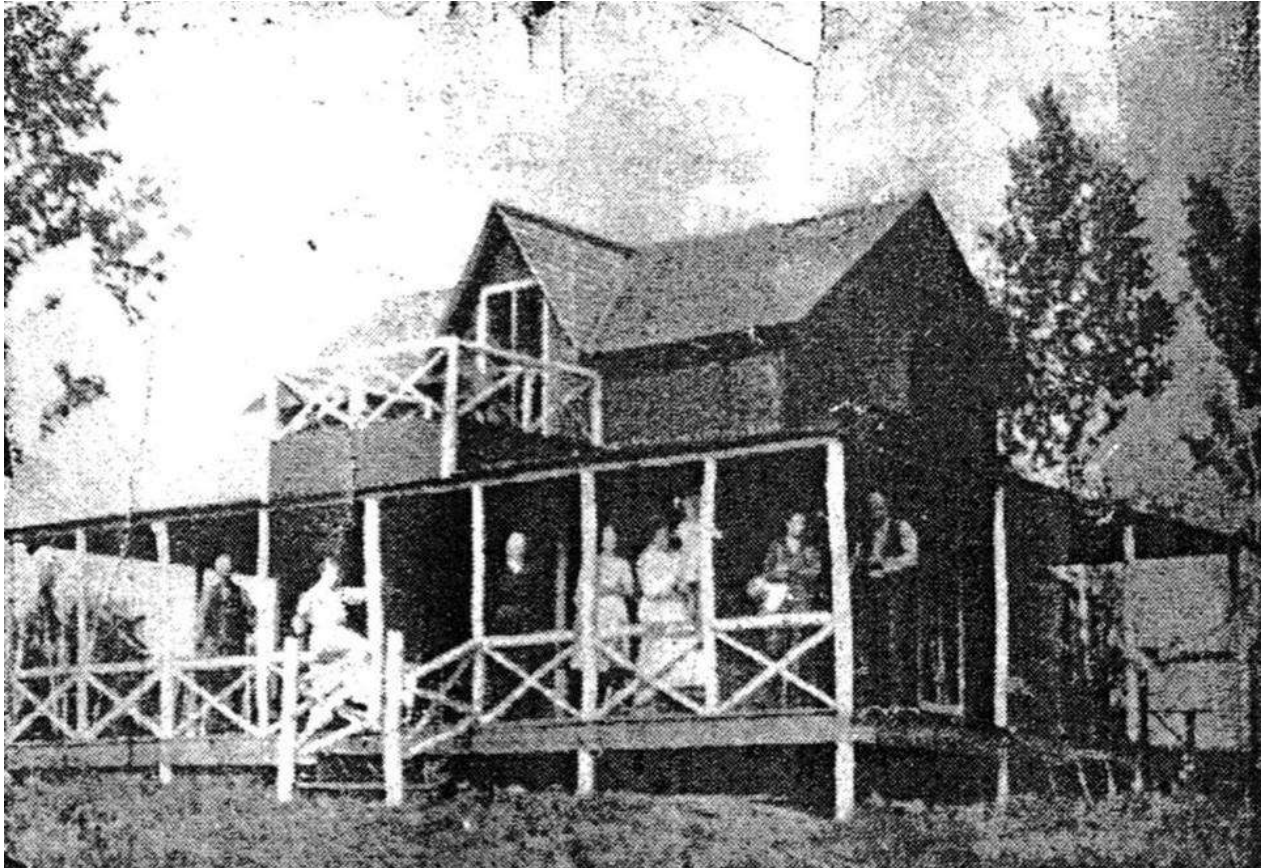


It Started with a Mistake

BY TOM LITTLE



Steenburg Lake's First Cottage: #197 about 1910. Bruce Powers (right) and family.

The ad in the newspaper read Cottage for Rent - Bass Lake. Our family had rented a cottage the year before on Bass Lake. I was just six, and for some reason the one thing I remember was that we met a man who had a Ford station wagon with sides covered in real wood, something my younger brother and I had never seen before. Yes, that would be the Woody that Jan and Dean immortalized in Surf City:

*I bought a '30 Ford wagon and we call it a Woody
You know it's not very cherry, it's an oldie but a goodie
Well, it ain't got a back seat or a rear window
But it still gets me where I want to go
And we're goin' to Surf City cause it's two to one ...
Ya know we're goin' to Surf City gonna have some fun
Two girls for every boy.*

We were too young to know about the advantages of two to one, though we knew cool when we saw it, and a Woody was cool. We had had fun at Bass Lake, so my parents picked up the phone and dialed the number, with the idea we would go back.

Whoever had placed the ad lived near us in North Toronto, because the “Hudson” phone exchange was the same as our own. My parents arranged to drop by to see pictures. The drive from our house on Mt. Pleasant into Lawrence Park took only a couple of minutes. When they arrived at the front door, on a tree-lined street too expensive for us to afford, they discovered that the other family was named Lloyd. Helen and Warren.

Wait a second, my dad said. The best man at my brother’s wedding was Warren Lloyd. Is that you by any chance? It was. Warren and Ellie (also known as Tiny, which makes sense if you consider that our last name is Little and that Ellie was a pretty big guy), had studied engineering at university together, and had been close friends.

But, as well as things had started, when Helen got out the pictures of the cottage they had available, my parents realized something was very wrong. The scenes looked nothing like our Bass Lake of last summer. As the conversation continued, my parents were able to slide in the most important question. “Where is this Bass Lake?” “North of Belleville, between Madoc and Bancroft”, was the reply. Ooops. That explained it. Our Bass Lake of the year before had been just outside Orillia.

A number of years later, the provincial government would ensure such mistakes would no longer happen, by renaming all but one of the Bass Lakes. The “Bass” in the Lake located between Madoc and Bancroft became Steenburg, apparently for a railway worker who settled for a time in the area and started a store while he was there. Jack McGeachie, now deceased but a great defender of all things Bass Lake throughout his life, was infuriated by that decision, and continued to lobby Ministers and bureaucrats until his last days, demanding that they change it again, to anything but Steenburg. Jack, wherever you are, I’m with you on that one. We could enlist whoever came up with “Mephisto Lake” to help us.

Maybe it was the family connection. Maybe it was the warm hospitality the Lloyds had shown my parents. Maybe it was the pictures of what the Lloyds called the Jordan Cottage, the one that sat beside their own, and had been inhabited for many years by the Jordan family, the one the Lloyds rented out each summer. Whatever the reason, we were off to another Bass Lake, this one east of Toronto rather than straight north, for two weeks in the summer of 1952.

The Jordan Cottage sat on the edge of a bay off the north road, a short distance from the Lloyd's cottage on the point. Both looked out at an island with a cottage that seemed to be bigger than the rocks it sat on. Even in those days the island cottage appeared to be slowly sagging, with the expectation it would eventually become one with the rocks below. What I remember most about the Jordan Cottage was that it had a wood cooking stove. What I don't remember is whether my mother ever used it in the two weeks we were there, although I assume she did because as the boy who preferred two breakfasts every morning, I don't remember starving.

There was a beach part way round the bay, and a boggy area that you passed on the way. The bog was full of frogs, and my brother and I spent many an hour catching the little critters and putting them in a small wood cask we had found. Against my parents' wishes, we took some of those frogs home with us when our time was up, but they never really adapted to city life. I like to think that when they escaped, some of them hopped their way back to the cottage, like the dogs you hear about that get lost and find their way home over hundreds of kilometers, after many harrowing adventures.

The next summer we returned to our newfound Bass Lake. The Jordan Cottage wasn't available, so we rented the McGeachie's, now part of the conservation area. The problem with it was that you had to cross the road to get to the water. Somehow that didn't seem "cottage-y" enough for us.

We had other commitments in 1954.

In the fall of that year Warren Lloyd called my dad to say the next cottage past the Jordan on the other side was up for sale. The owner, Reverend Neil, had been willed a cottage farther down the lake by one of his parishioners, something more befitting, it appeared, and he didn't need two. My dad agreed to talk to him, and we were more than excited by the prospect, but came back with bad news. The Reverend, said my dad, was asking "way too much", and we put the idea aside. A few months later, Warren called my dad again, indicating the cottage was still available, and that the Reverend might be a little more flexible this time. So my dad rang him up again. Perhaps due to a little divine intervention, this time they were able to make a deal. Not for the exorbitant amount of \$3,500 the Reverend had initially suggested, but something my dad felt was fair. In 1955, we had a cottage of our own. The price: \$1,700.

I have never been sure what role Warren played in making this happen. Once you left the county road to reach both the cottage we purchased and a number of others further along, including the Jordan Cottage and the Lloyd's, you had to use a road that crossed Warren and Helen's property. So he may have been able

to hold some sway with the Reverend over who the next owners would be. I think Helen and Warren put a lot of stock in having good neighbours, and perhaps they had determined that our family fit into that category. Regardless, my parents and the Lloyds became the best of summer friends, ties that lasted for many years.

For the princely sum of \$1,700, which I am sure we didn't have and which my dad would have had to borrow, we got a white building that was probably thirty feet across by twenty deep, with a porch along most of the front. The porch was separated from the rest of the interior by a wall with a door and windows in it. Inside was an open living room dining room with potbelly wood stove, a small kitchen at the back and three bedrooms along one side. The inside walls were made of smooth, milled cedar, and on them visitors had written their names and dates when they had used the cottage. "Bill and Edna. Thanks for a wonderful time. July 1935". I think it came furnished, but with what I don't recall. The wonders of electricity had arrived just the year before, thanks to the line strung along the road behind us. Running water, and especially indoor plumbing, were still glints in my mother's eye, and we quickly learned the art of going "up the hill" whenever nature called.

In life, mistakes take many forms. You step on a stranger's foot in an elevator. "Sorry, my mistake", you say. You buy a sports car, used, and find that while your hair is blowing in the wind, something else is blowing under the hood, something that can only be fixed by ordering a part from Japan that will take two weeks to arrive. And of course that costs money. Lots of money. You date someone, break up, and years later think, "Damn, I wish I hadn't done that". These are mistakes of the regrettable kind.

What would have happened if my parents hadn't mistaken one Bass Lake for another? Our family would have missed out on:

- Buying that cottage just around the bay from the Jordan cottage.
- Inviting people we hardly knew for a weekend the first year we owned that cottage, 1955, and finding that a hot summer can turn two families into one.
- Owning the third largest motor on the lake, a bronze Johnson Seahorse with white trim, right out of the carton, 10 beautiful horsepower, a motor smaller only than the Fitzgibbon's 33 H.P. green Scott-Atwater and the Bateman's 18 H.P. Johnson.
- Cottage friends.

- Arriving at the end of June and staying until Labour Day, successfully fulfilling a pledge to never use soap, not even once, cross our hearts.
- Walking to the store during the week because no one had a second car, and the dads needed the family chariots for work, in the city.
- Bonfires, and marshmallows roasted black on the outside, but gooey and irresistible on the inside.
- A bank robbery.
- Finding a man who had lived at the end of the lake all his life, and who could fix anything.
- A car crash heading to the Coe Hill Fair.
- Hammocks by the shoreline.
- Immersing a second generation, and now a third, in the best of cottage life.
- Chelsea buns.

Fortunately, there is another kind of mistake. The kind my parents made.

Unregrettable.

This was written by Tom Little, and is intended to be the first of several about his family's experience at Steenburg Lake. Only a concerted write-in campaign to Marlene Pollard saying "enough already", can prevent him from subjecting you to more.



Good Times in the 1920's . Looking West towards the Marina. The canoe is heading between Birch and Crystal Island.