

MEMORIES OF BASS LAKE
(STEENBURG LAKE)
GILMOUR, ON
by Richard McCarthy

CHAPTER 1 - Arrival at the lake

I was a 7 year old boy when my parents, Malcolm and Helen McCarthy, first brought me to Bass Lake for the summer of '53. I'm referring to Steenburg Lake as "Bass Lake", as that's how everyone referred to it at that time. The common name became "Steenburg Lake" over the years, as I understand there are about 50 Bass Lakes in Ontario, resulting in lots of confusion when one asked on what lake you were cottaging. My Uncle Dick (Dr. Richard (Dick) Potter), my mother Helen's brother, had encouraged us to spend a summer at a cottage that was for rent two lots up from where they had built their cottage several years prior. The Potters had purchased their land from a lady by the name of McMullen who had owned a fair bit of the shoreline along that side of the lake. I'm not sure whether she had any formal medical or nursing training, but I had learned as a child that a young man by the name of Dewey had been very sick, and that Mrs. McMullen had arranged for him to stay at her home on the lake which has been known in recent years as the Savage's cottage. As a result of Mrs. McMullen's care, the clean air around the lake, and the relaxing setting, Mr. Dewey regained his health. In the following years, he purchased and/or was given the little island off the shore that has been know to many as Dewey's Island, where he built a good sized 2 storey home. The Dewey's arrived every summer from the USA to spend the summer during the years we were raised at what is now the Pollards' home.

It's hard to believe, seeing it now, that little Dewey's Island had such a grand cottage on it, with a boathouse with a wet slip facing towards the shore. The Dewey's had a right-of-way, or an understanding to have access to the lake between the Savages and what was the Potters' cottage, and that allowed them to have easy access to their island. The Dewey's had 3 children, Butch, Peggy and David. I can remember as a young boy being shown around the upstairs of their cottage, and being so impressed with the main bedroom upstairs that had big wooden shutters that were pulled up with sash cords and pulleys to allow for a beautiful view right up the lake. On a summer evening with a gentle breeze, it must have seemed close to heaven sleeping up there. One night when we played cards as a group on Dewey's Island, I had the opportunity to eat my first Pizza. I'd never had one before. It came in a box with a little tin of tomato sauce and was made by Chef Boy Ardee.

Many years latter, late in the fall, an electrical storm caused the island to be hit with lightning. There was a large propane tank on the island next to the side of the building, and it exploded, ripping open like a tin can, destroying most of the island. The chimney remained standing, and the boathouse was there for years following, until it was dismantled. I had heard that Butch and David Dewey both wanted to rebuild a cottage, but could not agree as to whether it should be on the island or on a shore lot. The island could have been rebuilt at the time as "extensive repairs". Apparently they could not agree, and nothing was re-built.

CHAPTER 2 - Purchase of the cottage

Our family enjoyed our first summer renting the cottage. It was being rented from the LaFrance family from Belleville that owned their summer home next door where Tom and Charlie Quinn own now. Our cottage had been owned by the Campbell family. I never met the Campbells, but was reminded of their existence many times as a young boy with their names burned into paddles and other boating equipment around.

It seems that the LaFrances and Campbells didn't get along very well. Must have been like the Hatfields and the McCoys. In the summer of '52, prior to our arrival in 1953, my mother's sister Ena Sinden and her husband Reg had rented the cottage from the Campbells, who had it for sale. The Campbells would not have entertained an offer from the LaFrances, so the LaFrances had arranged for my aunt and uncle to present an offer to purchase the cottage, and then closed it in their name. This gave the LaFrances the opportunity to pick their next door neighbour. Mom and Dad purchased the cottage from the LaFrances following our summer rental, and the many wonderful years of living next door to Don and Freda LaFrance, with daughter Donna, started. I do remember that I couldn't go outside and make any noise in the morning before 11 o'clock, in order to not wake up the LaFrances. I could never understand anyone sleeping away the beautiful mornings at the lake.

CHAPTER 3 - Hurricane Hazel

We had beautiful big pine trees all around our cottage, and in front of it down by the lake. No one would ever even think of cutting down any of them, they were so beautiful. In October of 1954, Hurricane Hazel went through our area, causing tremendous damage.

Luckily, none of the trees landed on our cottage, but it looked as though a bomb had been dropped. A wonderful man by the name of Frances Calnan came to our rescue, and with his horse, skidded the huge logs away into piles where they could be taken to a mill for lumber. As a boy, I couldn't believe how wonderful it was to have all the trees down, and the beautiful sunshine pouring through where it hadn't shone for years. As I mentioned before, one would never have thought of cutting down any of the beautiful trees, and it took Hurricane Hazel to do the unmentionable.

On the other side of the road from the cottages that went around the lake, there was an entrance to a small road that did a loop back into the brush where the Steenburg Lake Association had a garbage dump for the cottagers on the north road. Mr. Don LaFrance, our next door neighbour, was the member of the association who was responsible for the dump. I don't think he was ever excited with his management title. The reason I'm mentioning this at this point, is that Mr. Calnan kept his work horse in a little wooden building at night in by the dump. My big treat as an 8 or 9 year old boy was to be thrown up on the back of the big tired work horse at the end of the day, and ride him to the wooden shed where he knew fresh hay, a drink of cool water and rest waited for him. Between opening up the sky and all this adventure, Hurricane Hazel had been my friend.