

Across the Loon Lake Ice in 1960

I often think of the manual labour that went into building the first cottages on Loon Lake beginning in 1960. The story of the building of my family cottage is only one of the many that could be told.

On August 24, 1959 our family and the Rowe family drove to the Ontario Lands and Forest Office in Parry Sound and purchased their Crown Land lots for one dollar per foot of lakefront plus \$150 Survey Fee. Their lot numbers were 14 and 15 located on the north side of Loon.

Purchasers had two years to construct a building on their lots that met a minimum size requirement. Otherwise the property would revert back to the Crown.

My father had very little building experience but he had trained and worked as a tool and die maker and had some idea of how to construct a basic frame building. He created a cardboard scale model of the cottage he wanted to build at our living room table. Mr. Rowe and my father worked at the same company and decided that they would use my father's basic design to build their cottages.

In early January 1960 they settled on plans to each purchase the building materials they would need and have it bundled and shipped from Toronto to Gravenhurst. Each bundle included framing materials, tongue and groove floor boards, roof planking, windows, doors, "Tentest" panels and shingles. Much of the lumber was "used" (recycled).

There were no roads to the lakes at that time and they determined that the shortest and most direct route was to drag the bundled lumber across the snow from Muldrew Lake Road to the south east corner of Loon Lake and then across the lake on the ice to the north east corner of Loon. Their route from Muldrew Lake Road was to follow an old blueberry pickers' path along the south edge of the marsh with a gentle slope to the south-east corner onto the lake ice.

Many of my mother's family lived in the area and her father had access to a team of horses and her brother-in-law a tractor. In February 1960 the bundled material for one cottage was dragged behind the tractor and the other by the horses. They were aware that the creek that empties into the lake from near the middle of the marsh could make for thin ice at the lake edge. So they decided to follow an arc west from the south-east corner and then back east to the north-east corner staying about 100 metres away from the mouth of the creek.

After successfully dragging the two materials bundles across the ice they still had a fairly steep slope to get up and get to their lots. Both bundles were eventually brought as far up the slope as they could onto Lot 15. The horses were able to get a better grip on the snow covered rocks and pulled both bundles the last 30 metres. Much of the trip was captured on Super 8 film.

When Spring came we would drive from Toronto on a Friday evening, sleep at my grandparents in Bracebridge, work on building the cottage and drive back to Toronto Sunday evening.

We parked our vehicles on Musquash Road and walked in carrying hand tools, nails and food for lunch. Those blackfly and mosquito filled walks in and out were the worst part for me as a 10 year old. The most direct and least marshy route was east along the north shore of Mud Lake and then south around the end of the lake to our property near the north-east corner of Loon – a distance of about 2 km. There weren't any worn paths and it seemed that every weekend we would get lost (my father had a very poor sense of direction). We would often come back out to Musquash Road nowhere near where we had left the vehicles.

To determine the location to erect the cottage on the property there was only one consideration; “where is the most level place that would keep the variance in the foundation footing heights at a minimum?”. We had no concrete blocks or concrete mix to make footings having earlier decided that they would make our materials bundles too heavy to drag over the ice. So we gathered the flattest rocks and stacked them on top of each other to create the footings.

My mother, my younger cousin and I carried each piece of material from where they had been left down the slope in February. The “men” laid out the footings and placed the support beams. There were no “laser levels” in those days – only simple string levels and carpenters’ squares. We had no electrical generator so no power tools. All lumber cuts were done with hand saws. This was no “prefab”!

My grandfather was an experienced framer and led my father in the correct ways to build the cottage. Often times my uncles from Bracebridge and Gravenhurst would help out. My mother created a makeshift fireplace and ensured that we had coffee and a hot lunch – when it wasn’t raining! But as I recall, it rained a lot on the weekends in the Spring of 1960!

I would be remiss if I didn’t recognize that while we were building our cottage, the Rowe family were also building theirs on the next lot over. The bundle of materials for their cottage was also left on the slope next to our bundle. Fred Rowe and his mother carried each piece of lumber about 50 metres to where Fred’s Dad was erecting their cottage. As a 10 year old I wanted to play and explore the lake with my cousin. In retrospect, because we had extended family to help us, I had a lot more free time than Fred who seemed to always be carrying building materials with his Mom.

Because we had brought in our building materials in the Winter we were able to get an early start in late April before other property owners had their materials to begin building. We had our floor and walls framed before they had even begun. However that changed very quickly. Several of the property owners brought prefab cottages on flatbed trailers and had them pulled in across rock ridges and wet marshes by a large steel track caterpillar. The blade on the caterpillar just mowed a trail through the forest and delivered each prefab to the properties. Apparently the flatbed trailers had to be scrapped afterwards because the trip left the frames so bent and distorted that they could no longer be used on the highways. The prefabs were erected rapidly and roofs were on before we had finished framing our rafters.

By mid-August 1960 a rough road had been constructed to within about 300 metres of our cottage and we were able to bring in some basic furniture and actually have a family “lake vacation”.

Electricity wouldn’t arrive until two and half years later.

I must confess, if I had the opportunity today to purchase a lakefront lot with no road, no electricity (no generator either); I’m not sure I’d be prepared to put the kind of effort it took to build the cottage five generations of my family have now enjoyed for 60 plus years. But I’m grateful for those who had the energy, skill and determination to begin so that we can continue to benefit from their efforts for hopefully many more generations.

I would also like to acknowledge Bob Jordan for his; “Notes from a Loon Lake Cottager – 1959 to 1998”, and Ken Urbach for his; “Fifty Years at Loon Lake”. Both excellent histories are published on the Loon and Turtle Lakes website. <http://www.loonturtle.ca/history/>

Steve Farrant - Redwing Drive - Gravenhurst, ON - September 2020