

Early Days at Otter Lake

By: George M. Cassie (written in July, 2001)

In the latter 1940's there were only a few cottages on "our" lake, then accessible by a rough gravel road as far as the Fletcher Bay corner. Nobody ventured beyond by car though travel was possible by horses and wagon.

I recall seeing Nehemiah Clayton (father of D.W. "Wes" Clayton) coming into Dorset from his wee farm at Fletcher Lake to buy provisions.

My earliest recollections of a cottage on the lake include the one just east of the "government dock" which was owned by the Batterenski family, operators of a Shell Garage, the present site of Zachary's Restaurant. Work kept the Batterenskis from ever occupying their cottage, which was rented out.

Next on the east end was a cottage owned by "Pop" Stewart, a taxi owner from Oakville. And just around the bay, Norman Hale from Toronto had built a cottage of logs he cut from around the "lagoon" and swam with them to his site. Next to him lived the Warners, also from Toronto.

Allen McEachern of Dorset purchased a strip of land extending from next to the government dock to the present Riggs cottage. Allen never lived at the lake, but sold the lot next to the dock to Rev. Albert Luck, the center section to Dr. Nathaniel Parker of McMaster University, and the western lot (now Riggs) to Rev. Gosnell. Later, a lot between Parker's cottage and Riggs' cottage was sold to Rev. John Waltho. Apart from the Camp Otter buildings on the north shore, and the house of William (Bill) Crewson on the Otter Lake road, these were the first cottages on the lake.

A few years later three other cottages were built – the Cassie cottage and the Rev. James Simpson cottage next to it on the north shore across the bay from the government dock, and the Dr. Porhan's cottage on the point on the south shore opposite Rocky Island. Dr. Porhan came from Niagara Falls.

These eleven original cottages have now grown to over eighty, made possible by the closure of Camp Otter and subsequent sale of the lakeshore property by its owners.

In the early years, efforts were made for road improvement and for an extension of hydro to Otter Lake. An Otter Lake Cottage Association was formed. Included in this effort, which finally brought results, were:

Dr. Parker, Rev. Luck, Rev. Waltho, Rev. Simpson, Rod Shepherd (who had bought the Stewart property and had begun building a store and an ice house), plus myself and others.

Early lake travel was a necessity for all cottagers before any road was available. This problem was solved by the “water taxi boys” for 25 cents a load. The “taxis” were run by Bruce and Paul Shepherd, George and Bruce Cassie and Wayne Brenn.

The oldest remaining building on the lake is the “ghost house”, once the sleeping quarters for Camp Otter staff. But the oldest reminder of pioneer days is the gravesite on the former Crewson farm property, and said to be the graves of two of that family’s early relatives.