A-Cobourg Recreation 07-05

COBOURG

THE SUMMER RESORTS OF ONTARIO IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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I

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, when settlement in Upper Canada was still in the frontier era, the back country, a few miles inland from the Lower Lakes, was still wilderness. This was pioneer country, and there could be as yet no thought of using land for recreation,[1] while the land itself had to be tamed. The rural settlers had two chief sources of enjoyment—liquor and religion. The former was in good supply (Anna Jameson in 1837 was struck by the vast number of taverns that lined the road between Toronto and Lake Simcoe) but it would be many years before there was a direct relation between liquor and the summer resort. Exactly the reverse was true of religion: if in recent years there seems to have been little connection between religion and the summer resort, in the beginning it was very close. The most enjoyable religious ceremony the settlers knew was the Methodist camp-meeting, which supplemented the work of itinerant preachers, and reached its fullest development in the 1820's. The excitement of the camp-meeting, the hysteria and violent conversions,[2] had an emotional appeal that nothing else could bring to the barren lives of the isolated settlers. Not only the religious came, but those of few religious convictions,[3] who derived enjoyment from the spectacle. Camp-meetings lasted as long as a week, and people stayed in tents at the camping-grounds, which thus came to have the appearance of many future summer resorts.

Only the rising privileged class in the towns of Lake Ontario—the British officers living on half-pay at Cobourg, for example, and the members of the Family Compact at York, and later, Toronto—could begin to think of recreational needs on a more sophisticated level. The earliest cottages in Ontario belonged to members of these privileged classes. Governor General Sydenham is reported to have had the first substantial house on Toronto Island (then a sandy peninsula still attached to the mainland) built for himself as a summer residence in 1839[4] and former Lieutenant-Governor Maitland had a villa at Stamford, near Niagara

1. The Indians, the first inhabitants, followed a summer and winter cycle of movement out of necessity, but it is possible that at times pleasure also entered into it, particularly by way of religious ritual. Thus Manitoulin Island, held sacred to the Great Manitou, was resorted to by Indians for their religious rites every summer.

2. S. D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), 152.

3. *Ibid.*, 155.

4. John Ross Robertson, *Landmarks of Toronto* (Toronto, 1914), Vol. II, 762, and Vol. VI, 18-19. According to this source, the house was 50 feet by 40 feet, built on a layer of 4-inch planks sunk about two feet in the sand, and was of three storeys, the lowest being of brick. In 1843 it became a summer hotel operated by Louis Privot and brother.

Falls. "It is the only place I saw in Upper Canada," wrote Anna Jameson, "combining our ideas of an elegant, well-furnished English villa and ornamented grounds, with some of the grandest and wildest features of the forest scene. It enchanted me altogether."[5] In the 1850's retired British officers at Cobourg were passing through the wilderness north to their fishing- and hunting-boxes on Rice Lake. Genio Scott, an American writer and sportsman, stayed at a hotel on the lake in 1858, and later wrote of a club there "composed of retired officers of the English army and navy, with a sprinkling of civilians who owned beautiful boxes on the margins of this beautiful lake."[6] These were the same gentlemen, no doubt, who owned the magnificent houses in Cobourg that were later bought as summer homes by Pittsburgh iron magnates. In the same year the *Cobourg Star* described a regatta at Gore's Landing.[7] It is probable, then, that Rice Lake had one of the earliest organized resorts in Ontario. The only other lake with a comparable development was further east, near Brockville. This was Charleston Lake, and by the time of Confederation its shores were lined with boathouses and the waters crowded with handsome steam and sail yachts.[8] At Long Point, on Lake Erie, Egerton Ryerson had a cottage built at about the same time,[9] the first indication I have come across of a recreational building on that mild lake.

The cottagers on Rice Lake and Charleston Lake were exceptional for that time, in that they had their permanent, all-year homes elsewhere. Other inland lakes of Ontario were also built upon, but not by cottagers. Thus English half-pay officers settled permanently on the beautiful northern shore of Kempenfeldt Bay, on Lake Simcoe, in such numbers that by 1832 they were able to have steamer service inaugurated to take care of their needs.[10] And at Lakefield, on the Otonabee River near the Kawartha Lakes, lived "a number of English gentlemen who have taken up their abode here chiefly on account of the attractions these back lakes afford,"[11] which could only be the beauty of the solitary wilderness and the excellence of the fishing. If this is not a form of recreational land use, it comes very near it, and these retired officers and gentlemen may thus have had the distinction of being the first to put the inland lakes of Ontario to some sort of recreational use.[12]

The residents of Toronto, who were to become the chief architects of Ontario's recreational pattern, if they did not travel to the resorts of the St. Lawrence, or to the much advertised Atlantic resorts in Maine,

5. Anna Jameson, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada, 1836-1837*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1923), 100.
6. Genio C. Scott, *Fishing in American Waters* (New York: Harper, 1873), 279.
7. *Cobourg Star and Newcastle General Advertiser*, September 1, 1858.
8. Henry Beaumont Small, *The Canadian Handbook and Tourist's Guide* (Montreal, 1867), 110.
9. Edward Harris, *Recollections of Long Point* (Toronto, 1918), 14.
10. Andrew F. Hunter, *A History of Simcoe County* (Barrie, 1900), Vol. I, 70.
11. Small, *op. cit.*, 128.
12. According to Watson Kirkconnell, the first regatta on nearby Sturgeon Lake was held in 1841, an astonishingly early date. (*Victoria County Centennial History*, Lindsay, 1921, 52.)

or even to Europe, stayed close to their own Lake Ontario. They flew "for two or three days together"[13] to Niagara, to stand on Table Rock (since fallen) and admire the Falls, or to St. Catharines to join American Southerners in taking the waters, or they had summer residences near Toronto or at one of the half-dozen little ports—at Long Branch, Port Credit, Lorne Park, Oakville, and Bronte—that lay along the lakeshore between Toronto and Hamilton. One does not hear of them travelling north to hunt or fish. Even though the railway reached as far as Collingwood on Georgian Bay by 1855, sportsmen travelled to Long Point[14] and to Lake St. Clair. (In 1860 two Torontonians at Lake St. Clair shot in a fortnight 1,860 pounds of swans, geese and ducks.[15])

Ontario's resort lands began to develop more fully in the 1870's. One reads of picnics at Erieau in 1870,[16] great numbers of American Navy men summering at Cobourg in the same year,[17] tourists beginning to frequent even the Kawarthas by 1875,[18] and yacht clubs springing up all along Lake Ontario.[19] Collingwood and Owen Sound were the eastern terminals of excursion steamers that traversed the Great Lakes even as far west as Thunder Bay.[20] Aside from these two ports, Georgian Bay was unused for recreation. As late as 1870 Midland was in virgin forest, and it was not until the railway reached it later in the decade, and lumbering operations began, that this part of Ontario became accessible to the "front". The opposite shore of Georgian Bay, on the Bruce Peninsula, remained little visited by vacationers from the rest of Ontario and the United States until well into the present century. The steamers on Lake Simcoe were much used for pleasure excursions. Even little Lake Scugog, which had its steamer by 1851,[21] began to be used for recreation about 1877, when a good road system was completed on its island.[22]

The recreational development of the 1870's that had the most important consequences when Ontario's boom came two decades later. This was in the direct line of resort history as it may be traced since ancient time—the secularization of the camp-meeting:

> The Methodist camp meeting disappeared as an institution of the rural backwoods and developed as an urban religious gathering closely associated with the growing tourist trade. Summer resorts were chosen as centres for the holding of such meetings, and religious worship was brought into close relation-

13. James, *op. cit.*, 89.
14. In these early years, before good roads and railways connected inland centres of population with Lake Erie (though Londoners could reach the lake comfortably, owing to the building of the London and Port Stanley Railway in 1856), hunting at Long Point was primarily an American prerogative; Americans could reach it easily by boat. (See Harris, *op. cit.*)
15. Small, *op. cit.*, 155.
16. *London Free Press*, Centennial Edition, June 11, 1949, Section 9, p. 16.
17. Edith Kerr Macdonald *Old Homes and Distinguished Visitors in Cobourg, 1798-1948*, edited by E. C. Guillet, (Oshawa, 1948), 195.
18. *The Globe*, Toronto, August 13, 1875.
19. *Loc. cit.*
20. *Loc. cit.*
21. *The Globe*, Toronto, June 3, 1851.
22. F. G. Weir, *Scugog and its Environs* (Port Perry, 1927), 41.

ship to the recreational needs of urban inhabitants. Grimsby park became one of the chief centres for the holding of camp meetings.[23]

The three great camp-meeting grounds were Grimsby Park and Niagara-on-the-Lake, on the shore of Lake Ontario in the Niagara Peninsula, and Thousand Islands Park, on Wellesley Island, in the St. Lawrence. Thousands of excursionists from Toronto, Hamilton, and other Ontario towns, visited the first two; and the last-mentioned, which was on American soil, was visited by great numbers of Methodists from both Canada and the United States.

By 1877 the camp-meetings had become thoroughly secularized, owing to the presence of urban tourists: "Some are afraid," wrote the editor of the *Primitive Methodist* in 1872, "that the camp-meeting grounds may become places of mere summer resort rather than of religious gatherings."[24] Still, the camp-meeting retained something of its religious flavour even twenty years later, when Charles G. D. Roberts visited the one at Grimsby Park.[25] Religion has not left the summer resort even yet, though it has certainly become attenuated.

The early 1870's saw the real beginnings of most of Ontario's resort lands. Even among the 30,000 Islands of Georgian Bay the first excursion steamer operated out of Parry Sound by 1871.[26] But of the resort area that was to become the greatest of all—Muskoka—little beyond the fact that the first hotel there was built in 1870[27] is heard until the decade draws to a close.

II

The rise of Muskoka can be traced to the enterprise of one man. This was A. P. Cockburn, who, in the 1860's, built the first steamships on the Muskoka Lakes,[28] thus ending the excruciating experience that travelling through Muskoka by stage coach, over corduroy roads, had been, and opening up the era of comfortable travel. In the decades after his coming, and partly by virtue of the strenous promotional campaign he instituted, Muskoka began its rise. Ironically, the one memorial to his fame, Port Cockburn, which he logically placed at the spot that was most admired in early days, the head of Lake Joseph, scarcely outlasted him, and by the beginning of the present century no trace of it remained.[29]

As late as 1854 it was written of Orillia, on Lake Simcoe, that from there to the North Pole there was "no European town or village,"[30]

23. Clark, *op. cit.*, 336. Dr. W. S. Wallace informs the writer that the Baptists used Grimsby for their meetings at an earlier date than did the Methodists.
24. *Ibid.*, 337.
25. Charles G. D. Roberts, *The Canadian Guide Book* (New York: Appleton, 1899), 15.
26. George A. Calder, "A Geographical Survey of the District of Parry Sound", Unpublished B.A. thesis, Department of Geography, University of Toronto (1949), 58.
27. Redmont Thomas, "The Beginning of Navigation and the Tourist Industry in Muskoka", *Ontario History*, Vol. LII, No. 2 (1950), 103.
28. W. E. Hamilton, *Guide Book and Atlas of Muskoka and Parry Sound Districts* (Toronto, 1879), 18.
29. Personal communication from Mrs. Dora Hood, April, 1950.
30. J. G. Kohl, *Travels in Canada* (London, 1861), 66.