

Memories of Winters Past

The roads are plowed. The sun is peering through the grey with a sickly yellow hue. I am warm here, and lost in my reverie of Wil-o-lea winter days. Days when I would wander down to the shoreline and out onto the ice. Yellow-grey days like today with a quiet wind that gently lifts the floating flakes, fanning the pristine air with powder puffs. Days when we would make a rink on the ice if Smith Bay had kindly frozen over on a windless night so that the ice would be smooth.

Only three days to wait for the ice to thicken to a safe enough depth to venture out onto it, if the weather stayed cold enough - it is a shallow bay. Then the crisp snowy white of miles and miles of a frozen winterland would be peopled with skaters, skiers, and sleds;

with colourful scarves and tasseled hats splashing the vista, flicking and flirting about for as many days again. Keeping the rink cleared was my self-appointed, and very enjoyable, job; a spiritual experience in that I was usually alone, skaters and rink shovellers being two different breeds of human being. I am a shoveller. I am a creative shoveller. I like to make curving pathways connecting one cleared area to that of another. I make the cleared areas into a variety of shapes - a rectangle, a circle, an arc, a long curving road. The stars are out - I will make one of them.

The night is still, the wind has dropped, the natives have gone in to hang up their skates, build a fire, make hot chocolate, and watch TV. I meditate. I shovel. The children will be so happy tomorrow when they see what I have created for them. I am an artist.

A few days before Christmas, in 1979, Smith Bay froze over one perfectly calm night. We awoke to a beautiful sight. It was sunny and blue. The sky was blue. The ice was blue. And as smooth as glass. We held our breath all

that day and the next. "Please, God", we prayed, "don't let the wind come up and break up the ice. Please don't let it snow." Our prayers were answered. Three days later, people could be seen from Waupoos Canning Factory, 2 miles across as the pike

swims, to Waupoos Island, to Pickerel Point, and all around Smith Bay's shoreline; skating, walking, and pulling sleds out on the ice. Even I ventured out. At the end of the dock, I cleared off a patch of snow, sat down, and put on my skates, (a long time now un-used), terrified but inwardly elated. Like bike-riding, the skill is not forgotten, only just reduced to that of a wobbly child. People whizzed by me, their tartan scarves flying in the wind, waving brightly mittened hands, and calling out breathless greetings. Little fish darted about and away from us, as visible as though we were on a gigantic glass-bottomed boat. We chased them, and we chased each other. We spotted long lost items on the bottom of the bay and tried to memorize where they were with hopes of collecting them once again next summer. I tripped, I was air-borne, I belly-flopped. I must say the winter ice is much more rigid than the warm, welcoming summer waters. I certainly didn't sink softly beneath the surface. Daunted, I dragged myself off the ice, and nursed my wounds while becoming a spectator for the rest of the day.

On Christmas Day, skaters by the dozens sped along for miles on the bay pulling sleds of exhilarated children and gaily decorated gifts to friends and relatives in neighbouring homes and cottages. Colour exploded over the white expanse like an inverse fire-works display. Youngsters, teens, and big, big kids alike donned their brand-new or very old skates, it didn't seem to matter, and did figure-eights and pirouettes, and raced and chased each other down the shoreline. The high-pitched shrieks and yells resounded for miles from those who played hockey. The very brave, and foolish, daring one another to prove their worth, I suspect (disobeying their parents, I'm



Continued on page 16