

ETCETERA

Home away from home

BY JEROME WATT
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A cottage isn't just a weekend getaway — it's a sanctuary.

"What a cottage gives you is perfect freedom from the city," Fred Geibel says. "It's a retreat. It's somewhere to go away."

But ask a group of cottagers to explain the freedom the cottage provides and you'll receive many different answers.

For Geibel, it's a home on 100 hectares of property northwest of Huntsville, where he can ride his dirt bike and practise skeet shooting.

"You can't do this stuff at home," the Aurora resident says. "There are too many laws restricting you and not enough space."

For Markham's John Higgins, a cottage is hacked out of the bush on Lake Manitouabing with no modern conveniences.

He describes his two outhouses as "a bit of a luxury."

On the other hand, Gord and Linda Robertson of Thornhill enjoy touring Georgian Bay in their 30-foot, twin-engine power boat and living in a home with all the amenities surrounded by nature.

The cottage life has always been a part of the family tradition for Newmarket's Carme Moxham, who gets away to Christian Island in Georgian Bay.

Her family built the cottage when she was six months old and she grew up knowing only cottage life.

A cottage even escapes official definition, said Wendy Moore, executive director of the Federation of Ontario Cottagers Associations.

"What it boils down to is, people can't define what a cottage is," Moore says, adding her own research hasn't turned up any answers.

"It would be easier to write what a cottage isn't."

Despite these differences, for all these cottage families, their getaway helps keep the family together.

"It's a family gathering place," Linda Robertson says. "It's a place to come together."

Linda finds the seclusion of her cottage a good backdrop for family conversations. Gone are the distractions of the city. Her husband, Gord, who works as a consultant, escapes the impulse to work in his home office.

Higgins says the solitude of the cottage forces his family to come together.

He shuns modern conveniences because they remove the focus from family togetherness.

"It forces you to communicate with the family," he says, adding

his children build tree forts and create their own games when they're at the cottage.

Moxham is keeping the family tradition alive by introducing her daughter, Carlie, to cottage life.

"We never ate meals as a family at home," she said. "The cottage is a family gathering place. I am continuing that tradition with my daughter."

All cottage families seem to go through the same cycle. When children reach their teens and early 20s, they lose interest in going to the cottage. But as they grow up, marry and have their own children, things change.

"Then you can't beat the family away with a stick. Especially the ones with grandkids," Gord Robertson says.

But cottages aren't all fun and games — there is a lot of work involved.

When Geibel talks about his cottage, one wonders why he bothers with it.

"It's 80 per cent headaches and 20 per cent pleasure," he says. "If you ask my wife, she'd probably say it's 95 per cent headaches and 5 per cent pleasure."

But the pleasure outweighs the headaches.

"That 20 per cent makes up for a lot," he says.

For Higgins, the cottage represents a major workout every time he goes up.

Without any power tools, he does all the work by hand. It's his way of keeping fit.

Recently, he put a metal roof on his cottage.

"It took 90 hours of work," he says. "Now it's easier for the snow to slide off the roof. You never finish! (the work)"

Higgins suffered a hernia when he tried to pull a 225-kg dock out of the lake. His doctor was familiar with the injury.

"He said to me, 'I get all you guys in September. You sit at your desks all year and think you can pull 500-lb (225-kg) docks out of the water.'"

At the Robertson cottage, work is another opportunity for the family to come together.

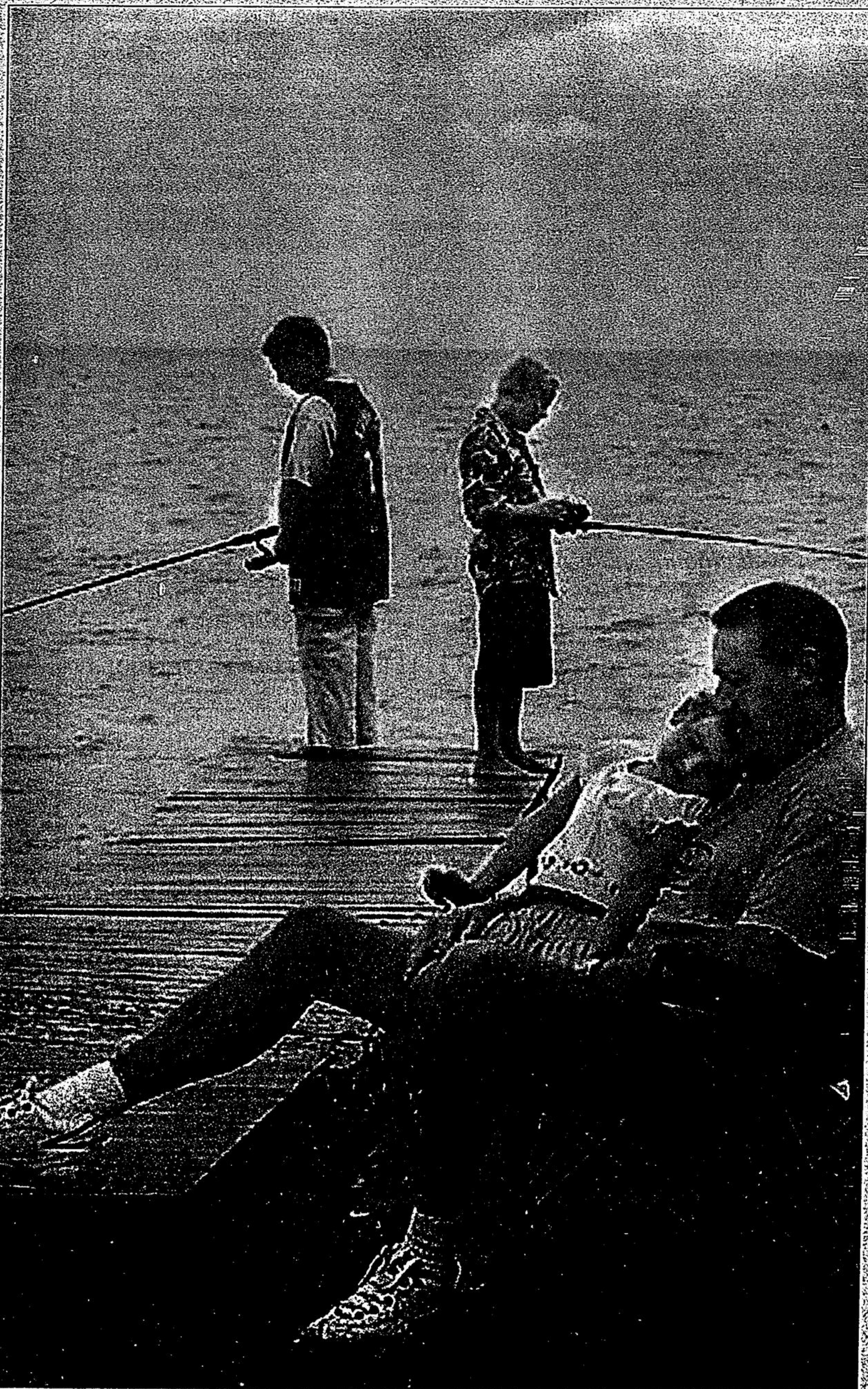
"They work through the day together," Linda says. "They enjoy working together."

A second home doesn't come cheaply, though. Geibel figures the cottage costs roughly \$5,000 a year.

"It's a very costly thing," he says. "You've also got to figure the gas going back and forth. The taxes are also getting ridiculous."

Geibel has a suggestion for anyone who wants to enjoy the cottage life but avoid the hassles.

"Find a friend with a cottage, bring extra food and drink. That's the way to go."



In cottage adventures, whether it's just fresh air or hours of swimming, there is always time for a much-needed rest. Above, 4-year-old Kendall Brake rests with dad Bob while Kody Brake (right) and Jeremy Buchner patiently wait for the big one on the shores of Lake Simcoe.

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