

Inside Muskoka By Gary Long

This Week: Conquering the Portage

Part 1 Over the hills

Lakes sprawl in such wonderful profusion across Muskoka's glacially-scoured landscape that it's not unusual to see a pair of them separated by the slenderest filament of dry ground.

You'll find one of the most intriguing of these near-connections about 12 km east of Huntsville. Here Peninsula Lake, part of a major chain of lakes on the North Muskoka River system, approaches to within just 1000m (5/8 mile) of huge Lake of Bays in the adjacent South Muskoka River watershed.

During the last quarter of the

19th century and the early years of the present one, this tantalizing proximity of two important waterways sparked the imaginations of politicians, entrepreneurs and engineers who saw enormous advantages in linking the lakes by some means.

Improved transportation was a prime goal of such a connection: a century ago waterways provided the best way of moving raw materials, freight and people around frontier Muskoka. Not surprisingly, many local residents advocated digging a navigation canal between Peninsula Lake and Lake of Bays.

In the same era the proximity of the two lakes, but more par-

ticularly the fact that Lake of Bays is 31.4m (103 feet) higher than Peninsula, spawned an audacious hydroelectric diversion scheme: the Portage power project.

Over the course of this two-part series we'll closely examine those bold but eventually abandoned plans to join Peninsula Lake and Lake of Bays. We'll also look at another better-known scheme, waterless, that did effect a successful connection at "The Portage."

Although the neck of land (or isthmus) between Lake of Bays and Peninsula Lake is not very wide, it posed a more formidable

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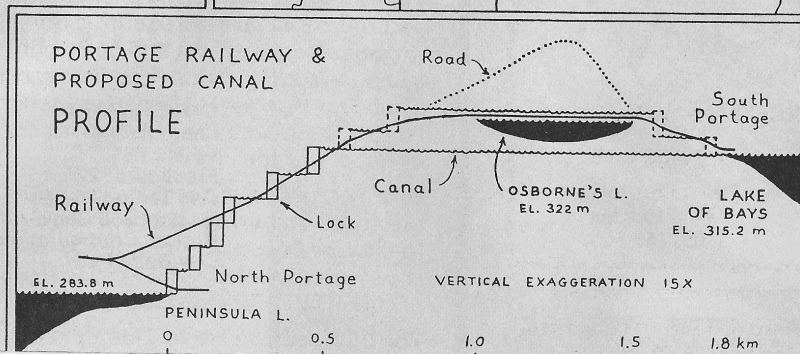
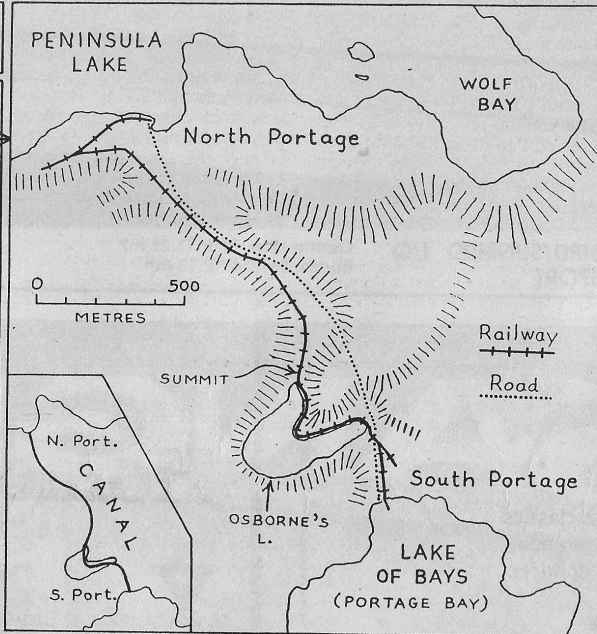
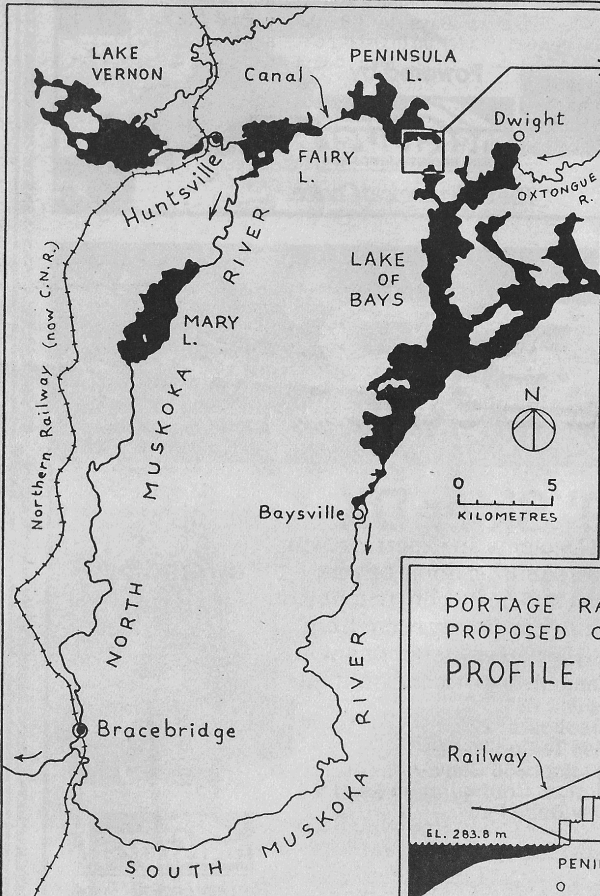
obstacle to any plan to connect the lakes than width alone would suggest.

Those of you familiar with that area know the isthmus is not some unobtrusive mound of sand or other easily removed material. Quite the opposite: a line of high rocky hills runs along

its spine. The most dramatic of these, known locally as Wolf Mountain, towers 99m (325 feet) above Peninsula Lake (or about 67m above Lake of Bays).

There is, however, a pass that slices through these hills: a narrow twisting valley that begins at Portage Bay (Lake of Bays),

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climbs slightly to a pond called Osborne's Lake; then descends steeply to Peninsula Lake. Immediately north of Osborne's Lake, and scarcely a metre higher, the floor of the pass reaches its summit elevation just 8m (26 feet) above Lake of Bays.

Clearly this pass would be the key to the establishment of surface connections between the lakes.

That modest 8m summit on the pass is nonetheless plenty to prevent a natural spilling of Lake of Bays' waters northward to Peninsula Lake. Lake of Bays empties instead from its southwestern extremity at Baysville to form the South Muskoka River.

This wasn't always the case. At one time, for a brief period, the lake did flow northward through the pass.

Between 11,000 and 12,000 years ago, as the last glacier of the Ice Age retreated from this part of Muskoka, the water level in the Portage area of Lake of Bays stood at least 20m higher than it does today. Fed by vast melt-water spillways pouring from the highlands to the east, the lake discharged both southward at Baysville and northward through the pass to Peninsula Lake.

At that time Peninsula Lake was a mere bay of a huge post-glacial waterbody, Lake Algonquin, that flooded much of Muskoka for several centuries. The water level in the Peninsula "bay" was at least 45m higher than the present elevation — higher, in fact, than the summit on the pass.

After the ice retreated far enough north, the meltwater

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spillways dwindled and Lake of Bays fell several metres to the level of Lake Algonquin. A narrow strait through the pass joined the two bodies of water.

For a brief period at this stage Lake of Bays probably did not flow into the South Muskoka River. Because the weight of the ice had depressed the land, the highest point on the pass was a least 8m lower than the Baysville outlet. Subsequent differential uplift raised the pass to its present elevation 8m higher than Baysville. The pass actually dried up more than 10,500 years ago.

Long before white men arrived in Muskoka, an Indian canoe route went through Peninsula Lake and over to Lake of Bays. A portage trail crossed the neck of land between the lakes. It followed the pass all the way except for a deviation near the summit where it took a shorter but higher route over a hill. European fur traders active in the region during the early 19th century no doubt knew of — and used — this trail.

The first journey over The Portage for which we have a written account took place in 1853. That year Alexander Murray, a geologist with the Geological Survey of Canada, portaged from Peninsula Lake to Lake of Bays during his ascent of the Muskoka River system. Murray, incidentally,

gave both lakes their present names.

Murray estimated that Lake of Bays was "upwards of one hundred feet" higher than Peninsula — which it is. But he exaggerated the length of the portage, recording it as "one and three-quarter miles" long. It's actually just a shade more than a mile (1.6 km) across. Mind you, lugging a canoe or heavy pack over the hills probably made it seem nearly twice as far.

Within 15 years of Murray's journey, the first settlers began trickling into northern Muskoka. In the absence of roads, waterways naturally assumed great importance for local transportation. During the 1870s the first steamboat appeared on the North Muskoka River lakes, and another on Lake of Bays.

In 1877 the 400-passenger "Northern" began plying the Lakes Vernon, Fairy and Mary on the North Muskoka. A government lock and dam and some channel improvements just below Fairy Lake made this navigation possible.

Initially, the "Northern" couldn't reach Peninsula Lake. The winding, marshy creek that carried Peninsula's outflow westward to Fairy Lake wasn't navigable, at least not by large craft.

A year after the "Northern" entered service, the steamboat era dawned on Lake of Bays with the launching of the little

"Dean." In coming years local entrepreneurs would place more steamers on Lake of Bays as well as on the North Muskoka River lakes.

As settlement and economic activity increased in this region, and plans were made to extend the Northern Railway through Huntsville (on the North Muskoka River between Lakes Vernon and Fairy), it became obvious that great benefits would accrue if steamers could travel from Fairy Lake to Peninsula and right over to Lake of Bays.

Such navigation would require the construction of two relatively short canals: one from Fairy Lake to Peninsula, and one from Peninsula up into Lake of Bays.

Settlers around Peninsula Lake had lobbied for years for the Fairy-Peninsula canal. Peninsula Lake stood less than half a metre higher than Fairy and the marshy creek valley connecting them could be readily dredged and dug out to create a steamboat channel. No locks would be needed.

Finally, in 1886, the Ontario Department of Public Works began digging the 1.3 km waterway. Although all of the necessary work wasn't completed until 1891, steamers could pass through the new canal by 1888.

The second canal, from Peninsula Lake to Lake of Bays, was an entirely different proposition. Technically, it was possible: it could follow a 1.8 km route

through the pass at The Portage. But it would require a lot of expensive civil engineering.

Actually, there were two possible ways of doing the canal, both, however, following exactly the same route. One idea used Osborne's Lake as the summit level: the canal would climb the pass from Peninsula Lake to Osborne's, then descend to Lake of Bays.

This scheme needed as many as ten navigation locks in all, eight to lift boats up to Osborne's Lake from Peninsula, two more to lower them to Lake of Bays. Probably Osborne's Lake would have been raised a couple of metres by means of a dam at the outlet (east end), this to minimize excavation in shallow areas and through the summit of the pass at the north end.

There was one advantage in using Osborne's Lake as the canal summit: it entailed the least amount of excavation (though still rather a lot). There was also a serious drawback. Not enough water flows into the lake from the surrounding hills to operate locks. Thus the project would have required a pumping station on Lake of Bays to lift the necessary water up to Osborne's.

The other canal idea didn't need a pumping station, and with fewer locks, would have permitted speedier passage of steamers between the lakes. Like the first design, this one called for the canal to climb the pass from

Peninsula Lake towards Osborne's — but this time only until it reached the elevation of Lake of Bays. For the remaining distance through the pass it would run in a deep cut level with that lake.

This arrangement meant that as few as six locks could handle the vertical travel, and Lake of Bays water could flow through the cut to operate those locks.

But that cut was a major stumbling block. Fully 1.3 km long and requiring excavation up to 10m (33 ft.) deep in solid bedrock, it would have taken a tremendous amount of work to complete. And as a side-effect, it would have virtually drained Osborne's Lake.

So, which canal scheme was better? It hardly matters. The cost of any canal between Peninsula Lake and Lake of Bays far exceeded the perceived benefits, and the idea quickly died.

Nonetheless, circumstances made it desirable that some sort of improved link be established over the Portage. An access road for settlers had been cut out in the 1870s along much of the old Indian trail, but it was just a rutted track which in any case veered east near Osborne's Lake and apparently didn't even go down to Lake of Bays.

The east-west water route between Huntsville and Lake of Bays seemed the natural transportation corridor. But if a Portage Canal was too expensive

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and the Portage Road too inefficient, what other alternative could conquer that narrow yet bothersome neck of land between Lake of Bays and Peninsula Lake?

Perhaps a railway could solve the problem.

The idea of a railway across the Portage had no doubt begun to take root earlier, but certainly in 1889 one was seriously proposed. It was to be a tram line designed mainly to carry logs over to Peninsula Lake, although obviously it could be adapted for other purposes as well. However, a railway engineer who examined the proposed route declared it "out of the question." The steep slopes probably contributed to his discouraging report.

Meanwhile, further south a rival railway scheme was being advocated: a line from Bracebridge to Lake of Bays at Baysville. By 1892 a company had actually been formed to build it (you can read the intriguing story of the Baysville railway in my up-coming two-part series "Phantom Train to Baysville").

That southern railway, if it were built, would syphon off the Lake of Bays trade to Bracebridge. Huntsville would be left out in the cold, so to speak. That prospect sparked renewed interest in Huntsville for a railway at the Portage. Previous engineering opinion aside, perhaps one could indeed be built across the isthmus.

One man who thought so was

Captain George F. Marsh, the local steamboat magnate and one of northern Muskoka's more ambitious entrepreneurs. In 1895 Marsh had the Portage Railway idea included in the charter for his new transportation company.

Marsh had originally entered the transportation business in 1884 with one steamboat on Lake of Bays. By the mid-1890s he owned several on that lake and had bought out the principal steamboat operator on the North Muskoka River lakes.

Perhaps more than anyone, Marsh realized just how much a Portage Railway would benefit the Huntsville-Lake of Bays district. He also realized how much it would benefit his steamboat business. Not surprisingly, Marsh decided to build the line.

The usual difficulty, financing, kept the Portage Railway project on hold for several years. Fortunately for Huntsville, the rival Bracebridge-to-Baysville line was in limbo too due to lack of capital.

Marsh and his company finally won the race to raise the necessary money. In 1903 work on the narrow gauge Portage line got under way. It progressed rapidly and partial operations commenced the following year. Passenger service began in 1905.

Huntsville had gained control of the rich Lake of Bays hinterland.

The 2.5 km Portage Railway, later touted as the "smallest commercially operated railway in the world," naturally followed the pass across the neck of land



Captain G. F. Marsh

from North Portage on Peninsula Lake to South Portage on Lake of Bays. Even so, its grades were very steep and it needed a switchback to circumvent the final precipitous slope leading down to the steamboat wharf at North Portage.

The accompanying map and profile illustrate the intricacies of line.

For more than half a century the lilliputian steam engines of the "Portage Flyer" huffed and

puffed over the summit between the lakes, hauling thousands of passengers and prodigious quantities of tan bark, lumber, building materials and other freight.

Long before it closed down, the little railway fulfilled its promise of stimulating economic activity. The resort industry on Lake of Bays, for instance, owed much of its early success to the line.

In later years, as roads replaced the lakes for local transportation, freight revenues on the Portage Railway dwindled and the lines depended more and more heavily for its survival on tourists taking boat cruises out of Huntsville. The last cruiseboat (a motor vessel: the steamboat era ended in 1952) ceased operations after the 1958 season; the Portage Railway closed the following year.

Although the rails themselves have been removed, the Portage Railway roadbed is still quite discernible along the north shore of Osborne's Lake and on down to Peninsula Lake. A quiet pond, sun-dappled woods and a palpable aura of history make the route an excellent one for a hike: here is a golden opportunity to develop a historical walking trail.

For a more detailed account of the Portage Railway and the steamboats that connected with it, you should read Niall MacKay's *By Steam Boat and Steam Train*. The book contains numerous fascinating historical photographs.

Despite the existence of that pass cutting across it, the neck of land between Lake of Bays and Peninsula Lake was a constant challenge to transportation engineering because of the great elevation difference between the lakes and the consequent steep grade on the Peninsula Lake side. A canal, we saw, would have needed at least half a dozen locks to traverse that slope.

The Portage Railway suffered from the same topographic circumstances. Between Peninsula Lake and the summit on the pass the little engines had to climb 39m (129 ft.) in just 1.4 km. That's an average grade of 2.8 per cent — nearly three times the ideal maximum; along one short stretch the actual grade was an incredible seven per cent. Not surprisingly, passengers occasionally had to help push the train over the top.

On the other hand, the big difference between the levels of Peninsula Lake and Lake of Bays provided a splendid opportunity to undertake a major hydro-electric scheme at The Portage.

Respected politicians and engineers endorsed the proposed Portage power project as a means of supplying the Town of Huntsville long before Ontario Hydro transmission lines reached that northern community.

Next Week in Conquering the Portage, Part 2 — Under the Hills — we'll find out more about the most unusual waterpower scheme ever conceived in Muskoka.