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STORIES OF THE PAST



Jessie, Margaret and Dorothy

Campbell Family Photo

JESSIE, MARGARET AND DOROTHY on the porch of Rocklea c. 1905.

Huntsville Forester

Our first trip to the cottage — 1904

Written by Mary Campbell in 1964 from the Ruth Martin Papers and edited by Barbara Paterson.

In February that year, Alick had pneumonia and was not picking up his strength, and our doctor, Dr. Tyrrell, told mother of a wonderful place to take Alick for his health — in fact, he called it God's country and we often refer to it as such, as indeed it is.

Mother mentioned this place, Norway Point on Lake of Bays, to Rev. Dr. D. McTavish, our most wonderful minister, on one of his pastoral visits to our home and said that our doctor thought it would be an ideal place for Alick to recuperate. Dr. McTavish couldn't speak highly enough of the Lake of Bays and told us he had a friend, the Rev. John Brown, who had a cottage to rent and he would speak to him and make arrangements. This little cottage community had five ministers — Rev. Dr. McTavish, Rev. John Neil, Rev. John Brown, Rev. James Murray and Rev. Dr. Hamilton, as well as two lawyers — R.V. McPherson and Mr. Higgins. Not only that, he had said, it was the nearest in scenery to the braes and lochs of Scotland that he knew of. As Father was away at the time, Mother made the big decision on her own. We were to have a well-equipped cottage — two storeys high, four bedrooms, two verandas and a gorgeous sandy beach. The name of the cottage was Blink Bonnie.

On the 19th of June, we started off — Mother, Alick, Ewen, Margaret, Jessie, Dorothy and John, who was a baby of four months, and our maid, May, who was as deaf as a doornail, the dog Tiny and our cat Blackie, a 24-lb crock of butter, nine loaves of bread, plus four trunks filled with clothes and five dunnage bags filled with blankets, a 100-lb bag of flour and a 50-lb bag of sugar. These last two were a must, as the nearest place to shop was Dorset, which could only be reached by boat — a day's trip.

All arrangements were made for 6:45 a.m. as all the baggage had to go down at the same time. Fisher Cartage looked after this for Mother as her hands were full with the children. At 6:30 a.m., the carriage called from T.A. Grew Carriage Shop on Yonge Street at Wellesley, and this gave Mother time to get us all up at 4 a.m., get dressed, have May make lunches for breakfast, noon and when we arrived about 4:30 p.m. What a scene — we couldn't locate the cat, then when we did, it was put in an old egg crate — if you remember, with open sides — then catch the dog, get a leash which he had never been used to, and close "93", for we would not be back until Aug. 30. All went well. Mother must have been out of her mind by now, and then when we were almost at Queen and University, May remembered the crock of butter was not accounted for, so back to "93" we went to get the crock.

Then the fun started. The children ranged in age from 12 down to four months; six children, all cranky from having to go to bed too early and worse for having had to get up so early. The train left at 7:50 a.m. but Mother, who had never had such a big responsibility thrust on her all at one time, had to see that the baggage was all checked and on the train.

One thing people do not realize they miss now is the fun when they go on the Northland. The old 7:50 a.m. Northland was a milk train (that is what we called it), for after we left Parkdale Station we would stop and pick up milk or leave milk cans. My, how we remember — Downsview, Concord, Maple, King, etc., etc. — but we didn't notice then, we were on our way to the cottage.

Then there was a snag. The conductor would not allow us to have the dog and cat with us. They had to go back to the baggage car.

All went well as we continued, except some farmers were late getting their milk down and there would be a slight delay — so everyone got off the train to smell the new-mown hay and nobody thought to count noses and after we had gone two miles, it was discovered that Terrence Higgins was missing. What to do. But it all ended well. The farmer realized the little boy would be missed at the next milk stop, so he drove him there. What great judgment on the part of the engineer to think that one out and wait.

Away we started again, as it was getting close to lunchtime. By this time, Mother had become acquainted with Mrs. Higgins, who like Mother had a large, young family plus two guests and had never been to where she was going before. But they were delighted to find out that they were also going to Norway Point and that Rev. Dr. McTavish had recommended it. They were to be next-door neighbours.

It was a very hot June day and everyone began to get thirsty. By 10:30 a.m., all the water in the big bottle at the end of the coach was gone and could not be renewed until we got to Barrie. Then, first Dorothy was train sick, then two of the Higgins, and Mother said she never smelled an orange or a banana again but it didn't bring back memories of that hot train trip.

The misery went on — everyone tired and noisy and quarrelsome — and the train was 1 1/2 hours late getting to Huntsville, which meant that instead of arriving at Huntsville at 2:15 p.m., it would be nearer 4 p.m. All the grown-ups could do was grin and bear it.

Finally, Huntsville was called as the next station and Mother and Mrs. Higgins agreed there never was a longer 23-mile stretch than between Bracebridge and Huntsville. Everything was gathered together again, the lunch baskets were checked — for there was still one more lunch to go. It had been such a hot day — no air-conditioned coaches — soot all over faces, hands and clothes covered with grime, and to cap it all off the crock of butter, well covered on the shady side when we left Toronto, was in the afternoon sun and had started to melt. Coats, etc. were a slimy mess, but you just have to carry on — carry the melting 24-lb crock of butter, a babe in arms with a sick two-year-old in tow. Mrs. Higgins wanted to return to Toronto on the next train and Mother agreed with her.

Then the train slowed down and pandemonium broke loose — just to get a sniff of the elixir in the air, the gorgeous blue sky and all so green and clear. All the children, dogs, cats, rabbits and five hens were accounted for and we proceeded down the wharf where the boat was waiting to take us to the cottage — or so we thought.

Can you imagine Mother trying to keep track of her brood, count the trunks, dunnage bags, etc. and then settle back to count her blessings that all the hurdles were over? Not so. A beautiful trip through the canal, where the boat had to go almost dead slow, to watch the water lilies standing up straight one minute and then gradually bowing their heads and being sucked under. This fascinated everyone for a time — but this new attraction soon palled. Then we stopped at a place called Deerhurst and everyone proceeded to get off, only to find that we were to stay on board to North Portage. The sky was beginning to cloud over and it looked as if a storm was brewing. "Oh no," said the captain, and all was serene again.

We arrived at North Portage — sky still dull — and there was a mile from North to South Portage to traverse. As there was such a crowd of women, children, babies, dogs, cats and baggage, the captain said that only women with babes in arms and children under four could go on the hay rick, as this was the only way they could get them over to South Portage. The cart had to take the trunks, baggage, etc., etc. and there would be no room for anyone. So Mother saw May with Alick, Ewen, Margaret and Jessie setting off for dear knows where and it looked as if it would pour any minute. All arrived at South Portage

safely, although the walkers had a struggle — the dogs went wild, our cat's cage was too heavy and the children put it down. (It was picked up by the man with the baggage cart.) Then the hens started to cackle. But it was fun and they did not mind the walk.

Then all were on board and away we went to the Norway Point Wharf. The gangplank was just up when great blobs of rain started to fall and a true summer storm broke loose. They had gone about 12 miles when the mast of the boat was struck by lightning and Mrs. Higgins was almost ready to throw in her gloves. By this time, it was nearly 9:30 p.m. Transferring baggage from the train to the boat, unloading at North Portage and transferring to the wagon, unloading and reloading again at South Portage took an hour each time — there seemed to be so much baggage.

At last the storm blew over and the lake was beautiful and calm and in the late twilight we could make out the majesty of the rock, pine trees and shoreline, and Mother and Mrs. Higgins began to relent. The boat was silent; all the children were exhausted but when the purser said, "Next stop, Norway Point," you would have thought the Iroquois Indians had returned. The children just hurtled down the gangplank whooping and screaming. As Alick was still not too well, he was slower in moving and just as he was in the middle of the gangplank, a mattress was tossed off and hurled him into the water. Grannie Robertson was there, saw what had happened and threw out her shawl for Alick to catch onto, and she took him ashore. Even before Mother learned it was Grannie Robertson who had rescued Alick, they became fast friends. It was the wonderful Scottish accent that Mother had that endeared her to Grannie Robertson — who had been over 30 years in this north country.

Alick was the only lucky one that night. He was in a good warm bed and had a glass of real cow's milk.

The well-equipped cottage, Blink Bonnie, was far from the standards of today — straw mattresses, heavy crockery, candles (two), and by 10:30 p.m., it was dark. As Mother entered the kitchen, there were two bright eyes inquisitively watching all that was going on . . . just a raccoon.

Mother told the men that brought over the luggage to leave it on the cart, as she was going home in the morning. All were so exhausted that no one minded the beds, mosquitoes and our first initiation to blackflies. Very early in the morning, Mother was awakened with a start by May in a loud voice saying, "It's all right, Mrs. Campbell, I am coming as fast as I can, but I don't know where the steps are." Followed by "All right, I am a coming." It was then Mother heard the knocking and assured May she hadn't called her. They went to investigate. No one at the door, yet this tap, tap, tapping continued. And before long, there in an old dead tree outside Mother's bedroom window was a woodpecker busily searching for her breakfast.

Soon the household was awake — a glorious June morning and Mother could hardly get the children to come to breakfast. She had told the man to be there at 9 a.m., as she was going home. With all the goings on, time had slipped away and Mother's thoughts of leaving were dashed to the ground as the steamboat whistle signalled its arrival at the dock. So Mother and Mrs. Higgins were left for another day.

By noon, some unpacking had been done and Mother saw what a wonderful time we were having on the beach — lovely white, clean sand and shallow water. She was really ecstatic over the blue sky and the warmth. Needless to say, by afternoon tea time, Mrs. Higgins decided they would give it a try and do you know, for 60 years, for it is now 1964, we have been going to Lake of Bays and love it more dearly each year. In 1965, our cottage Rocklea will be 60 years old and I hope we are here to celebrate.

The only reason we moved from Norway Point, farther west nearer the Terryberry Wharf, was because of the beautiful pine trees which shaded the cottage so well. Mother was never able to get the washing dry — especially the diapers — so, on a Sunday afternoon on a stroll along the shoreline with Father, Mother discovered the view from the top of the hill and she cried, as it reminded her so much of the hills around Dunoon, her birthplace, and when the cottage was built it was called Rocklea, after her own home in Scotland.

The love we have for Rocklea will, I hope, never fade. It always seems to be an anchor, something just extra special to look forward to. When things are dark for me, I just close my eyes and in minutes I feel calm and peaceful. This is the magic of the north. We are sentimental about Rocklea, but every cottager feels the same. This is God's country and there is no more wonderful place to go for regaining health and strength.