

My Muskoka

Article by Bobby Genovese

It's about making memories and eating butter tarts

My mother was the first to introduce me to the beauty of Muskoka.

It was love at first sight when she made that journey in 1946 with her mother and two siblings. They had been invited to a friend's three-bedroom cottage on Healey Lake, near Muskoka, for a much-needed reprieve from their cramped house on St. John's Road. Albeit rustic and lacking electricity and other creature comforts, the lake living experience cast an indelible impression on the entire family. The freedom and exhilaration of swimming in the lake with the intoxicating aroma of pine that fills the air is the stuff of lifelong dreams.

I think of her every time I make the Muskoka summer pilgrimage with my own family, how she must have felt, the excitement and liberation from city life.

My first visit to the region was in the late 1960s with my mother, stepfather and stepbrother. We were headed to Lake Muskoka where my stepfather had a cottage. My two brothers had been there years earlier and I had heard all the stories. But, when my time came, I could barely contain myself. I remember the morning we packed up and piled into the family's 1967 red Mustang for that painfully long drive north from Toronto on Highway 11.

It was the May holiday weekend when everyone opened their cottages for the summer season. I was five or six so it felt like the expedition of a lifetime and the anticipation was nothing short of excruciating.

But, the atmosphere inside the car changed the instant one of the region's iconic landmarks came into view: Weber's Restaurant, home of those famous hamburgers. The lake experience had officially begun. With our cheeseburgers, fries and milkshakes on board, the feeling of being trapped in the car melted away as my next landmark appeared: the enormous sign for the town of Gravenhurst flanked by those two massive black bear statues, which meant we were almost there.

Our arrival at the cottage signalled pure freedom. Moreover, it meant for the next week I could run as far and as hard as I wanted. I was thrilled to



Photograph: Sandy Lockhart

Bobby Genovese relaxes in front of his Lake Rosseau cottage.

discover something else: the prized tree house located near the entrance to the cottage property nestled in the largest pine tree to the right. It had been built years earlier by my stepfather for his own two sons though I suspect the boy in him relished it as much as they did.

We tended to it faithfully each summer. It was our first order of business from the moment we arrived on property. From there, depending on the time of day, my stepbrother and I would make that first cannonball plunge into the lake – our home for the weekend.

It was the 60s so there wasn't the boat traffic like there is today, which meant we had free reign to explore the lake in our old wooden Greavette without our parents worrying. Learning how to water-ski behind it was another matter! With wakes the size of mountains, it was no easy task. After a few hours of being thrown from one mountain of water to another, I got the hang of it.

One of my favourite memories is the morning boat ride that we would take to the Bala Bakery for fresh butter tarts and bread – that required a lot of begging.

Of course, I get to relive those memories now with my own kids who act pretty much the same as we did! The pleading usually starts right after breakfast and progresses into flat out begging until I relent and take them

for their treats.

That's the amazing feature of the Muskoka childhood. If you're lucky, you get to do it twice: first, as a kid, and then as a parent with kids. It's a joy and a pleasure that I would not trade for the world!

And it makes me even more grateful to know that my mother gave both my brothers and I that gift, knowing that it would live on for the generations that followed. It's the building of those memories and traditions that Muskoka is famous for.

I also remember how, even as a kid, I would marvel over the old wooden boats that I would see – all the pride and care that went into them as prized pieces of Muskoka's history. In many ways, it's why I began purchasing and restoring some of Muskoka's famous race boats.

In fact, 2014 marked the launch of the BG Vintage Race Boat and Antique Boat Museum – and Canada's first – expected to be completed some time next year.

In addition to featuring the iconic *Rambler*, the 73-foot, 1903 Polson Iron Works Yacht; *Pistoff*, the 970 h.p. Vic Carpenter custom runabout; *Miss Miami*; *Miss Canada III*; and *Miss Canada IV (MCIV)*, which we unveiled last July following an arduous 23-month restoration effort. She is on display at the Muskoka Boat & Heritage Centre this summer, across the bay from the Greavette Boat Works where

she was launched in 1949, 65 years ago.

Miss Canada IV's debut last year marked the launch of the BG Vintage Racing Team's entry into the North American Vintage Race boat circuit.

Her next appearance will be at the Muskoka Lakes Association show in Port Carling on Aug. 9. For that event, I'll be there with Canadian Boating Federation Hall of Famer Norm Woods. Also on hand will be restoration manager Jamie Smith and Harry Wilson, the son of *Miss Canada IV's* original race team of Harold and Lorna Wilson.

One's childhood always ends too soon. I was devastated when my parents decided to sell the Lake Muskoka cottage in the mid 1970s. I was 11 and life was marching on, calling everyone in different directions.

I, like my brothers, vowed to one day return and build a cottage of my own – which, we were fortunate to do. Today, the May long weekend signals us to gather our children and grandchildren and take residence in our respective cottages which we built side by side to encompass just over a mile of shoreline.

Our annual trek always brings us back to those early childhood days, which we are eager to revisit. In fact, nowadays, we count on our children's begging and pleading to take them to Port Sandfield Marina's Silver Stream Farms general store for butter tarts and their world famous fresh blueberry donuts.

Little do they realize, that we can't wait to get there ourselves!

With more than 25 years of experience in mergers and acquisition, Bobby Genovese operates BG Capital Group and BG Capital Management Corporation. Both are based in Barbados with associate management offices in the Bahamas, Fort Lauderdale and Boca Raton, Florida, Los Angeles, Toronto and Vancouver. In 2012 Genovese developed and launched BG Signature Properties, a portfolio of 12 exclusive luxury retreats in the US, Canada, Europe, South America and Bahamas, including its flagship property, BG Equestrian Resort in Ocala, Florida.