

Seventy summers at Camp Hurontario



The small group philosophy builds lasting friendships, self-confidence and strong personal skills.

By Steven Duff

Remember when camp was camp, when you were unplugged from the rest of the world, when you could just wallow in nature's realm? Such a place is Camp Hurontario, now celebrating its seventieth season and which is run according to ancient tradition. There is nothing mechanical here, no water-skiing or wakeboarding. No, instead

there are canoes, kayaks, and sailboats galore, and, would you believe it, a handsome fleet of rowboats! Many senior readers had their first boating experiences in rowboats, playing pirates, fighting naval battles, or just puddling about along the shoreline. You hardly ever see anyone rowing these days, but it is still happening at

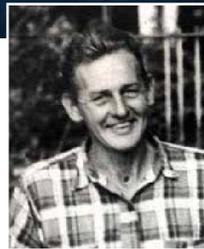
Hurontario.

Hurontario was the creation of teacher Birnie Hodgetts, who had been director at another camp and, after the war, saw a particular need for a camp for youth with maximum outdoor activities. Accordingly, he purchased a large tract of property, including several islands, in 1946, near the entrance to Twelve Mile Bay. And, rather than having builders come in to erect the first buildings, he hired a gaggle of teen-age boys and had them do the whole project right from scratch. And we mean from scratch.

The boys felled trees to clear what land was necessary, as well as some others, which were then floated to a sawmill operated by a man with the singular name of Johnny Clorok – we hope we have the spelling right, as nobody could remember for certain. The logs were ripped into planks and beams and floated back to the site of the new camp, where they were assembled into the first buildings, all designed by Birnie Hodgetts. Nothing in construction was store-bought except tools and nails. One must salute Birnie for spending his summer vacation thus rather than, as teachers must, spend July in recovery and then finally having some fun in August. But then, Birnie had his own idea of fun.

The Midland City was succeeded by McIsaac's big taxi boat, Lucky Strike, from Parry Sound until Highway 103 (now 400) and the present-day Twelve Mile Bay Rd. were established in the late fifties.

What about essentials like lighting, cooking, and refrigeration? For some of us, this is a Memory Lane thing. Lighting was with kerosene lamps, cooking likewise was with kerosene, and refrigeration was by way of tin-lined iceboxes. The ice was harvested right from the Bay and stored in sawdust before use.



In 1946, Birnie Hodgetts, built Camp Hurontario from 'scratch' as a place for youth to explore the outdoors

So, properly fitted out, the camp was ready for operation in the summer of 1947. Getting there was quite a challenge: a highway was still twenty years in the future and the closest railway stop was miles away, so until the suspension of its operations, the way to and from the camp was by the venerable steamer Midland City, which connected with the train at Penetang and would divert to the camp with passengers and supplies as necessary on her way to Parry Sound.

The camp's genial hosts are Don Marston and his wife Pauline (Polly) Hodgetts, Birnie's daughter, and they are carrying onward Birnie's original vision: camp craft, sailing, canoeing, rowing, and, since it became popular, kayaking. And that is not all. There are biological and environmental activities, including projects in conj-

unction with the Toronto Zoo and Guelph University that involve tagging Massasauga rattle snakes (due precautions observed!) and Monarch butterflies, which have been tracked to Mexico. At present, a study is underway in partnership with Queen's University concerning the endangered hognose snake.

The arts are also a vital element in Hurontario's curriculum, and the buildings are festooned with work by such distinguished alumni as David Blackwood, Ed Bartram, David Hodgetts (Polly's brother), John Hartman (who also worked as a counselor and came to camp by canoe from Midland), and Barry Rennie, who, in the summer of 1962, brought the celebrated A.Y. Jackson to the camp. And let us not forget the many campers who, although not making art their profession, have still adopted it as an essential part of their lives. Woodworking is also a form of art, and there are a more than a few alumni who still have canoe paddles they made while at camp.

Music is an additional part of the scene, not only with campfire singing, but campers who bring instruments with them. Margaret Atwood is one of many notables who have spent time at Hurontario and wrote an opera for performance by campers and staff. Now, wouldn't that have been something!

The camp has also been celebrated in the printed word. The author David MacFarlane was there and set his novel Summer Gone at Hurontario.

While we're on the subject of Hurontario notables, John Sewell, former mayor of Toronto, was a camper and counselor there, as was Tom Clark, Global TV's political correspondent, and former MP for

London, Tom Hawkin.

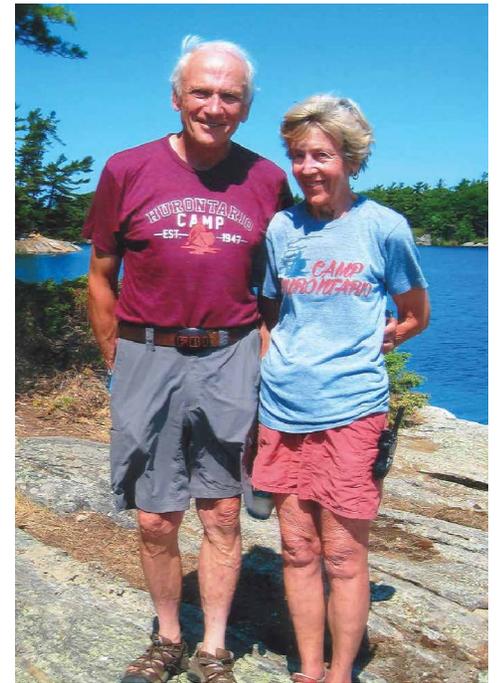
In terms of clientele, the camp is for boys between the ages of five and sixteen, numbering 195 and representing no fewer than fifteen countries. Their camp existence reminds one of the wonderful boys' books of the past, such as the Hardy Boys, Arthur Ransome, and the like. The staff, totaling 110, is co-ed and all male counselors were previously campers, some of whom have established cottages in the area and are frequent visitors.

The camp is formidably well-organized with no detail overlooked. By way of example, hand disinfectant dispensers are all over the place and there is also a doctor and a nurse on duty. In fact, before the nursing station was established on the nearby Moose Deer First Nation, Moose Deer residents would come to Camp Hurontario for treatment.

The camp has a mascot, an enormous snapping turtle named The General. He appears year after year and is regarded with the same veneration the Natives accord to turtles.

There is no glitz whatever here. here are no land sports, tennis, basketball, anything that would have an impact on the land. No, everything is as nature, just like the early days of cottaging. The only concessions to modernity are hydro, kitchen equipment, and telephone service.

We referred earlier to the camp's rowboat fleet. On one occasion, Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul were there for a visit and Mr. Saul was so taken with the rowboats that he asked where he could get one for himself. And these are real beauties, made of fiberglass, but with



Don Marston and Pauline (Polly) Hodgetts, Birnie's daughter, are carrying on the original vision and tradition of Camp Hurontario, to provide a unique non-competitive environment

traditional line and faux lapstrake hulls. There is no sound quite like a lapstrake rowboat quietly gurgling her way through the water.

Hurontario offers some really hard-core adventure. Routinely there are canoe and kayak trips on

the Bay, as well as from a satellite facility up at Chappleu. On top of that, the more experienced campers take trips on northern waterways and even into the Arctic, paddling such remote rivers as the Hood, the Kesagami, the Missinaibi, and the Moisie, having experiences that X-Box and Pokemom-Go could not even begin to approach.

With the diversity and nature of its program, Camp Hurontario has firmly taken its place in Georgian Bay history and legend, introducing young people to the values we ourselves held as inhabitants of Georgian Bay but with far greater care. A half-century ago, we had no idea of stewardship; now, thanks in good part to the teachings of Camp Hurontario over the years, a balance has been achieved between tradition and awareness.



Exploring nature is a fundamental component of the Camp experience

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