



The Wind from Dorset

By Jonathan Prasse, Nicholasville, Kentucky

During recess in fifth grade, if I lay with my ear on the metal base of the merry-go-round, and a friend pushed it slowly, it made a slapping, tinny sound, like water lapping between the cribs under the dock in Canada. Hearing this sound, I imagined I was there. In my mind, I lay in the hot Canada sun, lips blue from a long swim, teeth chattering so badly I couldn't speak.

My memories of Lake of Bays, Ontario, are as strong for me now as they were when I was ten, waiting for fifth grade to end and summer to start. They are clear memories because, while much on Lake of Bays has changed, much has stayed the same. Each year when I return, the new memories mix with old ones like saplings among tall trees.

In a way, I called on Lake of Bays before I was even born. In April, 1958, Mr Clayton, who ran Clayton's General Store and Post Office in Dorset, Ontario, received a long distance phone call. Mrs Prasse was in labor back in Indiana, and Reverend Prasse was going to have to quit his vacation and get back home. Mr. Clayton walked a mile through an April snow to let my father know I was on the way. I got there in person, for the first time, a few months later, long after the snow had melted. Driving the road Mr. Clayton hiked is still the best introduction to Lake of Bays. The hills are steep and close together, and "the road," as we call it, seems as if it fell haphazardly from the sky like a ribbon, draping itself over the tops of each rise and settling on the valleys below.

For Mr. Clayton, there was no thought of driving up the road to Trading Bay. He had to walk—the snow was knee-deep in places. More than likely he left his car on the highway at the road's narrow entrance.

It couldn't have been an easy hike. There were times, even in summer, when the road got the best of folks. My father gave up on it one year and left his car, when it would go no further, on a steep hill, pointed skyward, trailer still attached to the back end of the car. Our family took a boat to the cottage that year and left the car where it stopped.

It's quiet on Trading Bay, down at the end of the road. It's quiet as birch bark, as lily pads. The acorn that drops on the roof of the cottage at night wakes you up because the silence of the place is so deep. It plunks, and you wake up happy that such a thing as an acorn would wake you. Your ears feel funny for the first day or two on the Lake of Bays. You think you hear wind all the time in the trees. Soon you realize that's exactly what you hear—because it's possible to hear it.

The wind makes the leaves on the white and yellow birches tremble as they hang downward, as birch leaves do. The wind moves across the blue steel surface of the lake from Dorset, or from Paint Lake Creek, making patterns and waves on the water, as lines on a familiar face. A neighbor shouts, "Wind's from the creek! It's going to rain!" Trading Bay moves beneath the wind and commands respect, changing its huge mass quickly, mercurial-

ly, as far as one can see.

Lake of Bays is just that. It is a huge body of water made of many bays stretching scores of miles in Ontario's central highlands. It's deep; it's cold; it's clear. In the middle of a pitch-black night to run off the end of the dock with mosquitoes biting right up until you hit the water is something to remember. A swim at night is complete only after you've stuck your head underwater and looked around into the blackness. It always has the same effect of scaring and thrilling me.

You can't really see—just your arms and knees as they flash while you tread water. Then you might come up again for air, and dive down to swim into the black water, and what you can't see always makes you wonderfully short of breath and you're forced to come up laughing and gasping for breath, knowing that the darkness has tricked you into being frightened at the very water that in daylight is just clear and inviting and only slightly mysterious.

I broke my leg in Dorset. I split my head open. Twice. My brother and sisters and I sang and fought and cried and climbed the fire tower and drove the boat at night in the rain across the lake straining to see the dock just to land. "You're wet," my father says. "You guys have to learn to



drive between the drops like I do.”

We drove the cedarstrip boat with the Johnson 40. The Johnson 40, skiing, clams, owls, loons—haunting loons—porcupine quills, splinters, frogs, Mistovan, the outhouse, the porch, development, and acid rain all rise in one emotion when the cottage comes into view along the road, just as it did for Mr. Clayton in 1958. In our family we just call it “Canada.” We don’t mean the whole country, just the piece of it we know.

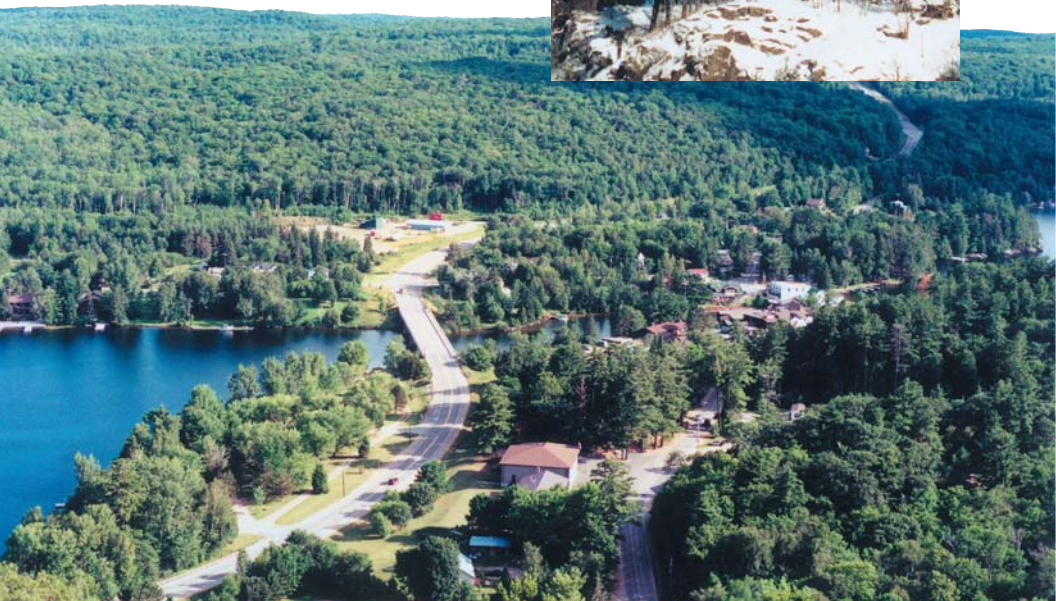
When it’s time to say goodbye to Canada and Dorset and Lake of Bays, the screen door slamming no longer sounds like lunch in the making or swimsuits being hung over the porch rail to dry. It sounds like suitcases. It sounds empty, like airports and clogged highways and 40-hour workweeks. I always take one last swim before I leave no matter what the weather; and then I stand on the dock for a minute and try to burn into my mind the picture of Dorset, far across the lake and barely visible, hoping it will last me until I come again.

Last summer when we said goodbye to Lake of Bays and Dorset, my mother stood outside the cottage next to the car. I found myself looking at her and clumsily asking, “Why does it still get me so to leave here? I’m thirty years old, and it

shouldn’t bother me like I was still a kid.” “You’re saying goodbye,” she said, “and you have memories here—you have memories here.”

My daughter was two last summer when she went to Lake of Bays for the first time. We saw a canoe on top of a car here in Lexington the other day, and I told her we could go for a canoe ride again this summer in Canada. She already knows the quiet slurp of the paddle pulling water. She sat very still in the canoe last summer, facing forward, looking over the water and feeling the wind from Dorset.

Our kitchen phone rang on a cold Kentucky night just before Christmas. Gloria Woodside from Lake of Bays Association was calling. She said she had just finished reading an article I had written nearly 15 years earlier. The article was



called “The Wind from Dorset.” She asked me if I’d be willing to revise it for this year’s Yearbook—to bring the article up-to-date. I told her I’d be happy to work on it and send it to her after New Year’s.

After I hung up the phone, I worried a little about trying to revise it. Sure enough, as I sat before the glowing monitor, the words wouldn’t budge. I tried several revisions, but found they weren’t working as well as the original. I wondered why. Then it hit me as I stared at the monitor, a square of light—still as a picture—that the original article was like a snapshot. It, too, was a moment in time just as surely as an old Polaroid, unwilling to be changed in a point and click world.

Maybe this is one of the lessons of Lake of Bays—that everything we cherish so deeply on the lake—our time with our families, our neighbors and long-time friends, our sense of history, the water, the enveloping hills—that perhaps all these things are also like snapshots, poignant to look at and sometimes missed at the moment. Maybe my revisions were like trying to change a Polaroid picture. Though I had written and edited for many years, when I first sat down to write the “Wind from Dorset” 15 years ago I had a bad time of it. A miserable time. I tinkered with it off and on for several weeks. Finally I went to talk to a friend of mine, a professor of writing instruction. I said, “George, I can’t get this piece to work. It’s all over the road. I need some help.” My friend asked to see what I had written. He read it, looked up, and said, “Jonathan, you’re not there yet. What do you really want to say?” I went back home, followed his advice, and tried to write what I really wanted to say. Back home, the piece picked up a nonfiction writing award at the University of Kentucky. And from the response I got from the north, it turns out my friend’s advice had helped me, at least partially, to capture what others had felt and experienced on the lake.

As for the update? Our two-year old daughter in the article is now a strapping 17-year old. She is headed to college to study art education, and play soccer. She still lives to come up to Lake of Bays. At the cottage, she sometimes takes off her water skis long enough to eat-or sleep. My sister Monica (one of the siblings I fought with) and her family come to the lake each summer. Together she and I navigate our way through the cottage basics from docks to roofs.



Edgar & Barbara Prasse

And my mother and father? Since they first started coming up to Dorset in the late 1940s (renting on Paint Lake), they have continued to return to Lake of Bays. My father, now 87, can still swim across the right-side thumbnail of our bay with an ease that would wind people half his age. My mother and father are ardently independent. They will want to be on the Lake of Bays on their own terms with that independence intact. The two of them have an agreement. They will not say when their last summer on the lake will be. How could any of us say goodbye to a place that has given us so much joy?

And yet one summer will be their last, and they will make that decision, too, in their own independent way, with their heads up, looking at it straight on. Their



strength in making that decision will be just as strong as it was when they first committed to buying on the lake in 1954. For my part, in my mind's eye, I see my parents or family members at every turn around the cottage. I will always see my father in his work clothes at the back of the cottage, hear him scraping paint. I'll see my mom, her hands folded in her lap, looking silently out across the lake in her rocking chair on the porch.

Through some tumultuous years in the States, the Prasses would return to Lake of Bays year after year to regroup, recharge our batteries, get brown in the sun, get stronger from swimming, paddling, chopping wood, scraping paint, skiing, hauling rock, or replacing a stringer. We worked hard and tried to play hard. In different ways, we left in better shape than when we arrived. Our notch on the shore was the family touchstone. It was a place that hung in there, simple as it was—hung in there like we did. The red cottage on the clear water held some restorative powers we didn't get anywhere else. Each of you has your own special memories, experiences, and unique family histories on the

lake. From talking with you, some of yours have been similar to ours, but with wonderfully different twists. Those of you who know Lake of Bays know what I was first trying to write about—even if I couldn't figure it out.

Being on Lake of Bays is about being with those we love; it's about the beckoning water, about cantankerous old boats, and about teaching our children to water ski or hold down their first summer jobs. It's about an environment we love and cherish. It's about that inevitable understanding of how fleeting our time is on the lake, and about how feeble any attempt really is to capture what it means to have a place get in your heart. For all these things to come together year after year in one place is miraculous. There's no other place like it.

So for everyone who enjoyed the article the first time, I've hardly tinkered with it. I'm glad Ms. Woodside wants to take the Polaroid out and look at it again. The picture is getting older, but it may still tell a story that has a ring of familiarity from your own days on the Lake of Bays.