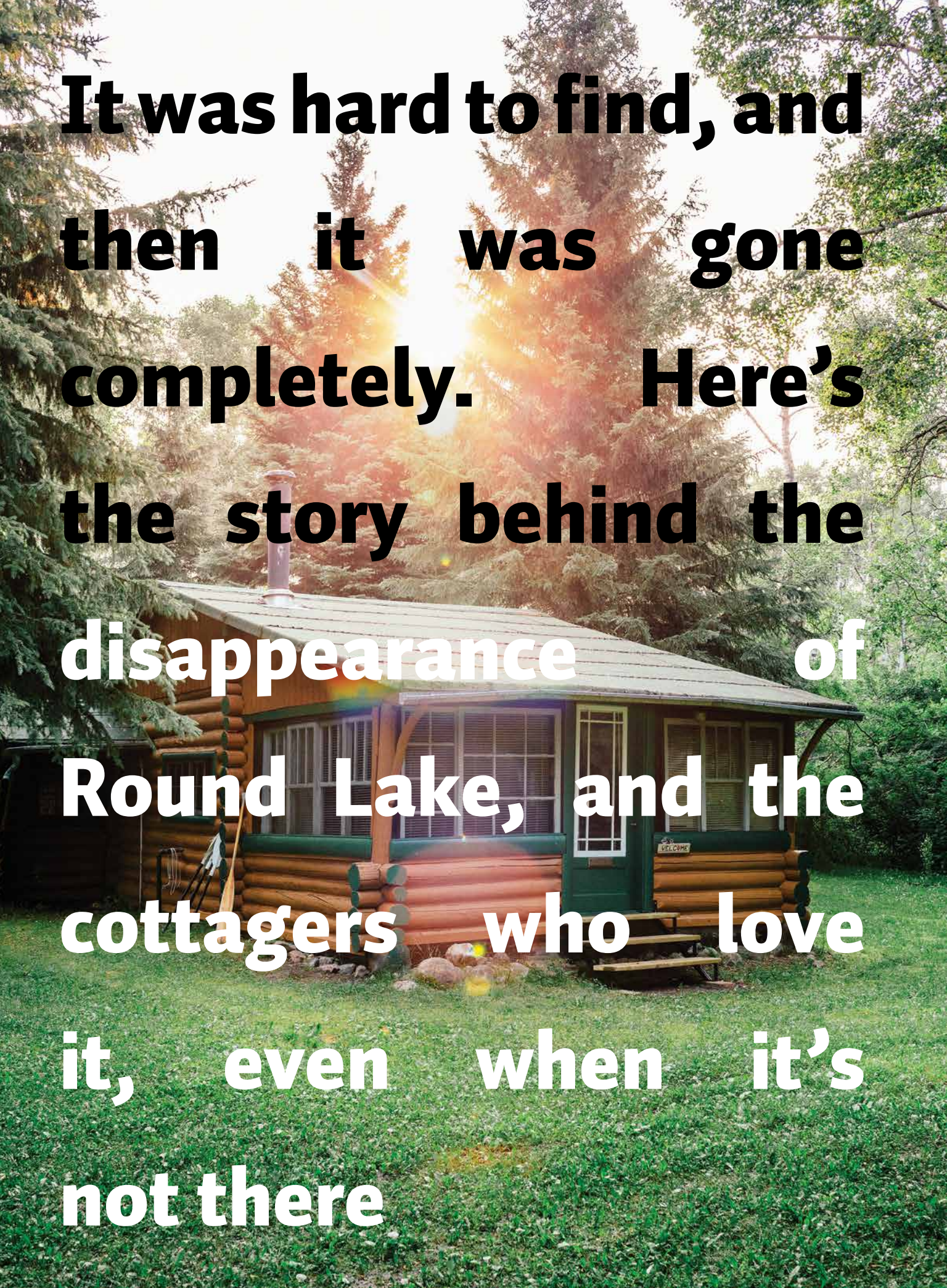


**It was hard to find, and
then it was gone
completely. Here's
the story behind the
disappearance of
Round Lake, and the
cottagers who love
it, even when it's
not there**

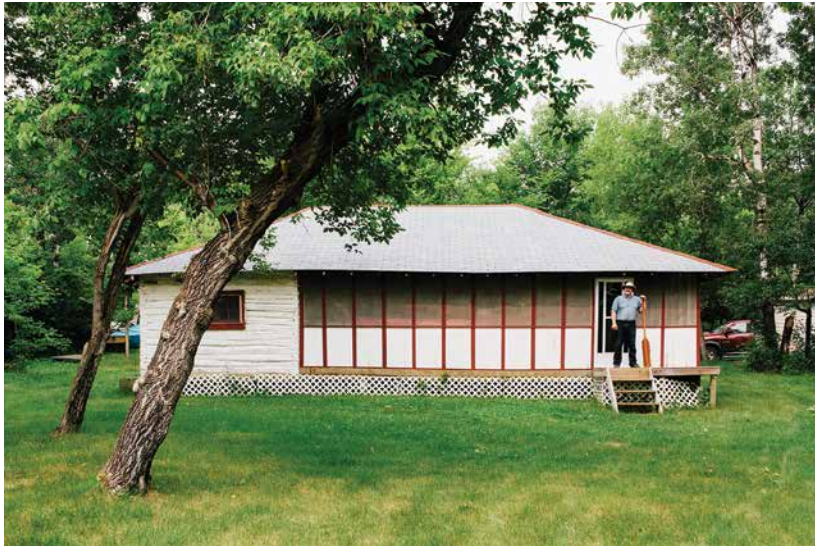


A taxidermied deer head with large, multi-tined antlers is mounted on a wooden wall. The head is shown in profile, facing left. The antlers are dark and have several points. The wall is made of vertical wooden planks. In the background, there are some framed pictures and a small owl figurine.

THE LAKE THAT WOULDN'T BE

By Jim Sutherland Photography Grant Harder





When we lived in Saskatoon

Barb McCracken reads in the 1918 cottage that she shares with her two sisters and their families (and the unfortunate ungulate on p. 71). The nearby log cabin (p. 70) was owned by someone outside the family for over two decades, until her father bought it back, in 1972. Above, Grant Gustafson stands by his cabin.

in the 1980s, my wife, Jessie, and I kept hearing tales of a lake lost in time, where picture-perfect cabins and charm-drenched cottages slumbered among the pines, their clocks stuck at 1926. A few people claimed to have seen this place, but no one could give us directions or even reasonable coordinates. They had a name—Round Lake—but maps showed only one body of water of that description, and it was in the south, not up north in the forest belt, where these people said they had been. We found ourselves wondering if these witnesses were completely reliable. Gosh, were mushrooms involved? A blindfolded ride in the back of a panel van?

Then one day: revelation. A new acquaintance not only knew of the lake but owned a cottage there and could give us directions. She was a writer and her husband a geography professor, and as a writer myself, I knew that if there is

anyone you can trust, it's a geographer. The lake, this couple assured us, really did exist, even if, only a few years before, it didn't—but more on that later. So into our commodious Renault we packed two tots and a rummage sale of camping gear, and we set out for the north woods.

The woods proved to be large and Round Lake small, but by following a rough trail that turned off a gravel road that wound mostly north from the barely extant village of Crutwell, we did eventually home in on it. And, what do you know, the lakeside that we finally found and walked along proved to be every bit the intriguing curiosity we'd heard about and, in fact, for us, a lot more.

Now, it's almost three decades later, and here I am back at Round Lake, inside one of those charm-drenched cottages, chatting with sisters Lorie Kellsey and Barb McCracken, who might have been sitting at this very table back on the fateful day of my first visit. I say "fateful" because Jessie and I decided that we had to have a cabin at Round Lake, especially after learning that several of the 45 or so cottages there were for sale and priced to move in the mid four figures, a range not generally associated with real estate even then. But hardly had we purchased one when we relocated to Vancouver, our time at Round Lake amounting to barely two summers.

Kellsey, McCracken, and a third sister have been spending their summers since the mid-1960s at Round Lake with their parents, the Dafoes, at the family cottage. Kellsey and her husband, Brian, maintain the place and make the six-hour drive here from Edmonton for three or four week-long stretches every summer. Often they bring along other family members, including a grandson who represents the sixth generation summering here. Back in the 1960s, the Dafoe girls were little themselves, but they were big enough to notice that the lake was almost completely deserted. "In a week there might be one other car," says Kellsey. "We'd run out to the road to see it."

There are two cottages on the property, and we are sitting in the larger one, which the sisters' great-grandfather built in



1918. The other, a few metres away, he added in 1938 as overflow accommodation, constructing it from local spruce logs using axe and bucksaw. Kellsey, who's a graphic artist and attuned to such things, describes the decor as "Round Lakish." There is an impressive variety of carefully preserved fish and mammals on the varnished wood walls, and paintings and photographs of animals too, along with lots of other stuff that has accumulated over the decades and that Kellsey describes as being just *there*. To those who aren't familiar with the Lakish school, I'd suggest that the look is common to shorelines all over the continent, and that in its purest form it might have had an influence on the set design for *Twin Peaks*.

Let's imagine, though, that the theme from another old show—*The Twilight Zone*—is playing while Kellsey and McCracken describe sparkling Round Lake as it was back in the 1960s and 1970s. "If we wanted to go swimming, we'd walk a mile or so to the river," says McCracken, who also lives in Edmonton, where she's a contractor in the oil patch. "Yeah, there wasn't a lot of water in the lake," explains Kellsey. Which sheds some light on how Round Lake lost its lustre. Water: so important in a lake.

The lake's disappearing act began in the 1930s, and by the '60s it had shrunk to a fraction of its original size. Kellsey



remembers walking down to the water through what seemed like miles of grassy beach, spotted with mucky patches. Trees had started to invade too, which would provoke mixed emotions after the water returned. On one hand, those newly flooded trees would all die and have to be laboriously pulled out. On the other, she says with a laugh, "They were great for hanging your towels."

Many Round Lakers more or less abandoned their places during those years. Not the Dafoes. The forest and the peace and quiet were lures, and the kids found things to play at. And the lake was still there, even if distant and diminished. The lake is stocked with pike and perch, and their family had a canoe and a row-boat. "We fished a lot," she says.

Then, late in the 1970s, and for no discernible reason, the water started to return, reaching its former levels within a decade. Since then, the water has stayed fairly stable, dipping a bit during a dry

Grant Gustafson, the president of Round Lake's Prince Albert Outing Club, takes pride in the history of the organization. The founders (merchants, clerks, and advocates, plus a druggist, a butcher, a sheriff, and others) lived in nearby Prince Albert and established the club to provide a serene, unspoiled retreat. Above, a unique spot for an afternoon nap at Gustafson's cabin.





**The lakeside proved to
be the intriguing**

**curiosity we'd heard
about, and a lot more**







period around the turn of the century, and subsequently coming back just a little too strong as the rains did likewise.

There isn't a completely tidy explanation for any of this. The water's initial drop in the 1930s is often attributed to prolonged drought during the dust bowl era. Roughly two kilometres across by three long, Round Lake isn't tiny, but it is shallow—only five or six metres deep in the middle—so fluctuating inflows and water tables are reflected quickly. Then again, the 1970s and '80s weren't particularly wet, yet the water here rose rapidly, so who can say with any certainty?

No one, says John Pomeroy, a University of Saskatchewan hydrology professor, but he can offer some clues. Round Lake is a closed basin lake in an area of sandy soil, so its levels mostly depend on the local water table, which in turn is most affected by annual precipitation. A lot of prairie lakes suffer from widely fluctuating levels, but most of the ones with cottagers have deeper bottoms, and for them losing water by the gigalitre isn't quite so catastrophic.

But Pomeroy offers another tidbit that could explain Round Lake's miraculous return. In a perverse way, the widespread clear-cutting in the '70s and '80s, followed by a big forest fire, might have been a good thing, since coniferous trees trap a lot of winter's snow on their branches, and much of that sublimates into the air instead of landing on the ground. When



you reduce the forests, runoff increases and the water table rises. "In clear-cuts, we've measured a sevenfold increase in spring runoff," he says.

So maybe Round Lake isn't unique in its waxing and waning, but in other ways, well, let's get back to Kellsey's cabin. One of the things *there*, on the wall, is a sign that says simply "G.C. MacDonald," a remnant from her great-grandfather's stewardship of the family's stake in Round Lake, a stewardship that lasted 51 years, finally ending with his death in 1957. Round Lake being Round Lake, a stake is not the simple plot of land it would be in most places. Rather, George MacDonald, general merchant turned provincial fisheries inspector, was a charter member of the Prince Albert Outing Club, founded in 1906, which owns most of the lake's north shore, and the club is owned by the cottagers, who are the club's de facto members. Basically, it's a condominium from the days before condominiums existed.

Today Prince Albert, the city, is the gateway to Saskatchewan's northern playground, a short drive from busy lakes like Emma and Christopher. Via a cross-country trail, {Continued on page 108}

Cottager Lorie Kellsey tells of the "wonderful, comfortable feeling that comes from entering the cabin and seeing these old familiar things that no one can bear to change, through almost 100 years and many generations." On p. 77, Brian Kellsey and Barb McCracken prepare to play a favourite game. Inside the 1938 log cabin (above, left).

THE LAKE THAT WOULDN'T BE

{Continued from page 79}

Round Lake is only half as far away as those spots, but even 25 km was a long way by horse and buggy. The club was formed to provide the young metropolis with a summer resort. By 1913, several dozen cottages had been built, plus an impressive two-storey clubhouse, which also had a store and rooms for rent. In 1919, a dance pavilion went up.

As a club, the members had considerable control over how their little resort developed, which they did not fail to exercise. Their inclination was to have a spot that was quiet and unspoiled. Powerboats, for example, are not allowed, and even electricity was resisted until the 1980s. Lorie Kellsey's parents were among those who didn't see the need. The majority of cottage owners, including the Kellseys, still rely on outhouses, and bring in bottled water for drinking. Overall, rusticity rules.

Now, a skeptic might suggest that the best way to prevent wild nights and wanton development at a recreational lake is

to have it dry up for three or four decades, during which time dozens of other lakes with actual water are opened up by new highways. But that skeptic should first come for a walk with Lorie Kellsey along the lakeside path that, by stern regulation, all cottagers must keep cleared at the front of their properties.

The first stop is the clubhouse across the road, a more modest structure that replaced the original about a decade ago. There's no second storey with rooms to rent and, perhaps more sadly, no tattered moose head for Kellsey and her sisters to ritually pat, upon first arriving every summer, and watch the stuffing pour out of its nose. What the new clubhouse and the club it serves do have, though, is an active membership intent on returning Round Lake to its glory days. They organize an annual regatta, outdoor movie nights, a ladies' tea, and a pig roast, all of which might have taken place back in the days when gentlemen wore boaters. Clubhouse yoga classes, not so much—although Round Lake has long appealed to those who could be characterized as creative, if not mildly bohemian. Mina

Forsyth, one of the province's best known painters, summered at the lake in the '70s and '80s. And I will not forget the quiet word from my writer acquaintance, who suggested that Jessie and I consider whistling before popping by their place because when the weather was pleasant, she and the professor liked to enjoy their days in the altogether. Kellsey hints that the inclination is not unknown today.

Walking west from the clubhouse, we pause to pick a few saskatoons, and pass on the hazelnuts, which won't be ready till later in the summer. A fallen tree must be ducked under in one place, and the very high shoreline skirted here and there. The cottages pass by as if in a newsreel. A few are fairly new, and many display evidence of recent work, but an equal number appear untouched since the days of dance pavilions and gramophones. A log cabin here, a low-slung-roof bungalow there, a tidy little stuccoed thing, not much larger than a garden shed, hidden among the trees. We stop to chat with David Larwood, who is building an expansive new deck in front of a representative specimen. "When we saw the

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price for this place, we thought they'd either left a one off the front or a zero off the back," he says. But no, the ad was correct: cottages here still sell at a steep discount compared to the rest of the province. Buying into a club rather than picking up a piece of land bothers a lot of people and, with the ban on motorboats, the lake is a little too quiet for others. And, of course, there's that lingering worry about the water and whether it will still be there the following spring.

Coming back from the community's westernmost edge, more than a kilometre from the clubhouse, we stop in on Grant Gustafson, who's the club president. If Round Lake serves as Saskatchewan's unofficial Museum of Summer—and consider it so designated—he's the head curator. Inside the cottage that he shares with his wife, there's almost nothing that wouldn't have been there before the lake dried up, and the impressive assembly has been arranged with more than a little attention. Any middle-aged guy who lives in Prince Albert might salvage a bedstead from the 1920s, but how many will ensure that the linen and the

curtains are period appropriate? An attached shed is piled with lots more vintage stuff, but Gustafson says that he manages—barely—to keep his acquisitions in check. "I've cleared out hoarders' places," he says with a tone familiar from war documentaries. "I don't want someone to have to do it for me."

Of course, a Museum of Summer would also need stories, and Round Lakers seem unusually inclined to record theirs. The walls of our old place were covered with jottings telling us that, for example, Oct. 3, 1943, was "a grand day," and that whoever opened up the cottage in 1962 was greeted by "36 bats!!!" Lorie Kellsey's mom kept a similar diary, on paper, while she herself thinks of her own years at the cottage in the novel form of an ersatz Chinese calendar. "The year the tree fell on the cabin." "The year Dad fell off the roof." "The year of the break-in." This last, incidentally, was surmised to have come at the hands of perpetrators aged approximately 14, as the only things they took were a giant sombrero and a bottle of oregano, maybe mistaking it for dried plant material of a different sort.

The family owns an assortment of paddle-powered watercraft and gets onto and into the lake often but, more than anything, Kellsey says, time spent at Round Lake is time spent enjoying nature. Some of that is reflected in her Chinese calendar: "The year of the bears." "The year the dog got sprayed twice." And another *annus horribilis*: "The year of the tent caterpillars." "It was like living in a haunted house," she says. "No leaves, just webs." But mostly, a life lived in nature is, as Thoreau would have it, good. "From birds to bears, snakes, frogs, spiders, and the usual rabbits and squirrels," she says, "there is always something to watch."

Of course, given the history, the one thing that everyone watches here is the water level. Kellsey is one of the few who remember the lake as it was during the dry years, but it's far from impossible that the water could disappear again. So it's worth asking her: would she still come? "Absolutely," she says. "It wouldn't make any difference at all." 🐸

Jim Sutherland wrote "John Gray Goes to the Cottage" in the July '14 issue.

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