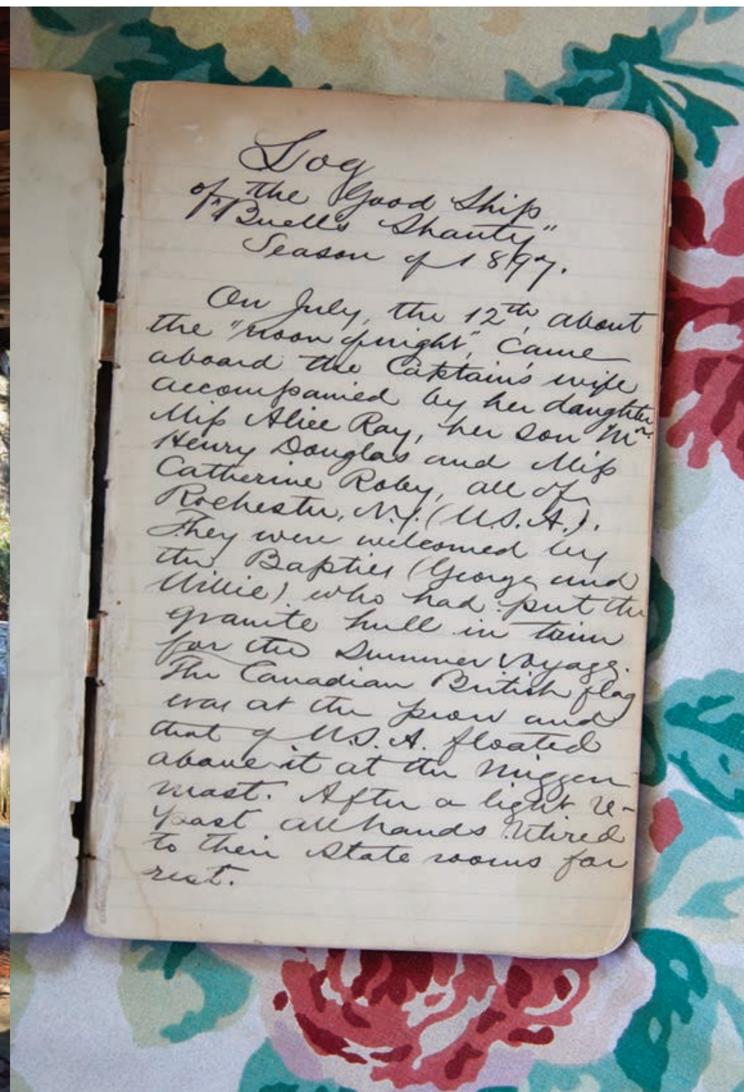
American Woman

Connie Wahl has the kind of stories you only get after a lifetime on the lake. This Yankee could teach Canadians a thing or two about cottaging

By Philip Preville Photography Paul Orenstein



Log
of the Good Ship
"Buell's Shanty"
Season of 1897.

On July, the 12th about
the "noon height" came
aboard the Captain's wife
accompanied by her daughter
Miss Alice Ray, her son Mr.
Henry Douglas and Miss
Catherine Roby, all of
Rochester, N.Y. (U.S.A.).
They were welcomed by
the Baptiss (George and
Millie) who had put the
granite hull in trim
for the Summer voyage.
The Canadian British flag
was at the prow and
that of U.S.A. floated
above it at the mizzen
mast. After a light re-
past all hands retired
to their State rooms for
rest.

Connie Wahl, at 77, still swims every day in the summer, leaping off a diving board and crossing to her extended family's place across the bay. The cottage logbooks, more than 100 years old, are "the most valuable thing in the cottage."

On the porch of the Shanty,

beneath the shade of its extended hip roof, hangs a many-decades-old couch swing. Its frame is made of steel rods better suited as garden stakes. Its sides are made of square tin sheets, painted forest green like the Shanty itself. The swing's back and bottom are lattices of rusty springs and steel slats, the kind you'd find on an old military cot.

The swing hangs just outside owner Connie Wahl's bedroom window. Connie has spent nearly every summer of her life at the family cottage they've always called the Shanty, making the annual trek since 1946 from Rochester, N.Y., to Stoney Lake, in the heart of Ontario's Kawartha region. She does not recall a time when the swing was not there. She and her late husband, Bill, fell in love in that swing, looking out over the lake together, and they are just one of many couples to have enjoyed its intimate embrace. "I can't repeat to you some of the things I've heard through the window late at night," Connie says bashfully.

Connie is a quintessential American extrovert. She greets strangers as she would lifelong friends, with a permanent smile, her speech filled with *oohs* and *aahs*. She is a hub of Stoney's social life, with an encyclopedic memory for people and their stories. At gatherings, the liveliest chatter is found in Connie's company, often around her swing. "That's why I married her," Bill once said. "She's like a circus that never leaves town."

Some 20 years ago, five children clambered onto that swing and rocked it so hard that its chains broke, sending them all flying backwards. No one was badly hurt—a miracle, Connie says—but the contraption itself bust into pieces, its springs littering the rocks. For most cottagers, such an accident would signal that it was time to get a new swing. But Connie couldn't bear to replace it, so she prevailed upon a family handyman to fix it. He did his best, but there's no getting around the fact that Connie's beloved swing is now held together with baling wire and faith. It meets no contemporary standard of safety or idea of comfort. And yet, when you sink into its floral patterned cushions and sway in Stoney's breeze, there's no getting out of it.

Just as she did not change the swing, Connie—which happens to be short for Constance—has not changed anything about the Shanty. Stoney Lake is arguably the cradle of cottage civilization, one of Canada's first summer-away destinations, but even along a shoreline of iconic properties, the Shanty stands out. Through the 120 years the Shanty has been in Connie's family, it has remained without heat, light, electricity, hot water, toilets, or showers. Its running water comes by virtue of a rusty hand pump in the kitchen sink. Its warmth comes from the living room hearth, the kitchen's hundred-year-old Renfrew stove, and human kindness.

It's a stark contrast to contemporary cottages, whose insulated walls and full suite of amenities shield us from the world outside, reducing cottage country to a pleasant view. "The storms are better here," Connie says, sitting in her swing. Though she's lived in New York State all her life, she's spent all of it west of the Appalachian Mountains, endowing her speech with a crisp, *Fargo*-esque Midwestern clip. "I remember one time it was regatta day, and the wind came all of a sudden, and the sky turned greyish black, and there were sparkles in the sky. Through the break in the clouds we could see stars in the daylight."

Such a sight seems impossible, but from the Shanty's porch Connie sees lots of things the rest of us don't. She and her American family are more in touch with the Canadian wilderness—the threats it brings, the strength it gives, and the grace it instills—than most Canadians. ››

"The water is very special," says Connie. "We always talk about the healing waters of Stoney Lake, and we believe it." She looks out from the dock on Juniper Island (top right), a social hub on the lake, where cottagers of all ages gather for a square dance every Wednesday in the summer. "That's the way we do things up here—all three generations at once."

"She's like a circus that never leaves town"

Connie travels to Stoney Lake from Rochester, N.Y., where she lives, but for her, the Shanty is home: "I'm really Canadian in my heart."

Stoney Lake sits in an ecotone, which is science-speak for the transition area between two ecosystems—in this case, the Canadian Shield and the St. Lawrence Lowlands. The Shanty sits atop a small peninsula, on what appears to be the southernmost slab of Shield granite. It's the very spot where fertile soil gives way to solid rock, where human settlement meets untameable backcountry.

The cottage was built in 1887, when Confederation itself was a mere 20 years old, one of Stoney's five cottages at the time. It's less than 75 feet from the water on either side: if someone wanted to build it today, it would never be granted a construction permit. The Shanty looks out on the lake's vastness to the south and on a tiny bay to the north—yet it's barely visible, hiding behind the white pines in its forest-green camouflage.

Connie's great-grandfather, George Candee Buell, a devout Protestant and a grocery wholesaler from Rochester with a reputation for good coffee blends, purchased the cabin from its builder in 1897 and christened it the Shanty. It was an odd choice for a name because, by the standards of its time, the Shanty was a cottage fit for a wealthy man such as George: a sturdy frame of oak walls and pine floorboards, with three bedrooms, a huge living room and bricklaid hearth, a large kitchen and adjoining butler's pantry, and a second-storey open loft accessible by ladder through a trap door.

The Buells spent their every summer on Stoney Lake from 1897 onwards, making the two-day voyage from Rochester via steam power: first the ferry across Lake Ontario from Rochester to Port Hope, then the Midland Railway to Lakefield, and finally the steamboat to the Shanty's shore. They brought with them a substantial entourage that included a handful of servants and a cow. Yes, a cow: Buell family legend holds that the first glass of cow's milk after her swim to shore was always the coldest. There was also a journeyman on the premises year-round named Jim Robinson, an informal property manager who lived in one of the Shanty's outbuildings while working on log drives in summer—Stoney Lake's surroundings were still being cleared for timber back then—and harvesting the lake's ice in winter for use in summer ice houses.

We know all of this because the Buells immediately began a tradition of keeping a diary every summer, always titled The Log of The Shanty. Every year a new family member would be entrusted with the task of keeping the diary, leaving ample space to include photographs. Connie still has most of the logbooks, including the inaugural 1897 edition. She's kept dozens of them, all in a basket beside the living room couch, each one wrapped in a stiff cellophane bag for preservation, each one written in elegant fountain-pen cursive script.

Even with servants, cottaging at the turn of the 20th century was a vigorous affair: the daily fishing expeditions were as much for sustenance as for sport. The steamboat carried the mail and signalled residents with a whistle: someone would paddle out to meet the steamer and be tossed a leather satchel with that day's mail, while tossing the outgoing mail back. The Shanty's two mailbags, cracked and worn but still visibly branded with the family name, now hang on the living room wall.

The Shanty was passed down to George Buell's first-born son, Ely—who dodged the seminary against his father's wishes—and eventually to Ely's youngest daughter, Isabella, in the culmination

Sue Dutton (with Connie, opposite) is a long-time lake neighbour; Connie's mother was best friends with Sue's grandmother, Ruth Allen. "She's the one who taught me to drive a motorboat," says Connie. "She gave me my confidence."

of Stoney Lake's greatest romance. As a 14-year-old, Isabella invited her best friend, Margaret Hickey, to visit the Shanty, and Margaret made the trip north from Rochester chaperoned by her older brother Tom. Isabella and Tom fell in love that summer, but the Hickeys were Catholic, and the patriarchal Protestant Ely would not consent to any relationship between them.

What followed, according to Connie, was a chaste courtship between Isabella Buell and Tom Hickey that lasted 14 long years, to the increasing dismay of onlookers from both Stoney and Rochester. The Rochester business community urged Ely to relent. Tucked into the 1938 edition of The Log of the Shanty is a note from William T. Noonan, one-time president of the Buffalo, Rochester and Pittsburgh Railway, one of Ely's contemporaries among Rochester's interwar titans of commerce, soothing Ely's misgivings about Tom: "He has been a devoted son, affectionate brother, and loyal friend, and those qualities insure his being equally as fine a husband."

But it was in Canada, itself a groundbreaking union of Catholics and Protestants, where Ely finally opened his heart. "The whole lake worked on Ely to get him to bless the marriage," Connie says. "Nothing happens up here at the lake without everybody knowing about it and getting involved." It was Ely's brother-in-law, Dubois Morris, the owner of the neighbouring cottage, known as Chosen Waters, who finally brought Ely around. "Morris was a missionary to China, a very holy man," says Connie, implying that only a living saint could possibly have won Ely over.

Tom and Isabella finally wed in 1937. Their three daughters, Connie, Terry, and Joanie, summered at the Shanty, first as toddlers, then as girls, women, wives, and mothers. Connie's eldest son, Billy, continuing in the family tradition, fell in love one summer on Stoney Lake with a visiting Brit named Dixie, and they were married at St. Peter's, the lake's island-bound Anglican church. "I remember paddling Billy over to the church that morning," Connie recalls. "We could see Dixie's father paddling her over from their place. We met at the dock. It was a beautiful ceremony."

These days, Stoney Lake carries a Muskoka-in-the-Kawarthas reputation, the result of opulent new cottages and the flashy motorboats shuttling their owners about. According to some, these well-heeled newcomers often spell the lake's name without the "e," as in "Stony Lake." The discrepancy has become such a bone of contention that it was the subject of a mock debate at the lake's community hub on Juniper Island. "Stony lake is all Jet Skis and satellite TVs," one debater argued. "Canoeing at sunset—that's Stoney Lake." *{Continued on page 106}*

AMERICAN WOMAN
{*Continued from page 97*}

Connie is the standard-bearer for the Stoney-with-an-"e" crowd, right down to the Shanty's single-pane windows, the chintz, the taxidermied muskies on the wall, and the four cedarstrip canoes on its dock, all of them more than a hundred years old. Yet she finds it hard to explain exactly why she has chosen not to renovate and update the Shanty. It's obviously a sentimental thing for her, but there's more to it than nostalgia, because she still delights in its present.

Like a marriage vow, the pledge to keep the Shanty intact, unchanged since its 1887 construction, is one that must be constantly renewed in practice. There is always temptation: an electric stove, the easy comforts of heat and light. But then, as years go by and partners remain true to each other, they find their lives too entwined to ever give in.

In 1989 Connie's husband, Bill, then aged 45, was diagnosed with a form of adult-onset muscular dystrophy, a progressive degeneration of the body's muscle tissue. It became clear that, if they were going to keep spending their summers on Stoney Lake, the cottage would need electricity, proper plumbing, and wheelchair access. Rather than renovate her historic property, Connie decided to build a brand-new cottage at the rear of her lake lot, beyond view from the Shanty. It became known as the Electric House, and it's where the family sleeps and cooks and bathes. But their days, and their life on Stoney, remains firmly centred around the Shanty.

"It was clever of her to leave it in its original state," says Connie's Stoney Lake neighbour, the Toronto architect Margie Zeidler, whose family purchased Chosen Waters from Dubois Morris when it too was still powered by wood in the stove and ice in the shed. With a view of the Shanty's porch from across the bay, Margie sees clearly why Connie would prefer it over the Electric House. "The less you have, the less is expected."

A cottage without light bulbs slips into evening quiet in concert with the wild. Without heat, blankets make for luxurious comfort, even in a rusty old porch swing. Without a modern stove, cottagers must carefully pick their moments for kitchen toil. Without a television, late-night entertainment consists of open fires and live laughter.

The Zeidlers eventually decided to update Chosen Waters with electrical power and running water. Margie's father, Eb, also an architect of some renown, still summers at Stoney at the age of 91, and, as Margie says, "The older we get the harder it is to do without those things." But she clearly envies the lifestyle that Connie's commitment has preserved. Cellular coverage reaches all points on Stoney Lake, but with nowhere to plug in a computer or a cellphone at the Shanty, it remains an oasis from the digitally driven lifestyle.

Canadians, avid cottagers blessed with some of the world's most stunning wilderness, are also among the world's most avid Internet users. It's beyond Connie why anyone would want to escape into a digital world when the real one around them is so breathtaking. Mobile technology has led us all to believe that freedom means having the world at our fingertips, but our constant gaze down our noses into backlit binary bits is no freedom at all. At the Shanty, the horizons are broader, lit by the sun, the stars, and unbound imagination.

After 120 years, the lake's excitements are well-worn: a canoe trip up Eels Creek, the catch of a prize fish, a rushed paddle back to shore under approaching storm clouds, nights spent sleeping under the stars. But, as Connie points out, those hoary adventures always light anew in children. "You get courage from growing up here," she says. "And that leads to better things. To bravery." This is part of what Connie means when she says the storms are better at the Shanty. The harsh weather tests mettle. You have to trust that your clan and your shelter, however worn, will persevere.

Connie perseveres as Stoney Lake's most ebullient personality. Though she does not have citizenship, she considers herself Canadian, returning to the Shanty every year for Canadian Thanksgiving. "I don't like American Thanksgiving," she says. "It's too commercial."

But even social butterflies need courage, and the Shanty is where Connie has drawn hers throughout her life. The Shanty's porch was the place where Connie received the news that her sister Terry had died of cancer. Terry was only in her early thirties when she passed away, leaving behind two sons: Clayton and Evan, aged five and three. Evan is in his forties now. "He lives in Chicago," Connie says, "but he comes back here and sits in front of the fire. His most vivid memories of his mom are here, because this place remains constant."

The cottage has been Connie's constant too. Bill lived with muscular dystrophy for his last 17 years. Within a decade of his diagnosis, the disease's toll left him confined to a wheelchair, and two of Bill and Connie's three children had been diagnosed with MD as well, left to anticipate the same decline. For a family as active as theirs, the news was devastating. "I said, 'I don't think I can go on,' and it was September, and I just drove up here," Connie recalls. "I sat by the woodstove, and I propped open the door, and I put my feet there, and I just was here by myself for five days, and I just breathed, and I just—"

Connie stops her story to catch her breath, as though the vivid memories were stealing it once again. She looks west, and points. "That tree, you see that tree, how it's all bent there?" It's a tall white pine on the western tip of the Shanty's granite point. "My mother would tell me stories about it, how we have to be like the tree, because it got hit by lightning. See how it bends there?" There's a distinct crook in the tree, as if it had twisted its way around an invisible obstacle and onward to the sky. "And it stayed alive for the children. See the children underneath it?" There are saplings beneath its shade. "Because, see, its roots go down into the rock."

Putting roots into rock: it's what Canadians have done for 150 years, and for centuries before that as well. It's allowed Canada to withstand world wars and separatist threats and tragedies great and small. It's how we transformed a hostile landscape into a welcoming one, and it's why we are still here.

Connie pauses again, then returns to finish her story: "—and after five days I just knew what I had to do. I had a plan. And I was myself again."

Philip Preville is an award-winning writer and, now, Connie's dear friend.