

COTTAGE COUNTRY IS A DIFFERENT PLACE ONCE THE COTTAGERS HAVE GONE HOME. TAKE A LOOK BEHIND THE SNOWY CURTAIN

# A portrait of small town life



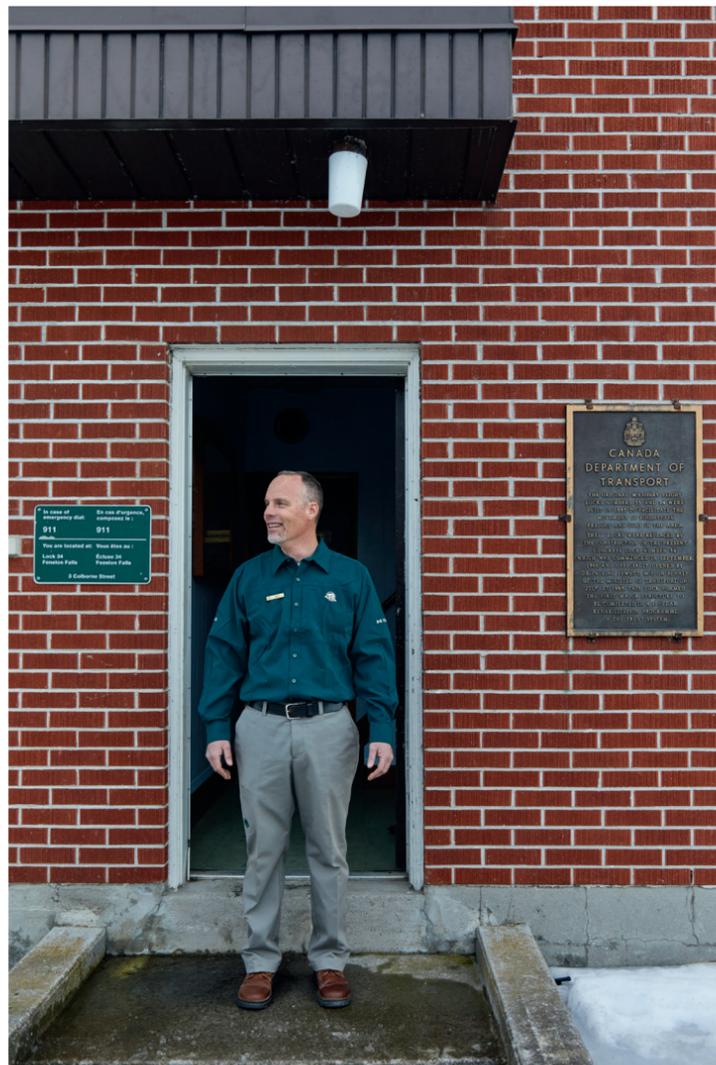
# in winter,

IN TWO PARTS

*photography + captions* DEREK SHAPTON

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① **“Born and bred” in the Fenelon Falls area,**

Adam Kay works for the Trent-Severn Waterway, a division of Parks Canada. In summer months, he serves as a supervisor at Fenelon Falls’ famous Lock 34, allowing the movement of boat traffic—which at peak times can be up to 225 boats per day—between Cameron and Sturgeon Lakes. With the end of boating season in October, the locks are closed, and the role of Parks Canada turns to off-season upkeep.

Most importantly, water flow still needs to be managed. “Even though it’s the wintertime, we still have to maintain levels,” Adam says. Using a series of locks and connected “reservoir lakes” that feed into Balsam Lake from as far away as Minden, fifty kilometres to the north, the staff maintain the water levels to make sure that they are adequate for boat traffic in the spring. For Adam, that means being out there all winter pulling logs and putting them back in, which, in winter, is particularly dangerous work. “You have a whole bunch of ice, a lot of moving water, and it is extremely cold. If it is -20°C on land, it feels about 10 degrees colder on the dam because of the water.”

“I wasn’t designed for the cold” he says, laughing.  
 “I don’t have any extra insulation!”

IN WINTER, MAINTAINING WATER LEVELS IS PARTICULARLY DANGEROUS WORK. “YOU HAVE A WHOLE BUNCH OF ICE, A LOT OF MOVING WATER, AND IT IS EXTREMELY COLD. IF IT’S -20°C ON LAND, IT’S 10 DEGREES COLDER ON THE WATER”



**2** **EMILY FORBES**, 23, grew up spending summers at her grandparent's cottage on Cameron Lake, but 2019 was her first year as a full-time resident. She purchased the Cow and Sow Eatery with her mother, Lorraine, in May 2019. The Cow is something of a Fenelon Falls landmark—in fact, it was her family's favourite restaurant when she was growing up.

Emily and Lorraine's first year running the restaurant "was crazy," and their first winter, although quieter, was still steady. "I thought it would be a ghost town," she says, but local customers kept them busy.

The past few months have been challenging due to COVID-19. With only a small patio, they elected to close completely and took advantage of the downtime to make some upgrades. "We want to preserve the character of the original restaurant," she says, while updating the layout to better accommodate social distancing. They are aiming for a spring 2021 reopening, and they anticipate a busy season.

**3** **TIM WISENER AND CHRIS VAN LIEROP**, local homebuilders who also run an art gallery downtown, live year-round in the Wisener family cottage on Sturgeon Lake, which they bought in 2017. Their work slows down in the cold months, but because of COVID-19, they expect to be busy this winter renovating and winterizing cottages. Many are being turned into year-round homes. "Some people are even purchasing for the first time in cottage country knowing that they will not be back in the office," says Chris. "We're also seeing requests for incorporating an office area into existing private spaces." Socially, Tim and Chris are also anticipating a busier than usual winter season. "Our friends and clients who normally head to Florida are going to be finding ways to enjoy winter at the cottage," says Chris. "It will be exciting to have more people to do things with this winter, and it will be interesting to see how we can do that inside while social distancing and being cognizant of the virus."

**4** **GLENN AND HEATHER JACKSON**, a husband and wife team, live in Rosedale, about 10 minutes from Fenelon Falls, and own and operate the Fenelon Falls Marina. They have 14 year-round employees, and 18 in the summer. In the fall, marina operations transition to boat storage (the marina has both on and off-site storage facilities allowing them to store 500 boats over the winter) and then to cold-weather activities. "Primarily, we sell and service snowmobiles," says Glenn, but they also work on boats that need new engines, and get boats ready for the spring. "We keep five full-time technicians on through the winter."

"We've always been winter cottagers," adds Heather, having owned a place on Lake Simcoe, Ont., for 20 years before buying the marina. "Skating on the lake, snowmobiling...for us the winter-summer distinction is just that the activities change."

**5** **MURRAY MOORE, WAYNE HARPELL, AND LIZ PHILLIPS** are involved with the Kawartha Lakes Snowmobile Club, which is an integral part of the wintertime scene. Made up primarily of volunteers, the club manages the local trails, which run through the heart of town and are part of a privately operated, province-wide network. Many local businesses rely on snowmobilers as a major part of their winter livelihood. Murray Moore, the club's secretary and one of five groomer operators, also does the groomer schedule. With nearly 200 km to maintain, the club grooms the main arteries at night on the weekend and the secondary ones during the week. He calls them "the 401 of snowmobile trails."

"Last season came to an abrupt end in mid-March when the province issued a stay-at-home order," says Phillips, the club's vice president and treasurer. Despite having to cancel popular events this winter, such as their Family Fun Ride, the club still expects it to be busy. With many "park and ride" areas, "we may see more sledders coming up from the city to ride our trails." >>



⑥ **A long-standing Fenelon Falls community landmark,**

Handley Lumber has been operating in the same location on the river just up from the Falls since 1936. Chris is the fourth generation of Handleys to run the business, which he oversees with the help of his father, Ken. Chris started at the bottom, working summers in the shop when he was 15 years old, sweeping floors and helping out. After he got his driver's licence, he took care of deliveries.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the lumberyard had a busy summer. Demand for building and renovation supplies was tremendous, and Chris anticipates a busy winter as well, despite ongoing supply chain issues and shortages brought on by the pandemic.

On a more personal level, he looks forward to reconnecting with his favourite winter sports, in particular snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. "The nice thing about these winter activities is that they're mostly outdoors," he says. "Not much fear of bugs in the bitter cold!"

That said, when asked what the best thing about winter is, though, Ken answers without hesitation. "Spring."

"WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN WINTER COTTAGERS. SKATING ON THE LAKE, SNOWMOBILING. FOR US, THE WINTER-SUMMER DISTINCTION IS JUST THE ACTIVITIES CHANGING"

# Life in a northern town



by DAVID ZIMMER  
photography DEREK SHAPTON

**AS A KID WHO SPENT ALL SUMMER AT THE COTTAGE,** the annual arrival of the Canadian National Exhibition carried double-edged significance. On one hand, it promised fun and excitement, unchecked gluttony at the food hall, and the terrifying possibility of vomiting on one of the loud and violent rides. But it also meant summer was officially over and soon it would be time for the drudgery of school. When the CNE opened, cottage-land—the best amusement park ever invented—closed for the season.

I have now lived full-time in cottage-land for a little over 20 years, much of that working at a small business where cottagers were our regular customers, along with local neighbours, travellers, and tourists from all points on the map. This year it was a COVID-19 bust, but normally, when I hear that the CNE will be opening soon, my heart gives a little pitty-pat of joy, because it means that very shortly my town and the everyday routines of the people who live year-round in cottage country will return to normalcy.

I consider it a rare blessing to be able to live in this place of water and rocks and trees. Every season has a special beauty, and there is plenty of wilderness, space, and solitude. Which is why so many cottagers have made it, or hope to make it, their year-round home. That's the wrinkle to living in an attractive locale; everybody else wants to share the experience, and who could possibly blame them? The downside for small towns, and the people who live in them, is a dramatic seasonal population explosion that at times can seem overwhelming. In the District of Muskoka, seasonal residents represent more than 57 per cent of the population. That varies town by town, of course. In Huntsville, where I live, permanent people outnumber seasonals almost 3:1. But in smaller townships such as Georgian Bay, where seasonal residents constitute almost 87 per cent of the population, those numbers are powerfully reversed. When you consider that these figures don't include tourists and travellers and leaf-lookers, never mind the organized mayhem of triathlons and craft beer festivals, it's easy to see how small places quickly fill to bursting in peak season.

This uptick in population obviously has pros and cons in a small-town economy. For those of us who work in businesses that rely on seasonal tourism—which is most everybody—boom time means business time and money in the bank. But it also means long hours, little time off, and a sense of sweeping invasion as traffic snarls and parking spots disappear. Banks and stores are jammed and local restaurants and watering holes are crowded to capacity. That scene, of course, was pre-pandemic. But it will return again, when things get back to normal. When a few routine errands that would normally take an hour will devour the best part of a day, if they can be completed at all. And sometimes patience wears thin. Sometimes

tempers flare. It's at these moments of maximum summer that my little town starts to exhibit the crappier aspects of the city I escaped from many years ago. This is when I sometimes curse summer tourists, in all their various guises, as "those goddamn ice-cream eaters."

But it's not as if this phenomenon is new. Summer in cottage country has probably been this way since well-heeled people wearing boiled wool suits started coming here on trains and steamboats. It's all part of the rhythm of the seasons, and the overheated, overcrowded, overly busy summer is but one part of the tourist town equation. The other part, and maybe the better one for locals at least, starts to show its face when traffic in cottage places starts to thin out a bit. Traditionally, Labour Day signalled the end of summer and a drastic decline in tourism. Some cottagers would return for closing-up and the ritual of Thanksgiving by the lake, but by mid-September the high season was pretty much over. Like someone flipped a switch. In normal, non-pandemic years, the subtle slide into off-season calm is more drawn out—and busier later into the year—as European tourists arrive to enjoy fine autumn weather, and the population features more retired people, who are masters of their own schedules. More like a dimmer than an on/off switch.

Still, it is quieter. And my first luxury of the dimmer season is to be able to visit my own cottage for more than the night or two I usually manage in July and August. Not long ago, before we sold our store, my summers were spent serving cottage customers, and when I can finally get to my own place, I truly appreciate the experience. It might be too cold for swimming and broiling in the sun, but it feels like an exotic vacation for me. Just doing normal cottage chores is a welcome respite from grinding it out for six days a week, because working on cottage projects, as we all know, is not the same as real work. Leaving the town you live in every day can make four nights up at the lake seem like a two-week vacation, and with a little rest and relaxation, the sweaty hustle of maximum summer eventually slips into the rearview mirror. The return to relative normalcy also means getting to do touristy stuff like going for a hike in Algonquin Provincial Park or improvising a road trip from town to town, cruising for junk store treasure and maybe even, miracle of miracles, stopping at some rinky-dink place to eat an ice cream cone.

For people who live in cottage country and work in businesses defined by summer tourism, fall and winter give opportunities to reconnect with friends and neighbours, people you don't see all summer, especially if they too are part of the intense tourist economy. In the fall, regularity returns for everyone as kids head back to school and the routines of work life, hockey leagues, and dance class kick in. Still {Cont'd on page 90}

busy, but a more measured tempo. Grocery shopping or cruising the aisles at Canadian Tire can once again be a mildly pleasurable activity. The global pandemic has thrown a wrench into the works, of course, but in a normal year this is the time to meet friends for wings and beer, host a dinner party, or just hang out in someone's garage working on a four-wheeler, without having to be anywhere in a screaming hurry.

The first broken spoke on the Ferris wheel of cottage-land shows up in late November, when the weather usually turns abysmal, and pretty much runs until Christmas. Dark and cold and sullen, it's no longer autumn, nor is it proper winter by a long shot. A good time for many to fly somewhere warm.

For me it's a time of making and mending, starting new projects and trying to finish others. The high point of this period is hunting season, moose first then whitetail deer, as solo hunters get some bush time, and the big family camps hit full stride, carrying on traditions that are as precious to them as any cottager's hard-earned summer stint at the lake. For many people who work without cease all summer, hunting season is their most cherished and inviolable vacation. It's a tradition that many cottagers don't get, and it's hard not to laugh when I hear from someone who can't understand why they aren't getting call-backs from their plumber during the first week of deer season.

When you are a local, the sometimes bizarre behaviour of tourists can be hilarious, like trying to make a U-turn on main street on a summer Saturday (impossible) or seeing a troop of urban hipsters with matching beards and slim-fit bush jackets get carded at the pub. One year, a lady drove her car over the edge at the waste transfer station and landed inside a dumpster. At our store we'd regularly chuckle at the sight of keen survivalists strapped with 10" Bowie knives, ready for their weekend of provincial park camping. Not hilarious is the off-hand rudeness offered to servers at restaurants and high-speed dangerous driving on cottage roads. Garbage is a problem, whether it's regular litter or full bags of trash left by my driveway, in the parking lot of our store, or tossed on the side of the highway. There are a lot of people trying to squeeze into cottage country during the summer. And it stands to reason that a small percentage of them will be irresponsible jerks.



**IT'S A RARE BLESSING TO BE ABLE TO LIVE IN THIS PLACE OF WATER AND ROCKS AND TREES. EVERY SEASON HAS A SPECIAL BEAUTY, AND THERE'S PLENTY OF WILDERNESS, SPACE, AND SOLITUDE**

The view over Balsam Lake, Ont., from Sandy Beach Resort and Trailer Court (also on p. 52), a seasonal, family-run business operating since 1940.

When I first moved to cottage country, I was surprised to find an us-versus-them attitude, at times quite ugly, held by some locals. They are a minority of people who complain bitterly about "cityots" and "tourrists," those non-specific ignorant visitors who, as certain vocal locals see it, have all joined together to make local lives a misery. Taking a page from the racist playbook, they think outsiders should just go back to where they came from. Everybody has heard commentary from these yobs before, and most just dismiss the moron minority. But I know many cottage people who are deeply hurt by this kind of talk, surprised to hear it because they consider themselves part of the com-

munity, many having come here for generations. They shop in town, support local hospitals and charities, and have made long-lasting ties within the community. And this is the response? Last spring with the pandemic came even more small-town small mind, as each little jurisdiction wagged frightened fingers at their nearest neighbour, all of them decrying the imminent hordes of big city cottagers charging north to gobble up food and supplies, spread disease, and congest hospitals. Which as we know, simply did not happen.

The reality is that anyone involved in a small-town, tourist-based economy, especially the business owners, builders, trades, retailers, and service providers who cater to cottage customers, knows that without support from "outsiders," there would be no local economy whatsoever. But just like everywhere else it is found, this chronic resentment toward "rich and privileged" visitors is driven by economic inequity. A summer snapshot of cottage country might depict shiny happy people having fun, but in the District of Muskoka, just 28 per cent of permanent households earn more than \$100,000 annually, compared to 76 per cent for seasonal residents—a situation that would grow exponentially more dire if cottagers and visitors stopped spending money in cottage towns and "just went back where they came from."

**WINTER IN COTTAGE COUNTRY** is, obviously, simply amazing. I've always liked the cold season, but up here its best parts are magnified and more exceptional, the silence above all, as the

whole world gets blanketed in a sound-absorbing mantle of snow. It's also at this time, but only when the ice is good and thick, that I can revisit my island cottage, hauling in weeks' worth of supplies with a snowmobile.

A few years ago, I made a simple groomer for the trails around my property at home, so now there is a network of smooth winter boulevards for snowshoeing, skiing, and cutting firewood to heat the house. It's important to get outside. Hunkering down indoors with Netflix and a stack of cookbooks is the surest path to an interminable and miserable four months. Do I get frustrated by January thaws that make everything melt and reset the fun odometer? Sure I do. And does moving mountains of snow from my driveway get a bit tired by March? Absolutely. But there's nowhere I would rather live, especially in January and February when cottage country is mostly left to locals.

After my move north, it was always fun to make occasional random trips back to the big city for food and shopping and nightlife. But as the years went by, and my age advanced with them, those trips became less interesting to me and more infrequent. These days, my preferred direction of travel is due north, to my new version of cottage-land. There are no hot-and-bothered crowds on my island, no sense of invasion even on the busiest summer days, and it's the place I like to be and think about all the time. No matter where they live, I'm pretty sure this is something all cottagers share. At our store, during the boiling panic of summer, I would routinely ask Friday afternoon cottage road warriors about the traffic on the way up, especially if I'd heard of an accident or a lane closure on the radio. Without fail, rather than grumble or complain about the worst-drive-ever, most people would simply give a tired smile and say: "I'm just happy to be here." 🐾

*Former Cottage Life editor and long-time columnist David Zimmer moved to the backwoods near Huntsville in 2000. Until last summer, he owned and operated a grocery store, The Dwight Market, in Dwight, Ont. Now he's spending as much time as possible at his Temagami cottage, where he's working hard at rebuilding the outhouse.*

**Coming next issue in**

# Cottage Life

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**SEASON KICKOFF**

**MARCH 8**