

FRONT LINES HOME FIRES



In the early 1940s, the distant battlefields of Europe and the



By Naomi Buck Photography Daniel Ehrenworth
sunny shores of cottage country were closer than they seemed



IF MEMORY SERVES,

The Cooper family's "Annex" cottage still bears some similarities to the hospital of the 1940s, when Edith Farwell (p. 97, bottom right, centre) welcomed scores of recovering airmen to Muskoka. The only surviving portion of the large ward room (above, right) is now the kitchen (section of cottage with chimney above); the long corridor (opposite), where gurneys once made ruts in the linoleum floor, remains intact.

most of my childhood was spent in the summer at our cottage on Lake Muskoka. Of course, memory does not serve, at least not the historical record. Most of my childhood was spent in a house in Toronto with a rectangular yard and neighbours across fences. But in memory, the cottage has trumped.

The cottage was a world (not mine because I shared it with others), its geography seemingly boundless. Turning off the highway just past Milford Bay, we drove down a long gravel drive that wended through uncharted woods, bogs, and bush to a parking area with paths leading to multiple buildings scattered across a large peninsula.

These buildings were full of history. A windowless tool shed, the pungent domain of the groundskeeper, Frank Muddyman, who pushed the lawn mower and smoked a pipe, had once been an ice house. The boathouse sheltered not only boats but also swallows, bats and, upstairs, an entire family whose members included an Anglican minister and a Mountie. There were no maids to be found in the maid's cabin, and the huge stone incinerator behind it looked more like Roman ruins. Most mysteriously, the long bungalow we called "the Annex" was said to have once been a hospital.

"Muskoka," as we modestly called this world, belonged to "the family," an entity so amorphous that I wasn't sure what united us beyond recurring names and an unencumbered culture of skinny-dipping. Everyone was welcome everywhere, and there was a lot of hollering.

My parents, my brother, and I stayed in the main house, an imposing building on the point whose six bedrooms were named after the pastel colours on their walls. Built in 1910, in a world of butler's pantries and back staircases, it had been modified over the years, most radically in 1972 when its interior was sliced in two to permit double occupancy. We lived on one side, my grandmother on the other. We were welcome on the other side but had to factor in my step-grandfather, a retired lieutenant colonel who seemed to regard his wife's family as a wayward battalion in desperate need of reform. Try as he might to impress upon us the historic significance of his military career, we as children were more struck by his physical resemblance to Humpty Dumpty. The moniker stuck.

Across what once had been a croquet lawn, which owed its flatness to the massive septic bed beneath it, was the Annex. It belonged to my cousins from Alberta, the Coopers. Sarah, the eldest, was officially my best friend. Our solution to the travesty of justice that put several provinces between us in the winter was to spend the summer virtually attached. Sarah had two younger sisters, a baby brother, and a mother, Anne, who was generous, outrageous and, at times, a little terrifying. There were no elderlies in residence, so no need to be quiet or obsequious. On the contrary, the Annex



VINTAGE PHOTOS COURTESY NAOMI BUCK

Pitching in for the cause

The Wartime Convalescent Homes War Charity Fund, initiated by Edith and Francis Farwell during the Second World War, was an idea borrowed from England, where there was a similar program during the Great War (think *Downton Abbey*). The Farwells loaned their cottage to the war effort and encouraged friends in their extensive social circle to do the same.

By war's end, 11 properties had been loaned to the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), with a total capacity of 600 beds.

After receiving treatment in hospital, returning airmen were transferred to these estates to recover. The RCAF embraced this non-institutional convalescence, developing a new Medical Reconditioning Program that combined physical activity with customized therapies and pleasant diversions such as gardening, basketweaving, and bridge. The program was a success; the airmen repaired quickly in these gracious settings, only to be sent back to the distinctly ungracious front. —N.B.



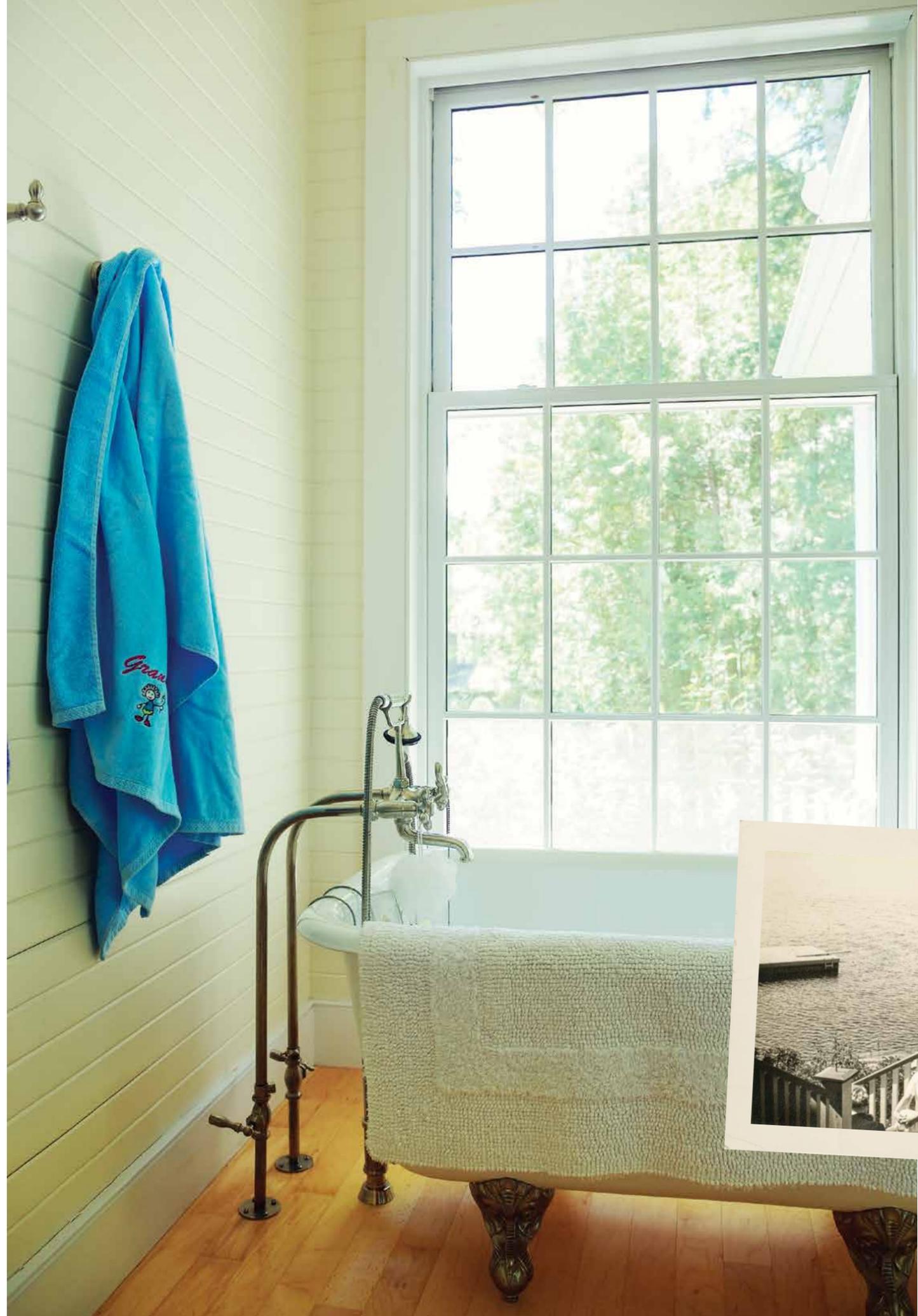
was a place of volume and emotion, cake mixes and processed cheese, hair-pulling fights over Barbie doll caravans, and banishments to faraway bedrooms.

Faraway because the Annex was basically one long corridor. At one end were the living room, dining room, and kitchen, at the other end a battery of bathrooms and, in between, bedroom after bedroom. This was part of the secret of its deep, dark past, a secret I felt privileged to know: the Annex had served as a hospital for injured airmen during the war. What war? What airmen? It hardly mattered. Hospital said it all.

We could tell. The bathroom cabinets were crammed with hand-labelled glass bottles with rubber stoppers and first aid kits that looked like they belonged in museums. The floors throughout were of brown battleship linoleum, grooved in places by the wheels of the beds.

It was something of a coming-of-age ritual to go prowling under the lakeside porch. It was dark and dank, lit only by the slats of light passing between porch planks and a dangling light bulb. We found all manner of relics: a plane propeller, a Royal Canadian Air Force sign, lawn bowls studded with ivory, honey tins filled with rusty hardware. Someone once reported a gravestone, but nobody offered to take a closer look.

We tried to imagine the war, the airmen, the hospital. It seemed the stuff of real drama. When the Coopers' American cousins visited the cottage, they contributed valuable military intelligence (based largely on the TV show *MASH*). They were also boys, which was helpful. Together, we put on a play



During wartime, the action centred around the main cottage, where Edith (below, seated) entertained not just airmen but family and friends as well. Sunday sermons (opposite, top) were part of lakeside life for airmen, staff, and the Farwells alike. Patients spent their leisure time on activities such as lawn bowling, a reminder of which are the balls that Anne Cooper keeps in glass vases on her mantel (opposite, bottom). Between the vases hangs a portrait of her father, John McColl, an airman himself and the inspiration for the charity program.





WE TRIED TO IMAGINE THE WAR, THE AIRMEN, THE HOSPITAL

about the vagaries of war. It premiered one afternoon on the croquet lawn to a sparse but enthusiastic crowd.

After, the cast went down to the dock for a swim. In the spirit, Sarah marched off the diving board as a soldier, straight as an arrow, and achieved the ultimate goal of “touching the bottom.” The glorious moment was short-lived, as Sarah discovered that her foot was spurting blood. The gash required a trip to the real hospital in Bracebridge for stitches.

The next day, my father went diving with a mask to find the offending object and uncovered not one, but hundreds of broken glass bottles. The airmen were to blame—they had done target practice by shooting bottles off the end of the dock.

We forgave them. The airmen of our imagination were benevolent, possibly even heroic. We found an RCAF album of the cottage during the war, full of hale young men doing calisthenics on the dock, swan dives off a tower, and archery in the woods. Heroic but for their none-too-fashionable bathing trunks. As much as we despised September and the return to school, it was hard to imagine how they felt about what they faced when their summers ended.

Gradually, as the Second World War entered our school books and our understanding of history, we pieced together the connection with our cottage. The central character in this story was my great-grandmother Edith. She cuts a formidable figure in photos with her furs, brooches, and massive collars, donned even as she tended to her two small children, Joan and John, born in

1916 and 1917. Her husband, my great-grandfather Brian McColl, appears in jaunty caps and britches. He doesn't look sickly, but his tuberculosis was the reason for the family's seasonal migration between rented homes in North Carolina, Arizona, and Muskoka, where he took in the airs. He died in 1924.

Within a decade, a new man was at Edith's side, wearing round-frame glasses, three-piece suits, and a purposeful look. Francis Farwell was a Bostonian who owned Canada Coach Lines in Hamilton. The couple moved into a country home in nearby Waterdown.

In September 1939, John, then in his third year at Royal Military College in Kingston, joined the RCAF and left for Europe. As a flight lieutenant, he sent back terrified reports from the front. When he returned to Canada on leave, he brought friends with him. Edith welcomed them warmly at the Muskoka cottage. Soon it had become something of a destination for worn-out airmen.

Charity and patriotism were in the air. Francis, although American, was working in Ottawa as a dollar-a-year man for C.D. Howe's Ministry of Munitions and Supply. And Edith had the idea of institutionalizing the visits of her son's comrades. {Continued on page 118}

A visitor takes a dip (opposite) at the large dock belonging to the boathouse that Anne Cooper added to the Annex cottage in the 1980s. Down the shoreline, the dock at the main cottage was once the site of military-style calisthenics (above).



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In 1942, the Farwells bought the rented Muskoka cottage and handed it over to the Air Force for a convalescent facility.

The property had to be tailored to its new purpose. A hospital was built. Architectural drawings show an L-shaped building composed of two prefabricated 20-bed wards with offices, showers, and washrooms. Several small cabins labelled “sleeping quarters” were scattered across the point to accommodate staff. A garage was built, officers’ quarters were added to the boathouse, and kitchens and laundry facilities were incorporated into the main house.

The plans for the “No. 1 RCAF Convalescent Hospital, Milford Bay, Ont.” now reside in the National Archives along with personnel charts that would have warmed the Colonel’s cockles—all military and civilian occupants are listed according to rank and function. The facility’s total capacity was set at 100, and the hospital only accommodated 40, allowing for a robust staff. In the summer of 1945, it included two “medical,” two nurses, one carpenter, four chefs, two drivers, one seaman, one masseur, one motor mechanic, five drill instructors, one crafts and hobby instructor, clerks and assistants of various descriptions, and even one “specialist miscellaneous.” The facility operated from May through October.

It was a success, and soon similar facilities sprung up in Ontario and Quebec as part of a Wartime Convalescent Homes War Charity Fund (see “Pitching in for the Cause,” p. 100). An article in an April 1945 issue of *Saturday Night* magazine celebrated the end of “weariness, boredom, and depression” as convalescing airmen enjoyed “physical exertion in the fresh air and sunshine,” “mental diversions,” and customized therapy, concluding that the program was “one of the good things which has come out of this war.”

Of course, it relied on “private sponsorship” and the “many little details of equipment and consideration” that came with it. At Milford Bay, one of these little details was Edith herself, for whom caring for people and running things seemed to come naturally.

John McColl survived the war and, when it ended, the Muskoka property was returned to the Farwells. Hamilton-based architect Arthur Wallace, who had spent the war designing military buildings in Europe and the Middle East for the British War Office, was tasked with converting the hospital into a residential building. His plans, dated November 1948, show one wing “removed and salvaged” and the remaining one turned into a corridor of bedrooms and bathrooms—much as the Annex was in my childhood. His suggestions for the interior evoke another era: sinks from the *Port Hope Sanitary Catalogue*, a furnace from Tweed Steel Works, copper half-screens, three-ply birch walls, half an inch of asbestos insulation around the fireplace, and tongue-and-groove floors in maple and pine.

Civilian life resumed at the cottage. The family multiplied. John and his sister, Joan Braden, each had six children. The two clans, the McColls and the Bradens, were divided between the Annex and the main house; an annual charades trophy—a tin cup nailed to a slab of cedar—migrated between the two houses. The RCAF cabins got a lot of use, accommodating domestic staff and later serving variously as adolescent dens of iniquity, chicken coops, and refuges for guests.

Edith ruled the roost into the 1960s and did a lot of entertaining. She and her Hamilton lady friends played endless games of bridge on the porch, dipping their supposedly waist-trimming Metrecal biscuits into their martinis. The grandchildren performed diving and waterskiing stunts off the dock, in the hopes of eliciting shrieks from the porch.

By the time Joan, Edith’s daughter and my grandmother, occupied that porch, there were fewer martinis and more tea. Her cottage life revolved around her vegetable garden, watercolours, and ever-expanding family.

Of the steady trickle of visitors to the cottage, the most spectacular was her brother, John. In the post-war years, he arrived in a double-winged Tiger Moth, engine blaring, propeller spinning, every one on the dock scrambling to grab ropes and secure babies. In my childhood, it was a somewhat tamer Cessna that Uncle John crawled out of, a twinkle in his eye and a flask on his hip. >>

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He once took me up in that plane. My mother tried hard to look relaxed as we taxied away from the dock. (She was probably recalling the time Uncle John took one of her brothers up to a thousand feet and cut the engine, for fun.) It was too loud in the cabin to talk. The lake glinted in the sun and, for the first time, I could see the entire shoreline, the boundaries of that world. The family was a bunch of waving specks on the dock.

Every now and again, a car would drive up our driveway and a stranger would get out, looking a little lost. An elderly man, leaning on a cane or a relative, would make his way carefully across the lawn and introduce himself. He'd stayed at the cottage during the war, but it was a bit different then...and the memories began to flow. My grandmother always invited these men in for tea. They would sit on the porch and drink it all in, half in the past, half in the present, as the lake buzzed with motorboats and the voices of children at play.

Over the years, such visitors became less frequent. Uncle John died. My grandmother died. The Muskoka property was carved up. Parcels were ceded to family members and ultimately sold to strangers. The only part of "Muskoka" that remains in family hands today is the Annex.

My aunt Anne Cooper, herself now a grandmother, has turned the Annex into a very gracious cottage. Gone are the linoleum floors, the warped copper screens, the institutional bathrooms. She's added a winterized wing, a retreat from the multi-generational chaos. The cottage is full of art and treasures from her travels all over the world.

No stranger would ever know the place had been a hospital. But the lawn bowls on the mantelpiece and the wooden plane propeller mounted on the wall would have stories to tell. As would Anne's father, John, who hangs in official portraiture above the fireplace. Stories the memory would hold on to. Because that's where places like this live. 🐾

Naomi Buck is a well-travelled writer for whom cottaging on lakes is the best thing about being Canadian.