

Joys of island life

Living on Toronto's Centre Island had its magical moments. And fabulous frustrations.

I was reminded of my lingering love affair with the 14 Hiawatha Group islands, the size of downtown Toronto, that house the island airport, and animal park, theme park rides and countless Canada Geese depositing their green, cigar-shaped calling cards.

I rented a house — actually part of 8 Oriole Street, a small wooden cottage — for the best part of 1965, during which time I wrote dozens of poems, talked with the ducks, gazed at stars from a rocky perch facing the lake, and contemplated moving to Pitcairn instead of running a public relations firm.

But, like a typical Canadian, I compromised. I stayed in Canada and visited Centre Island whenever I could.

Back in 1956, when I first wrote about "The Island" as it is called by those most familiar with the cluster, it had 3,000 residents, many descendants of three or more generations. In the 1920s, Centre Island proudly boasted several fine estates, a magnificent Victorian sight. Today the population is barely 500.

My cottage, Casita by name, faced a row of other cottages separated by a thin concrete sidewalk and wide, weedy lawns. Two concrete pots held fiery red geraniums that refused to fade all summer long. A crazy squirrel, hopping like a Scot performing the sword dance, ate nuts from my hand and raided by kitchen early in the morning.

I remember the clanking sound of my heater-stove and chime of Chinese wind-bells on the porch. And the rattle of the milkman's bottles and his informal trudge through the kitchen in my near-sleep.



Wine
&
Dine

Don Crossley

Across the lagoon at night I heard the throaty murmur of a yacht and an accordion played by a frequently interrupted musician.

There was a little rabbit elf, who, black and white, would sit beside a similarly painted post.

The landlady, living in the back section of the grey cottage, cooked me a steak once, figuring that as a writer I was likely almost in indigent. Around the corner and along another street lived poet Gwen MacEwen who wrote shadowy things about Egypt and who years later died in poverty only days before the Canada Council announced a \$5,000 award for her. On The Island some guy committed suicide over his love for her.

Songwriter Brockman Brace lived in our house. His alarm clanged frighteningly at five in the morning, and he went off to write for a Brampton weekly newspaper. Brock and I were great friends for many years until his death in 1985 from Alzheimer's Disease.

The permanent residents, back in 1956, included several salty characters, such as Aquilla Skene, who rented bicycles. He arrived at The Island in 1895 and opened his rental shop in 1932. "Things are beginning to look kinda seedy around here," he told me in the year of the Hungarian Revolution. "Did you notice the old dance hall?"

I did. I walked along Indian-named streets. Ongiara. Shiawassie. Manitou. then to Hanlan's Point. The dance hall, in its heyday, must have been a grand sight. I saw it as a derelict, gray and faded, broken boards ready to tumble.

The ancient carousel nearby contained a menagerie of plaster and wood. Its horses, tigers, pigs and aristocratic ostriches produced an effect of joy. A sad joy.

Strange. One thought hit me: what were the animals thinking? A tiger's face sent a shiver up my spine.

During the week I worked at 2 Carlton Street in downtown Toronto. Each workday, in a gray flannel suit, white shirt and red tie, I walked briskly to the island ferries — the Sam McBride, William Inglis, Thomas Rennie and Trillium. The old Blue Bell sat like a defrocked swan in the inner island swamp.

I was the only businessman on each early-morning voyage to the city dock. It seemed strange to the deckhands, seeing me with my rectangular attache case and businesslike mien.

On foggy days the ferries halted business. I had to grab the water taxi - if its cantankerous operator decided to forge through the mist with a single passenger. He usually refused to budge.

But most times when the ferries failed to materialize, I commandeered the Algonquin Restaurant's outside phone booth. I called corporation presidents vice-presidents and assorted chief Poo-bahs in by summer shorts and jersey, and running shoes, trying valiantly to produce the sound of an earnest, careworn executive. My secretary helped keep up the marvelous hoax. I did get work done between duck feedings and gazing at girls on bicycles.

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