

THE WINDERMERE GAZETTE

Season's Greetings to our Windermere Community!!

As the cold of winter has settled over the Village of Windermere, we thought some “glacial” history would feel appropriate, along with some early Windermere area information!

(Excerpts from “Windermere - the Jewel of Lake Rosseau” by Richard Tatley)

Prior to 1860, there are few records of events in the Windermere area, but there are some historical and geological records that can provide a few facts.

Until about 10,000 years ago, the site of Windermere (and all of Ontario) was buried beneath the glaciers of the Wisconsin ice sheet. After their retreat, a huge meltwater lake, now known as Lake Algonquin, filled much of the present day Lake Michigan and Lake Ontario, until the land, released from the crushing weight of the ice, rebounded, causing Lake Algonquin to drain by way of the Mississippi and Trent Rivers. The giant lake left its mark by depositing thick alluvial layers over the Precambrian bedrock, resulting in the clay belts of Monck, Ryde and Watt Townships. These areas make up the finest farming lands in Muskoka.

As the climate warmed up and the subarctic tundra gave way to birch and poplar trees, and then later the pine, spruce, oak, and maple forests, small bands of indigenous hunter-gatherers found their way into Muskoka. Some of them may very well have camped in Windermere Bay, although time has erased any trace of their presence. No doubt the Ojibways would have made frequent use of the easy overland route from Portage Bay to Three Mile Lake, and then to Mary Lake and the Lake of Bays, but there is no reason to believe they ever settled permanently in Muskoka until the nineteenth century. By the 1830's there was a native settlement on Tobin Island and at Port Carling a little later still. There were a number of people - including Chief Mesqua-Ukee, who gave his name to the Muskoka District, and the shadowy fur-trader Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, for whom Lake Rosseau is named, and William Robinson of Penetanguishene, who operated from his cabin at Yoho Island on Lake Joseph, and the immortal mapmaker David Thomson - who all visited the site of Windermere, but the whole region remained what it had always been - a vast indigenous hunting ground.

All this changed around the middle of the nineteenth century when the Canadian government became profoundly aware of the need for additional farming lands to lure in more immigrants. Ignoring the warnings of critics, it ordered surveys of the Ottawa-Huron Tract, that vast expanse of hills and lakes and forests lying north of the Severn River and the Kawartha Lakes, and started advertising in Britain, Germany and other countries, that free lands were available to “would-be settlers”. It also ordered a number of “colonization roads” to be slashed through the wilderness providing access to the “new Eden”.

That this colonization scheme was basically a mistake, the critics right in claiming that most of the region consisted of sterile granite, and that hundred of men and women tragically wasted their time, money, energies and even their lives trying to tame a region where it was impossible to farm profitably - it is now history. On the positive side, the effort laid the basis of the modern Muskoka, and eventually gave rise to the village of Windermere.

By the year 1862, the Muskoka Road, the most successful of the colonization roads, had been extended north from Washago, past the future sites of Gravenhurst and Bracebridge to Falkenburg where one of the district’s first post offices was opened in 1863. In 1864 the Parry Sound Road, branching off at Falkenburg, was opened to Parry Sound, past the north side of Three Mile Lake. Two years later (1866) it was declared fit for wheeled vehicles. Soon a van or wagon, known locally as “Black Maria”, was bumping its way painfully over the road twice a week, carrying mail and passengers, but for most of its length it was little better than a stumpy trail.

As early as 1862, years before Watt Township was laid out, land hungry settlers, not waiting for roads or surveys, came to the area. A genial pioneer named Jacob “Jake” Bogart, of Pennsylvania Dutch Loyalist ancestry, was building a shanty beside a creek flowing into the south east side of Three Mile Lake, thus becoming the founder of the small farming community of Ufford.

More newcomers followed in 1863 - James M. Shea and his family, second generation Irish immigrants from Glengarry County. They settled west of Jake Bogart’s holdings clearing the land and erecting their shanty. It was an exceedingly rugged life they led, bitterly cold winters, mosquitoes and black flies of summer, wild animals, and no roads, sawmills, gristmills, stores, doctors, or clergyman closer than Orillia. They were hardy, they improvised, they hunted, trapped and fished, and they walked fifty miles to get supplies and mail. They kept ruffians off their lands. Gradually more settlers arrived, including the Hammels and Creaser brothers.

Stay tuned for more in the 2025 Windermere Gazette - starting June....and until then, all the best in 2025!!

from your editors - Karen Lang, Susan Kinsella and Bev Longhurst