

MEMOIRS
BY
BRIG. GEN. S. A. DENISON, C.M.G.



BRIG. GEN. S. A. DENISON, C.M.G.

TORONTO

T. H. BEST PRINTING CO. LIMITED

1927

CHAPTER VII

LAKE MUSKOKA

It is now over fifty years since my first visit to Muskoka and, as I was quite young at the time, it made a great impression upon me, so much so that ever since my greatest pleasure has been to return every summer to these waters, I have done this every year, but two, that I have been in the country since that time, and only missed those two summers by being unable to procure leave from the Field Training of my Regiment. These annual visits have in all amounted to forty two so I trust my readers will be good enough to overlook my devoting a chapter to my much beloved summer home at Lake Muskoka, Ontario, which I have named "Agiiohook", an Indian word meaning, "Place of the Spirit of the Pines".

The facilities for reaching Muskoka fifty years ago were very different from those of to-day when you get a perfectly-equipped train service from Toronto to Muskoka Wharf, which only takes four hours; while on my first visit, the railway was only completed to within twenty-five miles of that point. The train was made up of the most antiquated and uncomfortable coaches and, as to its speed, you will appreciate that when I say that one was asked the conundrum in those days "Why those trains resembled that unpleasant insect that sometimes occupies uncleanly beds" to which the answer was "Because they crawl over the sleepers".

When we reached railhead we had to stage twenty-five miles over the roughest road that human has ever experienced, cut through the dense forest, and so narrow that you could only pass an approaching vehicle about one spot in every mile, but, as in those days the traffic was not quite equal to that at Piccadilly Circus to-day, we experienced no difficulty, in that regard, as we met neither motor car, or even an ox-cart. We, however, had one unusual experience on this road, and in this way—I have already mentioned that the road was very narrow and cut through the dense forest—As luck would have it there had been a heavy wind the night before and a great forest tree, of about four feet in diameter, had fallen across the road. It was absolutely impossible to make a detour round the tree, through the forest, without felling twenty or thirty trees and anyone who knows anything of our Canadian forests will admit, at once, that to do that, and after felling, clear a passage for the stage, we should have been there for the best part of twenty-four hours. What was to be done? Only a Canadian woodsman and an exceptionally good one at that could solve the difficulty. Anyone who has ever seen a Canadian backwoodsman handle his axe will never forget it. Just as a perfect horseman can do anything with a troublesome mount with ease and grace, so can the aforesaid woodsman do anything in a forest with equal grace and greater rapidity.

A smoker is never without his pipe, a woman her powderpuff, nor a Canadian woodsman his axe and that axe, in perfect condition, i.e., as sharp as a razor.

Within a quarter of a minute of reaching our obstacle, the driver, axe in hand, was out of the stage, had selected a suitable tree of about eighteen inches in diameter, in a convenient position and, in an inconceivably short time, had felled it exactly where he wanted it, cut from it two lengths of about seven or eight feet each, placed one on either side of the tree to act as a ramp, resumed his seat on the stage, drove it intact, without of course our party, over the tree without mishap and within thirty-five minutes we were once again moving on towards our destination, which we reached in ten most uncomfortable hours, instead of in the four very comfortable ones which it takes to-day. It would only bore my readers describing what one met with in the wild, untouched

forests of Canada in those days as there is no one who cannot imagine, and I think fairly accurately, the kind of rough playfellows one encountered. I will therefore proceed to set forth the many attractions that make my Canadian summer home as fascinating to me as the most heavenly—and they are certainly that—country domain of the most envied country gentleman in that most beautiful country in the world, dear old England, is to him.

To begin with the climate from the first of June, until the middle of September, cannot possibly be excelled, if equaled. I am mentioning the climate of summer months only, for the reason that I am writing about my summer and not winter home. Some may wonder why, if Muskoka is so terribly attractive as I try to make out, I don't live there all the year round.

There are many reasons. Winters in Canada, especially in Northern Ontario, are very severe. The thermometer has a playful habit of hovering around 30 degrees below zero. The Island cottages are built to be as cool as possible, rather than as warm as possible.

The ice on the lake being from one-and-a-half to two feet thick there are absolutely none of those delightful pleasures of summer available, such as boating, fishing, bathing, etc., and all winter sports are as easily obtained nearer civilization.

Bathing in Muskoka is absolutely perfect.

The boating, whether in an Indian birch-bark or other canoe, yacht or motor boat is hard to beat.

Owing to the fact that our lakes are dotted with hundreds of islands, varying in size from a quarter of an acre to five hundred acres, there are any number of clear stretches where one can open the throttle for speed. Should a sudden storm arise there is always shelter to be found behind these Islands and at a very short distance.

As for picnics, either for lunch or tea, it is perfect owing to the unlimited number of places convenient for landing, building fire on rock close to water, which is very important as it is then, easily and thoroughly, extinguished; obtaining shelter from sun, to say nothing of other essentials to comfort.

The fishing is good, but it is limited to Salmon-Trout, Pickerel and Small-mouthed Black Bass. I have never killed a Salmon in my life, but envy to a degree those who have the privilege of enjoying that greatest of sport, but I have, however, fished on many occasions in the lakes of the Nickabon Club of the Laurentian Hills, in the Province of Quebec, one of, if not, the best Trout-fishing preserves in Canada and I have the honour of holding the record for that Club of landing the largest fish, having caught one Trout of five pounds one and one-half ounces, and yet unhesitatingly say that there is more pleasure to be gained in playing a three-pound Small-mouthed Black Bass, than any five pound speckled Trout that was ever spawned.

The firm, sweet, thick flesh of a Bass—boned before frying—is preferable for breakfast to any other fish, not excepting the English Sole.

Although I have often uttered the Fisherman's Prayer, "Lord grant to me to catch a fish as big that, even I, when talking of it to my friends shall have no need to lie", yet, have I, in fifty years' experience, never landed a Bass of over five pounds in weight, except on three occasions, and these then only exceeded that weight by a trifle, but each summer have had no difficulty in securing many from three to four pounds, and, as most fishermen will allow that the Bass is the Bull Dog of fishes, you will understand why one thinks our fishing good.

While writing of fishing, there is a yarn on that subject that I wish to spin and, unlike most fish

stories, it is a true one. Muskoka is now a very different place from what it was when I first knew it, especially the two northern lakes of our Muskoka group of three, viz:—Rosseau and Joseph; there are hundreds visit these lakes annually and consequently the fishing there is poor. My dear old friend the late Sir Glenholme Falconbridge, Chief Justice of the King's Bench for Ontario, was the keenest of fishermen and who, strange to say, seemed to be able to arrange to always hold his Court in a community where there was Trout-fishing, at a time when he could exercise his bent to the full.

He said to me one day, "Why do you say that the fishing in Muskoka is good while all who have been there tell me it is fished out?" The reply to this was, "You're right as to the Northern Lakes, but wrong as to my part of Muskoka." "How do you account for that," was his next question. "Easily," said I. "When I see anyone impertinent enough to cast a line within a mile of my Island I promptly produce my Martini-Henry, with the object of improving my ability to use that weapon, and, somehow or another, accidentally select as a target something close to them and when they find bullets landing all about them they, usually and with the same alacrity, do, as Pat said the Black Squirrels did, when asked by a neighbour to whom he was returning the rifle he had borrowed with which to shoot them, "Did you kill any Pat?" "No," was his reply, "But I made them leave that."

I have several times heard Sir Glenholme telling his friends "General Denison's novel method of preserving the fishing about his Island in Muskoka."

Enough about fishing. Now for a word about bathing.

It seems impossible to believe, but it is absolutely true, nevertheless, that one meets people who prefer salt water to fresh water bathing. I have, however, always put them down as lazy people who prefer the more buoyant water, as it gives them less exertion to keep up.

Any swimmer will agree with me that the only way of entering water for a swim is to plunge in head first and open the eyes as soon as under water. When I do this in salt water, if succeeding in not getting a mouthful of it, I am not so successful in missing an unpleasant smarting in the eyes. However, "Chacun a son gout".

I have bathed in salt water from the cold Labrador current of northern latitudes to the warm gulf stream of southern, and in many other parts, but I need scarcely say that on each occasion it was a case of Hobson's choice.

I have bathed in the Great Lakes of Huron, Erie and Ontario, and in the smaller lakes and rivers of Ontario and Quebec and, in no instance, have I found the bathing to equal that of Muskoka for these three reasons:—

First. The water is as soft as rain water. Second. It is so intermixed with iron that it acts as a tonic and, Thirdly. The temperature of the water is at all times of a degree to stimulate exertion and give that essential feeling of freshness and that glow which should accompany perfect bathing. In no other place in the world, in which I have bathed, did I feel, on coming out of the water, stronger than when entering it, with the skin soft and smooth as a baby's and, with a desire—which I could, with impunity, satisfy—to repeat the dose, into four or five times daily, which I have often done and been none the worse for it.

No one will say that the sticky, clammy feeling after a salt water bath is pleasant, or that, that hard roughness of skin after a plunge in the waters of our Great Lakes is conducive to unmitigated pleasure.

There is one other attraction in Muskoka worth mentioning, and one to be found in few places other than in Northern Ontario and Quebec, and that is the inexplicable pleasure of wandering through a primeval forest where human foot has scarcely, if ever, trod before; where the woodman's axe has never been swung, leaving magnificent trees as they have stood for centuries; breathing the most delicate and gratifying pine-scented air, to say nothing of enjoying to the full that awe-inspiring, supreme peace and quiet, to be found only in our northern forests.

It would, perhaps, be amiss to omit, from an account of Muskoka life, a reference to Camp-fires and I will, therefore, give a short account of one held, at my request, for the entertainment of the Marquis and Marchioness of Aberdeen whom I prevailed upon to spend a few days in Muskoka during their last year at Government House.

I wrote to Professor Campbell of Yoho Island and asked him, as the oldest Muskoka-Island resident, if he would arrange a Camp-fire for me, which he very kindly and successfully did.

The wood for the fire, which of course, in Muskoka, is unlimited, had been carefully selected, which is important, properly piled, which was well understood, and suitably placed, which is of paramount importance and often difficult to achieve, i.e., upon ground that has assumed a natural amphitheatre.

Invitations had been sent to the visitants of the various Islands, within a radius of ten miles, resulting in about a hundred guests assembling.

An excellent programme had been arranged of recitations, glees, songs, and music from different instruments, such as mandolins, banjos, etc., from the abundant talent readily found among the guests.

At these entertainments all are expected to do their "little bit" to help it on and His Excellency certainly did his by telling a story in that inimitable manner for which he is renowned.

The evening was clear, cool and calm and those who have never seen a "Camp-fire" in our Canadian backwoods can, perhaps, imagine what a picturesque, unique sight it was, and appreciate how we thoroughly obtained perfect effect from voice and music in the open air, on that heavenly, calm evening.

After the programme was finished all joined in singing the National Anthem, and the entertainment was brought to a close by, what I might term, a "Muskoka free and easy supper".

This typical Camp-fire was, I am sure, much appreciated by all, even by those who had experienced many similar entertainments, of course, of a smaller nature, and, especially, by their Excellencies, who recalled it to me many years after.

It was something to be remembered to see the guests departing for their Islands, in every conceivable form of craft, from the smallest Indian canoe to the largest Jollyboat and to hear, fainter and fainter as their distance from you increased, their merry boating and other songs which, I think, can never appeal to anyone more than when well sung, on a dead calm evening on our intensely quiet, romantic lakes, even if intermingled, at times, with that exceedingly weird call of the Loon.