

Always
cherish every
moment.

—I. Anne Link,
Farm Lake, Que.

70 Years (and counting)

There's no such thing as a cottaging expert. But after so much water under the bridge, here's what I've learned

By Roy MacGregor Photography Raina + Wilson

Dear Catherine,

Congratulations. You have just taken leave of your senses—creature comforts, reliable services, traffic ease, handy shopping—yet are entering a whole new world that, with each passing year, will come to make more and more sense.

Cottages, in fact, *are* for you.

Believe me, I know of what I speak. I am coming up to my 70th summer at the lake, given that I was all of four days old when I was taken to my grandparents' log home on a rocky point on Algonquin Park's Lake of Two Rivers. We stayed all summer every summer until the grandparents passed on and the cottage sold. In the years since, as much of summer as possible has been spent at a small cabin on Camp Lake, which receives its clean, clear water from a waterfall on the very edge of Algonquin.

You may think that 70 summers at the lake would make me an expert on cottaging, but there is, in fact, no such thing. Nevertheless, there are a few tips I might hand on to someone just starting out.

Your new place sounds like quite the bargain. Think of it as a good buy rather than as an RRSP with waterfront. If it must be considered an investment, think of that in terms of time and family rather than money—but one with guaranteed returns.

Your cottage is rustic. No electricity. No running water. I can relate to that. We had no such luxuries in all those years on Lake of Two Rivers. My grandfather

was a park ranger. He built the log home, the cabins, and, of course, the out-house, a two-seater. We hauled cooking and washing water up from the lake. Drinking water required that you carry a pail more than half a kilometre along a rocky, root-riddled trail and across a beach to a small spring where a dipper was conveniently kept.

For more than three decades there was electricity but no running water at our current spot on Camp Lake. No one complained. Then, however, a small inheritance suggested it was time to put in water, septic, a bathroom, a hot water heater for showers, and a small washing machine to cut down the trips to town.

You will not be able to resist putting in that water you mentioned, Catherine, but let me tell you, on behalf of all cottagers with a salty sailor's vocabulary, that there will come a day, usually late in November, when your cold, unresponsive hands will have to haul plastic pipe out of the water, twist off a locked-on foot valve, bleed the pump and the hot water heater, sponge out the toilet, blow the lines clear with a temperamental compressor, and fret all winter long that your pipes have frozen and split.

There is something to be said for no running water, you know.

Every late spring, someone at your new summer place will say that the blackflies are worse this year than they have ever been. Every time they say it they will be right.

There will be no ordering-in at the cottage. You will eat out more often, but only once the blackflies have died down.

I note you have children: Oliver, who is seven, and four-year-old Zoe. Youngsters and water are a good mix, when carefully watched, during the day and before bed. No one, however, is capable of watching all the time. My mother's solution was to tie me to a tree using a length of rope and a leather harness. While effective, this method would not be recommended today. What you can do, though, is institute a hard rule about lifejackets and swimming only when a grown-up's there.

There will be trying times. You need to stress the importance of respect for wildlife—even to those who are only four years old and never meant to hug that little toad to death.

Back in the 1950s, my sister Ann and I fell in love with watching dragonflies hatch. We would hover over them as they emerged from their nymph stage in the warm sunlight, waiting for their sparkling wings to unfold and dry before flying off in search of mosquitoes. We wanted them to stay so badly that we pinched off the wings. Ignorance is no excuse, of course, but it's the only one we have.

We left frogs to dry out in pails. We put minnows in jars, tightened the lids, and, next day, were aghast to find them floating upside down. "Catch 'n' release" is a good philosophy for all ages. (With our own four children, we made sure that they had a shaded tub in which to place toads, frogs, and salamanders, and made them empty it each day.)

Soon you will find the delights of toad-hunting will turn {Continued on page 96}

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to the teen lament: “There’s nothing to do.” The easiest solution, of course, is to pack a friend or two when heading for the lake. Choose carefully, especially if you stick with the notion of no electricity and no running water. What lies under the bed at night pales compared to what lies down that dark and threatening wooden hole on which a city child is about to place a bare bum.

Use boredom as an opportunity to introduce the delight of board games. Monopoly, Clue, Scrabble, checkers, and—the greatest of them all—crokinole are, for reasons never fully understood, pure delight at the lake and of next-to-no interest at home. And just as it is always advisable to have a good supply of pancake mix at the cottage, it’s equally wise to have a healthy pile of Archie comics.

The day will come, not long after that stage, when your children will no longer consider themselves children. One of them will ask to have the cottage without you for the weekend. It will happen. It

might be about the gang or, as happened to us, about someone you suspect may be more than just a friend. Your weekend in the city will feature a great deal of tossing and turning, yet I am here to tell you this: it will all be just fine. It passes.

At some point down the road—let’s hope not too soon after—you will be entering the realm of grandparenting, which is the secret joy of cottage life. The first sign one sees upon entering our cabin is: Welcome to Grandma’s: No Rules! No Parents! No Bedtime! There is a pure delight in having grandchildren there, all to yourselves, where you can say to them, as Rat said to Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*: “Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.”

I do have some very practical advice for you, as well:

Hide a key. You will be astonished how often it will come into play.

Buy, and learn how to use, a chainsaw. Also learn how to sharpen one. You do this by taking the chains into a place that sells chainsaws.

Find your own “Old Guy,” though he may actually be fairly young and he may be a she. Someone who knows how to do things—fell threatening trees, jury-rig a water pump, fix the roof, solder copper pipes—and can be trusted to use that hidden key. Once you find yours, treat him or her as a god, as gods of cottage country these people most assuredly are.

If you can get in, visit during the winter, even though there is no road access and, obviously, no central heating. Once you get there and get the place warmed up, there is nothing quite so precious as the deep silence of a winter’s day.

Understand that your assertion “we even got rid of the mice” is, sadly, wrong. You will never, ever, ever be totally mouse free. Live with it.

Finally, I would advise you to take time each closing up to appreciate the season past. You will not always be aware of what was notable and what memories will last longest, but many, if not most, will come from this very special place.

I came to realize this through my mother, the person who carried me to the cottage when I was all of four days old.

Her cottage memories, surely, would revolve around hard work. She had to carry the buckets up from the lake to do the dishes, fire up the woodstove to cook—the stove blazing hot even on the muggiest days of summer—and haul the ice block out of the ice-house sawdust. She did the washing, the cleaning, looked after her four kids and, usually, various other cousins, dropped off the way kittens are sometimes left at the end of a farm lane.

Her escape was to go for an evening canoe ride. I would sometimes go with her—she taught me how to paddle—but there would rarely be any talking. It would be so quiet you could hear a trout surface, the light kiss of water being punctured. You could hear every stroke and draw of her paddle.

One would think, then, that she might resent such a life of constant work, but in fact she treasured it more than anything else. Nearing 80, she suggested a return to Lake of Two Rivers. Cousin Don McCormick and I drove her up to Algonquin and we parked at the side of the road, the parking spot long ago grown over. We tried to make our way down

the long path to the point, but windfall and overgrowth made it impossible, so we bushwhacked. At one point Don held my mother under her arms and I carried her by her legs as we made our way through a tangle of fallen trees.

But we made it. She went around to all the nearly invisible sites—a few stones from the old fireplace, the crooked tree in front of where the outhouse had stood, the piled rocks by the point that had served as a foundation corner for the kitchen where, it seemed, if she wasn’t cooking she was ironing, if she wasn’t washing she was cleaning up.

Then she went and sat on a log and quietly stared out at the water for what seemed like an hour. She knew she would not be there again.

Years later, when her mind was wandering, and she was in the hospital, the end obviously near, she coughed, and I asked her if she would like a drink of water. “Yes,” she said. And then, in a young voice perfectly lucid, she proceeded to tell me where to go to find that water. “There’s a trail back of the big house,” she said. “If you stick to it and stay by

the water, you’ll come to a place where you can climb down...”

I did not interrupt her or even consider correcting her. I sat as she described the roots-and-rock trail along the cliff and down, the walk across the beach, and the trail that led to the little spring with the handy dipper.

I just let her go, the two of us, two different generations, lost in the same memory of where we both, and countless others in our family, spent so many of our happiest days.

What I hope this story tells you, Catherine, is that though it is often said that time stands still at a cottage—it does not. The woman who carried her infant to the lake that day eventually became a very old woman, yet in her cottage memory she is forever young, forever in love with what would always be, to several generations, the most treasured place on earth.

Welcome to the cottage.

Enjoy, Roy 🐾

Roy MacGregor’s latest book is *Canoe Country: The Making of Canada. He lives in Kanata, Ont.*



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