

They lost nearly everything in the fire. But these hardy northern Saskatchewan cottagers found what it took to start over again

THAT

WHICH

DOES

NOT

BURN

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# PAM

# AND ERIC

Woodsworth had a ritual. Every time they steered their motorboat around a point of Saskatchewan's Nemeiben Lake and their cottage came into view, they'd feign surprise and say, "It's still here." The exact origins of the ritual are unknown, but it started shortly after they bought the rickety 480 sq. ft. wood cabin in 1995 and would continue through many renovations and a size-doubling addition. The cabin was in the middle of nowhere, 400 km north of Saskatoon, accessible for less than half the year and camouflaged in dense forest with pine siding, so there was genuine delight every time. The Woodsworths would practise this ritual with their two daughters in the boat and, over the years, with their grandchildren. It's still here.

And then, one day, it wasn't. The cottage was gone. The aluminum fishing boat, melted. The birch and the jack pines, stripped thin like matchsticks burnt to their ends. The lot, four hours north of their home, was blanketed in thick, greasy ash that spread across thousands of hectares.

The sight was a shock but not a surprise. Two weeks before the Woodsworths arrived to see the devastation, in June 2015, three lightning strikes had ignited tinder-like grass 20 km northwest of the lake. High winds and record-setting heat propelled the fire southeast, swallowing up timber until it slammed into the lakeside. The Woodsworths had been following the fire's progress online via NASA satellite photos. They thought their cabin might be safe, but embers blew across the lake and ignited new fires wherever they landed.

Only a special brand of people would vacation in this northern wilderness. Since Crown land property leases are only \$275 a year, the community is affordable enough for middle-class Saskatchewanians and farmers, as well as many teachers, whose two months' vacation makes accessing the remote community less onerous. Before retiring, Pam, 62, a community



"Fires are just a part of a forest's life," says Pam Woodsworth, who's come to see the silver lining in disaster. "Who knows what we'll see grow next year?"



health nurse, often got summers off, and Eric, 64, a biologist for Environment Canada, would join his family on the weekends. Even when they weren't around, they followed the community's informal rules of leaving doors unlocked in case stranded boaters needed refuge. The people here are more laid-back than the cabin owners you'd meet at, say, Emma Lake, near Saskatoon, home to a famous artist retreat. Even before the fire, you wouldn't spot too many Jet Skis and other "toys," but you might see Indigenous people checking traplines or enterprising wild-rice harvesters pulling stalks into their canoes.

The lake is also a training ground for water bombers, but they could not save the community this time. Over 100 wildfires were burning across the province, overwhelming emergency personnel and forcing 13,000 evacuations in Northern Saskatchewan. As a result, firefighters and water bombers couldn't protect the recreational properties with the same valiance as the threatened residential communities, and a third of the 80 cabins—some on islands miles apart—turned to ash.

After the wildfires were controlled, the Woodsworths drove back to Nemeiben Lake. They climbed out of their boat, onto the half-burned dock, and assessed the wreckage. Eric searched for the trumpet he toured Europe with as a young musician and that he played with their daughter Jordan on the screened porch, but like almost everything else, it was dust. Even the cast iron pans that had become an essential ingredient of Pam's Thanksgiving dinners were warped beyond usefulness.

The wreckage was daunting. The Crown lease stipulated that in case of a disaster they'd have to rebuild within two years or give up their lease. Or, they could break the lease without penalty. But the decision was easy: within weeks, the Woodsworths started raking glass, pulling out stumps, clearing trees. Back-breaking work.

"There was no question we would rebuild," Pam says in a raised voice as Eric steers us five minutes from the last dock at

"Our view has changed," says Pam (opposite, with Eric). "Now we can see the colours at sunset more than before. That's kind of a bonus."

# “THERE WAS NO QUESTION

the Nemeiben Lake campground. I can hardly hear her over the motorboat engine and the splashing of the wake. More than two years have passed, and they're close to finishing, though it's less a rebuild than a re-envisioning. What Eric calls the “quintessential cabin in the woods” is being replaced with a striking structure designed by modern infill architect Crystal Bueckert of Saskatoon's BLDG Studio. It was constructed largely by the Woodsworths themselves—they got lots of practice, renovating the humble original over 20 years. But this one, at 1,770 sq. ft.—nearly quadruple the first incarnation—is being built to last and to accommodate the next generation. “We are considering this a gift to our children and grandchildren,” says Eric, before turning off the engine and letting the boat glide into the rebuilt dock. He had only retired for a month when everything burned. “We may not get to enjoy many more years here ourselves.”

For now, they can only describe the unfinished cabin's design to me. It's a brisk September night, and we must walk through the grass with flashlights. Highlighted by floodlights, two men drill metal siding that should offer better protection from future fires. Eric pulls on thick gloves and a headlamp and joins them, while Pam leads me into a rented RV, which they brought in over an ice road last year, and shows me to my bunk. While potatoes and chicken sizzle in the oven and scent the camper with herbs, she recounts how her daughter Jordan and son-in-law Steve Flegel's teenage romance budded in the cozy cottage, and how Jordan's sister, Julia, born with a developmental disability that impairs her vision and motor skills, found a rare sense of freedom tubing in the water. Julia is non-verbal, but Jordan always called the cabin her “favourite place on the planet.”

“There are people who still live very traditional lives in this area, who've lost summer homes and traplines,” Pam says with reasoned gratitude. “We didn't lose that. What we did lose was a place that we had grown to love deeply and was a source of fun, relaxation, family time, and friends.”

Eric's back an hour later with the contractors, two young brothers from Beardy's & Okemasis' First Nation. Tomorrow,

# WE WOULD

# REBUILD”



Aside from the guestbook, the Woodsworths don't mourn the items they lost in the fire. “We still have the memories,” says Pam. “The rest was just stuff.”





after lunch is finished, they'll pack the tools in the large heated shed that's been a makeshift cabin for contractors all summer, and the Woodsworths will head to home Saskatoon before reconvening their project in May.

It wake up to the smell of sausages and an impossibly bright day. With century-old conifers gone, there's little shade and stronger winds, but the scorched terrain also has benefits: formidable sunrises and sunsets, perfect views of the stars and the northern lights, and the ability to grow vegetables. The clouds rained all last night and scrambled before dawn, creating a magical glistening to the landscape finally in full view.

Within a week of the fire, corydalis wildflowers sprung up and spread so fast that, by the time Pam and Eric started rebuilding in spring 2016, the whole hillside looked pink and yellow. This year it's purple with fireweed, yellow from scrawny birch leaves stretching out of stumps (some over six feet tall, nearing Eric's stature), and green from baby jack pines soft as grass. "There's, like, 20 trees in this patch here," Pam says, kneeling down to brush it tenderly. "It's like a carpet." They're fire-adaptive trees, she explains, because the heat cracks open their cones and releases their seeds. "I wonder what it's going to look like next year?" she asks herself as we walk to the cottage, rain-soaked moss burbling under our boots.

To take advantage of the higher ground, the new cabin is set 70 metres east of the original, allowing it to stretch toward the lake with a screened outdoor kitchen. It wings out at the centre where four bedrooms steal views of the back bay and a massive rock, exposed and given characteristic cracks by the fire. The open kitchen and living room windows are more generous, taking in almost seamless views of Nemeiben Lake. Eventually, continuous window cushions will run along it, atop storage benches, accommodating dozens of {Continued on page 100}

Even without a finished cabin, "we're still hosting dinner parties," says Pam, who fed neighbours and their crew after a long day of rebuilding.

## THAT WHICH DOES NOT BURN

{Continued from page 87}

guests for their famous Thanksgiving parties that fog up the panes with both oven and body heat.

For now, there's not much to see inside but plank piles and sawdust flying off Eric's bench saw. Soon, whitewashed pine walls will stretch up to the 12-foot-high ceilings, creating a canvas for wildly coloured kitchen island bar stools and bright, hyperrealistic paintings by Saskatchewan's Destiny Schafer. Thousands of dollars of art and crafts—birchbark baskets and beaded moccasins—were lost in the fire, much of it from a traditional trading post in nearby La Ronge. Pam was able to find some identical ones and is replacing the works with bold and vibrant art—styles I can tell she's drawn to by her uniquely shaped eyewear and asymmetrical pixie cut.

Though it's larger, the cabin is also a chance to reduce their environmental footprint with solar panels on the side of the house and a smaller water heater. The previous one, at 25 gallons, was a needless luxury when most of the time jumping in the pristine lake will suffice.

Outside, Pam shows me a few rusted steel trinkets rescued from the ashes, currently piled around a tree, but which will eventually make their way into the new cabin. A key holder for the entry, a tea towel hook for the kitchen, a cow-shaped wind chime, still chiming. They'd rather have found intact Eric's trumpet or the guestbook teeming with handwritten memories. But they'll take what they can get. "We're just going to clean them up and use them, because we want to have memories of the old cabin," says Pam.

She returns to the RV to make soup from scratch—Pam, it would seem, is in a constant state of cooking—and I bask in the late summer sun, amid wailing loons and thumping woodpeckers drawn to burned bark for easy feeding. Across the lake, I can see the randomness of the wildfire's path in small islands lush and green and in others brown and hollow. In total, 27 cabins were destroyed.

A motorboat rumbles across the lake, turns and drifts to shore without hurry. It's a bit battered, unroofed, and seemingly upholstered with garbage bags.

"Good morning," calls a woman in a green scarf, while a man with a long grey beard and bent ball cap ties the boat up to the dock. It's Kacy and Gerry Lindskog from Lindskog Island, named after Gerry's dad, Allen, who is a bit of an establishment on the lake. He cut the gravel road into Nemeiben's campground and built the first lodge in the 1950s as an outfitter who jump-started tourism on the lake. Gerry, who grew up between Nemeiben and La Ronge, would help build eight lakeside cabins before selling the family business 15 years ago. After the wildfire consumed their 54-year-old cabin, he hopes that he'll only have to build one more.

Pam steps out of the RV. "I didn't even hear you come," she says, sharing a big embrace with Kacy.

"I really wanna see your cabin," says Kacy. "Every time we come, you're not here." Kacy scurries away for a tour with Pam. "I love those!" I overhear her exclaim about the transom windows.

In the meantime, Gerry teaches me about the area's unique zoning laws that enforce a minimum of one mile between each cabin on the Crown land, creating even more isolation in the region, where cell reception is nearly non-existent. The remoteness has made finding and retaining reliable contractors a constant battle, forcing cabin owners to trade skills and do as much of the construction together as possible. Luckily, in hardy Saskatchewan, those skills are widespread, as is the barn-raising attitude cultivated in Canada's farming capital. "Everyone is helping each other. If it was just a couple cabins, they'd all be done and up by now," says Gerry. However, with two dozen simultaneous construction sites, labour is spread thin, and delays are many.

Given the short construction season, the extreme remoteness, and the need to bring materials boatload by boatload and then lug them up narrow paths by hand, it's a miracle that these buildings are as far along as they are. The Woodsworths anticipate finishing in spring 2018, the Lindskogs even sooner. I climb into Kacy and Gerry's boat and trek five kilometres north, shivering the whole way as clouds return and canvas the sky.

Set by the eastern shore, Lindskog Island was one of the first to go up in smoke. But despite their generational

connection to the land, they've remained level-headed about their losses, in part because their adult daughters were at the cabin when the fire spread. They watched the fire jump from the mainland to an island north of their cabin, then made a panicked escape back to La Ronge while ash rained down on them.

The fire kept spreading, coming within kilometres of the La Ronge airport. The Lindskogs' son-in-law volunteered to stay and help fire crews, but the rest of their family was evacuated for two weeks, driving to refuge in separate vehicles in a hundred-car convoy along a highway flaming on both sides. Living as far north as they do, wildfires are a regular part of life, and they acknowledge that as summer temperatures rise fires will become even more common in Western Canada. In the three years since the Nemeiben Lake fire, wildland infernos torched over a million B.C. hectares and, in the Fort McMurray area, caused Canada's largest evacuation and costliest insurance payout, destroying nearly 2,000 structures. Still, despite ominous climate trends threatening wooded communities, the Lindskogs' hearts are set on rebuilding.

The family has opted for a cottage inspired by the original, albeit with higher stilts and a lift for Kacy, who has multiple sclerosis. They'll pay further homage with a wall dedicated to pictures from the old cabin so they can "look into the past," says Kacy. Outside, she points out fresh bear droppings and scratches in the newly installed green vinyl siding. "I think he's been back," says Gerry, poking at a ripped-open insulation bag with little worry. For them, it's a sign that the land is returning to normal.

Back at Pam and Eric's, we lunch with the workers, and the Lindskogs say goodbye. As I toss my duffel bag into the Woodsworths' boat to head back to my car, I catch Pam taking in the landscape pensively. "I think I know what our ritual was about," she offers. "We still have the sky, we still have the lake, we still have the rock. If you're lucky in life, you find some places on this earth where your spirit just feels totally at peace. That's what this place is for us." 🐾

*Omar Mouallem is the co-author of Inside the Inferno: A Firefighter's Story of the Brotherhood that Saved Fort McMurray.*