

How To Meet Your Neighbours

One persons' story of the North Pigeon Lake Association and what it has meant to him and his family.

My first sight of Pigeon Lake was on a camping trip to "Green Acres" on Pigeon Lake's west side in 1962. My parents loved the lake from its excellent fishing to the small town of Bobcaygeon very reminiscent of our home town of Harriston. In 1963 my parents started their progression through various sizes of permanently stationed trailers from 13 feet to eventually 42 feet all ensconced at "Lilac Lodge" on the first level ground above the tenting area. Eventually they bought a back-lot at Tate's Bay and then, with grandchildren enjoying the lake and its surroundings, they settled in for years. Retirement came and as the Tate's Bay area was very underpopulated with year round residents they sold and moved back to Harriston. For a few years we were without a tie to Pigeon Lake and Bobcaygeon.

Thanks to the Spittels of Bobcaygeon we were able to rent a cottage on the lake and the hankering for a cottage on Pigeon was renewed. The hunt was on. We could not afford both a great move in ready cottage as well as a prime piece of waterfront. Limited finances were cramping our wants! The cottage we had rented was in an area called Springbank Woods on the northwest shoreline near Nogie's Creek Bay.

In July of 1986 my wife and I found our perfect location back on Pigeon Lake and moved into the Springbank area with two children who were about to experience the joys of cottage country. But first there were significant repairs to be done on the old cottage circa 1924. After about 5 years of seeing only animals as tenants and having had two trees wear holes in the ceiling the first day made us wonder at our sanity when making such a significant purchase. Family and good friends all arrived that July weekend with food, refreshments, tools, and most importantly the eagerness to get the old place livable in short order. The roof was left to professionals who had it fixed in two days effort. The water would now stay out while we shovelled debris into bins for the dump.

The bonus that came with the cottage were the neighbours. The Hills on one side were super. The Jones on the other side complimented the Hills plus they were all related. As we widened our introduction to the other cottagers in the Springbank area we smiled broadly at how lucky we were to be accepted into the neighbourhood. Someone always had a hand to lend or the perfect tool to repair our run down cottage. I even think we returned all of them! As an aside it did take about ten years for the cottage to be referred to as the Morton cottage not the Stephenson's, the previous owners!

Within two years of our getting comfortable in our new environment there arose an issue regarding Boyd, Grand or Big Island (to this day locals have their own name for the magnificent island sitting quietly in Pigeon Lake). Four hundred plus cottages, a golf course, a landing strip, roads, and everything else that goes with a major development were bandied about as a certainty. From my recollection, the local town council seemed oblivious to the consequences of such a development. Where would 400 families park their cars and boats on the mainland?

Was there to be a bridge? What about fire protection? Does the township own a fireboat? How would septic systems work when topsoil was a mere inch thick? Questions were many and concern festered amongst residents both seasonal and permanent in and around north Pigeon Lake. We had yet to have our very own Tim Hortons where locals could easily gather to ruminate over the development!

Out of the blue a group of very enlightened residents who had years invested in the lake started to meet regularly to discuss "What can we do?" Ted Hill, George Jewitt, Ted Pollock, and Jim O'Brian are names that come to mind as standout leaders who commanded great respect from neophyte cottagers like me. They knew we, the owners of property on and around Pigeon Lake, needed to be organized if we were to get recognized and listened to by town council. Out of their deliberations came a cohesive group to be moulded into the North Pigeon Lake Ratepayers Association. When my neighbours asked me to join and be part of the initial board of directors I was more than willing to step up to the challenge. The group grew in size and represented a significant number of property owners all around the north end of the lake particularly those who had a view of the island or sat next to or in view of where the rumored 400 boat marina was to be located.

It was like a lightning strike at how fast I got to meet even more of the neighbours! What a great bunch of people as the number grew.

George and I wrote letters to editors outlining our concerns. The town council was approached with legitimate arguments, well crafted by Ted, Jim and Ted. Looking back was it indifference or just inexperience that hamstrung the council in their deliberations? Regardless, to cut through years of mild agitation and critical input, the NPLA were heard and reason prevailed. One after another, steps were taken to guarantee that any development would be sane and abide by restrictions that were right for the island and the lake. They evolved into legal obligations attached to any development. The island remains one of the most pristine pieces of property on Pigeon Lake and all indications are the new owner will more than satisfy the dreams of the original board and members of the NPLA.

The legacy of Ted, Ted, Jim, George and others from 25 years ago is very evident today yet none received the accolades they so deserve and that is the way each of them would want it. It was not about them, it was about the lake and the generations that would enjoy it.

The neighbourhood had certainly grown and, unlike any city neighbourhood, this one seems to have very likeminded neighbours willing to get involved and be one's true neighbour. I have always felt they "had my back".

After those early years the challenges were perhaps not as visible but one should not discount the work of numerous members and directors who have toiled endlessly and with no fanfare. They have tested the lake's water religiously for a decade to insure our quality of water was protected. They met with councillors and mayors to make sure development was right and proper for our township. They made sure no issue was left with only one side being studied.

They also reached out to welcome all the new owners of property so they felt at ease and in tune with what the lake means to all of us. Luckily, for years, there was no one overwhelming issue that threatened our environment and the role of vigilance and maintenance became the norm.

Then the word quarry entered the vocabulary of NPLA members as every indication was that our area was becoming the new quarry capital of Ontario. In 2011 the issue was so important to the members of the NPLA that we had a spokesperson from the Ontario Sand Stone and Aggregate Association come and talk to our annual meeting in July 2011. She allayed some of our fears as the association seemed to have high standards for how a quarry should operate from first shovels in the ground to remedial reconstruction of nature's site. From that high point to the mention that none of our townships' quarries were members of the association! Scary is all I can say about that revelation. In attendance were two town councillors and the mayor. I would have hoped they would take away the members' feelings about "too many quarries" and who's minding the store, sorry quarry operations?

Fast forward one year and we have a mega quarry on the docket for our township. The size of this quarry is described as "mega" by some and when listening to or reading about it the term is appropriate. I will not go into when did council know what was coming but rather say most of us would have hoped they were on top of all potential plans for quarries --- where were people looking, where had preliminary work been carried out, etc. Luckily when the Planning Meeting was listening or reading about the proposal a deluge of concerned constituents descended on Council. The point was made and a further public meeting was held on the 23rd of June 2012.

In summary, there is overwhelming concern for what is happening. There is overwhelming concern for how strong are our elected representatives when it comes to facing a mega project that has built up three years of steam? People were quite vocal and they covered all the issues. To me the best and most succinctly encapsulating statement was when someone stated that Town Council appears to give more attention to a request to build a dock then they give to quarry plans. An exaggeration but it is the perception. NPLA has thus focused on this issue since it is as great as the original reason for our association's formation 25 years ago.

And guess what? I am meeting more new neighbours who are parking their indifference to what is happening and joining NPLA as they see the issues surrounding quarries as equivalent to what we saw years ago about the island's development. Collectively they see we can have a voice and it is an important voice much needed right now and perhaps for several years since the threat is chronic not acute. Issues bring people together and it is a textbook sure fire way to meet your neighbours and more intense than behind them in line at Tim Hortons!

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