

Leisure Cruising and Cottaging on the “Romantic” Ottawa River

By Elizabeth Bond

Although Buchanan Township didn't generate much income itself, it certainly did attract wealthy people seeking leisure and adventure. First pleasure cruisers, and then cottagers, were drawn to this portion of the Ottawa River by its outstanding beauty. These wealthy outsiders to Buchanan Township would inject some cash money into the area's economy, and for this reason alone the Buchanan residents welcomed them.

In 1854, a steamboat run was established along the particularly wide, deep and straight portion of the Ottawa River from Pembroke to Rapides des Joachims (locally known as 'da Swisha'). Dubbed as “the most romantic” part of the river, wealthy lumber barons and their families from Pembroke would spend a leisurely five hours enjoying the fine meals, entertainment, and beautiful scenery while passing by Buchanan Township.

The “Pontiac” was the first steamship to cruise this route, and the “Oiseau” the last. Named after the spectacular rock face of Oiseau Rock across from Buchanan Township, the “Oiseau” was a local favourite due to her festive midnight cruises on Saturday nights. Traditionally, she would toot her whistle while passing Buchanan, which echoed compellingly off of Oiseau Rock. Unfortunately, she sank in 1929 when her propeller shaft went through her hull. Many of her sister ships fell victim to fire and disrepair, and most were converted into barges and cargo vessels.

Though few residents, if any, traveled aboard these ships as leisure passengers, the steamboats created financial opportunities for the early riverfront settlers of Buchanan Township. Some, like Joseph Nadeau and John Robert, were able to take advantage of the new market created by the cruise route, selling firewood and other supplies from their wharfs. Colborne Richard, raised by courageous Mrs. Richard, made his living as a steamboat pilot. Others, like the McQuestion family and later Roger McLeod, benefited from the monthly allowance provided by the Marine Company to watch over the lighthouse still located today where the river narrows at McQuestion's Point.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, wealthy outsiders—known as ‘*Sports*’ to the locals—began to summer in Buchanan. Accountant Nat Harrison had a modest cottage on a rise close to Balmer's Bay. Others, like the Wallace and Millar families, built stately summer homes on the beach at Pointe Aux Bapteme that equalled and surpassed the permanent dwellings of the Buchanan residents. And P.K. Smith, a wealthy entrepreneur from Ohio, had an ambitious hobby farm directly across the Ottawa River at Oiseau Bay. He leased ten thousand acres, on which he built several large homes, two sawmills, a hydroelectric dam, and a fully operational farm. These wealthy cottagers paid local residents good money for labour, and bought goods from them such as firewood and wild berries.

Gerald Nadeau recalls picking wild strawberries and selling them to Nat Harrison. It was the first glimpse the local children had into the world of material wealth, and an

introduction to a sector of society that they instinctively knew they could never be a part of. “Those were *rich* people,” Gerald recalled. “We were not rich people. But it sure was nice to see what rich people had.”

Around the time that the wealthy cottagers began to spend the summer months in Buchanan, a paradigm shift began to occur within the Township. Before the appearance of the *Sports*, the residents of Buchanan had not known just how humble their living conditions were. Increasingly, however, the young men sought after automobiles and machinery they could not afford and wanted to leave Buchanan Township to earn monetary wealth. Perhaps this new way of thinking was, in part at least, incited by the seasonal appearance of wealth in the Township.

Further Reading: “Staying The Run: A History of the United Townships of Rolph, Buchanan, Wylie and McKay” by Jennifer Mercer, published by the Rolph, Buchanan, Wylie and McKay Historical Society, 1998.

The Diary of P.K. Smith about his time spent hobby farming at Oiseau Bay, online at http://oiseaubayresort.com/oiseau_bay_about.htm