

Summer Hotels: Then & Now

by Katherine McIntyre

At the turn of the last century, large wooden summer hotels surrounded by wide sweeping verandahs that sheltered wicker rocking chairs were part of the holiday scene. Sadly, most of these havens of leisure have burned down, been demolished or renovated into something else. But there are still a few left, whose current owners are geniuses at adapting, upgrading, patching and promoting, while maintaining the original integrity of the building.

Even before the advent of the seasonal summer hotel, travellers from Upper Canada and New England were drawn to view spectacular sites like Niagara Falls. Newark, now Niagara-on-the-Lake, and still one of Canada's premiere tourist towns, has been accommodating visitors since the 18th century. A favourite stopping-off spot was the Olde Angel Inn, known today as Ontario's oldest continuously operating hostelry. Dating back to 1789, it was once a coaching stop on the marketsquare in Newark. Badly burned during the war of 1812, it was rebuilt in 1815 and now has a prominent location in the heart of the historic town. With its wide plank floors, exposed wood beams, original fireplace in the bar area, and straight narrow staircase leading to the rooms on the second floor, it retains the look of a charming 19th-century inn.

To keep it solvent, the Olde Angel Inn has become a twelve-month operation, catering to visitors attracted by the most intact collection of early 18th-century buildings in Canada, by the now famous Shaw Festival, and by the new and expanding wineries of the region. The inn's owner describes its guests as middle-income, middle-aged and middle-class. That there is a resident ghost, Captain Colin Swayze, a British soldier killed on the premises during the war of 1812, who haunts if the Union Jack does not fly above the front door, only adds to its mystique.

More in keeping with the tradition of the grand summer hotel overlooking the seaside or the lakeshore is the Marathon Inn on the Island of Grand Manan off the Fundy Coast in New Brunswick. It looks much the same as it did when it was built in 1907 by a local sea captain, James Pettie, ostensibly to keep his wife busy when he was away at sea.

According to the current owner, Ben Phillips, the captain and his wife targeted the city of Pittsburgh, infamous for its coal-polluted air, to attract visitors. They advertised that the ever-prevalent fog was nature's air conditioner. Despite the island's distance from Pittsburgh, the same guests returned year after year to enjoy walks, tennis on the lawn, tea on the verandah and the simple pleasures of masquerades, parlour games, cards, chess, checkers, lectures on "uplifting books" for evening entertainment and a dance on Saturday night.

Phillips claims that today it is the special-interest guests-such as birders or nature enthusiasts-who prefer the low-tech experience his hotel offers. Having captured a niche market, he has not had to upgrade the hotel to meet the 21st-century traveller's expectations. At the Marathon, there is no elevator to the third floor, nor phones, nor high-speed communication connections. But all the rooms do have the exceptional antique beds, bureaus and washstands that were there when Phillips bought the hotel in 1977.

Originally built in 1874, the Lakeview Inn in the Eastern Townships of Quebec is another hotel whose owners lifted a page from the past for inspiration when restoring this forgotten gem. The history of the inn is connected with the history of the townships area itself. Its reputation for fresh, cool air and for fishing in its clear lakes began to spread to the New England states after the Loyalists settled the area in the 1780s. Once spur lines from the railways were routed to the townships' towns and villages, wealthy American and Canadian travellers began to arrive in ever larger numbers. Hotels quickly sprang up along the lake shorelines.



The Lakeview Inn, Eastern Townships, Quebec.

The Lakeview Inn, overlooking Brome Lake, was one of the first. Left derelict after a lifespan of about one hundred years, it was bought, restored and refurbished with furniture and lighting fixtures of the Victorian age salvaged from old barns and antique stores. The wide front verandah remains open to the breezes and, complete with rocking chairs, offers the authentic look and feel of a bygone era.

But it was on the shores of the Muskoka Lakes, in the 4,000 acres of Ontario's Canadian Shield that summer hotels flourished. The original visitors were American sportsmen who, on hearing that the lakes were teeming with fish, came north by train, stagecoach and lake steamer.

Neither the mosquitoes nor the primitive living conditions intimidated these first travellers. What they did find was that the local settlers were hospitable, kept market gardens and offered them shelter when they needed it. In turn, the settlers discovered that there was more profit catering to the fishermen than farming the unproductive land.

Over the winter many added a few bedrooms to their frame houses and in summer offered home-cooked meals along with board. From this simple beginning, the Muskoka tourist industry got its start.

When the railroad came through to Gravenhurst on Lake Muskoka in 1875, venturing north for a holiday became a fashionable, healthy and leisurely way for the Canadian and American city-dweller to spend time away from noisy city life. However, women wanted more for their families than a bedroom upstairs in a local farmer's frame house. Enterprising settlers quickly realized the need for expansion. By adding a separate dining room, more bedrooms, a wide verandah and a lounge area, their simple boarding houses grew into small hotels. For the next fifty years these family-owned enterprises proliferated on the shores of the Muskoka Lakes. At their peak, 76 grand hotels and many smaller ones provided accommodation for about 50,000 visitors a season.

Guests arrived by steamboat with children, nannies and trunk-loads of clothes. Women and children stayed for the summer, while husbands journeyed up a couple of times during the season. Cleveland House on Lake Rosseau was one of the hotels that grew from a settler's cabin. The original proprietor, Charles Minett, a shy uncommunicative man, forbade liquor on the site. To ensure peace and quiet for his many female guests, he insisted on an eleven o'clock curfew. Furthermore, no single men were allowed to book a room in the hotel, but were permitted to live in a fully furnished tent on the surrounding grounds. Despite these restrictions, families looked forward all winter to their relaxing summer at this Muskoka lakeshore hotel.

The most successful summer hotels were family-owned enterprises that stayed within the family for two or three generations. The Cleveland House remained in the Minett family until 1953. The new owners sold it sixteen years later to a long-time hotel employee whose family, the Cornells, has run it ever since.

Hotels were finally sold when no family member wanted the round-the-clock demands of managing the property. Responsibilities included tending a market garden, providing three formal meals a day-served on crisp white tablecloths-offering entertainment for the guests, preparing picnics, planning boat rides, and more. Then, when the season was over, the work of maintaining these large wooden buildings would begin.

According to Joseph Kenney, the fourth-generation owner of the Hotel Kenney in Ontario's Rideau Lakes district, it is a constant battle to preserve his old wooden building from the ravages of time and Canadian winters. The hotel first opened at the base of the Jones Falls Locks on the Rideau Canal in 1877 and has been continuously operated by the Kenney family ever since.

Originally built between 1826 and 1832 for military use, the extensive lock system of the Rideau Canal quickly became the "highway" for early settlement and commercial traffic. By



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the late 19th century, its reputation for bass fishing saw lodges and guides popping up along its route. Today, it is a designated national historic site, recognized as a cultural living landscape of villages, small towns, farms, cottages and private residences, including a few historic hotels of which the Hotel Kenney is one.

The challenges of upkeep are many, including upgrading every year to keep within the strict requirements of the fire code and to meet the demands of the new generation of guests who Joseph Kenney says, "like a place to look quaint but be state of the art." Visitors to the area now come from around the world, attracted by the picturesque setting and the recreational activities available.

While still providing guests with those summer amenities associated with old lakeshore hotels, including fishing guides, boats and bait as well as picnic lunches, tended pathways and gardens, the hotel must also offer fine dining and modern conveniences mixed in with that old-world charm.

Noni Kelley of the Gananoque Inn on the shores of the St. Lawrence River agrees with Joseph Kenney. "When we put bathrobes in the rooms, we believed that we had thought of everything that a guest would want," she said. "Not so, they crave spas, portable phones and swimming pools! It is hard to keep up."

The Gananoque Inn is probably Canada's first renovation of an industrial building into a hotel. It was in 1893 that the local Carriage Works, one of the town's major industries, was moved to Brockville, leaving its large, brick building vacant. Forward-thinking board members, capitalizing on its riverside location and superb view of the Thousand Islands, promoted its conversion into a luxury hotel. Since that time most of the owners have been local people. Kelly believes that family-owned enterprises-particularly ones that are owned by a family with a relationship to the community-will continue to flourish.

Most managers of seasonal summer hotels agree that the experienced travellers of today are not satisfied with an unadorned room, a book, a rocking chair on a verandah overlooking a lake, or the quiet of an evening paddle.

Increasingly, our definition of leisure is tied to measurable accomplishments offered through tennis courts, cooking courses, bridge lessons, boats, jet skis-and maybe a summer theatre nearby. The challenge of the historic hotel operator is to provide the old-world setting that harkens back to simpler times while offering all the modern conveniences travellers have come to expect. Their success at being both illusionists and pragmatists has kept these wonderful historic places functional and accessible, enabling locals and visitors alike to experience and enjoy them.

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