

A Timeless Place

The Ontario Cottage

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UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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1

An Introduction to the Cottage

I was grateful to encounter Caroline that afternoon. I had been feeling like an outsider at the crowded social gathering in an upscale Toronto neighbourhood. Our respective in-laws, two extended families whose connection went back fifty-five years, comprised the guest list at the party. These families had been neighbours for many years at their lakeside cottages. Caroline and I chatted at length about what had prompted the get-together. She observed:

Canadians and summer. It is as if they have to make the most of it. It is a very precious time. Not a moment of it can be wasted. It is expected that everyone will make plans, and in Ontario that means making plans to go to the cottage. The whole country seems to anxiously await summer's arrival, expressing endless angst over whether it will deliver the promised days of warmth, sun and fun. Maybe it has something to do with the cold and snow of winter.

Caroline was an Australian who had come to Canada when she married her Canadian husband thirty years before. Since her move, she too had spent time at her in-laws' cottage. Both my relationship to my in-laws and my introduction to the cottage were much more limited, though, because I had only become a part of that collective a few years earlier. And my father-in-law had sold the family cottage years ago – thankfully, to my mind. It seemed as if Caroline and I were the only two people in the room who had not grown up with a cottage as a central part of our world; accordingly, we seemed to be the only ones who found the practice rather curious. We marvelled at how the memories of summers spent together

many years before kept alive a special bond between the extended families, even though they had seen little of each other in recent decades. Caroline aptly concluded that Canadians saw these precious summer months as “an almost religious time,” which was certainly reflected in the treasured memories of many in the room that day. Her astute and forthright observations intrigued me.

I had been living in Ontario for five years when I attended this gathering. Having spent the first four decades of my life in western Canada, I moved to Ontario to take up an academic position. My outsider status was somewhat more muted than that of my new Australian friend, but Canada’s physical vastness and its regional, historical, and cultural differences still amplified the many subtle things about life in Ontario that were new to me. As the summer of my first year there approached, I was made aware of three assumptions about how I would spend this time: I would be going to my cottage at every opportunity, or negotiating as much time as I could at a relative’s or friend’s cottage, or, failing these two options, I would spend my summer lamenting the sad reality that I was not at a cottage on the shores of a nearby lake. Such presumptions initially struck me as mildly amusing, if not somewhat odd. I grew to take a more serious interest in what such expectations reflected about the cultural and social milieu of my new home, particularly when I realized that many of the lakes that were readily accessible to the city I now lived in were in essence private. I could access them by canoe if I could find the limited public access points, but if I wished to stop for a picnic on shore there was often little or no public land available. Cottagers seemed to own every inch of shoreline. In such an expansive country, I found it most troubling that the privilege of private ownership had taken precedence over what I had initially presumed were public recreational spaces. These realities were taken for granted it seemed by Ontarians. As a newcomer to the province I found them perplexing, if not troubling.

My desire to more fully understand the meaningfulness of the cottage experience was further prompted by the lively discussions I mediated among my undergraduate students in my Anthropology of Tourism courses at Trent University. My students were almost equally split between those who are cottagers – largely from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) – and those who come from small towns in lake-filled regions of central/eastern Ontario, places that receive a summer influx of cottagers. When the class attempted to define who and what a tourist is, the question as to whether

a cottager was a tourist inevitably emerged. Those who were cottagers insisted that they were something other than tourists, since they had a deep sentimental connection to, and often a multi-generational family history at, their cottage. Those from small towns who experienced the seasonal influxes of cottagers saw them otherwise, as non-locals or tourists who demanded special privileges and services and who brought much of the big city to the cottage. At the same time, cottagers were seen to resist economic development designed to benefit the local community, as it might disrupt the idylls of life at their cottage, on their lake (Pcholkina 2006).

Popular media reports at least since the mid-1990s, including repeated articles in all sections – news, lifestyle, business, and of course real estate – of local, regional, and national newspapers, fuelled the Ontario summer mentality that there was nothing more desirable than sitting on the dock at one's cottage, favourite beverage in hand and swathed in languid summer heat, surveying the calm and beauty of the lake as the sun slowly dipped below the tree-lined, rocky horizon.¹ All of this attention was rather surprising considering that, according to Statistics Canada data from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, only about 8 percent of Ontarians owned cottages.² Few commentators – or promoters of such notions – focused on what I, as a newcomer, felt were the less-than-enticing elements of this experience: the tensions and anxieties of the regular weekend trips on clogged highways to get to the cottage, the unrelenting investment of time and labour a cottage demanded, the financial burden of owning a cottage, and the realities of spending every weekend cooped up with family and perhaps not-so-much-loved friends and acquaintances. In this book, then, I examine what was – and is – seen to make life at the cottage so richly and passionately meaningful for those who own or regularly visit cottages in the Haliburton region of Ontario.³

Though a non-cottager might not understand the appeal of cottage life, many Ontario cottagers have profoundly strong ties to their cottage and actively seek to spend as much time there as possible. What I saw as the negative dimensions of cottage ownership were simply minor hurdles to cross or, in some cases endure, in order to indulge in all that made cottage life blissful. Sack (1992) has suggested that cottages are places “thick” with meaning (see also Chaplin 1999b; Cross 1992; Halseth 1998, 18-20ff; Jaakson 1986; Löfgren 1999, 139ff; Luka 2006, 171-76ff; Sack 1997; Williams and Kaltenborn 1999). This study supports this interpretation.

I developed a research project to try to grasp more fully why the experience of a second home – here called a cottage – generates such strong emotional attachment and commitment. This undertaking was a natural extension of my previous work, which sought to understand what made pleasure travel to international destinations meaningful to an inveterate group of middle- and upper-middle class Canadian tourists (see J. Harrison 2001, 2003). Cottagers, as I discuss below, have frequently been labelled in the academic literature as a type of domestic or second-home tourist (see, for example, Jaakson 1986).

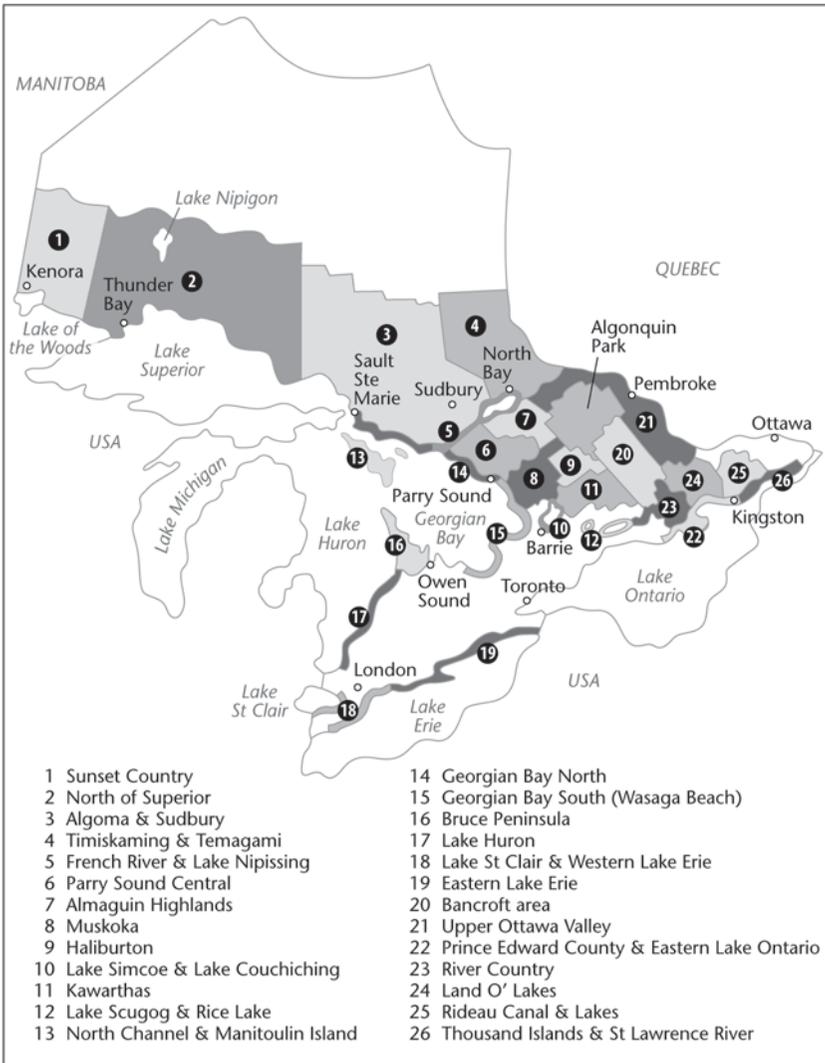
I chose to focus my research on the loosely defined middle-class cottage experience of the Haliburton area of Ontario. This demographic paralleled that of my earlier work on Canadians who travelled internationally each year, which provided a basis for some comparison (see J. Harrison 2003, 2008b). Many of the cottages in the Haliburton region were developed in the two decades following World War II. I interviewed a few cottagers whose grandparents, often their grandfather, had a rustic hunting cabin in the area in the 1930s. A few others had spent their summers as children with their grandparents at cottages as early as the late 1920s and through to the 1940s.⁴

The 1950s-60s expansion of “cottaging” in the Haliburton region was positioned as a much more affordable experience relative to the adjacent Muskoka region.⁵ The latter was one of the first areas in central Ontario developed for cottaging and summer residence, beginning largely with an influx of well-to-do Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jasen (1995, 117-24) notes that Muskoka’s development as such a destination was due to the expansion of transportation technologies including railroads and steamships that operated on the large lakes in the region and to its more immediate proximity to large metropolitan centres (see also Luka 2006, 115-25). The latter initially brought wealthy Americans from midwestern cities and, close on their heels, Torontonians of similar status, seeking to avoid the stifling summer heat of crowded industrial urban centres. These arrivals prompted the development of resort hotels and, later, individually owned cottages. Throughout the first fifty years of the twentieth century, cottaging in Muskoka remained in very large measure the purview of the wealthy, if not the very wealthy. It also established for many the iconic status of the Ontario cottaging experience.⁶

Adjacent lake-filled areas, like Haliburton, steadily expanded in the last half of the twentieth century as more affordable cottage country, although Haliburton certainly had been an area of tourist interest since the early decades of the century (see Baker 1930; see Map 1 on following page). This area may lack the large lakes that are seen as the jewels of the Muskoka experience, but Haliburton does have many good-sized lakes that embody the aesthetic qualities – deep water, exposed rock and tree-lined shores – championed in Muskoka. Haliburton cottagers today would argue that “their” lakes have many more virtues than anything found in Muskoka. Post-World War II Haliburton developers aimed their sales campaigns at the newly emerging middle-class southern Ontario residents who had achieved a degree of sufficient prosperity that they could consider acquiring a summer cottage, even if quite modest.

Canada’s population grew from nearly 14 million to over 21 million between 1950 and 1970.⁷ Average annual wages almost doubled in this same period, with the cost of living annual increase remaining fairly stable at less than 5 percent.⁸ Overall, Canada’s population at this time was, in broad strokes, racially homogeneous. Until the late 1960s, 70 percent of the immigrants to Canada came from the United Kingdom and Europe; another 15 percent came from the United States. Immigration patterns began to change as Canada adopted a “colour-blind” policy in 1967. For the second half of the twentieth century, Ontario received the largest percentage of these new Canadians, regardless of their origins. Cultural differences between these populations should not be ignored, though the vast majority of immigrants in the decades immediately following World War II came from a Western European Judeo-Christian tradition. In contrast, the largest group (over 70 percent) of immigrants to Canada at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century came from elsewhere, a topic I will return to in later discussions.⁹

In the chapters that follow, I reflect on the symbolic, aesthetic, social, cultural, personal, and, ultimately, moral levels of the deeply held meaning of a postwar Haliburton cottage. I explore the cottage as a place where people felt physically, emotionally, and, for some, spiritually grounded, as the place where they most wanted to *be*. The cottage is where treasured memories are carefully stored; where homogeneity across culture, class, and race, national identity, and tradition are presumed; where joy is found in much that is modern because it is integrally entwined with “timeless



Map 1 Ontario cottage country. Ontario's cottage country has no official designation, that is, it is not marked on provincial maps. However, it is a taken-for-granted place in the provincial landscape. Not a cohesive whole, it is understood to be divided into twenty-six distinct areas, each one understood to have its own character. Its representation here is based on a map originally drawn up by Tracey Wood/Reactor Art and Design that appeared in *Cottage Life* magazine (March 2006).

nature.” It is a place where specific constraints of time are abandoned to be replaced by those deemed more pleasurable, lasting, and indulgent; where prescriptive regimes codify, desirably or not, the practice of life at the cottage. At the Haliburton cottage, I found that human bodies are specifically disciplined, measured, marked, and yet ironically imagined to be free. Intensely valued social relationships, be they those of ‘family’ or friends, are fostered and grounded there.¹⁰ For many male cottagers, work became leisure, but often for women, leisure became work. I came to understand why the cottage is seen as a place where the “right” kind of behaviours, values, if not moral character, can be inculcated and rewarded. More succinctly, in this book, I explore what prompted and solidified the commitment and passion boldly expressed by those I interviewed about their cottage and what it meant to them. I also examine what I came to see as the ambiguities and contradictions of the cottage, a more troublesome side inherent in all that it represented. Before I begin to explore these themes in more detail, I provide, first, some background on this much loved place, Haliburton County, and how it came to be part of Ontario’s cottage country. I provide some background on those who bought cottages there in the latter half of the twentieth century, what others have said about such second-home domestic tourists, and how I conducted my research on those who cottage in this place of natural beauty.¹¹

**“Blessed with an Abundance of Natural Beauty”:
Haliburton County, Ontario**

A tourism website for the province of Ontario describes Haliburton County as being “a pleasant two and a half hour drive [northeast of] Metropolitan Toronto ... [b]lessed with an abundance of natural beauty – crystal clear lakes, pristine forests and miles of ... wilderness trails.”¹² Another source describes it as “a county of Ontario, Canada, known as a tourist and cottage area in Southern Ontario for its scenery.”¹³ A large county – 453,292 acres in size, the third largest county in the province (Barnes 2002, 1) – it is described in one popular guidebook as a “great elevated plateau” (locally known as the Haliburton Highlands) that gives way to “largely wooded [tracts] ... a skein of countless lakes and rivers, and a few farms in the southernmost corner” (Barnes 2002, 2).

Haliburton County lies at the southern edge of the Canadian Shield – the large outcropping of Precambrian rock that hangs like an apron

around Hudson's Bay, spreading out to cover two-thirds of Ontario (see Map 2, p. 11). Glaciers scraped away much of the soil that once blanketed this massive outcrop when they moved through the area 12,000 years ago. Lakes formed in the depressions left by the receding ice and eventually a total of eight rivers carved their way through the granite and the isolated pockets of limestone. For millennia, Aboriginal peoples successfully tapped the wealth of resources that such geography offered them. By the seventeenth century, the British and French fur traders arrived seeking to exploit these assumedly endless riches; they were specifically in pursuit of the beaver. These waterways would later serve the rapacious industrial harvesting of vast timber stands of mixed deciduous and coniferous forests in support of the massive expansion of colonial regimes in the urban centres across the continent (Reynolds 1973).

Throughout the twentieth century, second-growth forests steadily reclaimed the rocky shores of the many picturesque lakes found in the county. In contrast to how earlier traders and industrialists perceived such topography, it progressively came to symbolize the rugged, if not sublime, beauty of the Canadian landscape, construed as a domain of leisure, a place of restorative and therapeutic nurturance, what Gunn (1997) called a "vacationscape" (see also Löfgren 1999, 93; Rojek 1993; Urry 1990). As such, it is seen to present an enticing alternative to life in the claustrophobic concrete and dehumanized reality of urban life. Such tropes fuelled what came to be the understanding of Haliburton County as the perfect place to have a recreational cottage, a place that offers a retreat from all things undesirable, and fosters, as one cottager told me, "just good times" for all who gather there (Barnes 2002, 1-3). Such benign imaginings, however, ignore the complex histories layered on the county.

Making an "Indian Canoeist ... a Novelty": A Historical Snapshot of Haliburton County

Haliburton County is the ancestral homeland of the Algonquian-speaking bands of Mississauga and Ojibwa who had sustained themselves for generations on the abundance of fish and game in the area.¹⁴ By the mid-seventeenth century, the Iroquois, in search of ever-diminishing fur supplies, were pushing farther into the areas north of Lake Ontario, particularly the lakes and highlands of the Haliburton and Algonquin regions (see Map 3, p. 14). Always a fearful presence, the Iroquois gained control

of the region by 1650. These incursions started the lengthy process of the displacement of Algonquian-speaking peoples from the area, which eventually culminated in their permanent resettlement on reserves at various places in the province by the early twentieth century.¹⁵

By 1818, Aboriginal bands who had slowly reclaimed parts of what is now Haliburton had surrendered their lands to the Crown in the Crawford Treaty in the face of ever more intrusive colonizing forces. Europeans and Canadians arriving in the area had brought disease, alcohol, and notions of property rights that limited access to land for hunting – all of which had devastating effects on the indigenous populations. By 1923, they had signed away the rest of their hunting territories in Haliburton, moving to reserves farther south and west and eventually making the presence of an “Indian canoeist ... a novelty” in the region (Reynolds 1973, 12). However, the legacy of the Indigenous history of the regions remains embedded in the landscape of Haliburton, as many of the lakes carry adapted versions of their original names – for example, Kennisis, Boshkung, Miskwabi, Kawagama, Kashagawigamog, and Kushog (see Map 2, p. 11).

At one time, the Haliburton region had been imagined to hold the secret of an easy and direct route to Georgian Bay and the waterways beyond. Military survey parties were sent by the Canadian government to the region in 1819, 1825, and 1827 to map the territory. In the face of the complex network of streams, rivers, and lakes and the unforgiving terrain that define the Haliburton landscape, the viability of such a route was eventually abandoned (Reynolds 1973, 21). But an even greater wealth captured the attention of private entrepreneurs as they observed the vast timber stands and the potential for mineral resources in the area. They also presumed that these lands had agricultural and homestead capacity, having noted the success of the Peter Robinson settlement in Peterborough to the south, which proved that “it was possible to tame the wilderness” (ibid.) (see Map 3, p. 14). In the early decades of the nineteenth century, small numbers of trappers had begun to live in the area over the winter “in small cabins and tending their traps” (Barnes 2002, 12-13). Like the early Aboriginal populations, they carried on the tradition of seasonal residence in the area.

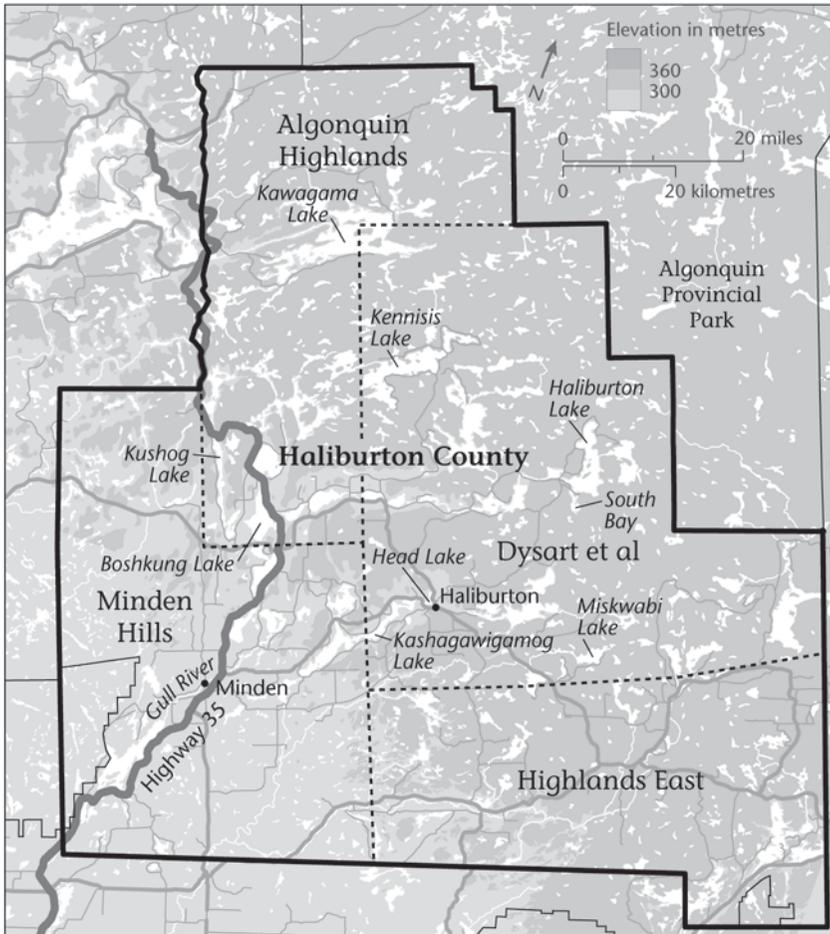
The colony of Upper Canada, as Ontario was originally known, was positioned along the St. Lawrence River, a vital transportation route for the early colonies in the region.¹⁶ It was to emerge as the dominant economic,

social, and political force in the North American British colonies after 1776,¹⁷ a role that deepened after Canadian Confederation in 1867. The first wave of British settlers to Upper Canada had arrived in the late 1700s from the United States. Known as the United Empire Loyalists, they were loyal subjects of the British Crown who fled following the American Revolution. These immigrants played a major role in shaping the identity of the province.

In the early nineteenth century, more immigrants arrived in large numbers from Ireland, England, and Scotland. The demand for homestead land steadily grew, but all the southern arable land had been taken up by earlier waves of settlers. Colonization roads – the Bobcaygeon, the Burleigh Falls Road, the Monck, and the Peterson – were painstakingly (and some never very successfully) carved out of the rock and boggy terrain to allow settlers more ready access to the Haliburton region. To entice settlers, free land grants were offered adjacent to a public road in 1853 (Cummings 1962, 4; Reynolds 1973, 25).

By 1859, the southern leg of the Bobcaygeon Road was completed as far as a small squatter settlement on the Gull River (see Map 2, p. 11). Following the government survey of the area and the arrival of the post office, this community was officially named Minden. It flourished until about 1929 as a somewhat prosperous yet “rough and tumble logging town” (S. Wilson 1997, 11) while agricultural settlement in the area floundered. The village would have to wait until the end of World War I before the first evidence of what would become its economic mainstay emerged. A small number of summer cottages were built close to Minden after World War I, their presence presaging the real boom in cottage development that would begin after World War II.

In 1860, the Canada Land and Immigration Company, an English company under the direction of Justice Thomas Chandler Haliburton, purchased 360,000 acres for fifty cents an acre “in the northern townships with the aim of reselling it to immigrant settlers” that they would bring to the area (Barnes 2002, 17-18). Model agricultural communities with schools, churches, roads, and, of course, arable land were promised to the new arrivals. However, the lands sold to settlers had often been previously leased by the Crown to lumber companies, and were, in many cases, either far too rocky or boggy for agriculture. The Crown was also dissatisfied with the Canada Land Company, as it claimed that the settlers were poorly prepared



Map 2 Haliburton cottage country. The borders of Haliburton County encompass Haliburton cottage country.

for what they would face on arrival (Cummings 1962, 43). Eventually, a commercial and service centre for the struggling settlers in the area developed in Dysart Township on Head Lake. It was called Haliburton Village even though its namesake never set foot in the region¹⁸ (see Map 2).

Most of those who came to Haliburton as either loggers or prospective farmers were of Irish, British, American, or Canadian ancestry. In fact, the greatest percentage of them was comprised of “the children and grandchildren of immigrants who first pioneered the Counties around the Great

Lakes. Included were descendants of United Empire Loyalists who fled the States following the American Revolution or the Whiskey Rebellion of 1791” (Reynolds 1973, 40). When settlement opened up on the western prairies, “many families moved [on] in search of more fruitful land and lives” (Baskerville 2002, 73). Others simply abandoned their farms and moved to burgeoning industrial centres such as Toronto. Those early settlers who managed to survive practised a subsistence pattern based on mixed farming, supplemented by hunting and fishing. Many also worked as wage labourers in an industry that made numerous lumber barons very wealthy. Yet, once the timber resources were depleted, the question remained as to how this land could be made productive in light of the challenges it presented to agriculture and the obvious limits of large-scale lumbering.¹⁹

In 1874, in response to requests from remaining local residents for more autonomy over their affairs to foster further colonial settlement and infrastructure development, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario created the Provisional County of Haliburton. The village of Minden was to become its administrative centre. It remained a provisional county, due to its small population, until its name was officially changed to Haliburton County in 1983. It still boasted a permanent residential population of only 17,026 in the 2011 census.²⁰ It took until 2001, as part of a provincially driven project of amalgamation of administrative and governing units, before Haliburton County was restructured into four larger municipalities, a dramatic reduction from its original constitution. The former townships included Algonquin Highlands,²¹ Highlands East,²² Minden Hills,²³ and Dysart et al. (see Map 2, p. 11).²⁴ By 2006, tourism and recreation, particularly that associated with those owning cottages in the county, was the cornerstone of the local economy. Small-scale forestry and limited mining and light manufacturing contributed in smaller ways to the region’s viability. Reflecting a historical pattern of non-Aboriginals struggling to secure a viable livelihood in the region, in 2006 the unemployment rate among permanent residents in Haliburton remained higher than the provincial average. Such realities further determined an even greater reliance on cottagers and their demands for a service sector in the local economy.²⁵

It Was “Very Muskoka”: Cottaging Comes to Haliburton

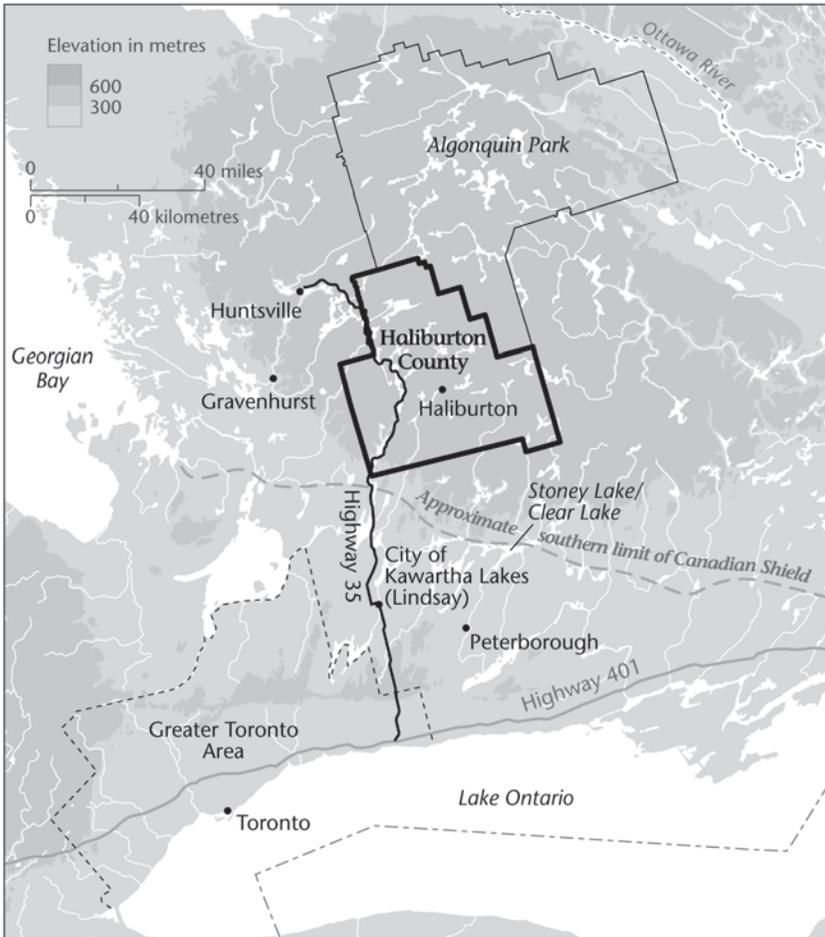
A small number of tourists had begun to find their way to Haliburton in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Neighbouring Muskoka,

which was much more accessible and was promoted in southern cities, had already begun to attract tourists. But Haliburton, “just as beautiful but much less accessible[,] did not receive its first tourist trip until 1865.” One of the first references to tourists in the area offers little detail beyond noting that a group of young adventurers saw Haliburton as a diversionary route home from Muskoka, not a destination in itself (see Barnes 2002, 10).

In 1874, the Victoria Railway, originating in Lindsay and terminating in Haliburton Village, opened. Intended to service settlers to the area, it soon began to bring tourists. These early tourists came looking to stay in hotels, as the desire for summer homes, a tradition already emerging in Muskoka, would take some time to emerge in the Haliburton region.²⁶ This exposure to the area – “the charms of its scenic waters and rugged hills ... attracted camping and canoeing parties” – by the end of the century led a few to “purchase summer cottages and return annually” (Reynolds 1973, 178). The railway was never financially viable – the most it made in profit was \$28, in 1880. By 1965, in operation for less than one hundred years, it reduced its service to only three trains a week. But even this limited service was well used by some post-World War II cottagers. In 1978, the year it terminated service, it was reduced to offering autumn colours recreational excursions (Barnes 2002, 28-33).

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lumber companies moved rapidly through the region, felling the stands of magnificent white pine forests that blanketed it (Reynolds 1973). The need to protect the watershed of the many rivers of the Muskoka-Haliburton region, to temper the greed of the lumber barons, and to shelter some of the region’s wildlife led to the creation of Algonquin Park in 1885 (see Map 3, p. 14). At the time, it was noted that such park lands were simply an extension of the region now encompassed by Haliburton County, and the former “would in all probability eventually become a health resort and tourist area for Ontarians” (Reynolds 1973, 75). In light of this, “holiday makers would be allowed to rent cottages on the shores of the lakes [in the park] and fishermen to fish in the waters” (Lambert and Pross 1967, 167).

By the end of the nineteenth century, a few local residents had started to build small cottages to rent out to summer visitors. These were usually located on lakes close to the small settlements in the area. By the 1920s, cottaging had established itself as a well-defined recreational practice in Ontario, even if it was practised only in a limited number of areas and by



Map 3 Haliburton County and environs. To many cottagers, Haliburton is geographically and conceptually positioned between the imagined ‘wilderness’ of Algonquin Park and the densely populated Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

a small segment of the population (Luka 2006, 120). Haliburton had begun to imagine itself as a tourist destination, as evidenced by moves to organize the Highlands of Haliburton Tourist Association in 1935 (Rotary Club of Haliburton and Curry 1975, 43).²⁷

The expansion of cottaging was both hit hard and yet eventually facilitated by the Great Depression of the 1930s. The financial constraints of the era limited much private capital investment in the practice but public infrastructure projects provided the labour to build “a majority of High-



Map 4 Central Ontario and Cultus Lake, BC. The Canadian Shield, which shapes much of cottage country, is a dominant topographical feature in the central Canadian landscape.

ways 35 and 121” (Barnes 2002, 25). By the end of the 1940s, the improved condition of Highway 35, which followed much of the route of the original Bobcaygeon Road, facilitated access to lakes in the western end of the county (see Map 3, p. 14). And the economic woes of the Great Depression did not stop cottage development altogether. One cottager on Boshkung Lake reminisced about how his family worked intensely in the summer of 1932 to get a basic structure erected on their newly acquired cottage lot. Local farmers had begun to sell off lakeshore properties, often supplementing their unstable incomes by selling fresh provisions to cottagers during the summers (Boshkung Lake Millennium Book Committee 2001, 38, 43). Several cottagers I interviewed had early childhood memories of summers at their grandparents’ cottages in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s on lakes adjacent to Highway 35. Still, these early experiences were those of a minority.

Cottaging grew exponentially in Haliburton during the immediate post-World War II period. Various factors fuelled this expansion: the two-day weekend became institutionalized for many in the labour force, standard periods of annual holidays were expanded, private automobile ownership rose, roads in cottage country were improved, guaranteed pensions became a reality, and disposable income increased. Waterfront Crown lands were released for private sale to encourage tourism and recreational development in regions such as Haliburton (Luka 2006, 127;

Stevens 2008a, 2008b). Such factors enabled the expanding urban and suburban middle-class population in southern Ontario to solidify its status and even imagine its extension upward as the people gained access to a recreational practice loosely conceived as the domain of wealthier classes, particularly in neighbouring Muskoka.

Reflecting on the practice of cottaging in the 1960s, Roy Wolfe (quoted in Luka 2006, 17; see also Wolfe 1962, 1965) posited that “the primary purpose of cottage life was status-seeking; the flaunting of wealth by lavishing splendour on unnecessary dwellings.” Clayton Hodgson, a descendant of one of the early lumber barons and who, in the 1950s, sold some of the family property on South Bay on Haliburton Lake for a large cottage development project, explicitly summed up the sentiments of many who bought cottage lots in the county. His adolescent memories of an evening in 1945 spent at the cottage of family friends on Haliburton Lake led him to comment years later that he found the experience “very Muskoka” – he described the host, who “cut a very dashing figure on the lake”; he “was impeccably dressed; i.e.[.] white running shoes, white flannels and blue blazer” (Hodgson 1992, 127-28). Few cottagers that I interviewed would ever cut such a figure as they (or their parents) laboured long and hard in the 1950s and 1960s to make their roughly framed cottages and rugged lots habitable and functional for their families, but the symbolic referents of their labours would have resonated with such imagined elegance and status. Haliburton cottagers I spoke with, while on the one hand wanting to emulate what Muskoka was seen to represent, were on the other hand adamant that their cottage experience in Haliburton had matured over the last fifty years to be distinct from, and frankly better than, what Muskoka was held out to be.

By the early 1970s, the boom in cottage development had waned. A spike in oil and gas prices, the reality that many more women were entering the workforce full-time and were thus unable to spend extended periods of time over the summers at the cottage, the limits of desirable and easily accessible vacant waterfront properties, and the preoccupation of many baby boomers with solidifying their lives and careers all contributed to this lull. In the early 1980s, second-home properties became taxable assets in Canada, which altered the “fiscal context that had previously been quite supportive of cottaging” (Luka 2006, 132). But by the end of the decade, the baby boomers had gained greater financial stability, thereby stimulating

a renaissance in cottaging. This shift is signalled by the launching of the magazine *Cottage Life* in 1988, a popular publication still in press today; for some it has become, as one cottager said, “the cottager’s bible.” At its heart, the magazine privileges what I call here the values and understanding of what it means to be a “real cottager” and to own a “real cottage” (Luka 2006, 132-34). For some of the people I interviewed, the magazine and the biannual trade shows it sponsors served as vehicles to champion what really mattered at the cottage (ibid.); for others, it commodified and trivialized the experience, which exemplifies just one of the contradictions that infused notions of the “real cottage/cottager” that emerged during my research.

What has happened over the last three decades in cottage country? Simply put, much. There has been a steady increase in the price of cottages in Ontario. Real estate reports suggest an increase in costs of as much as 25 percent, but regardless of the business interests that might favour such positive assessments for the purposes of demonstrating the efficacy of the cottage as an investment, by 2004 “the average cost of a waterfront second home property in Ontario exceeded the average cost of a dwelling in Toronto” (Luka 2006, 134). Following the global recession in the latter part of 2008, overall cottage sales in Ontario remained strong. By 2012, however, real estate prices in Ontario’s cottage country were stalled. As one real estate agency said, “We have not seen cottage prices decline, but they haven’t increased either” (Pigg 2012). Nevertheless, in 2012, waterfront property in Haliburton could not be acquired for much less than around \$250,000; many properties were much more expensive (Royal LePage 2012; see also Archer 2010, 46). More and more people want their cottage to be a year-round property, which has led to the upgrading and expansion of many cottages into homes, or in many cases the building of entirely new, much larger, more “suburban-looking” structures. The cottage is becoming an ever more popular place for people to retire. One Haliburton cottager told me that on her lake over 50 percent of properties were occupied full-time by recently retired owners.

Condominium and fractional ownership properties can now be found in cottage country (Lorinc 2010). In 2012, one real estate agent suggested that “demand is booming for a different kind of ‘cottage.’ ... The maintenance-free waterfront condo for those looking for all the amenities of upscale lakefront living, minus the lawn-cutting and plumbing problems” (Pigg

2012). Such developments, which I did observe as present if not booming in Haliburton, bring a new clientele to cottage country, a group that in the eyes of some long-time cottagers has no understanding of the “culture of cottage country” (see J. Harrison 2010). Inheritance and succession issues loom large in many families as original owners of cottages die or simply become too elderly to manage the cottage. The dispersed nature of many families across the country and the globe further complicates who should or can take responsibility for the family cottage.²⁸ The luxury of a defined period of annual vacation has become more elusive as the neo-liberal pressures of often more precarious employment have taken hold in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Compounding the difficulties of escaping one’s workplace has been the arrival of the technologies that allow cottagers to remain virtually connected to their place of employment even while at the cottage.

Change, or concern about change, at the cottage is a recurrent theme in what follows. Yet, for those I spoke with, the symbolic, aesthetic, cultural, and social values of the cottage and the experience that ownership/access was seen to offer remain undiminished. For those cottagers I came to know, their cottage remained, as a couple of them said, “the place where their heart is” and “where their soul resides.” This sentiment resonated with what others who have written about this experience have found, wherever their studies have taken them.

What Has Been Written About the Cottage Experience

In Canada, the cottage has been a topic of interest for the popular press, but it has also attracted the attention of an array of academics including geographers, historians, and a limited number of sociologists and anthropologists. The trope of the cottage and the cottager has captured the imagination of Canadian fiction and creative non-fiction authors, poets, and filmmakers. This list includes some of the nation’s most iconic literary figures. Many who have written about the cottage have grappled with what makes this experience a meaningful if not mythologized part of Canadian, specifically Ontarian, life.

It is important to note that there are several cottage country areas in Ontario, each with its own particular character and geography. Based on 2001 data, Luka (2006, 8n13) argued that 43 percent of all Canadian cottage

owners were in Ontario, and based on my observations, the cottage experience is deeply embedded in the provincial zeitgeist. It is also a popular practice in Quebec and, drawing on census data, Halseth (1998, 23) concluded that the bulk of Canadian second-home owners are in these two provinces. Quebec *chalets*, as they are commonly called, were sometimes built with the singular intention of winter use, a tradition not common in Ontario, although many cottages are now being winterized for year-round use. There appears to be more limited scholarly study of the chalet experience in Quebec compared to what has been written by academics about cottaging in Ontario (see Bovet 1998; Martin-Roy 2007). However, the chalet experience does appear to garner many of the same expressions of strong emotional bonds and practical concerns that cottages do in Ontario. This adds even further irony to the assumption that the Ontario cottage exemplifies all that is “Canadian,” with its “Canadianness” rooted in what is seen to be the cultures and traditions of all that comprised Upper Canadian – that is, Ontarian – history.

Recreational second-home ownership is also found in British Columbia, south-central Manitoba, northern Saskatchewan, and some regions of Atlantic Canada (see for example Barbour 2011, 58-96; Lehr, Selwood, and Badiuk 1991). In some of these regions, a cottage is variously called a cabin or a camp. My own memory from my childhood in Saskatchewan is that people spoke of “going to the lake” rather than identifying the structure they owned there. But beyond Halseth’s (1998) study of cottaging in Cultus Lake, BC, and the Rideau Lakes in Ontario, little comparative work has been done of the second home experience in Canada (see Maps 1 and 4, p. 6 and p. 15). Allan Casey’s (2009) book, *Lakeland: Journeys into the Soul of Canada*, offers a journalistic account of his travels to various cottaging and water recreational areas across the country. His work hints at the scope of more academic study yet to be done. It is important to note that other recreational practices have significant currency in various parts of the country. Skiing, hiking, and climbing in southern mountainous regions of Alberta and regions of British Columbia, sailing on both the east and west coast, and car camping in most other regions of the country are some examples of other popular recreational practices (see for example Dummitt 2007b; Harding 2010). However, it is beyond the scope of my research to comment on these practices and their predominance in regional zeitgeists.

The broader academic analysis of the second-home experience falls generally into two chronological blocks: the early work done in the 1950s to the mid-1980s, and a more recent body of work that emerged in the late 1990s and continued in a much greater flurry in the first years of the twenty-first century. Analysts who have turned their attention to this phenomenon demonstrated considerable interest in comparative reflection about the second-home experience in places such as the Nordic countries, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. Literary authors, journalists, creative non-fiction writers, and cottagers tend to concentrate their writing in a much more localized context. Well-known literary figures and journalists have waxed eloquently about, or at times probed the underbelly of, the cottage experience in Canada. Cottagers themselves often produce sentimental histories of life on “their lake.”

Anyone interested in reading about the cottage experience in Canada, specifically that in Ontario, should begin with the work of geographer Roy Wolfe, whose contributions to the field began in 1951 and whose most significant early piece was his 1956 PhD thesis (see also Wolfe 1951, 1952, 1962, 1965, 1966, 1977). Grounding his analysis in postal lists to determine the location and density of cottages in Ontario, he reflected on what motivated people to pursue the cottage experience in Ontario. He posited themes of escape, being in nature, and status seeking. Despite the limitations of his methodologies, Wolfe offered some important insights and identified the experience as one worthy of intellectual scrutiny. In 1977, John Coppock edited *Second Homes: Curse or Blessing?* which brought together examples of international research from Norway, Sweden, France, the United States, and Canada. Its title alone highlights the complexities of the phenomenon. Were the economic benefits to local economies and the pleasures of life at the cottage worth the demands for massive infrastructure development, the threats to fragile physical environments, and the social tensions caused by the status differentiation between cottagers and locals?

In 1986, physical geographer Reiner Jaakson addressed his frustration at the lack of attention paid to the question of what is meaningful about the cottage experience in an article titled “Second Home Domestic Tourism.” In this piece, he accurately identified the cottager as a form of tourist – much to the chagrin of many cottagers – and produced a laundry list of meanings attributed to the experience. The latter included things such as the tensions between routine and novelty, work and leisure, the desire for

social and cultural inversion, the attraction of being in nature, and a search for identity, surety, status, continuity, and temporal and physical distance from life in the city. Jaakson's (1986) analysis was based on informal conversations and interviews he had done with cottagers throughout Canada over the previous twenty years. According to Plog (2001, 15), cottagers fall generally into a spectrum of "psychocentric" or "dependable" tourists who "try to make [as] much of their daily lives predictable and dependable." Annual, and in the summer weekly, returns to a well-known and much-treasured place offered such constancy. Two key characteristics of tourists in Plog's analysis resonated with many cottagers I interviewed: they "like structure and routine" and "prefer to be surrounded by friends and family" (2001, 16).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, several geographers reinvigorated the study of second homes by examining the cottaging experience in locations such as the United States, Norway, Finland, and New Zealand, making important contributions to the field. The understanding of the second-home experience greatly benefitted in this latter period from the theoretical and analytical capacities brought to it by human, as opposed to physical, geographers. Drawing on comparative research in Norway and the United States and on the work of Anthony Giddens (1991), Daniel Williams and Bjorn Kaltenborn (1999, 215) argued that cottaging can play an important role in resolving the "identity dilemmas created by modernity and the phenomena of space-time compression." The cottage as a place for the construction or retrieval of self-identity has become a recurrent theme in the literature. But the specificity of what actually shapes that identity is something often glossed broadly.

Williams and Kaltenborn (1999, 226-27), in their research in Norway and regions of the United States, observed that cottaging could be seen to reflect distinctive nationalisms/regionalisms. Periäinen (2006, 109) noted that for Finns the "summer cottage is a set of nationalistic values, such as the belief that to be a Finn is to love nature and long for solitude" (see also J. Harrison 2010).

Halseth's (1998, 2004) comparative study of two different cottaging areas in Canada highlighted the tensions between selected rural communities and the development, and in some cases transition, of cottages to permanent residences. He established the links that these "elite" landscapes have to metropolitan areas, a theme Nik Luka (2006) later further

developed. Drawing on the concept of “multiple residency” developed by Hall and Müller (2004) and Quinn (2004), Luka argues that cottage country has to be “built into the metropolitan housing equation” (2006, 292). To Luka, “the housing market of the Toronto metropolitan region effectively includes second-home settings in central Ontario cottage country” (ibid., 293). His discussion of the suburbanization of cottage country, the latter which he sees as a “generic category of landscape and urban form,” and of the motivators of “the social practice of cottaging in central Ontario,” sets a base to build on and refine. For example, I do not take his use of such notions as “pleasant place,” “nature,” and good “values” as neutral. I build on the work of Luka, Halseth, and others who argue that the Canadian cottage should be seen as an extension of the metropolitan space, examining how suburban social and cultural values play(ed) out at the cottage.²⁹

Luka (2006, 38-39ff) surveyed the literature on second-home ownership to ascertain what others had said about the motivation and meaningfulness of owning and retaining a cottage (see also Pitkänen 2008; Vepsäläinen and Pitkänen 2010). Some elements of the meaningfulness of this experience highlighted in this literature include a cottage as presuming an implicit link to recreation and play; a place of family/childhood connection and memories; a return to nature as a primal/therapeutic/restorative space; a non-urban but not-quite-wilderness place; a place of community, belonging, and, for some, a place of spiritual connection; and a place of escape. Many of these themes and their complex entanglements as expressed by the Haliburton cottagers I interviewed shape much of what follows here.

Hall and Müller’s (2004) *Tourism, Mobility and Second Homes: Between Elite Landscapes and Common Ground* is one of two relatively recent collections of papers based on international examples of second-home living. The essays in this volume give a central place to ideas of mobility, challenging at least in part the taken-for-granted assumption of the priority of the primary home over the second home, and highlighting the evolving “elite” nature of this experience. As Quinn (2004) suggests, multiple residency dwelling is a condition of many in the world today, be they elite second-home owners or immigrants and migrant workers who move regularly between two or more countries. Several authors further develop the tensions around the inequalities that are heightened when mobile populations or second-home tourists move in and make their presence felt in someone else’s “home territory.” Some attention is given to the question

of the motivation of second-home tourism, but again this discussion glosses over key differences within this tourist group. Of particular note is Stephen Svenson's (2004) typology of the Canadian cottager. While useful, it is both homogenizing and particular at the same time, glossing gender, class and age differentials in cottaging behaviour and the nuanced understandings of this practice.

The chapters in *Multiple Dwelling and Tourism: Negotiating Place, Home and Identity*, edited by N. McIntyre, D. Williams, and K. McHugh (2006), further engage the topic of mobility in the life of the second-home owner, and the tensions that it sets up in relation to any simplified understandings of home and, by extension, place and identity. Such dwellings are far from being homes with an "inessential purpose," as Wolfe (1977) once called them. To many of the authors in this volume (and to those in Hall and Müller 2004; see also Williams and Kaltenborn 1999; Williams and McIntyre 2001), these dwellings comprise a phenomenon that needs to be seen in the context of modernity, globalization, a search for authenticity, a "thinning out" of place, and the resultant fragmentation of identity in the reality of the late modern world, something that cottagers proactively respond to by all that they invest in their cottages. As cogent and helpful as much of this analysis is, I am forced to query the assumptions of homogeneity and consistency across place, time, individual experience, gender, race, and class position that seem to underlie it.³⁰ Relatively little sustained attention has been paid to such factors. Luka (2006, 124-25) notes that certain parts of Ontario's cottage country reflect ethnic/cultural divisions, and it is taken as a given that there are clear socioeconomic divisions between those who cottaged in Muskoka, for example, and those who cottaged in the Kawarthas (see also Wolfe 1951). But as Lehr, Selwood, and Badiuk (1991, 47) noted, looking at such developments in the Lake Winnipeg region, these divisions are "virtually ignored in the scholarly literature devoted to the study of recreational development in Canada." And while they made this claim some years ago, and in a period when there seemed to be little interest in the study of cottaging, there has been no significant attention to these social and cultural factors in much of the current literature. Alluding to this very oversight, sociologists Perkins and Thorns (2006, 76-78) recently noted that there is a "conspicuous lack of critique" in the research on second homes; rather, it is characterized by "its positive inclinations of leisure, escape, and meaningful experience." I concur with

this observation, though with no intention of dismissing the important work done by many on the second-home experience. Instead, I seek to build on it.

The researchers in much of this more recent work use a variety of methodologies. Surveys, questionnaires, and statistical information provided through government surveys and censuses are common. Highly directive and structured data collection techniques aimed at selected recreational activities and the subjects' response to doing them is another methodology recommended by Williams and McIntyre (2001). Luka (2006) supplemented his detailed online survey with a wealth of material gleaned from cottagers in semi-structured interviews about their experiences. While he quotes extensively from these interviews, there is much more to be teased out of such material. But his main priority, as is fitting of his field, was situating cottaging in the socially constructed place of central Ontario. I have discussed elsewhere (J. Harrison 2008a) the distinctive strengths that the more open-ended qualitative methodologies of ethnography can offer a study of cottagers, something that I see as complementing these other strategies while directly and strongly privileging the voice of the cottagers and what they say and do. The role of the researcher in my field-work is critical, and I make no assumptions or attempts to eliminate that presence. I see this as extremely beneficial to the depth, character, and scope of analysis I am able to offer.

Regional historians have discussed the development of seasonal tourism/cottaging in particular areas (for example, in Ontario, Hodgins and Benidickson 1989 on Temagami; C. Campbell 2004 on Georgian Bay) and as part of a broader analysis of recreational and environmental history in Canada (Jasen 1995; Loo 2006). Peter Stevens's (2008a, 2008b, 2010) work is focused on the development of cottaging in the immediate post-World War II era in Ontario; one theme he covers is the role of the automobile and highway development in shaping the Ontario cottage experience – a point made in some of Wolfe's early writings – and cottagers' views of nature and the environment of the era. Stevens's demonstration of how modern technological developments greatly expanded the potential access to the cottage experience is very relevant to my work.

Michael Ondaatje (1987), Margaret Atwood (1991), David MacFarlane (2000), Mordecai Richler (1997), and Janice Kulyk Keefer (2007) are just a few of the well-known Canadian fiction authors who have found the

cottage and cottage country a fruitful setting. Even renowned American authors take their heroes to a Canadian cottage, as John Irving (1989) did Owen Meany. The cottage has been a recurrent theme in Atwood's poetry and that of other Canadian poets (see for example Purdy 1974; B. Struthers 1996, 2005, 2008). Life at the cottage, or the cottage as a place of important life transitions, figures in a range of Canadian films – *The Barbarian Invasions*, *Five of Us*, *Away from Her*, and *Who Loves the Sun* are just some examples. An abundance of creative non-fiction has been written by individuals such as Roy MacGregor (2002, 2005), Charles Gordon (1989, 2006), Lawrence Scanlan (2004), Allan Casey (2009), and Amy Willard Cross (1992). There is even a one-time hit song, “You Sold the Cottage,” by the 1970s-'80s Canadian pop group Martha and the Muffins about what the sale of the family cottage meant to an angst-ridden teenager.³¹ Some of this writing is intended to be comedic, while other pieces are quite black. But at its heart, this work expresses a desire to capture some of what the cottage represents to Ontarians, who in much of this material are taken to be the “generic Canadian.” In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the appeal of the cottage as a setting for popular novels continued. Kit Pearson set her children's story *Looking at the Moon* (1991) at the cottage; John Ibbitson's *The Landing* (2008) and Dorothy Palmer's *When Fenelon Falls* (2010) are examples of this genre written for an adolescent audience; Robert Rea's *The Earth, The Stars, and Whisper* (2003) and Gregor Robinson's *Providence Island* (2011) are other examples of novels about the cottage, best read there to pass lazy summer afternoons.

Anthropologists say very little on the topic. Swedish anthropologist Orvar Löfgren includes a chapter titled “Cottage Cultures” in his 1999 monograph *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing*. His discussion is topically and geographically wide ranging, chronicling the historical experiences on both sides of the Atlantic. He highlights many relevant themes – familial continuity, local/cottager tensions, nostalgia, gender tensions – but offers little detail and no in-depth analysis. Shiho Satsuka's 1997 master's thesis, “Re-creation through Landscape: Subject Production in Canadian Cottage Country,” was a pioneering anthropological work in this field. Satsuka situated her research in Georgian Bay, Ontario, and spent time talking with and observing cottagers' daily lives. As a Japanese national, she found this an ideal location for examining Western notions of individualism and how they were inculcated and reinforced through cottaging

behaviour. I draw on many themes that have historically shaped anthropology: kinship, gendered divisions of labour, status markers, belief systems, and ideologies. Such discussions are complemented by some of the more contemporary preoccupations of anthropology, themes that augment these traditional pillars of analysis: memory, belonging, place, and embodiment.

Studying the Haliburton Cottager

Making generalizations about those who own a second home in a particular geographic region of Ontario is challenging. One could compile an array of statistical profiles that in some measure would expose the broadest parameters about who owns and uses Haliburton cottages, and likely one would find significant variation among that group, particularly as the social and economic positioning of some Haliburton cottage families has shifted dramatically in the last fifty years. Such “facts” speak only in the most limited way to my curiosity about the meaningfulness of this experience.

It was difficult to do traditional participant observation fieldwork with cottagers.³² Many lakes in Haliburton, as in many other areas of Ontario’s cottage country, are completely surrounded by cottage properties, thus defining the lakeshore as private property and eliminating any obvious access for the general public. To avoid the dilemma of trying to turn friendships into research relationships, I avoided bartering the goodwill of my friends who own cottages. I needed to figure out a strategy to make contact with cottagers beyond meandering down private laneways hoping that it was a weekend the owners were in residence and that they would take the time to talk to me. Such a strategy could likely have triggered police attention and accusations of trespassing, particularly as greater concern about security and crime prevention has blossomed recently in cottage country.

Many cottage owners on Ontario lakes organize themselves into cottage associations or, as they are called today, property owners or ratepayers associations that act as networking, lobbying, and advocacy groups for cottagers’ interests with various levels of government.³³ Most communicate with their members through newsletters, annual meetings, and seasonal social events. When I began my research in 2004, a few had websites.³⁴ For those that did, I used links to executive members and eventually

received offers to put a small ad in their upcoming newsletter or obtained invitations to speak at association meetings. I also attended Haliburton community events in the county to meet people and talk about my research. At one such event, I met a reporter from a local newspaper who subsequently wrote a story about my research project. His article generated a large number of contacts for me. I also placed ads in the two local papers. In a limited number of cases, I followed up on personal contacts who, in turn, had contact with cottagers on lakes in Haliburton. To further contextualize what those I interviewed were telling me, I drew on the magazine *Cottage Life*, beginning with its first issues in the late 1980s and continuing to the present, and on the steady stream of articles about the Ontario cottage experience that appeared yearly from 2003 to 2009 in early spring in the real estate, lifestyle, business, and news sections of national newspapers such as the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, and smaller newspapers in Haliburton and surrounding counties. Only in limited measure did these former sources speak specifically to the Haliburton experience, but where they did, I drew directly on them. In dealing with the cottage experience more broadly, they allowed me to situate the experience both comparatively and contrastively to the wider Ontario/national experience.

All but two of my meetings with cottagers were conducted on-site – that is, at the cottage. These interviews and informal conversations lasted anywhere from two to eight hours, and were with one family member, a husband-and-wife couple, a family including parents, adult children, and, in some cases, their spouses. I often stayed for lunch and/or dinner, was given a tour of the cottage, and frequently received a boat tour around the lake. I remain in ongoing email contact with several of these cottagers, and often returned more than once to visit them at their cottages. My research assistant did some of the interviews I draw on here, using a parallel protocol of questions and format.³⁵ Thus, my discussion and interpretations here are based on the semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and some ongoing extended communications over email and follow-up visits with fifty-four Haliburton cottagers.³⁶

The cottagers interviewed either owned or shared ownership of cottages on both large and small lakes; some have lengthy familial histories of cottaging in Haliburton, while others only recently acquired their cottage. Three-quarters of them had lived for significant periods of their lives in the GTA (see Map 3, p. 14). Many still considered that region home when

I met them; others had moved to smaller communities closer to cottage country to facilitate easier access to their cottage in retirement. Some lived in other large or mid-size Ontario urban centres or had permanent residences much farther afield, either in western Canada or, in a couple of cases, the United States.³⁷ A very few had grown up their entire lives in small towns or spent their very early years on farms. A very large portion of the cottagers interviewed were middle-aged and older, hardly an unexpected age range considering the cost of owning a cottage today. Additionally, this was likely the demographic most interested in talking to me as they had a significant financial, personal, and emotional investment in the experience.³⁸ Only in a few cases did individuals under forty own their cottage; most frequently I met them at a property owned by their parents, other family members, or close friends. In one case, several siblings had come together to jointly acquire a cottage.

Some of those interviewed would never consider living permanently at the cottage; others were contemplating such a move in the future; only a very few had made it. What they all shared was a passionate commitment to the idea and experience of life at the cottage, whether they had known it for five, fifteen, or forty years, or even if a few had sacrificed some of what it represented by moving permanently to cottage country. Nearly half had owned or their family had owned the cottage where I met them for more than thirty years. A few had had their cottage property in their family for considerably longer, and there were a couple of individuals whose grandfathers had owned some form of modest recreational property in Haliburton as early as the 1920s.

At the other end of the spectrum, just 30 percent had owned the cottage where they were interviewed for less than fifteen years; some had just bought their first cottage less than five years before I met them. It is important to note, however, that some of these more recent owners had owned another cottage elsewhere, usually on another lake in Haliburton, prior to purchasing their current one. These families demonstrated a passionate commitment to the experience of cottaging in Haliburton – many had been cottaging there for at least twenty years and some much longer – if not to a particular cottage. The remainder, however, could not be considered new to the Haliburton cottage experience, as they had owned their properties for at least fifteen years.

As for their educational backgrounds, almost three-quarters of them had at least some post-secondary education, resulting in employment histories that covered a wide range of professions and occupations in the fields of education, finance, law, public service, arts, television, engineering, health services, administration and management, business, law enforcement, manufacturing, sales, and marketing. There were very few who worked (or had worked) outside of such “middle-class sectors,” as postal workers, secretaries, and office support staff. These cottagers in particular had purchased modest cottages in the immediate postwar period, when such things were relatively more affordable. Approximately half were retired or semi-retired. Very few had annual incomes of over \$150,000 a year. The vast majority made less than that amount; many declared incomes of less than \$75,000 a year, an income base that for some was quite stretched in an effort to keep their cottage. Most were frequent newspaper and magazine readers; the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, *National Geographic*, and *Cottage Life* – the latter definitely the most popular – were common favourites. As for their hobbies, a wide range of sports, reading, gardening, arts and crafts, and home (that is, mainly cottage) repairs were most commonly noted.

The demographics of age, occupation, income, education, length of cottage ownership, and other objective markers capture some characteristics of who these people are. There was an equal number of men and women, even if it was initially men who more frequently contacted me about wanting to be part of my research. With the exception of two people who had married someone with a familial history of cottaging, everyone could be classed as Caucasian. In keeping with such backgrounds, many were from families that had roots in Canada extending back for more than three generations on at least one side of the family; almost all (98 percent) traced their ancestry to Western Europe, the United States, or Central Canada. For those whose sexuality could be assumed based on their identification of their partners (current or in the past), with the exception of one couple, all were heterosexual. I have changed all names to pseudonyms in what follows.

Being in “Poor Man’s Muskoka”

When I attended the annual general meeting of one cottage association to inform them of my research, I began by saying that I had chosen to focus

my research in Haliburton, not Muskoka or even Georgian Bay, the places that are generally taken to be the iconic cottage locations in Ontario. My statement, to my surprise, was greeted with a round of applause. I was told, “We are not Muskoka; it is better here in Haliburton. Muskoka has been spoiled.” For these cottagers, my decision validated what they assumed had prompted me to base my research there: Haliburton was where “real cottagers” would be found. Cottages in Muskoka and Georgian Bay, in particular, were seen to belong to the wealthy, if not the very wealthy. Company presidents, politicians, lawyers, stock exchange “high rollers,” even movie stars and “other Americans” had cottages there, as one cottager told me. According to her, “mansions of old money, not cottages,” dominated the lakeshores there, structures that were definitely not the product of the sweat, labour, energy, and frugalities of the “ordinary” families who cottaged in Haliburton. With big cottages went big lakes and big boats, things many of those I spoke with said would detract from any real sense of community at the cottage. These other cottagers were not part of the “do-it-yourself/we can do it too” ethos of the cottage in Haliburton.³⁹

Simply put, Muskoka cottagers were perceived to be ostentatious in their demonstration of wealth.⁴⁰ Haliburton did not have the dance halls,⁴¹ sailing clubs, and large marinas that Muskoka did and, in fact, many of the Haliburton cottages were quite isolated before the improved road access in the latter decades of the twentieth century; others still are. These things prompted both a self-reliance and a mutual dependency on others on the same lake, something several commented was particularly strong when they were first building their cottages or among women who had spent their entire summers with their children at the cottage, a pattern characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s. The towns of Minden and Haliburton – as opposed to Gravenhurst and Huntsville in Muskoka – were, in the minds of those I spoke with, “real towns.” As Neil said, “You can still buy the essentials of life on the main streets of these places, and not only the ‘tourist trinkets’ found in [Huntsville].” And if comparisons were made in the other direction, Haliburton fared well relative to places such as Wasaga Beach and much of the Kawarthas where the working class went to cottage, with the exception of Stoney and Clear Lakes in the Kawarthas, as they had cottages as expensive and elegant as any found in Muskoka (see Maps 1 and 3, p. 6 and p. 14). These places were, as Marnie noted, “cottage, next to cottage, next to cottage, laid out like a suburb.”

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21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada on FSC-certified ancient-forest-free paper
(100% post-consumer recycled) that is processed chlorine- and acid-free.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Harrison, Julia D. (Julia Diane), 1953-, author
A timeless place : the Ontario cottage / Julia Harrison.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-2607-5 (bound). –

ISBN 978-0-7748-2609-9 (pdf). – ISBN 978-0-7748-2610-5 (epub)

1. Vacation homes – Ontario – Haliburton Region. 2. Vacation homes – Social aspects – Ontario – Haliburton Region. 3. Country life – Ontario – Haliburton Region. 4. Haliburton Region (Ont.) – Social life and customs. I. Title.

GV191.46.O58H37 2013

333.78'0971361

C2013-903359-9

C2013-903360-2

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Set in Rotis and Minion by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Stephanie VanderMeulen

Proofreader: Helen Godolphin

Indexer: Heather Ebbs

Cartographer: Eric Leinberger

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

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