Making Muskoka
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Introduction

In 1904, settler Fanny Potts observed that “for the past few years the population of Muskoka has been gradually dividing itself into two classes – tourists and settlers, otherwise capital and labor, pleasure and toil, butterflies and bees, whichever you like to call them.”1 By the time she wrote these words, Muskoka had become a tourism mecca, attracting affluent visitors from cities to the south who sought recreation, leisure, and recuperation at a lakeside wilderness retreat. Since then, the popular imagination of Muskoka, located roughly 150 kilometres north of Lake Ontario at the southern edge of the Canadian Shield, has been dominated by fashionable resort hotels and opulent summer cottages on the rugged shores of a lake. Indeed, most perceptions of Muskoka, including historical ones, do not extend any further than the view one would have standing next to the shore looking out at the lake, or sitting on the water looking back at the shore. The version of Muskoka that most people know privileges the tourist’s experience and rarely moves inland beyond a narrow ribbon of land next to the lakeshore. It captures only part of Muskoka’s history and obscures the experiences of the people who made tourism possible.

This book explores the role tourism played in the colonization of the southern edge of the Canadian Shield in Ontario during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and considers how the communities that lived in this region became more or less sustainable over time. I argue that during the first generation of resettlement between the 1870s and the 1890s, tourism provided many settlers in Muskoka with a more sustainable basis for constructing and reproducing their rural identity.
than commercial agriculture or large-scale wood-resource harvesting, and that the rise of consumer culture and fossil fuels after 1900 eroded their control over tourism and resulted in less sustainable arrangements than had existed during the 1880s and 1890s. Furthermore, in the context of the dispossession and devastation wrought by settler colonialism, tourism also provided important opportunities for members of Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee First Nations to protect their Indigenous identities at a time when the provincial and federal governments restricted social, cultural, political, and economic life on- and off-reserve. I pay attention to the region’s environmental limitations and occupational pluralism to show that rural people constructed identities, which combined elements of both a temporary, seasonal presence and a permanent, sedentary occupation on the Canadian Shield.

To better understand the people who supported tourism in Muskoka, this book introduces the concepts of rural identity and sustainability to help explain how settlers negotiated inherited colonial ideas about liberalism, improvement, and private property with the material realities and economic opportunities in a place that was unsuited to agriculture and sedentary life. I conceptualize rural identity as a means of investigating the emergent properties of a way of life, rather than as an entirely deliberate social or political category. I also accept that people in the past may not have been fully conscious of how the material world shaped their identity. I challenge the notion that identity is strictly a social construction and demonstrate how it was shaped, in part, by the material realities of the environment in which people lived and by their interactions with that environment through economic activity. Rural identity is a malleable concept that can help to account for how and why people adjusted when they encountered new environments, engaged in new occupations, and responded to new social relationships. During the late nineteenth century, rural ways of life throughout North America displayed many similarities, and the concept of rural identity therefore provides a useful framework to reveal what made Muskoka distinct. Given their desire to extend an agrarian society into an environment unsuited to sedentary occupation, an important aim of this book is to assess how sustainable the rural identities were that people in Muskoka constructed and reproduced between 1870 and 1920. Sustainability provides a helpful framework because it allows for a comparison of economic, social, and environmental dimensions of rural identity across space and over time.

When the government opened Muskoka for Euro-Canadian settlement during the late nineteenth century, many who took up land envisioned
their place in an agrarian society. Instead, they encountered a heavily forested and poorly drained landscape characterized by numerous small lakes and granite outcroppings. Its thin, acidic soil was largely unsuited to farming (see Figure 0.1). Few thrived as farmers. They did, however, live permanently, year-round on the Shield. To do so, like other rural inhabitants throughout North America, they embraced occupational pluralism, which R.W. Sandwell describes as a combination of “self-provisioning, waged work, and the sale of commodities.”

Within the first years of resettlement, visitors from cities to the south began showing up, and settlers quickly incorporated tourism as a central pillar of their survival strategies.

Through their temporary, but annual, presence in various places in the region, the Anishinaabeg acquired knowledge and skills related to the Shield environment, which they used to construct, maintain, and reproduce their Indigenous identity. The communities that inhabited the lands at the southern edge of the Canadian Shield in the mid-nineteenth century understood the Shield’s material realities and lived in Muskoka for part of every year. Over hundreds of years prior to colonization, First
Nations followed a seasonal cycle between defined resource sites, which included fishing locations next to Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay, and hunting grounds in Muskoka. After 1850, Euro-Canadian settlement, discriminatory hunting and fishing restrictions, and authoritarian paternalism under the Indian Act seriously constrained their lifeways. To support their communities and cope with the pressures of colonization, they repurposed their skills and knowledge of the Shield environment to sell crafts to tourists and guide fishing and hunting parties in Muskoka. In this way, they returned each year to protect their Indigenous identity.

Tourists visited Muskoka to escape the city, rejuvenate their minds and bodies, and experience the wilderness. Their seasonal presence provides an interesting parallel to that of the Anishinaabeg, since they too spent only part of the year in Muskoka. During the first generation of Euro-Canadian settlement between the 1870s and 1890s, as a strategy to support year-round living on the Shield, settlers who lived near Lakes Muskoka, Rosseau, and Joseph aligned many elements of the local economy with the needs and wants of summer visitors (see Figure 0.2). At resort hotels
and privately owned cottages beside the water, tourists relied on them to do the physical work and provide food and fuel. Tourists had expectations regarding style, taste, and quantity, but settlers were the ones who built and maintained the hotels and cottages, produced the fresh food, chopped the wood, cut the ice, and maintained the landscape aesthetic that visitors demanded each summer.

As was the case nearly everywhere that Euro-Canadians resettled the Shield, agroforestry contributed to the construction of rural identity in Muskoka. The government licensed large logging companies to cut timber and extract incredible wealth from the forests, only a small portion of which benefitted settlers in the form of wages and payment for goods and services to support the winter logging camps. Large-scale logging also degraded aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, pulled men away from families for months at a time, and declined by the end of the century. Three large leather tanneries consumed enormous quantities of bark from the region’s hemlock trees, with similar social, economic, and environmental consequences. Many settlers, however, pursued more sustainable alternatives by selling relatively small quantities of logs to sawmills, and hemlock bark to tanneries, at a scale that moderately altered the local ecology, limited social dislocation, and provided important income. Compared with tourism, agroforestry presented a less sustainable basis for settlers to construct a rural identity.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, tourism provided the most sustainable basis for constructing and reproducing a distinct rural identity in Muskoka, because settlers maintained a relatively high degree of control over the goods and services that visitors needed and wanted. After 1900, however, the rise of consumer culture and fossil fuels pulled Muskoka’s local economy into new networks of distant market exchange over which settlers had no control. In particular, mail-order catalogue shopping and fossil-fuel technologies created new patterns of life in Muskoka, which eroded the demand for locally produced food and fuel. Tourists continued to rely on many local goods and services, but the opportunities for settlers to turn the material realities of the Shield environment to their advantage diminished when local merchants and farmers competed with large urban retailers for tourists’ business, and when local sources of organic energy competed with exogenous sources of mineral energy. By the 1920s, tourism had become a less sustainable feature of rural identity in Muskoka than it had been at the turn of the century.

Scholarship on the history of tourism in North America tends to focus on the visitors, rather than the permanent residents whose lives, labour,
and land structured the tourism economy. This is particularly true for Muskoka. Only a few works have concentrated on its rural inhabitants. Historical studies of tourism elsewhere in North America typically explore its cultural meanings, the desires and mentalities of tourists, the efforts by local governments and development agencies to promote various regions, and the points of potential contention between tourists, locals, and Indigenous communities. As a result, histories of tourism tend either to privilege an urban perspective or to treat tourism as an imposition and a detriment to rural communities. In North America, the idea of wilderness that dominated the tourist imagination during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has heavily influenced the perspective of historians. The most popular places to experience the wilderness were national, state, and provincial parks, which governments protected from farming, lumbering, and mining. As William Cronon and Jocelyn Thorpe point out, the trouble with wilderness is that it imagines rural places as being devoid of people and history. Invariably, protected places dispossessed Indigenous peoples, and in most cases they excluded non-Indigenous residents as well.

Of course, North Americans also took holidays in settled rural locations. In areas with a long history of European resettlement and agriculture, residents turned to tourism to supplement their farm economies when commodity prices fell in response to surplus crop production in the American West and the Canadian Prairies at the end of the nineteenth century. As Dona Brown argues in her study of New England, though very few farmers felt “that the work of boarding tourists was essentially different from ordinary farm work,” tourism nevertheless “reflected a contest over the farm family’s identity and over the meaning of the farm.” Blake Harrison shows that farmers and other residents of rural Vermont adopted a strategy of “reworking” to redefine how farmers engaged in new types of farm work to accommodate leisure activities and tourism. In rural locales that were unsuited to agriculture, tourism often followed after periods of fishing, mining, logging, and unsuccessful farming. Ironically, the same limitations that made places such as the northlands of Maine, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Washington unsuited to agriculture also made them desirable wilderness holiday destinations for tourists. Unlike similar places, Muskoka’s community and economy co-evolved with tourism, which resulted in a distinct rural identity during the first generation of resettlement.

Rural historians often take for granted that the places, people, and ways of life they investigate are distinct from urban ones. Inspired by the work
of Raymond Williams, many simply explain rural people and their life-ways as contrasting with those of urban centres. Generally, they treat “rural” and “agricultural” as interchangeable. As American agricultural historian David B. Danbom states explicitly, “the vast bulk of the rural social, economic, and political history produced in the past generation has focused on farm people.” The same is true of the Canadian literature, where rural historians have devoted much more attention to the residents of agrarian communities than to those in hinterland resource communities, where farming was combined with, or supplemented, waged labour. R.W. Sandwell explains what it meant to be rural during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Canada, “the dominance of life lived out-of-doors, the enormous amount of hard labour, and the pervasive presence of the household” structured the rural experience. These three features, Sandwell insists, “not only identify for us what it meant to be rural then but also gave coherence and identity to rural Canadians themselves.”

Understanding the commonalities among rural people across the country acknowledges that “not all farmers relied exclusively on selling farm produce to make a living” and that “many rural dwellers were not really farmers at all.” But it does little to help us understand the distinctions between rural people and their ways of life in different places. As early as 1990, geographer Keith Hoggart argued that “researchers have assumed that [rural] places are equivalent to one another when they are dominated by very different causal processes.” As a result, “research on rural areas has tended to adopt a theoretically undifferentiated approach to what is ‘rural.’” Elsewhere, Sandwell points out that historians must regard the rural “as a place whose meaning and significance is both variable and negotiated on geographically – and historically – specific terms.” The concept of rural identity can help historicize and differentiate what it meant to live a rural way of life in discrete places.

Accepting that a wide variety of meaningful similarities and differences in socially constructed categories of identity, such as gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and politics, existed in rural places, this study seeks to understand specifically how more materialist categories of analysis shaped rural identity in Muskoka. Drawing on the work of neo-materialist historian Timothy J. LeCain, I demonstrate that rural identity became constructed, in part, through a creative process that included the influence of the environment and interactions with that environment through work. I treat both ideas and activities as evidence of people’s expression of identity. In other words, I accept that we can discern aspects of people’s identity in the past through both the discourse they used to signal their inclusion.
in a particular social group and the physical performance of work and interactions with the material world that they, perhaps subtly and non-discursively, undertook to indicate their commitment to a particular role within their family and community.

Because identity is so malleable, it is a useful tool to aid in understanding change over time, but it also presents some potential risks. Sociologist Rogers Brubaker and historian Frederick Cooper suggest that identity “tends to mean too much (when understood in the strong sense), too little (when understood in the weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity).” As a theory of social psychology and sociology, the risk with using identity as a tool for historical analysis is that the ideas, decisions, behaviours, and actions of people in the past (categories of practice) could be used uncritically by the historian to develop broad, reified typologies of groups of people (categories of analysis). Part of this risk, however, stems from the fact that scholars have tended to think of identity as entirely, or perhaps exclusively, socially constructed. As sociologists Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke note, identity theory seeks to “understand and explain how social structures affect self and how self affects social behaviors.” These postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches to understanding and explaining identity present ample opportunity for researchers, including historians, to treat highly abstracted categories of social roles or belonging as sufficient criteria to evaluate the salience of a particular identity.

Postmodernist and poststructuralist scholars have, LeCain contends, “put far more effort into analyzing the abstract and textual than in trying to discern the real world that was also supposed to be contiguous with that text.” They ignored “the possibility that human ideas emerged at least in part from their engagement with [the material] world and could not be accurately understood apart from this engagement.” Avoiding the temptation to explain rural identity as the product of a universal consciousness, “entire world view,” or mentalité requires recognizing that “there was a direct relationship between the material environment, on the one hand, and the consciousness and activity of the population on the other,” as historian James A. Henretta maintains. Insisting that identity was shaped by the environment and people’s interactions with it should not be an argument in favour of environmental determinism. “From a neo-materialist perspective,” LeCain states, “our environments are a powerful influence over this historical process [development of individual cognitive systems] but in a creative rather than a determinative sense.” Some of the work by rural studies scholars, and rural sociologists in particular, reveals how environment and occupation have influenced the social construction of
identity. And many environmental historians have begun to grapple with the ways that the material world shaped identity in a wide variety of settings, including the Canadian forest-prairie edge, China’s borderlands, Black Amazonia, the Adirondacks of Upstate New York, and Washington’s Pacific Northwest Coast. On the Shield, most settlers identified as farmers, but they also modified their rural identity to accommodate a plurality of occupations, including many that supported tourism.

Muskoka provides a contrast to studies that equate rural and agrarian or that present resource extraction as the only viable alternative in places unsuited to agriculture. Euro-Canadian resettlement in Muskoka occurred at the height of what historian John Weaver terms “the great land rush.” Immigrants from Europe, most of whom were British Protestants, relocated to temperate regions of the globe, where they expected to take up arable land and live as farmers. In 1871, over 93 percent of the 3,756 settlers who lived in the fifteen Muskoka townships included in this study identified as being of English, Irish, or Scottish ancestry. Thirty years later, in 1901, this pattern had not changed: more than 90 percent of the 11,101 permanent residents had British ancestry. Similarly, in 1881, more than 85 percent identified as Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, or Anglicans. In 1901, Protestants still constituted more than 80 percent of the population.

Central to this project of colonialism were Lockean “ideas about private landed property that were supported by the law; a popular and correct belief that privately held land was a source of freedom and power; and the juxtaposition of improvement and wilderness,” which settlers inherited from Britain and spread throughout the Anglo-American world. These “shared cultural traits” justified the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and informed the settler colonial desire “to apply labour and capital, so as to boost the land’s carrying capacity and hence its market value.” However, land-hungry immigrants were forced to adjust their expectations when the great land rush reached the Shield.

As a bellwether of modernity, tourism presented an alternative path to improvement. Visitors from the city desired to experience the wilderness, which meant uncleared, forested landscapes. And, ironically, settlers in Muskoka found that clearing their land did not necessarily improve it, because the soil was so poor. Those who took up land between the 1870s and 1890s either moved on once they discovered this fact or constructed a rural identity that reflected its realities. The blend of strategies they pursued challenges the idea that rural life in the late nineteenth century was either traditional and insular or destroyed by modern, capitalist economic structures. Using the Saguenay region of Quebec as his case study,
Gérard Bouchard argues that rural people practised “co-integration” whereby “the farming economy maintained numerous, close and regular ties with the extra-regional (and even international) capitalist economy but did so without converting to its specific ways and means.” In Muskoka, settlers included tourism as part of their co-integration strategy within the first generation of resettlement and remodelled ideas of improvement into a negotiation between the limited agricultural potential of the Shield and the aesthetic expectations of visitors who paid settlers to accommodate their needs and wants.

To evaluate how tourism and the Shield environment shaped the rural identity of those who resettled Muskoka, I compare the first generation of settlers in Muskoka with three baselines. First, rural identity must be understood in terms of the private property, agrarian ideal that inspired so many immigrants to come to Muskoka. Second, the history of tourism in Muskoka must be understood in contrast to that of similar places, where tourism emerged after resettlement and resource extraction. Third, the influence of tourism on rural identity in Muskoka must be understood by comparison with the Indigenous identity of the Anishinaabeg. First Nations lived in Muskoka for hundreds of years prior to Euro-Canadian resettlement, and their lives on the Shield represent an important baseline for understanding how tourism enabled settlers to adjust to the region’s material realities. Treating Indigenous occupation of Muskoka as a baseline for comparison risks reifying First Nations people as “ecological Indians” who lived in harmony with the environment simply by virtue of being Indigenous. I avoid this trope by examining the relationships that Euro-Canadian settlers and Indigenous people built and maintained with the Shield. This study highlights the similarities in the process, while also making clear that settler colonialism, including tourism, dispossessed and discriminated against Indigenous people.

Throughout this book, I use the concept of sustainability to characterize and evaluate how rural identity changed in Muskoka because it enables me to consider the constantly evolving circumstances of economy, society, and environment, rather than the static conditions of their interaction. In the chapters that follow, “sustainability” refers to the potential for a society, or a particular feature of a society, to reproduce patterns of economic exchange, social relationships, and environmental conditions. This definition asserts that nothing is completely sustainable, only more or less sustainable. The potential is enhanced when the arrangements become more sustainable and is diminished when they become less sustainable. When life in Muskoka became more sustainable, people were better able
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to construct, maintain, and reproduce their identity than when it became less sustainable.

Defining sustainability in historical terms is complicated by the temporal and spatial variables that must be considered, as well as the technical and ethical ones. Moreover, many definitions of sustainability are not useful for historical inquiry, because they involve certain goals and ways of thinking about the world that were extremely uncommon in the past. Finding value in the concept of sustainability involves reconciling the benefits of a heuristic tool for evaluating change with the risks of anachronism posed by analyzing the past in ways that might not have made sense at the time.30 The Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability defines sustainability as “the capacity to maintain some entity, outcome, or process over time.”31 However, socioecological conditions never remain static, so sustainability can never be an exact science, and therefore, comparison and change become critical to defining, assessing, and understanding it.32 As sustainability expert Richard Heinberg puts it, “sustainability is a relative term.”33 Robert Costanza and Bernard C. Patten argue that “because we can only assess sustainability after the fact, it is a prediction problem more than a definition problem.”34 In other words, changing circumstances and conditions, not identifying indicators, are the real challenge (and opportunity) in using the concept of sustainability. For John Ehrenfeld, sustainability is only a “possibility,” not a measurement.35 Likewise, McMichael, Butler, and Foulke see sustainability as maximizing the chances that any given condition can be maintained indefinitely.36 Acknowledging these realities, sustainability expert Daniel Lerch suggests that sustainability “is best thought of as a process, not a goal.”37 The sustainability concept’s capacity to assess change over time (a central axiom for historians) makes it a useful device to compare a community (Muskoka), or a particular feature of a society (tourism), relative to itself at an earlier or later point, or relative to a similar unit of analysis at the same point in time.38

Environmental historians have grappled with the concept of sustainability as either a category of intellectual history itself or a tool to help explain change over time. A number of recent works have investigated the origins of the concept and its influence on land use, resource management, and environmental change over the last several hundred years, particularly in Western Europe and North America.39 Important scholarship by environmental historians has also demonstrated how it can be used for rigorous comparative historical analysis. In his study of agriculture in colonial Massachusetts, Brian Donahue asks “could Concord’s system of husbandry, once established, continue to deliver the desired level of natural
products and ecological services to its human inhabitants more or less indefinitely, or did it undermine itself?”⁴⁰ Given the pre-industrial realities of farming in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he argues, “the colonial husbandry systems could have gone on supporting the community for a long, long time.”⁴¹ But even this particular socioecological system, which demonstrated a high potential for sustaining itself, succumbed to pressures that it could not resist. It “was bound up in and deeply committed to a broader world of European economic growth that ultimately led it to move in a new, arguably less sustainable direction as it encountered its limits ... But this should not blind us to what was achieved during the era when, partly by choice and partly by necessity, those constraints prevailed.”⁴² In his work on Great Plains agriculture, Geoff Cunfer makes a similar case for understanding the contingency of sustainability in the past. “Human adaptation to environment is never permanent,” Cunfer states, “because people change and environments change. No system is ever ‘sustainable’ forever. Sustainability, at its best, can only mean a temporary state of equilibrium and a willingness and ability to change again in the future.”⁴³ As Donahue and Cunfer demonstrate, sustainability is not a template for explaining features, characteristics, and typologies of the past. Instead, it helps to explain changes in the past. Specifically, it allows historians to identify changes that shaped the potential for societies to maintain or reproduce particular economic, social, and environmental arrangements over time. In the case of Muskoka, it provides a methodology for analyzing changes to the relationship between identity and environment found in Indigenous lifeways, Euro-Canadian resettlement, resource extraction, and tourism.

There is no single narrative of sustainability in the history of Muskoka. Instead, sustainability is assessed in multiple comparative terms. Economic, social, and environmental arrangements may have become more sustainable for one group of people in a certain way while simultaneously becoming less so for a different group in another way. For example, during the 1880s and 1890s, tourism made life more sustainable for settlers living near Lakes Muskoka, Rosseau, and Joseph but did not have the same impact in the backwoods. When consumer culture and fossil fuels eroded local control over tourism after about 1900, life became less sustainable for all permanent residents. Likewise, in the 1870s and 1880s, economic opportunities provided by logging camps made settler life more sustainable than it would have been without them, but after about 1900 household-based logging presented more sustainable opportunities. And the Anishinaabeg repurposed their skills and knowledge to pursue opportunities in Muskoka
and make their lives more sustainable even as colonization made their lives less sustainable everywhere else. In each case, sustainability provides a useful tool to evaluate how identities changed in Muskoka between 1870 and 1920.

The District of Muskoka is located approximately 150 kilometres north of Toronto and is situated at the southern edge of the Precambrian Shield, east of Georgian Bay and west of Algonquin Park. The origins of the name “Muskoka” are not clear, but early historians have suggested the name derived from Chief Misko-Aki, who spoke for several Anishinaabeg nations in the region during the early nineteenth century and was known to the British as “William Yellowhead.” During the 1850s and 1860s, the Government of Canada West created Muskoka as a distinct political territory in an effort to settle the Ottawa-Huron Tract, a swath of land north of the St. Lawrence lowlands between Georgian Bay and the Ottawa River as far north as Lake Nipissing. Township and district borders made Muskoka legible to government agencies, but this study takes a “bio-regional” approach to delimiting its geographic scope. In Muskoka, the watershed exerted important influences on people’s lives that did not conform to the arbitrary political spaces created by government mapmakers. For this reason, in this book, Muskoka primarily refers to the watershed of the Muskoka River. Many primary sources refer to and organize information according to the township and district borders created by government surveyors during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. But in many ways, the people who lived in Muskoka thought about their geography in different terms.

The geography of the Muskoka River is almost entirely a product of the combined forces of geology and glaciation. Younger than the rock of the Shield farther north, the gneiss granite bedrock across all of Muskoka was created roughly one billion years ago when metamorphic rock thrust upward to form the mountainous Algonquin Dome. These mountains were once as tall as the Rockies, but after eons of ice, water, and wind erosion only their base remains. Approximately one million years ago, the climate cooled and the northern portion of North America experienced cycles of glaciation, the most recent of which began to subside around twenty thousand years ago. This process occurred across most of southern Ontario, including Muskoka, between eleven and twelve thousand years ago. Glaciers scoured the bedrock of its soils and softer sedimentary rock, such as limestone, producing a barren landscape of granite. As they melted, enormous volumes of water flowed out of the Algonquin Dome, forming Lake Algonquin, which at its greatest extent covered the basins of Lake
Michigan and Lake Huron, including Georgian Bay and the western half of what is now Muskoka.

The force of these meltwaters eroded billions of tons of rock and deposited them downstream as glacial till (clay, silt, sand, gravel). As the meltwaters subsided and Lake Algonquin drained out to form the Great Lakes, the region underwent isostatic rebound, and the basins carved by glaciation and erosion formed the lakes that remain today. The outwash of glacial till, the receding of Lake Algonquin, and the deposition of organic matter that accumulated over the last twelve thousand years created the soil arrangements present in Muskoka when Euro-Canadians colonized it after about 1860. Meltwaters carried glacial till downstream to the irregular shoreline and archipelago of Lake Algonquin’s eastern coast. Over roughly eight hundred years, it settled to form a layer of lacustrine clay in the low-lying areas along the eastern shore of the lake. As the lake receded, this deposit formed Muskoka’s only pockets of fertile soils that were somewhat suitable for farming. However, because Lake Algonquin existed for a relatively short time, little or none of the outwash settled

**Figure 0.3** Muskoka River watershed 11,000 years ago. *Gary Long, This River the Muskoka (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1989), 25. Adapted by Eric Leinberger*
along its bottom in deeper water. Thus, like the areas that remained above
the level of Lake Algonquin, the landscape west of Lakes Muskoka,
Rosseau, and Joseph received very little meltwater deposition, which meant
that its thin soils were accumulated solely via organic processes during
the next several thousand years (see Figure 0.3).

By almost any measure, Muskoka was unsuited to commercial agricul-
ture. The Canada Land Inventory categorizes soil capability for agriculture
according to seven classes and fifteen additional subclasses. Classes 1–4
“are considered capable of sustained use for cultivated field crops, those
in Classes 5 and 6 only for perennial forage crops, and those in Class 7 for
neither.”48 The vast majority of Muskoka features Class 7 soils, which have
no capability for crop use or permanent pasture and are dominated by
stoniness and shallowness to bedrock. East of Lake Muskoka between the
vicinity of Bracebridge and Three Mile Lake, tucked into the pockets that
formed next to the eastern shore of Lake Algonquin, settlers found patches
of Class 4 soils, with low natural fertility and deficient moisture that re-
stricted the range of crops. They also encountered larger swathes of Class
5 soils, with severe limitations and adverse relief, as well as Class 6 soils,
with undesirable soil structure, low permeability, and shallowness to bed-
rock. Similarly, farther east, along the old post-glacial lakeshore between
Mary Lake, Lake Vernon, Fairy Lake, and Peninsula Lake, settlers found
Class 4 and 6 soils, featuring characteristics that resembled those east of
Lake Muskoka. By comparison, much of the most fertile regions of south-
ern Ontario, such as Wellington and Middlesex Counties, overwhelmingly
possessed Class 1, 2, and 3 soils, with either no or only moderate limitations
for crops. Even the Saguenay region of Quebec, which featured many
socioecological similarities with Muskoka, contained arguably much better
soils, including several pockets of Class 2 and 3 around Lac Saint-Jean,
interspersed with lower-quality areas of Class 4, all surrounded by vast
stretches of Class 7 farther away from the lake and the Saguenay River.49

I opened this introduction with Fanny Potts’s insect analogy comparing
tourists and settlers. Her comment captures well the distinctions and the
relationships between consumers and producers, urban and rural dwellers,
temporary and permanent residents. “The tourists we may liken to the
butterflies,” she continued, “because they flock in upon us with the sum-
mer sunshine and flowers. The hard-working settlers are like the bees,
because they gather their honey with busy toil in the hot sun and store it
away for the cold winter days.” Potts was careful not to romanticize the
relationship between tourists and settlers, and she acknowledged that
“between these two classes there is a great gulf fixed. It seems to come
naturally to the pleasure-loving tourist to look down with a kind of pity on the hard-working settler, and it seems just as natural for the hard-working settler to look down on the giddy tourist.” It matters greatly, however, from her experience, “One thing is sure, each class would be very badly off without the other. If the busy little brown bees of settlers had not these lovely ‘tourist blossoms’ from which they gather their honey, where would their winter supply come from?” With these opening lines of a chapter entitled “Settlers and Tourists,” Potts articulated, almost perfectly, a key feature in the construction of a rural identity that was distinct in North America.50
Rural Identity and Resettlement of the Canadian Shield, 1860–80

In the spring of 1878, seventeen-year-old Frederick de la Fosse journeyed on his own from southern England to the small community of Ilfracombe in Muskoka. His uncle, and sole guardian, Colonel Montague Ricketts, had arranged for him to learn backwoods farming at the Harston Agricultural School in Stisted Township, on the shores of Buck Lake northeast of Huntsville. Ricketts had agreed to pay the school £100 per year for three years to lodge and feed his nephew as well as teach him to farm in the wilderness. After that, de la Fosse would be free to take up his own land. In reality, the Harston Agricultural School was simply the homestead of a retired British army officer, Captain Charles G. Harston. A recent settler himself, Harston had no credible agricultural knowledge suitable to frontier farming on the Canadian Shield, with its thin acidic soils, cool climate, and short growing season.1

On the final leg of his journey, de la Fosse spent the night at the British Lion Hotel in Bracebridge. In the sitting room, a group of rough-worn settlers attempted to impress upon him the realities of farming life in Muskoka. After learning of his uncle’s arrangements, the group had a laugh “to hear a boy whose weight was just one hundred pounds talking glibly of clearing a farm in the woods, but more excruciatingly funny was the fact that he was actually paying out what appeared to most of them a fortune for the privilege of helping a man to clear his farm and attend his cattle.”2 By 1878, most settlers had been in Muskoka for less than a decade and were still learning the difficult lessons of how to live on the Shield. The men at the British Lion understood that de la Fosse had little hope
of succeeding as a farmer in Muskoka. These facts on their own were not particularly humorous. But the idea of paying somebody else to improve one’s own chances of success seemed farcical.

During the late nineteenth century, North American settler colonial societies extended into places with low agricultural potential, such as Muskoka. What distinguished its settler society during this period were its extraordinarily poor soils and the co-evolution of tourism alongside agriculture and logging. The arrangements made by Ricketts for his nephew reveal assumptions widely shared by settlers in places where governments treated agricultural settlement as the key to continued colonial expansion and state formation. Arriving pioneers expected that environmental conditions would be similar to those of more populated regions with established farming communities. Where the material realities of resettled land precluded a predominantly agricultural society and economy, rural inhabitants pursued a combination of subsistence activities, market exchange, and waged labour. They experimented with various agricultural land uses and practices while simultaneously engaging in the agroforestry economy and earning income through market exchange.³

This chapter examines the suite of adjustments first-generation settlers made to construct rural identities that reflected the region’s environmental limitations and occupational opportunities. After the first generation, those living closer to the lower lakes (Muskoka, Rosseau, and Joseph) had begun to construct a more sustainable rural identity than those living in the backwoods. Poor soils and limited transportation options left settler households struggling to support themselves and isolated from the wider economy of Southern Ontario and northeastern North America. Compared to regions south of the Shield, Muskoka’s agricultural potential was uniformly poor, but settlers living closer to the lower lakes enjoyed opportunities not available to those located in the backwoods. Pioneer households everywhere in Muskoka experimented with various crops and strategies for subsistence, including hunting and fishing. Many pursued opportunities in the logging industry by selling their labour and that of their draught animals, along with the produce of their land, to logging camps in the winter. And, notably, an increasing number quickly seized on the opportunities to provide accommodations, goods, and services to tourists from cities to the south. When confronted with an environmental reality they did not expect, many, including de la Fosse, gave up, abandoned their land, and moved away. By the 1880s, transportation networks linking steamboat navigation and railways alleviated many of the problems associated with isolation closer to the lower lakes, but settlers living in backwoods
locations around the upper lakes continued to struggle and abandoned their land at higher rates.

The Euro-Canadian resettlement of the Muskoka District took place within what John Weaver calls “the great land rush,” and, in particular, the mid-century exodus of land-hungry immigrants and farmers’ sons from southern Ontario to the American West. Although the rich mineral deposits of the Shield initially attracted the government’s interest, the 1850 Robinson-Huron Treaty, which was signed with seventeen Ojibwe (Anishinaabeg) First Nations, also enabled settlers to take up land under the terms of the 1853 Act to Amend the Law for the Sale and Settlement of the Public Lands. An agricultural panic over collapsed wheat prices in 1857 placed pressure on the government to construct the Muskoka Colonization Road, which it completed in stages using mainly local labour (see Figure 1.1). In 1859, the road connected Orillia and Gravenhurst. It was extended to Bracebridge two years later and reached the future site of Huntsville in 1863. At the same time, a series of trunk roads extended laterally into surveyed townships, opening more than half a million acres to resettlement by the end of the century. The 1853 act allowed the government to sell hundred-acre plots at fixed prices and to grant hundred-acre plots of free land to settlers who were willing to locate next to the