

SINCE  
1989

NO 47 \$4.95

SPECIAL ISSUE

ONTARIO HISTORY, HERITAGE & NOSTALGIA

# The Country Connection

M A G A Z I N E

**Peterborough Lift Locks**

**Old Hastings Road**

**Algonquin Park**



**Highway of Shame, Highway of Hope**

**Homemade Pickles & Relishes**

**Cormorant**

**A fish eating scapegoat ?**

AUTUMN 2004



DISPLAY UNTIL DEC. 31, 2004

*Hand in Hand.* Photo by Joanne Healy



# SO MUCH LIKE HOME

## THE FINNISH VILLAGE AT SCOTT'S DAM

by Marjorie Ludlow Green



Sunny Rock Lodge in the late 1940s.

**T**hey arrived late at the Nichols farm, on a beautiful moonlit night, having lost their way somewhere past Bobcaygeon. But for the young Finnish tailor, his wife and daughter, the long trip north from Toronto would be the start of a great adventure. Woitto (Victor) and Alice Konni were about to play major roles in the formation of a distinct settlement in the wilds of Haliburton County, a community that would be known as the Finnish Village at Scott's Dam.

Yes; Farm vacations were popular in 1915; Torontonians had their choice of farms almost anywhere in southern and central Ontario. The Konni's chose the farm of Karl and Hilda Nichols, on the Gelert Side Road, just south of Canning Lake. They chose this farm at the suggestion of one of Woitto's employees, a childhood friend of Finland-born Hilda.

These Finns had found familiar territory in this land so far from Finland—a rugged rolling wilderness of rocks and lakes and trees. The Konni family, also feeling close

to home, returned each summer for several years, becoming close friends with both the Nichols and their neighbours, the Hoikkas.

Typical of farm vacationers, they often spent their days taking long walks through the countryside, hiking along what was then the Burnt River (now the Drag), gathering sweet, wild raspberries along the way. Scott's Dam provided a place to rest on a large rock surrounded by virgin bush, at a point where Canning Lake fed into the Burnt River and the small dam created a waterfall and rushing rapids. It was an unspoiled treasure of a place, providing a view down the wide river no visitor would soon forget.

In 1927, Ernest Miller put two parcels of land on the market: 26 acres of rocks and trees around Scott's Dam and along the west side of the Burnt River, plus a large tract of land stretching along the southern shore of Canning Lake. The Konni's were quick to buy. For \$300, Woitto bought his paradise. He also had dreams of farming

where the Miller farm was located, but Alice reminded him he was a successful custom tailor, not a farmer.

The following year, they were ready to build the family cottage at Scott's Dam, on the large rocky terrain overlooking the falls, rapids and river. Woitto was not a builder either but fortunately, Hoikka, his farming friend, was a skilled woodsman. Despite terrible sunburns from the day spent clearing the land, the timber cottage was completed. It was small but sturdy with the traditional Finnish style of architecture: logs intricately locked together, and a large open verandah with a view of the river. Alice and her daughters stayed there throughout the summers while Woitto ran his business in the city, traveling north each weekend to join them. Alice enjoyed entertaining guests, usually other Finns, most of them tailors, from Toronto. From these visitors came the recurring suggestion that she open a resort.



Adult group of Finnish guests, circa 1940.

Alice liked the idea. By 1933, still in the Depression but with cottage-ownership on the rise, word of this area "so much like home," had spread throughout Toronto's Finnish community. John and Alma Flink built a cottage on land close by the Konnis, followed later by a permanent home. Others from their family followed. As Woitto sold off pieces of land, Finnish cottages became recognizable by small saunas popping up all along Canning Lake's southern shore.

This heightened interest from Toronto's Finnish community also assured the popularity of Sunny Rock Villa, the resort that drew its name from that unforgettable day spent clearing the rock. The lodge building by Finnish master craftsman Jooseppi (Joseph) Tikka grew out of the original



Konni cottage. A recent arrival from Finland, Tikka was staying at the Hoikka farm until he could find a place of his own.

A deal was struck: the remaking of a cottage into a lodge, for a large piece of land, from the road to the lake, and a sum of money.

"Tikka was a very ingenious, patient and clever man," wrote Lillian Winterflood in 1988. "Sunny Rock is a three-storey building of quite large proportions and it was built entirely alone by Mr. Tikka."

Tikka's grandson, Arvo Kaasalainen, tells a slightly different story of his grandfather's remarkable feat. While Tikka did indeed do all the shaping and cutting of the huge timbers, he required the help of at least one assistant when it came to fitting the corners where precision was so essential. A small man with large hands, Tikka was a blacksmith and woodsman who firmly believed "if you can't make it, you don't need it." Also an ardent fisherman, Tikka boated around the lake and river, locating the perfect trees to fell and tow back to the building site. A unique pulley and leverage system—his own device—allowed him to lift and place each of the squared logs, one on top of the other, until the three-storey structure was complete.

Joseph Tikka became almost legendary in his lifetime, building his home and the cottages and homes of many other Finns in the area, each one easily recognizable by its squared-log Finnish construction.

Alice Konni became known for her remarkable cooking and hospitality and Sunny Rock Villa prospered, both for eating and accommodation. The addition of a large, separate, recreation hall attracted neighbours as well as guests, to evenings of square-dancing, card-playing and musical entertainment. Several cabins added on, near the river, enlarged the resort's capacity.

Today, Sunny Rock is a popular B&B, where guests can relax and ponder its history. The lake, the river, and the dam with its waterfall and rapids are all still there—as is the sweeping view from the verandah, overlooking the wide Drag River. The old Gelert Side Road may now be County Road 1, but the unique architecture of many of the homes in the area—homes to people with names including Kaasalainen, Flink and Ketola—keeps the memories and heritage alive. In this pocket of the Haliburton Highlands, it's easy to imagine you have just stepped into Finland. □

**A**rvo Kaasalainen was twelve when he first saw Sunny Rock. As was generally the case with lodges in the late '40s and early '50s, it was a full service lodge, serving three meals a day, and with everything provided. There was always plenty to do, including Sunny Rock's large Finnish steam bath on the river's edge—the neighbours, of course, had their own.

It became the hub of a now sizable Finnish community. The year 1952 was a summer to remember in the young lad's life, being the year the Olympics were held in Finland. "Everyone went over to Sunny Rock to listen to it on the radio," he recalls. With TV still a distant dream throughout Haliburton, the recreation hall's radio could satisfy a large crowd.

Guests enjoyed accompanying the Konnis on brisk walks after supper. Some would visit a snack bar nearby, operated throughout the war years, by Catherine Lang and her daughters, Christine and Thelma. Christine Lang Sommacal, now in her 80s, remembers those days with fondness. "We've been coming up here for 70 years," she recalls, laughing at the recollection of their bunkie, now used by the grandchildren, when it was a rough wood cottage. In their 20s at the time, the two young sisters would serve guests from two or three nearby lodges.

"During the war, people weren't able to get gas for their cars, so they would walk over to Mother's cottage for meals." She remembers it as a "big, happy family", with as many as 80 people all sitting on wooden chairs and benches. In times without electricity, they relied on gas lamps, and a wood stove when necessary. But there was always warmth and laughter in the closely-knit community, right where Christine and her sister, Thelma Lang Burke, still reside.

Romance found its way into those golden summers too. Maurice Winterflood was 22-years-old and just out of the navy when his father decided his young warrior could use a holiday up north. "Sunny Rock had good meals and dances and looked after you pretty well," he recalls. "It was rustic, with boats and badminton courts. And it was always lively, with lots of children playing on the beach and in the water."

And, very importantly, the lodge owners had a daughter. Maurice kept returning, eventually marrying Lillian Konni and settling into the Konni family's summer home. Built down-river in 1955 after the lodge was sold, it became known as Alvic Cottage (after Lillian's parents, Alice and Victor). Upgraded several times throughout the years, the home remains Maurice Winterflood's permanent residence—a model of Finnish architecture, situated on a hill overlooking the Drag River. □



Photos courtesy Sunny Rock Lodge