

Lake St. Peter Stories

That First Pot of Tea

Early cottagers were a hardy bunch, who learned to make do without modern conveniences. For many, it was the first time they had confronted life without electricity, running water and indoor plumbing. When faced with shortfalls in their skill sets, however, they boldly plunged onward.

They simply pretended they knew what they were doing, secure in the belief that Canadians were endowed with an innate ability to live in the bush.

For our three families, the experience was not without its humour, particularly when a Coleman was involved.

One late summer weekend in the mid-1950s, when a cottage was finally fit for occupancy – with a roof of sorts, exterior walls roughed in and some rudimentary partitions in place – the women and children arrived to help with construction. The first order of business, once everyone had unloaded their gear and claimed their living space, was to brew up a nice pot of tea.

Out came the battered Coleman stove that one of the dads had purchased from a friend at work. Up to that point, the boys had avoided the stove lighting routine by relying on beer and sandwiches, but they weren't unduly concerned. There were operating instructions on the stove lid, weren't there? And they wouldn't sell these things if they weren't safe.

After a brief discussion, one dad was designated as stove lighter. He claimed greater experience in these things because of his overseas wartime service (on board a small naval vessel). Besides, it was his cottage, or would be eventually. The other two were disinclined to argue. So up he strode to the kitchen table to play host. Everyone else crowded around to watch.

Armed with a box of wood matches, he cranked the burner on full, pumped the tank with confidence and lit a match. Nothing. More pumping. More matches. More nothing. Finally, after particularly vigorous pumping, he lit another match and the stove went up in a geyser of flame. Fortunately, my mother reached in to turn down the gas before the boys' three months of work was reduced to ash.

She became our designated stove lighter after that.