

Lake St. Peter Stories
Vintage nightlife

Half a century ago, Lake St. Peter cottagers liked to surprise their weekend guests by treating them to the exotic nightlife available in their seasonal home.

After a Saturday-evening game of cribbage, my parents would often cram their visitors into the family's Volkswagen and head off to the dump. They'd join a row of cars on the ring road, back the car into a vacant spot and aim the headlights over the garbage pit. There they'd wait, shushing their curious guests with knowing grins.

"Just watch," they'd say.

As twilight deepened, dark shapes began to emerge from the scrub on the other side of the pit. Visitors stared with growing fascination as they slowly made sense of the shapes. Bears! Real live bears! They'd watch wide-eyed as mom and the kids rummaged through the garbage for favoured morsels.

Eventually the show would end. Cubs clambered back up the garbage slope and scampered off into the dark. Mom followed, dragging the night's haul back along a path that had been worn through the bush. As the last of the bears disappeared into the woods, car engines started up and the audience dispersed, exiting the dump in an orderly and practised file.

From there, it was off to Esmund's Tea Room to cap off the evening with a light snack and a selection of piano tunes. A sing-a-long was never out of place. On the way out, visitors could pick up one of Esmund's driftwood creations or snag one of his paintings to brighten a living room wall with a reminder of their cottage weekend.

Seeing the bears at the dump was a memorable part of my Lake St. Peter experience, but one night in particular sticks out in my mind.

We were watching mom and the kids, as usual, when a large male sauntered out of the woods beside us and began lumbering toward our little car. With a look of sheer terror, my dad opened his door and started to get out, presumably intending to flee on foot. My mother grabbed his arm and yanked him back. The slamming door startled the bear. He veered away and headed down into the pit instead.

My mother laughed,.
"What were you thinking?" she asked.

"Uh," answered my chagrined father.

Later at Esmund's, he ordered a toasted western instead of his usual butter tart. We kids figured it was to celebrate his narrow escape from Black Bear doom.