

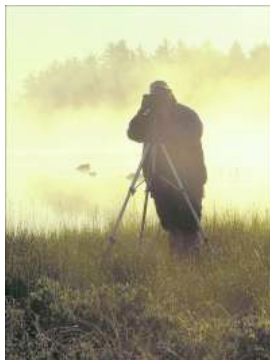
Backwoods refuge

Former hunting lodge, monastery an escape from civilization's noise

By SANDRA PHINNEY
Sun, Sep 28 - 7:28 AM



This typical log cabin, which is almost 100 years old, is still in use at Birchdale today. The former monastery is now used for religious and artists' retreats. (SANDRA PHINNEY)



Photographer Peter Muise shoots photos in dawn mist at Birchdale. (SUE HUTCHINS)



Smokey the deer receives an affectionate pat from a guest of Birchdale in the early 60s. (Yarmouth County Museum & Archives)

THE FIRST NIGHT John Ramessar hunkered down in an old log cabin at Birchdale, he knew he was in a very remote part of Southwest Nova Scotia. Ramessar was part of the Yarmouth Photography Club's retreat.

He appreciated the fact that there were no phones or electricity but he struggled with insomnia, the sound of night insects and the overwhelming lack of city noises.

"In a fitful dream-tossed sleep I turned to bat an offending chirruping insect only to have the 'insect' bat me back and accuse me of spousal abuse. So off to a grumpy wash of the face and creaky opening of cabin doors to deal with those damn insects," says Ramessar, "when all of a sudden, dawn. Wow!"

RELATED

» [Click here to visit the Birchdale website](#)

He wasted no time setting up his camera and tripod.

"Dawn was a rapturous dance of sun and sky, redolent reds and luminous yellows, chastened by crisp clean air. The light of the dance brought a whole universe into being, if but for a fleeting moment," says the wannabe photographer, pausing to find just the right word. "It was . . . seraphic."

In 1910, Omar Roberts cut logs and hauled them with his oxen across the ice on First Carrying Lake, 15 kilometres from the village of Kemptville, Yarmouth County.

That was the humble beginning of a hunting and fishing lodge called Birchdale.

Kemptville was famous for its guides and in 1912 sportsmen could do a round trip from Boston for \$18. Guides were \$1 a day; food and lodging \$1 a day. Trout, moose, woodcock and partridge were plentiful; it didn't take long for Birchdale to flourish.

Over the years, Birchdale changed hands a few times but in the 1940 and '50s, Selwyn and Pauline Ring excelled as hosts. Selwyn added washrooms in each cabin by using a gravity feed. Pauline's cooking was legendary and carloads of people journeyed two hours from Yarmouth (on dirt roads) for Sunday dinners.

Another attraction was Smokey the deer. She enjoyed being petted and was especially fond of cigarettes, cookies and ginger ale, which she guzzled straight

MULTIMEDIA CENTRE

TOP VIDEO



PLAY VIDEO ▶
Economy, ethics add drama to leaders debate

TOP VIDEO



PLAY VIDEO ▶
Liberals accuse Harper of plagiarism

TOP SLIDESHOW



PLAY SLIDE ▶
Pictures of the Week Sep 20 -26

ANNOUNCEMENTS: [Obituaries](#) | [Births](#) | [Cards](#) | [InMemoriams](#) | [Milestones](#)

WEEKLY THE NOVA SCOTIAN

- [Commitment sought on oil storage \(2008-09-28\)](#)
- [Backwoods refuge \(2008-09-28\)](#)
- [Sarah the hockey mom and Henry the K \(2008-09-28\)](#)
- [There's no escape from Facebook \(2008-09-28\)](#)
- [Mounties vs. the media \(2008-09-28\)](#)
- [Politicians pig out \(2008-09-28\)](#)
- [Commission gets Islanders all worked up \(2008-09-28\)](#)
- [Museum tickled to get Hillier tunic \(2008-09-28\)](#)
- [100-million people club \(2008-09-28\)](#)
- [Buchanan's PCs sweep to power \(2008-09-21\)](#)
- [Graham's choices slim in cabinet shuffle \(2008-09-21\)](#)
- [Digging for treasure in P.E.I. \(2008-09-21\)](#)
- [Political cynicism behind arts cuts \(2008-09-21\)](#)
- [Early election call doesn't sit well \(2008-09-21\)](#)
- [Barbies for war in Sarahville \(2008-09-21\)](#)
- [Nova Scotia: Cradle of democracy \(2008-09-21\)](#)
- [Power of the press \(2008-09-21\)](#)
- [Pakistan's future \(2008-09-21\)](#)



Birchdale owner Helen Matthews takes a time out with her 16-year old dog Blair. (SANDRA PHINNEY)



Kayakers paddle the still water between First and Second Carrying Lake at Birchdale. (SANDRA PHINNEY)

from the bottle. In the fall, the Rings put a bell and red bandanna around the deer's neck so she wouldn't be shot.

In spite of Birchdale's popularity, during the '60s there was a shift in travel trends. Motels and campgrounds spawned. Fewer families vacationed at lodges. The number of avid sportsmen keen to hunt and fish dwindled. Birchdale landed on the selling block and was purchased in 1972 by the Spiritual Life Institute, which planned to start a monastery.

Although the locals were skeptical about the monks' survival skills, they managed to get through the winter. And right from the start, they honoured Birchdale's history, but only after removing the guns and deer heads in the main lodge.

The monastic community added a few cabins, built a chapel/library, and accepted people for retreats. On Sundays from June until November, they hosted a popular open house.

In the late 1990's, J. D Irving Ltd. started 24-hour logging operations in the vicinity. The monks tried to negotiate a two-mile buffer zone but the logging company offered one mile. The monks left in 1998 and Nova Nada went back on the selling block.

Fast forward to 2002. Retired sociology professor Helen Matthews was operating a successful tree propagation business in Texas. She and a friend were looking for a place where older women could live, help each other out, and yet have separate living quarters. Nova Nada popped into view.

Matthews watched a video of the property, but had never been in Nova Scotia. "I thought that before I signed my life away, I'd better come and look in person," she says. Arriving in the dead of winter was a little daunting, but she was totally smitten by the

beauty of the forested sanctuary, and the genuine warmth of the people in Kemptville.

The original idea didn't pan out, but Matthews hopes that artists, writers, photographers, paddlers, musicians — anyone who will appreciate the essence of the place — will spend time there.

Although she's passionate about restoring Birchdale and making it available to people as a gift to Nova Scotians, her pockets are not lined with gold. So, in lieu of charging set rates, she asks for a donation or work in kind. For example, some people have helped to cut wood, replace ceilings or repair roofs. One group donated a power saw.

Matthews has a never-ending to-do list. Most days she's up at dawn and usually has five projects on the go.

"I pretend I'm a carpenter and I have to pretend I'm a plumber," she says with a wry grin. But she loves having small groups out to stay.

Kerry Lawson, a certified yoga instructor, organized a two-week retreat and invited yogi Yogendra Mishra from India to be the teacher in residence.

Mishra kept saying how much he loved Birchdale. Asked why, he replied, "Being here is like being in the hands of God. No electricity, no electromagnetic disturbance in the air, just pure nature. There are not many places like this left on the planet."

Vita Healy, a paddling enthusiast from Shelburne, recently spent a few days at Birchdale with 18 women for a canoe/kayak getaway.

"I had heard of this place all of my life but actually being there was magical. There is so much history there," says the canoeist, "and Helen Matthews is a godsend. She's working her butt off to keep the place alive and well."

Several years ago Healy led a group of paddlers into Barrio Lake from another entry point,

not realizing the lodge was so close. So she was thrilled to learn she could paddle from her cabin right through to the Barrio. "Those lakes are beautiful, and the way they're connected by still waters is amazing. It's pure paradise," she says.

Spending time at Birchdale is not complicated. Bring your own food, sleeping bag, pillow and towel. Each cabin has a washroom, propane hotplate, airtight stove or fireplace and kerosene lamps. **WARNING:** Birchdale will cast a spell over you. It's downright addictive.

And, oh, cell phones don't work there.

Sandra Phinney is a freelance writer from Yarmouth. In 1948 the guides at Birchdale taught her how to paddle a canoe. She was four years old and thought she was Hiawatha. Sixty years later, she's back paddling at Birchdale.



NEWS

- [-Front Page](#)
- [-Metro](#)
- [-Nova Scotia](#)
- [-Canada](#)
- [-World](#)
- [-Business](#)
- [-Sports](#)
- [-Arts & Life](#)
- [-Travel](#)
- [-Books](#)
- [-Religion](#)
- [-Science](#)
- [-The Nova Scotian](#)

COMMUNITY

- [-Community News](#)
- [-NS Communities](#)

OPINIONS

- [-Editorials](#)
- [-Columnists](#)
- [-News Columns](#)
- [-Business Columns](#)
- [-Sports Columns](#)
- [-Arts & Life Columns](#)
- [-Community Blogs](#)
- [-Community Reviews](#)
- [-Posting Up Blog](#)
- [-MacKinnon Cartoon](#)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- [-Obituaries](#)
- [-Births](#)
- [-Cards](#)
- [-InMemoriams](#)
- [-Milestones](#)

MULTIMEDIA

- [-Photos](#)
- [-Videos](#)
- [-Community Photos](#)

JOBSPRESS

- [-JobsPress](#)
- [-News & Resources](#)
- [-Advertising](#)
- [-Post a Job](#)

WHEELSPRESS

- [-WheelsPress](#)
- [-Search](#)
- [-Sell Your Vehicle](#)
- [-Dealers](#)
- [-Advertising](#)

NEWSPAPER

- [-Today's Paper](#)
- [-Classifieds](#)
- [-Subscribe](#)
- [-NIE](#)
- [-Professional Directory](#)
- [-South Shore Calendar](#)

ABOUT THE HERALD

- [-About Us](#)
- [-Contact Us](#)
- [-Charities](#)
- [-Work @ The Herald](#)
- [-F.A.Q](#)
- [-Library Services](#)
- [-Privacy Policy](#)
- [-Terms of Use](#)

ADVERTISING

- [-Web Advertising](#)
- [-Sales Executives](#)
- [-Media Kits](#)

CLIENTS

- [-Print Upload](#)
- [-Web Upload](#)
- [-Media Kits](#)

FUN & GAMES

- [-Lotteries](#)
- [-Sudoku](#)
- [-Crossword](#)
- [-Comics](#)
- [-Contests](#)

USEFUL INFORMATION

- [-E-Flyers](#)
- [-Eye on Nova Scotia](#)
- [-N.S. Highway Cams](#)
- [-Horoscope](#)
- [-Lotteries](#)
- [-Tides](#)
- [-Weather](#)
- [-Movie Times](#)
- [-What's Happening](#)
- [-Mayflower TV Guide](#)
- [-Herald Archive](#)