

# It all started at a place called Birchdale ...

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1 / 9 Willard Hewey, one of the author's canoes, on the bank of First Carrying Lake at Birchdale. (SANDRA PHINNEY)

It's 9:45 p.m. one mid-September day. Although the temperature was a balmy 16 C earlier today, it rapidly plummeted to 6 C — and is still dropping.

I can see my breath and my fingers are getting numb.

"I should have worn gloves," I think to myself. "And a heavier sweater."

Looking around, I see several women dipping their kayak and canoe paddles in the water. We are paddling to the head of First Carrying Lake under a blanket of stars in a remote region of Nova Scotia.

Within 30 minutes of our departure, a full moon peeks over the horizon. Slowly, slowly it rises. The only thing I can hear is an occasional dip and drip as paddles slide in and out of inky black water. In the distance, a band of silver mist hovers. Mute with wonder, I forget how cold my hands are.

This is part of a four-day women's paddling getaway I arrange every fall at [Birchdale](#), a former hunting and fishing lodge located in a remote location about an hour's drive inland from Yarmouth.



*Paddling friends  
out of the  
stillwater.  
(SANDRA  
PHINNEY)*

My first  
memory of  
Birchdale is  
from age six,  
when I  
spent part  
of the  
summer  
there with  
my family.

This is  
where I  
discovered

that real castles were made of logs and had giant fireplaces that took six armloads of wood to fill.

Each day, the mile-long cookhouse counter was full of freshly made brown breads, giant white rolls, and more pies than I could count. Blueberry was my favourite.

Rainy days were the best. Sometimes, seconds before the rain stopped, everything would turn quiet and the mists would appear. I'd slip out of the lodge and dash into the woods to feel the squish of spongy moss beneath my feet.

The forest smelled different after a rain — like mushrooms. And the ferns! They were forever bent over with the weight of the droplets. I loved shaking them by the stem to lighten their load.

It's been said that wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit. Omar Roberts would likely have agreed.

In 1910, Roberts was a guide and woodsman who lived in the village of [Kemptville](#), commonly referred to as Kemp. He cut logs and hauled them with his oxen across the ice on First Carrying Lake to what would become Birchdale — 18 kilometres from where he lived. It took three days by ox cart to get there.

The following spring, construction started on the main lodge. It featured a 10-foot veranda that extended around three sides and a six-foot fireplace three feet deep. Along with a large kitchen and huge communal dining room, it also had quarters for guests and guides.



*Hackmatack sided deck surrounding the lodge.  
(SANDRA PHINNEY)*

A 1915 brochure bragged: "Fires built there light easily, burn well and *never smoke.*" Another part of the brochure

promised "Fresh milk from the Camp cow. Fresh vegetables from the Camp garden. NO MALARIA. NO HAY FEVER."

Trout, moose, woodcock and partridge were plentiful. Hunters and fishermen from the U.S. — referred to as "sports" — came over on the SS Yarmouth which sailed from Boston. A round trip was \$18; guides \$1 a day; food and lodging at Birchdale \$1 a day.

The likes of Zane Grey, Ernest Hemmingway and John D. Rockefeller were regular visitors to Nova Scotia, and had their favourite guides for hunting, deep-sea and freshwater fishing.

Teddy Roosevelt is reported to have stayed at the Imperial Hotel in Kemptville, and Babe Ruth was rumoured to have stayed at Birchdale.

As early as 1907, Yarmouth County had its own guide association. Two years later, the group rolled into the [Nova Scotia Guides Association](#) (NSGA).

As part of its annual meeting, the NSGA hosted woodsman competitions, which included events like skeet and trap shooting, canoe races, log rolling, fly casting and moose calling. Eventually the one-day event morphed into a week's activities with over 40 competitions.

Along with Birchdale, several inns and lodges throughout Nova Scotia had guides, including the Chiasson Hotel on the Margaree River, the Goodwin Hotel in Weymouth and Parker House in Caledonia. One place of note was [Milford House](#) in Annapolis County.

In 1906, Albert Bigelow Paine (Mark Twain's biographer and eventually the executor of his literary works) accompanied his friend Edward "Eddie" Breck (doctor of philosophy, military spy) to Nova Scotia.

After a stay at Milford House, they hooked up with two guides — Del "the Stout" Thomas and Charles "the Strong" Charlton to venture into what is now known as [Kejimikujik National Park](#) and the [Tobeatic Wilderness Area](#).

Their mission was to canoe in the wilderness in search of trout "as big as your leg."



*Guides gathering at the Imperial Hotel in Kemptville, 1908. Eddie Breck (of The Tent Dwellers fame) was president of the Nova Scotia Guides Association. He is in the centre, back row. (YARMOUTH COUNTY*

*MUSEUM & ARCHIVES)*

Two years later, Paine penned [The Tent Dwellers](#), a poignant account of that journey. The book has been perennially popular, I suspect because it has marvellous illustrations, and Paine's wit is pure genius.

In 2008, [The Friends of Keji](#) and park staff planned several events to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *The Tent Dwellers*. To launch the year's activities, they decided to re-create the original journey.

I went along as the official journalist/photographer and like to think I was selected because I'm a fairly decent paddler and experienced in wilderness treks. Truth be told, I bugged the organizing committee so much I suspect it was easier for them to cave in and let me go than not.



As soon as I got *the nod*, I contacted a paddling pal, Vickie Healy. After extensive planning, four canoes set off on May 17 with over 400 pounds of gear to recreate that journey — only we had six days instead of 14, and no guides to do the heavy lifting.

The first night, after a gruelling portage over Two-mile Mountain Carry into the next water system, I thought about other canoe trips I'd been on, and the importance of the canoe in my life.

I recalled how the year before, in 2007, CBC hosted a popular competition titled the [Seven Wonders of Canada](#). When I heard that the canoe was part of the seven selected, my heart skipped a beat.



*Willard Hewey one of the author's canoes parked on the bank of First Carrying Lake at Birchdale. (SANDRA PHINNEY)*

My heart also skipped a beat when I visited the [Canadian Canoe Museum](#) in

Peterborough, Ont. two years ago.

Manitoban Kirk Wipper — known as the “Father of the Canadian Canoe Museum” — spent a lifetime encouraging young people to take to the wilderness in a canoe. He also collected canoes like some people collect hockey cards.

At one point he had over 500, most of which belong to the museum. It was thrilling beyond measure not only to wander around the museum, but to also have a tour in the vast warehouse next to it. There were so many canoes, my eyes couldn't take them all in.

Wipper often referred to the canoe as the gift of freedom. When interviewed for a CBC Radio Ideas program titled *The Perfect Machine: The Canoe*, he said in part:

"The canoe is a vehicle that carries you into pretty exciting places (where) you are removed entirely from the mundane aspects of ordinary life. You're witnessing first-hand beauty and peace and

freedom, especially freedom. Flirtation with the wilderness is contact with truth, because the truth is in nature. Although nature is in a state of flux, it is enduring. It is where reality is."

As it usually does when I think about paddling and my need to "flirt with truth," my mind wanders back to Birchdale.

After Omar Roberts died in 1922, Lloyd Ring was hired to manage the property. He eventually bought it. At the age of 15, his son, Selwyn, was put in charge of building a road into the camps.

Selwyn told Mike Parker, author of [Guides of the North Woods](#), "We worked all summer in there, with the horse and plow, axes, pickaxes and crowbars, pryin' rocks out, fillin' in the holes and levelin' it off."

In 1930, Selwyn watched as the first car drove in. "It was Harry Allen with his old Chevy coupe."



*Smokey the deer getting attention. She loved cigarettes, cookies and ginger ale, which she guzzled from the bottle. (YARMOUTH COUNTY MUSEUM & ARCHIVES)*

Birchdale closed

during the war but Selwyn and his wife Pauline took the reins and reopened in 1945. By this time, along with the main lodge and Pine cabin (commonly referred to as the honeymoon cabin), there were five more cabins — Hackmatack, Maple, Birch, Spruce and Fir.

Selwyn added washrooms to the cabins using a unique gravity feed water system rigged up from the lake to a large wooden water tower. The system is still used today.

And so it was, that on an August afternoon in 1950, while my parents were occupied with big-people things, I sat cross-legged on the ground next to the stand of canoes stacked by the shore. By now, I was six years old ("... going on seven," I'd quickly point out.)

John, one of the guides, had been splitting wood nearby. He strolled over to the canoes, lifted one up, flipped it over and put it in the water. He turned to me with a grin and said, "Come!"

"I want to paddle too," I told him.

"The paddles are too long."

"But I can do it. I want to paddle."

"A paddle should come up to your chin or nose. This one's way over your head."

"But I want to paddle."

"OK. I'll find you something later."

He paddled me around the cove and when we returned, promised to meet me by the canoes after breakfast the next day.

When John showed up, he presented me with a rough-hewn paddle that came up to my chin.

The guide gave me several lessons and by the end of our stay, I could paddle across the cove by myself and scoop armfuls of white lilies without tipping.



*Sandra  
Phinney  
paddling the  
Grumman  
canoe she  
earned by  
swimming a  
small lake.  
(PHINNEY  
FAMILY)*

The  
following  
summer, my  
father  
bought an  
old  
farmhouse

in the country for a get-away. Nearby was a small lake called Somes where we often went for a swim. Papa also owned a Grumman canoe.

After a few drinks one night, he said that he'd give me the canoe when I could swim Somes, not thinking that I could — or would.

The next day, I insisted that he bring the canoe and paddle next to me while I swam the lake. Halfway across, my shoulders felt like they'd been pierced by arrowheads and the water felt thick as mud. I pictured John, the guide back at Birchdale, cheering me on.

Then my belly scraped a rock. I was close to shore. The Grumman was mine.

In the late 50s, Selwyn and Pauline made a lifestyle change. They sold Birchdale to a group of Yarmouth businessmen who later sold it to Spencer Harris, a well-to-do sportsman who loved the place.

Alas, during the '60s the number of avid sportsmen keen to hunt and fish dwindled, as did the game. At the same time, motels and campgrounds were becoming more popular and the notion of spending time at remote lodges was no longer in fashion.

Birchdale was sold to the [Spiritual Life Institute](#) in 1972 and morphed into a monastery called Nova Nada.

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

My first visit there since Pauline and Selwyn Ring had left was with my husband, Barrie MacGregor, shortly after we married in 1978. I was 34 (going on 35, the child in me would say).

Although I found it somewhat disconcerting that cabins now bore the names of saints instead of trees, and they had removed the guns and stuffed moose heads in the main lodge, it was gratifying to see that they honoured the integrity of Birchdale.

*The long but lovely winding road from Kemptville leading into Birchdale in the fall. (SANDRA PHINNEY)*

In the late 1990s, however, J. D. Irving Ltd. started 24-hour logging operations in the vicinity and the noise interfered with monastic life.

The monks wanted a two-mile buffer zone; the logging company offered one mile.

The monks left in 1998 — one year after they celebrated their Silver Anniversary — and Nova Nada went up for sale.

Fast forward to 2002. Retired university professor Helen Matthews was operating a successful tree propagation business in Texas. She and a friend were looking for a place where retired women could have separate living quarters yet would have a sense of community.

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 said.





Arriving in the dead of winter was a little daunting, but she was totally smitten by the beauty of the forested sanctuary and the warmth of the people she met in Kemptville.

Although

the original idea didn't pan out, and, in spite of some major challenges, Matthews has hung in.

She changed the name to Birchdale Lake and encourages anyone who will appreciate the essence of the place to spend time there.

She's booked weddings, anniversaries, and family reunions, along with yoga, paddling, and writing retreats — although you don't have to be part of a group to rent a cabin.

*One of three interesting stillwaters between Birchdale and the Barrio. (SANDRA PHINNEY)*

I'm 72 now — going on 73.

I own four canoes and have paddled countless lakes and rivers in Atlantic Canada (and further afield.) I never tire of stepping into a canoe. And I never, ever tire of Birchdale.

At the end of this month, I will start another trip there with my husband, some paddling friends, and John Prout, a chap from Kemp I met last year.

Now picture this: John is 91, and one of the guides who was at Birchdale in 1950. Another guide, John Jeffrey (deceased), was there at the same time. One of these men taught me how to paddle.

We will paddle through First Carrying Lake where I watched the full moon rise last year.

We will paddle through three stillwaters and two more small lakes up to the big Barrio Lake, and camp there for two nights.



We will reminisce about Birchdale, my family (he's already told me wonderful stories), and tell tales around the campfire.

Perhaps we'll all go for a paddle under the stars, and get a

glimpse of the moon as she rises over the Barrio.

### If You Go

Birchdale Lake is usually open for guests from early June to early October. Contact Helen Matthews by calling (902) 740-3913 and leave a message. Although all cabins have beds, a wood stove and running water, there is no electricity. Bring your own pillows and bedding, along with food. You can cook in the kitchen at the main lodge. Oh yeah ... leave your cellphones and computers at home. There's not a signal for miles.

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## Comments



