

## "I made the resolve never again to spend an entire year shut up in an office."

**P.K. Smith waking up on a bed of pine needles on his first morning at Oiseau Bay in 1916**

*Gripping onto the back seats of Cam Hilborn's old Chevy Suburban, we maneuvered around deep ruts embedded in the road as we approached a farm property on the Quebec shore of the Ottawa River. The road to Oiseau Bay took us through Pembroke, across the river, through Sheenboro, Quebec and then 20 kilometers on a road still recovering from the spring thaw. When we stepped out the roof was covered with mud and we were greeted by JC, a permanent feline resident of the Oiseau Bay Resort. Comprising of 400 acres, the resort lies 40 kilometers west of Pembroke by road and 12 kilometers east of Deep River by water. Cam has been managing the property for the Hilborn family since 1999. He has learned a lot about it by talking to local old-timers and studying an old diary written by P.K. Smith, a former owner. With entries dating back to 1915, this diary outlines the remarkable history of this farmland.*

*By: Pierre Wilder and Andrew Marak*



**P.K.'s men unloading cows brought from Point au Baptême (background: Old barns that burnt in 1974)**

*We asked Cam about the origin of the property and learned that the first to settle here and develop the land was a family named McCormick.*

**T**he McCormicks came to Oiseau Bay in the 1850's and presumably built a log house and a barn. They were squatters settling on Crown land and with no title to the land, the Bryson family, from Bryson Quebec, purchased it from Crown in 1885. The Brysons were notorious lumber barons from Quebec. After logging the property, the Brysons lost title of it to squatters James W. Hennessey and William Ladouceur. The diary doesn't have any information on

Hennessey but there is a bit about Ladouceur. I would say that that was a moonshining operation here because there was a still up on the hill and there was a lot of traffic coming from Chalk River. By 1916 prohibition was in place in Ontario and boats were always coming over at midnight, stock-

### **He actually dug a canal so he could drive his boat right to the back door.**

ing up. He wasn't around when P.K. found the place. P.K.'s lawyer found Hennessey when he was planning registration and he made an offer. That's how it was

purchased: for about 5 dollars an acre, except they thought that there were 500 acres. P.K. bought the property from Ladouceur for one dollar and a farm on the Ontario side for Ladouceur to live on.

*Cam continued to describe the pioneer from Ohio, P.K. Smith, and his significance to land's development.*

The two buildings here before P.K. were in very bad shape. P.K. jacked up the barn to dig a foundation under it. He used the log house as a garden shed for a couple years but after building a garage, he tore it down.

The first thing that he built was the River Cabin in 1917 and then the Farmhouse in 1923. He used a horse and a drag-scoop to dig a basement and concrete foundation. In 1945 he built the White Cottage, also with a basement and foundation. P.K.'s own building, the Lodge, was started in 1925 and finished in 1926. They had a sawmill here, producing lumber for construction, and logs squared on three sides for the walls. He actually dug a canal so he could drive his boat right to the back door of the Lodge. The canal filled in over the years, but



**A big day for PK with the installation of the water wheel to power Oiseau Bay**

traces of it are still visible.

P.K. hired Sam and Ema Hebner from Alice in 1924 at Oiseau Bay. When the Farmhouse was built, Sam moved his family in. He was the foreman and he stayed year-round for about 25 years, putting up fences and barns, building roads and bridges, tending to livestock and generally maintaining the property. Their children boarded in Chalk River during school and came over on weekends and holidays.



**The overflow chutes for the dam, the only remnants still visible to this day**

In the 50's, P.K.'s workers used the old garage as a workshop, which included a blacksmith shop and forge. The workshop was equipped with hand tools as well as a stationary truck engine. The engine powered a driveshaft and pulleys to operate a table saw, planer and drill press.

P.K. also planted many trees on the shoreline. They were mainly poplars. They're only 75 years old but they're very tall now. They're not native poplars; he brought them in from Ohio.

*The most significant change throughout the history of the farm was the construction of a hydroelectric dam on Oiseau Creek. Hiring local men and horses, P.K. began to build the dam in 1935. Ruins of the dam still stand on the property. Cam discovered the detailed story behind these rem-*

*nants by reading P.K.'s diary.*

*As noted in his diary:* "I had been thinking for several years how nice it would be if we could build a dam and power plant at the creek. This was an undertaking I hardly dared to tackle, however, this year I finally decided to try. I hired several teams and men from Sheen, in May, and started a dirt fill across the valley... By the latter part of August we had all of it done, which could be put in until we had the concrete retaining walls at the Creek built." – P.K. Smith, 1935

*The 12-foot high dam took three years to build and it took an additional three years to construct control dams upstream.*

"Finally after three years work we turned the water on the wheel and everything worked perfectly. This was on May 20,



**Building the dam, spring of 1936**

1938, a red letter day in the history of camp."

– P.K. Smith, 1938

"I rigged a wire extending from our cottage to the gate on the flume, so that I could regulate the flow of water on the wheel from the cottage and the plant worked satisfactorily pumping water and furnishing light for eighteen years." – P.K. Smith, 1938

*In the Lodge, Cam showed us how P.K. operated the*

dam with a hand crank from his bedside.

From P.K.'s bedroom, he could control the water flow to the generator. There was a crank and a line going out to the turbine. When he turned the crank, it

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### with no caretaker, the buildings were robbed and vandalized

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moved water either onto the wheel or off the wheel. So when he went to bed he'd shut the whole camp down and anybody who didn't want to go to bed would have to light up an oil lamp. Not only did the dam provide electricity, it was connected to a hydraulic ram, a remarkable device used for pumping water on many of the early farms in Ontario and elsewhere.

*Even after successfully building the dam, P.K. was still not satisfied with the land's development. His diary explains some of his other plans including a control dam to focus the water towards the generator.*

"In the summer it was hot and dry and the creek was so low in August that we did not have enough water to run the light plant. It was then I decided to build another dam."

- P.K. Smith, 1940

"I had ordered a large pump to install in the power house and a quantity of pipe to put in a sprinkler system on the lot lying between the cottage and the farmhouse. This lot had always been a weed patch and I hoped, if we got water on it, we could cultivate it."

- P.K. Smith, 1943

*Cam told us that the dam*

*collapsed in the 1950's, when a sudden release of water for log driving operations upstream flooded the valley. The last entry in P.K. Smith's diary is dated 1958.*

*We learned that Cam's father and two other families, the Milleys and the Melvins, had purchased the farm from the Smith family in 1973.*

The three Deep River families used the farm for family holidays, both winter and summer. Sam and Ema retired when P.K. left but the Smith's caretaker, Camille Boucher, stayed on for several years and lived with his wife year-round in the Farmhouse. Over time, as children grew up, the Milleys first, then the Melvins, sold out to my father. Then, with no caretaker, the buildings were robbed and vandalized. There were, from what I've heard, some amazing art and all kinds of antiques including a wind-up gramophone, telephones, a pedal organ and an oil painting by Catherine de Grey. Many wonderful old artifacts were stolen. That's when the place went downhill. It didn't get used any more until the Laroche

Cottage, the Lodge and the garage got fixed up and reused, but the Farmhouse and River Cabin remained in a decrepit state

*Reluctant at first, Cam ended up taking over management of the farm.*

It wasn't until 1997 that I began restoring the other buildings and getting them into shape. Gerald Nadeau, a previous TAMARACK interviewee, encouraged me and helped. He grew up on a farm on the Ontario side of the river, before the land was taken over by Atomic Energy of Canada. One day he brought me over here and mentioned that with a little bit of work I could preserve the place. And from there I sort of took the bull by the horns and did a lot more than just preserve it.

*During our visit, Cam gave us a guided tour of the resort as it is now.*

Along the Ottawa River the property extends from the creek to an old pier past the River Cabin. Now most of the buildings have solar power but we also have electrical generator backup. Water from a natural spring is



**The Farmhouse at Oiseau Bay**

family from Fort Coulonge took over as caretakers and fixed up two of the buildings. The White

pumped to an underground cistern up the hill. The gravity system provides reliable pressure

and cold spring water all the time. Since the spring never freezes, the cistern can be pumped throughout the winter, and water is then piped underground to the Cottage and



**An Oval Findley cook stove in the Farmhouse helps to warm its interior**

Farmhouse. We also use the water for fire protection. The insurance company asked me how far I was from a fire department. I said, "A mile". They said, "Oh, okay, well that shouldn't be a problem. Where are you?" "Just across the river", I replied. They said, "You can't be serious". I said, "Well, it's a mile away, I'm not lying to you".

*Also during our visit we stopped at the waterfalls along Oiseau Creek. We could hear the falls long before we could see them and knew they were going to be spectacular.*

At the sitting area during the summer, the water level is low and you can climb under the falls to have the water come down on your back and shoulders. The pool below the towering falls offers swimming in

about five feet of water.

*Starting from the East side of the farm, he showed us P.K.'s building, the Lodge.*

The Lodge is not winterized; it's used only in the summer and now it's in excellent shape. Large groups have used it and they just love it because upstairs is just wide open. It's full of beds up there and there are two on the main floor. The Lodge also has a large screened porch facing the river.

*Cam took us across the field towards an old one-story building deep in the bush.*

This rustic building was the original cottage used by P.K. Smith and his family. With a magnificent view overlooking the bay, it was built in 1917 and used by the family until the Lodge was built in 1926. Because of its historical significance I intend to restore it more or less as it was in the early days.

*Upon our return back to the field we visited P.K.'s old Farmhouse.*

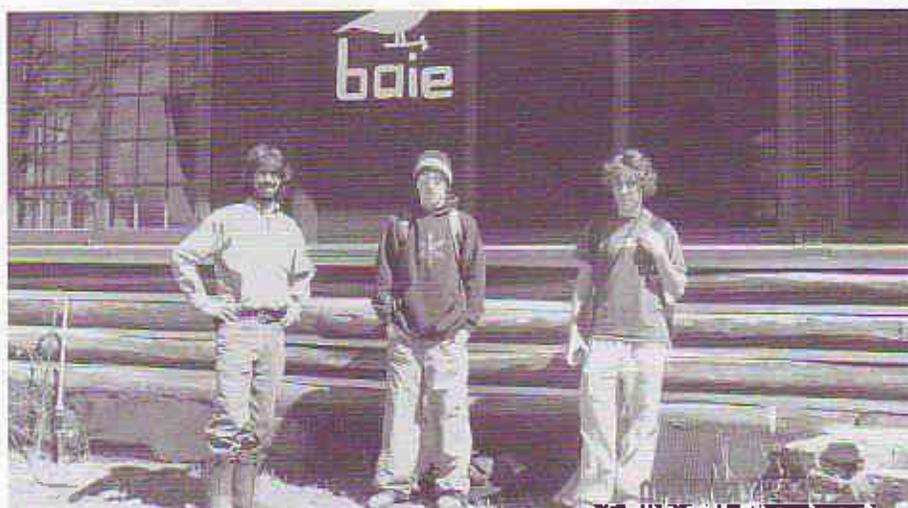
There are four bedrooms upstairs, each with a cedar-lined closet. I fixed all the walls and refinished the floors and the steps. The cast iron bathtub is

original but I replaced all the plumbing and now it's beautiful. People thought I was crazy for putting that thing on my boat to bring it across the river for refinishing. Two guys could barely lift it. We really struggled getting that through the door and onto the boat.

It's kind of tough taking care of the land and buildings. You do your best but Mother Nature isn't always cooperative. You try to respect her as much as you can and sometimes you want to do a job but she says, "No, you had better do something else today'."

*As the sun began to slide out of view of the western sky, we headed home and paused to reflect on the story of a remarkable pioneer, P.K. Smith. We left Cam to ponder future projects at this idyllic wilderness resort. P.K. would be pleased with the property's current condition.*

For more information about the Oiseau Bay Resort, the web page is [www.oiseaubayresort.com](http://www.oiseaubayresort.com), and Cam can be contacted via telephone at 613 - 639 - 9727. The web site contains more historic pictures of the property.



**Cam, Andrew and Pierre in front of the Lodge at Oiseau Bay**