



Not every thriving cottage community can claim a population of zero. But then, Cockburn Island isn't your average cottage community

By *Conor Mihell*



THE ISLAND THAT TIME FORGOT

Photography Daniel Ehrenworth



Standing in the centre of downtown Tolsonville, a ghost town turned cottage community on Lake Huron's Cockburn Island, is a 100-year-old general store. It's the first building you see after crossing the North Channel to get here, and the picture it presents is less than reassuring. The chimney lists precariously, the roofline sags, and red tarpaper appears to be peeling away pretty much everywhere. Tall windows face the old, broken-down wharf where the ferries and supply boats used to land, providing a waterfront view that once must have been invigorating. Looking at it myself now, though, the main challenge lies in deciding which is in worse shape: the store or the crumbling wharf.

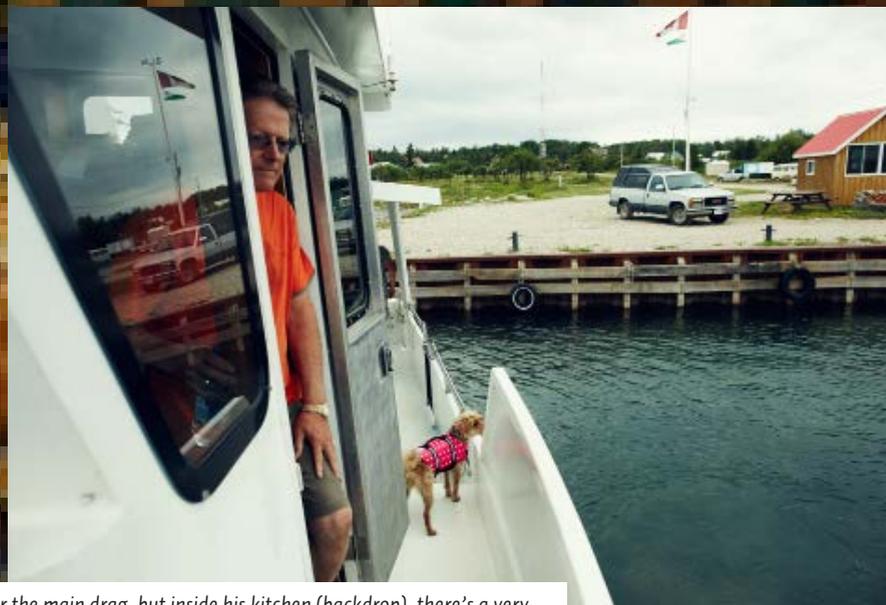
It occurs to me that in any other cottage community, this old, two-storey general store would be a teardown, a prime candidate for replacement by a chalet with cathedral ceilings and a sprawling deck. But not on Cockburn Island. While gentrification in most cottage areas obliterates the past and substitutes a gleaming, at best retro-kitsch, present, Cockburn repairs the past with duct tape and haywire, and calls the patch perfection. It is a place between: between Canada and the US, town and country, then and now, reality and recreation, survival and serendipity. Its seasonal residents are addicted to its unique, slightly off-kilter allure, which is partially why John Jones, a steelworker in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., who lives in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., and is a lifelong summer resident with deep island roots, bought the store in 1980.

"I wanted a place for myself," says Jones, 59, who grins boyishly beneath a tousle of silver hair. "Places like this don't come up for sale very often. It's one of the nicest lots on the island, and the building has a lot of character and historical meaning. This was a place where people met and discussed their day. You can just imagine all the stories that went around, of near misses and the ones that got away."

But while living in a place in-between has its charms, it also comes with contradictions. Following Jones on a tour of his general store, walking by the dusty bay windows and yellow stained glass, the cracked plaster and piles of insect carcasses, you can't escape an eerie feeling of restless suspension, a sense of ticking time passing you by. The sensation is so strong that even Jones—Tolsonville's chief junk collector and jerry-rigger and the owner of two other Cockburn Island properties—will admit to musing about finally getting on with a restoration of the store. New siding, roofing, drywall, a steel chimney, and, yes, a deck, he assures me, are all part of a grand, someday plan.

"Hopefully then I could get my wife to come over," he says. "Right now she doesn't like it here. She isn't crazy about boat rides or outhouses."

Cockburn Island covers 170 sq. km and is part of an archipelago stretching like beads on a string across a 250 km expanse of Lake Huron. Among others, the chain includes Manitoulin Island (Canadian) and Drummond Island



John Jones' old general store (above left) looms gothically over the main drag, but inside his kitchen (backdrop), there's a very different aesthetic: Deer hunting was a popular pastime for the Jones family on Cockburn Island. David Haight (bottom right), Tolsmaville's mayor, prepares for docking aboard the trawler belonging to Sandy Gardiner (above, with his daughter, Jessie).







Cockburn Island's human population may well be rivalled by its population of "vintage" cars, many of which can be found in the lot opposite the marina (backdrop). Scott Gardiner (right) learned to drive on the island at age eight. Most Cockburn Island cottages aren't on the waterfront, making picnic areas such as the one on Sand Beach (previous pages) popular for get-togethers.



(American). Cockburn lies between the two in Canadian waters, with the international border zigzagging past it, north then west to Sault Ste. Marie, some 140 km away. There's no easy way to get to Cockburn Island. Depending on the season, you need a substantial open water trip or a dangerous journey across sketchy lake ice. Even today, the boat trip from Thessalon or Blind River, the closest mainland towns, takes about an hour across a yawning 40 km gulf of open water. Getting to the nearest landfall on the west end of Manitoulin Island, a 15 km boat ride from Tolsmaville, needs a two-hour drive on twisting roads from the ferry landing at South Baymouth or the mainland at Espanola.

A community thrived here for nearly 100 years, first established in 1877 by American Siberon Tolsma, a commercial fishing czar. Tolsmaville's fishing economy flourished, but it was forestry that brought the population to about 1,000 at the turn of the 20th century. Soon it became too expensive to transport Cockburn Island timber to outside markets, and overfishing and parasitic sea lampreys decimated lake trout stocks. Starting in about 1920 the slow sequence of abandonment to the mainland began. The school, post office, and store were shuttered in the early 1960s. Today, the island community consists of 200 cottagers, who live primarily around the old town plot, navigating the island in a fleet of ancient jalopies, revelling in a combination of hardscrabble freedom and small-town idiosyncrasy.

The town aspect means at least a dozen Cockburn "cottages" aren't on water at all, but on large, lawn-covered lots in Tolsmaville. John Jones himself, the intrepid general store owner, has spent all his summers since childhood in a cedar-sided, two-storey house that served as the Jones family's year-round home up until their exodus in 1953, the year before his birth. Perhaps the most striking is a home in the centre of town known to locals as the "Yellow House," a stately Victorian edifice with a sweeping verandah that has been the summer residence of Jones' older sister, Bess Ambeault, since the 1970s. It was originally owned by a family called McLeod

(who superseded Siberon Tolsma as Cockburn Island's high-line anglers), and was purchased by Ambeault and her partner, Rusty Gibb, who worked together for 19 years as Cockburn's summer road crew. Gibb passed away a few years ago, and for a while health problems kept Ambeault from coming to the island as often as she would have liked.

At his Grandma Bess's cherished Yellow House, Scott Gardiner, 28, ducks into the crawl space to turn on the water pump. Indoors, the musty odour of the initial stages of neglect cannot diminish old-time style: soaring 10-foot ceilings, sash windows, hardwood banisters, thick baseboards, and wrought iron heat vents. A country kitchen in the south-facing back of the house is bathed with sunlight, while the living room windows reveal glimpses of the Lake Huron waterfront. In the corner of the living room, a VHF marine radio spews static and the occasional click of a keyed mic. Like many of the Cockburn Islanders, Gibb, an ardent mariner, always monitored the marine airways for casual chatter and calls of distress.

Much as the Yellow House's long history would point otherwise, it doesn't carry the same haunted vibe as the general store. It might be because here, Cockburn's then-and-now aura is embodied by youthful enthusiasm. Scott's sister, Jessie, can't help herself from peeking in the pantry, where her Grandpa Rusty once stashed chocolate bars and candy in a breadbox. A graduate student of human development at Sudbury's Laurentian University, Jessie, 25, says she still remembers her grade three teacher's look of disbelief after reading an essay she wrote about her summer on Cockburn Island. "It was like this remote and private place that no one knew about," Jessie says.

Scott shares the same passion for the offbeat Cockburn lifestyle as his great-uncle John Jones. Scott's only missed one summer on Cockburn Island his entire life. He laughs at the memories of learning to drive an old Jeep out here at age eight, and has fond recollections of deer hunting and bombing around the island's trails by ATV with his Uncle John. More recently, working as a lead hand for his





father's marine construction company on St. Joseph's Island has afforded him two month-long contracts to repair the township docks. "It's an amazing place because of the freedom you have," he says. "It teaches you responsibility. As I've gotten older, I've started to think how much I want my kids to be able to experience this."

The yin to the yang of the old, repurposed family homes is Cockburn Island's newer generation of waterfront cottages—the nondescript bungalows and overhauled hunt shacks set around the perimeter of Tolsma Bay. Just across the street from the Yellow House, Dave Hale's lean, single-storey camp is one of the most cottagey places in Tolsmaville proper. It has a large deck facing Lake Huron and an open-concept kitchen and living room, where the din of CBC Radio is a constant backdrop. "A key selling feature was the view," says Hale, motioning towards the open water of the North Channel. "I don't know how I got so lucky." From the deck, the view he's speaking of is filtered by a screen of young cedars, which extends at least 25 metres to the white pebble shore, just west of the old ferry dock.

Hale's Cockburn Island story began when his Guelph neighbours, Joe and Beth Weston, invited him to their log cabin on the island in 2000. Initially, Hale was leery of the lengthy commute—the drive north, a ferry ride from Tobermory, navigating Manitoulin Island's back roads and finally boating across the Mississagi Strait to Tolsma Bay—that eats up the bulk of a day. "It's hard to talk people into coming this far," says Hale, a bachelor in his late 50s who is employed as a municipal maintenance shift worker in Guelph.

From the Meldrum Bay Marina on Manitoulin's west side, Hale and the Westons loaded supplies and set off by boat to Cockburn Island. For Hale, the "magic" started midway across, when Joe jumped off the moving vessel and into the water. "I had no idea what he was doing," recalls Hale. "His wife took the controls and circled us around, and Joe announced it was time we all had a swim, right out there in the channel."

It's clear that Hale, like so many Cockburn Islanders, values freedom, and his first visit got off to a good start. He fell in love with "the trails, the nature, the fresh air, and the lack of pollution." Soon, he and Joe were making regular, lighter-weight trips on their motorcycles to Meldrum Bay and across to Cockburn, even doing ice-out missions in early April. "We'd come over by Zodiac with survival suits on," says Hale. It was on such an adventure in 2009 when he discovered a cottage for sale. "We took a look at the place and I decided whatever it took, I wanted it," he says. He promptly struck a deal over the phone with the seller upon returning to the mainland.

Cottage Kelly Stewart, who, along with her husband, Scott, lays claim to the newest building in Tolsmaville, experienced the same sort of life-changing moment on her first trip to Cockburn. Scott's parents adopted the ghost town as their summer home in 1967, and Kelly visited in 1980. It was "dry, hot, and dusty," she says. "But I loved it. You just get over here and it's so peaceful. There are no unexpected visitors. The pace is different. Work over here isn't work—it's just part of the day."

The Stewarts decided on something different when they set out to design their cottage, which sits atop a gentle rise on the southern edge of Tolsmaville, nearly 20 years ago. They knew from the get-go that they wanted a sweeping view of the village and waterfront, so they decided on a turret. "It's a lighthouse effect," says Scott, explaining that if the tower were a foot taller, it would have required a steeple under the municipal building code. A balcony off the second-floor master bedroom offers just the view the Stewarts wanted.

At home in Sault Ste. Marie, Kelly works as a personal banking officer and Scott is a heavy machinery mechanic. He admits to being "weekended to death" in the construction of their cottage, which began with the pouring of the foundation in 2000 and is only just entering the finishing stages today. It doesn't help that he's constantly lending a hand with cottage construction projects across the island. "You can't really afford to have {Continued on page 140}



Jessie Gardiner (above, right) shoots some stick in the relic-stuffed general store belonging to John Jones (above, centre). The original school was built in 1882, replaced by a new building (left) in 1907, and closed in 1961 due to lack of enrollment. A heritage committee has preserved some desks, readers, and even report cards. Turns out those permanent records really are permanent after all.

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contractors come over here to do the work,” says Scott, referring to the lack of accommodations and the fickle nature of Lake Huron, “so you have to do the work yourself. Everyone helps out and has their own little bit of expertise to share.”

The Stewarts recruited their children, Zak, Samantha, and Ben—now 25, 22, and 17, respectively—to assist in harvesting local cedar and pine for the framing, cabinetry, trim, and some furniture, all hand-cut and hauled by pickup truck on the island. The timbers and boards of the Stewart cottage were amongst the last pieces of lumber cut at Cockburn’s mill, which has since ceased production. About the only imported building components in the place are the particleboard floors, painted battleship grey. “When they get dirty, I just buy another gallon of paint,” says Kelly.

Like Hale, the Stewarts are counting down the years until they retire and can spend more time out here than just weekends and holidays. “I’m envious of

the old-timers who get to watch us coming and going every weekend in the summer,” says Scott. “I can’t wait to be the one doing the watching. I don’t see us being anywhere else.”

Most summer days on Cockburn Island, in the late afternoon, cottagers gather in the Tolsmaville kitchen of Jack and Arlene McQuarrie for happy hour. The McQuarries, who will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary this July, are Manitoulin Island natives and the retired publishers of the *Manitoulin Recorder*; they’ve been coming to their cottage on Cockburn for more than 50 years and have even wintered over. Jack mixes drinks, bustling around the wood-fired cookstove and airtight fireplace that crowd the kitchen. When he finally sits down at the long wooden table, centuries’ worth of collective island experience fuels a round of storytelling.

Today’s crowd includes Gord and Joan Jones (no relation to John), John Jones, and the mayor of Tolsmaville, David Haight. Jack, a Justice of the Peace, tells of the three or four services he holds

each summer at the island’s century-old church, which features a mishmash of spiritual accoutrements, including an 1890s-vintage Presbyterian communion set, an old pump organ, an electric organ from Guelph, and hymn books donated by a church in Thessalon. “Everybody goes to church out here,” says Jack. “It’s 100 per cent non-denominational. The young people enjoy it as much as anyone. One time, a few of them came up to me and said, ‘Why aren’t we having church this weekend?’ I thought, Holy moly, I’d better get the lead out!”

Then there’s the annual August fish fry and the end-of-season Labour Day potluck, both of which attract well over 100 islanders. For Mayor Haight, the true halcyon days came with the 100th anniversary in 1981, celebrations that united old-timers and newcomers and went off without a glitch, before the days of full-time electricity and running water (when the community steam bath was a popular rendezvous).

Haight, 71, has served as Cockburn Island’s highest elected official for four terms, and has been on council since

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1980. With a permanent population of zero (due to a Statistics Canada rounding error—the island had one year-round resident in 2011, the township maintenance superintendent), Cockburn holds the distinction of being Canada's least populous organized township—but a township it is. Retaining municipal status has many advantages, says Haight, who once challenged a suggestion to merge the island into neighbouring jurisdictions on Manitoulin Island or the mainland north shore. "We're an island set in an inland sea," he says. "We need to look after ourselves."

In 1987, the township made a deal with Ontario Hydro to bring electricity to Cockburn, after years of part-time power produced by diesel generator. The change meant drilled wells and indoor plumbing for the island, as well as modern appliances and non-propane refrigeration. Council used its municipal status to secure federal and provincial funding to repair the wharf, construct

new docks and, in 2011, to erect a cell-phone tower. The town gets four seasonal student workers. "We do well to stay in the black," says Haight. "Not many communities can say that."

Haight's own homestead is wryly named "Camp David." It's a small bungalow shaded by maples, cedars, and poplars, about a kilometre inland from the waterfront at Tolsma Bay. If a visitor is lucky—and patient—he might get to sit with the wiry, busybody bachelor in his immaculate front room, whose walls are adorned with paintings of the old passenger ferries that once serviced Cockburn Island. With little provocation, Haight describes his childhood memories as an islander, in a baritone voice grown gravelly with time.

Haight's bloodlines run back to the island's pioneers, his mother having cooked for the logging camps while his father "worked in the bush in the days of crosscut saws and horse teams." Even after his parents sought greener pastures on the mainland, the Haight's came over "every opportunity we could," he says. "I still had relatives here. I came on

the ferry in the summer and stayed for two or three weeks or a month. As I got older, I started coming over even more."

For years, Haight piloted his own boat to Cockburn from the marina in Thessalon. But now, like many other retired cottagers, he relies on islander friends for shuttles to and from his residence in Sault Ste. Marie. He proudly points through the window at his new "bike," the local term for an all-terrain vehicle, which he uses to explore the island's network of trails. When the ice sets fast in cold winters, he makes several trips by snowmobile. He pulls out a calendar, does some quick arithmetic, and reports that he spent 96 days on Cockburn last year. "This is my home," says Haight. "I love the remoteness of it and that we're not run over with people. It's where I was born and it's where I'll be buried." 🐾

Sault Ste. Marie-based writer Conor Mihell's fascination with islands led him on a sea kayak trip to uninhabited Caribou Island, 70 km offshore on Lake Superior, where his great-great-grandfather once worked as a lighthouse keeper.