



When Sheila and Dick Morse had an old cottage on Peninsula Lake rebuilt, they drew on the skills of numerous area artisans and design professionals to achieve their goal of creating a new cottage that looked as if it had been on the site for generations. They also wanted the structure to appear small from the outside but, inside, to be spacious and comfortably equipped for entertaining.

# More than lumber

Article by Don McCormick

*A cottage must meet physical, emotional needs*

This is a story about the building of a cottage. But, to the people who built it – Dick and Sheila Morse – “the cottage” meant much more than just a building. There were not only the physical needs of the family but also, more importantly, the emotional needs. Building a cottage to satisfy both physical and emotional requirements was no mean feat.

To appreciate the care and attention to detail that went into the design and building of this cottage it is first necessary to know something of the Morses’ personal history at “the lake.” It is this history which gave shape to their needs. Elements of the story will undoubtedly resonate with other people who have had cottage experiences.

Sheila Morse (née Houghton) has a deep love for “the lake” – Peninsula or Pen Lake, near Huntsville. “It’s a love that has grown and developed over time,” explains Sheila. Her first visit to the lake took place when she was only months old, and she has been

back almost every year since.

At first, visits to relatives on the lake brought the family north from their Oakville home. Slowly, however, the lake and the cottage culture began to work their magic and relatively short visits evolved into resort stays, then cottage rentals and, eventually, “the trap was sprung,” she explains. Her family built their own cottage in the early ‘60s.

“The lake and its spirit just crept into my heart,” says Sheila. Fishing with dad, evening paddles, night skies with northern lights and meteor showers, the call of the loon, playing cards with mom, visits by friends and relatives, autumn walks, Thanksgiving dinner – all of this “stuff” forged lasting family memories and a deep love for life at the cottage. And, of course, there were friendships formed along the way.

Dock parties, water-skiing, picnics, climbing Wolf Mountain, forays into town (Huntsville) for lacrosse games and “Teen Town” dances, hanging out, summer romances added to the fun. There were shared adventures, friendships and summer loves that had the whole winter of separation to





Photographs: Jenny Kirkpatrick

Photograph: Don McCormick



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The interior wood of the Morses' cottage, as shown in the upstairs hall and balcony, was made to look old. At right, a heron wall mural is reflected in a bathroom mirror.

grow to mythological proportions. "I had many wonderful friends who are still my dearest friends today," says Sheila.

There seems to be something special about those friendships forged "at the lake." Roy MacGregor, *Globe and Mail* columnist and best-selling author, says, "The cottage is where you are most yourself." He may be onto something – it's very difficult to be pretentious when you are sitting on a dock in harsh sunlight with 90 percent of your body exposed.

Perhaps, when we dare to show "our real selves," it serves to nurture and deepen relationships, we're told.

In the summer of 1969, Sheila brought new boyfriend and soon-to-be husband Dick Morse to the cottage. "I was immediately welcomed into Sheila's group of friends," recalls Dick. He was struck by the sense of community at the lake; it became very apparent that, if he were to marry into this family, holidays would be spent at the lake.








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Dick and Sheila married in 1971 and soon had their own family – two boys, Richard and Michael. Every summer, they would load up the car and drive the 15 hours from their home near Boston to the family cottage on Pen Lake. This scenario was repeated in communities all over North America, as those childhood friends from the lake answered some primal call and brought their families back for a “gathering of the clan.” As Sheila explains, “We were like one big extended family.”

That close-knit Pen Lake cottage community would assemble in mid summer, in time for the Pen Lake Regatta Weekend. Included in the weekend was the annual Open Sailing Race, which had been initiated by Sheila’s father. The Morses have carried on the tradition and now host the Skipper’s Party, following the race. This weekend provided the focal point for renewing friendships that had their origin at the lake.

When Sheila and her brother Tony arrived at the lake with their families, the cottage was strained to the bursting point. Soon it would not be able to contain them all.

The Morses started looking around for a cottage that could accommodate them all and, in 1991, found an old fishing camp that had been built in the late 1920s to early 1930s. There was a main cottage, along with some bunkies, on a property that had, at one time, been owned by former National Hockey League legend Tim Horton.

The main cottage was old and needed substantial repair. The bunkies were gradually restored but, by the year 2000, it was apparent the cottage needed major renovation. After consulting several local contractors, it became evident that rebuilding would be more appropriate. This was their chance to build something that truly reflected them and what the cottage meant to them.

“Our intent was to build a cottage that appeared to have been there forever,” explains Sheila. It would have to exude the feeling that generations of family history had been absorbed into its very walls.

This feeling would have to carry over into the exterior appearance and the landscaping as well. The exterior finish would have to be the traditional Muskoka – dark brown with white trim. Retaining walls, walkways and driveways would have to use native flagstone and boulders, the kind that would have been available on the site 100 years ago. The trees would have to be big, mature trees to create the sense that they and the cottage had grown old together. The floors, ceilings and walls would have to be of wood, the material traditionally used to build the earliest cottages. And, the wood would have to be old and a little rough in appearance, to give that sense of age.

As well, there would have to be fireplaces and they would have to be made out of native stone. They would have to be serious-looking fireplaces, not mere decorations, too – after all, fireplaces were a primary source of heat in the earliest cottages. It would also have to be big enough to comfortably accommodate the entire extended family, when they gathered. But, it was extremely important to recreate that sense of intimacy – the warmth and coziness – the crowded Houghton family cottage had afforded.



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Looking and feeling old and established was one thing but, in practical terms, it had to work. It would have all the modern conveniences but they would be carefully camouflaged, so they didn't intrude on the ambience of the older aesthetic. The water, septic, electrical, heating and security systems would have to give years of trouble-free, high-level performance.

Bringing all these elements together into a building design would be the work of the architect. Steve Charron, an architect from Barrie, had married into the Pen Lake cottage culture and had already designed other cottages on the lake. He proved to be well qualified for the job and the design proceeded quickly.

The design, however, is only a plan. What was needed, next, was a builder with the skill and sensitivity to turn the plan into reality. Following a selection process, Garry Best and Son of Dwight was chosen. Very quickly, Garry demonstrated he was very much in tune with the Morses' vision for their cottage. "Our contractor had some fabulous thoughts and ideas and was able to do anything that we asked, and more," comments Sheila.

The main living room of the cottage is post and beam construction. This produces the big, open space ideal for large gatherings and entertaining. The open feeling is enhanced by a cathedral ceiling and windows all along the lake side. The "Muskoka Room," Dick's favorite part of the cottage, extends along the lake-front side and has windows around three sides. This further adds to the feeling of lightness and airiness.

The kitchen, open to the living room, is large and conveniently laid out for hosting large groups. The appliances are all clad in wood, so they integrate well with the wood of the walls, floors and cupboards. The refrigerator handles are wooden, carved into bulrushes, part of a theme Sheila encouraged throughout the cottage.

The walls, ceilings and floors are all wood. As much as possible, all the beams, timbers and boards were recy-

clad from old buildings. The old wood is coated with clear finishes to expose its character. The weathered patina, the scars of hand hewing and rough-cut sawing, the irregularities of length, width and the color of boards all give the sense that the building was built a long time ago. Where new wood was necessary, it was stained with colors that complement the rich natural tones of the older, exposed wood.

Antique furniture and new pieces, deliberately made to look old, add to the effect. Custom-built chandeliers and sconces have been beautifully crafted, antiqued and personalized with a bulrush/lily/hummingbird motif.

Aging brought out all the character in the old wood. Deep, rich colors; well-defined grain; knots, worm holes and imperfections make the walls, ceilings and floors interesting, informal and warm. In combination, they provide a sense of intimacy and coziness.

With the assistance of Lena Patten of Hilltop Interiors, the colors and textures of the fabrics in the furniture were chosen to complement the deep, rich color of the woods. Antique, Oriental carpets give a warm, well-worn tone to the rooms.

The two large fireplaces in the revamped cottage were made from local Canadian Shield river stone in the traditional Muskoka style. They are focal points in their respective rooms, and lend an air of antiquity, tradition and permanence.

One enormous challenge, during the rebuilding process, was to keep this very big, two-story building from looking big. The secret was in the design of the roof. It is a traditional Muskoka-cottage type of roof. The lower edge is at the top of the ground floor. Numerous hips, valleys and dormers break up what would otherwise be a large expanse of roof. It is such a complicated roof that pre-engineered trusses could not be used. The effect produced from the outside is to lower the visual height of the building. Inside, it means the upstairs bedrooms have sloping ceil-

*Builder Garry Best was very much in tune with Dick and Sheila Morse's vision for their new cottage.*



Photograph: Jenny Kirkpatrick

**The master bathroom, viewed through a glass shower door, has mirrors which echo the motif in the master bedroom (below).**

ings, dormer windows with window seats and alcoves that give a cozy, hunkered-in feel.

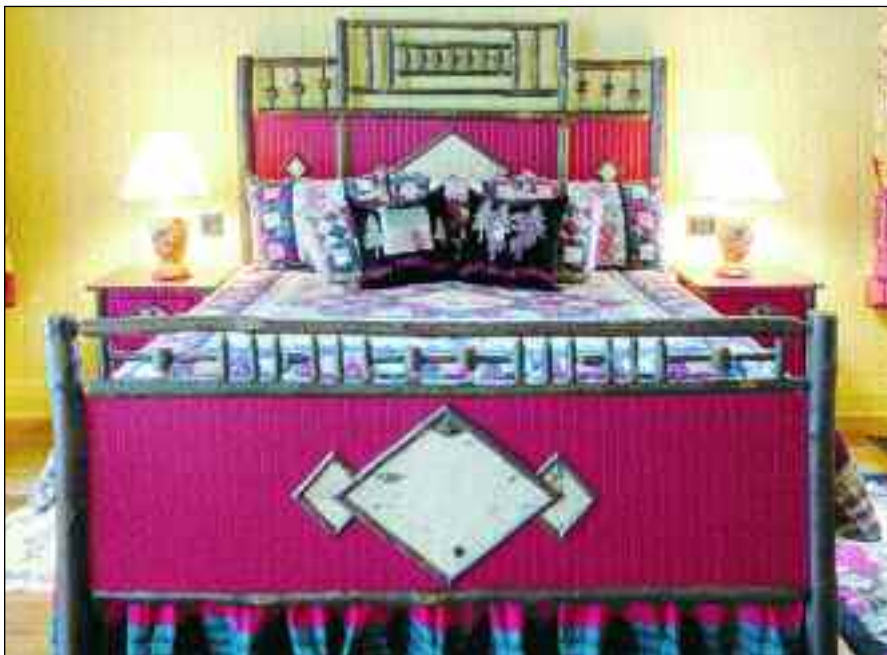
Landscaping effects further enhance the feeling that the cottage has been there for a long time. Only two large trees had to be removed to make way for the building. An additional 30 large trees were planted. Native boulders, rather than quarried stone, were imported and strategically placed. These boulders were covered with a slurry of moss and buttermilk. Very quickly, they became covered in moss, giving the appearance that they had been there since primordial times. The spaces between flagstones were planted with moss to create a similar effect. Century-old cobblestones, used to build TTC (Toronto Transit Corporation) rail lines, were brought in to pave the drive and entrance way.

Contractor and client worked closely together throughout every step of the process. At the end of each day, Garry Best would photograph the day's progress with his digital camera and e-mail the pictures to the Morses in Boston. Later in the evening, they would talk on the

phone to assess the progress and decide on any changes – if needed – to the plan. Garry and Sheila would prowl through lumberyards, stone quarries, carpet shops and so on, looking for just the right items. Dick would pitch in whenever and wherever his schedule allowed. Contractor and clients spent so much time together they became close friends.

Was the desired effect achieved? “We definitely achieved all we had hoped for, and more,” Sheila and Dick agree.

This had been an ambitious and challenging project. Building a cottage to meet both physical and complex emotional needs was a difficult assignment. It required a team of players with great skill, sensitivity and patience to deliver the desired effect. With only a few exceptions, those team members all work and live in Muskoka. They brought an understanding and knowledge of the local environment that was invaluable in achieving the desired effect. The team, working together, delivered what was desired and, in doing so, earned the respect, admiration and affection of the Morses. ❧



Photograph: Jenny Kirkpatrick

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