

A Cabin, a Lake, a Memory

The cottage where the author spent many vacations was torn down, but it never disappeared

By CHRISTINE S. COZZENS

LAST August I went back to visit a lake in northern Wisconsin, Rest Lake, that I had not seen in 29 years. During that time I had moved from Illinois to California to Boston to Atlanta, lived in Belgium and London, climbed the Sierras, made a dozen trips to Ireland and spent 14 summers on Gape Cod. Yet I had never forgotten the pine-fringed lake with its hard sand bottom and water so clear you could see the first-sized tadpoles dart away from your footfall.

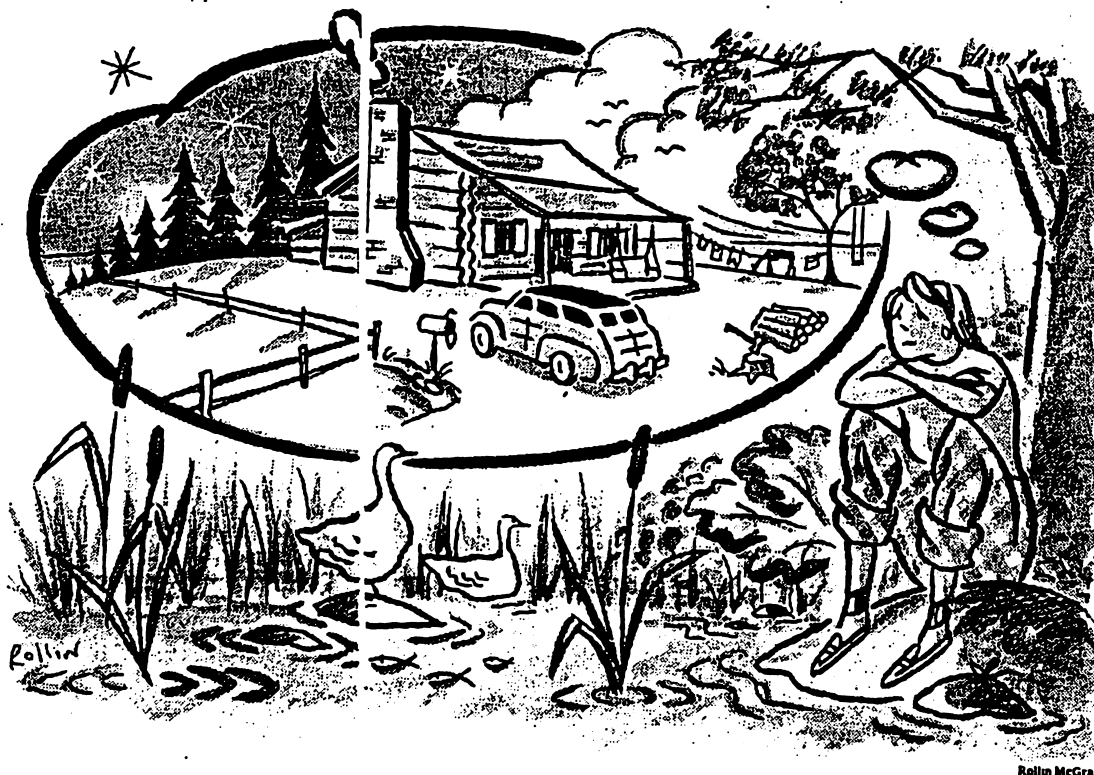
I have always been one to go back to places, to touch up a faded canvas according to my current sense of color and proportion. There had been many opportunities to return to Rest Lake. Family members and friends had made the pilgrimage. Why had it taken me, the inveterate retracer of steps, so long?

Over the years in my dreams, waking or sleeping, I had recaptured detail after detail of the "Hoosier cottage" where I had spent so many childhood summers: the old-fashioned utensils stacked in a wire basket on a kitchen shelf, the 1920's blue-knit bathing costume around which we created impromptu plays, the feel of the pier's hot bleached planks on bare feet. One of five cottages built in the 20's by a group of friends from Indiana, ours was the simplest: a wood-frame cabin on a rise about 20 yards from the lake, four small rooms flanked by a screen porch and a utility porch that once housed a real icebox. (I still recall, when I was 3 or 4, sitting on the back seat of a car, next to a huge block of ice.)

The house, the woods and shore have lived in my imagination, more real than when we swung in the squeaky porch swing to stir a breeze in midday heat, or played endless hands of casino by the fire in the knobby stone hearth to the steady beat of a summer rain. And they have grown to mythic dimensions, becoming the standard next to which every other place or trip or experience was doomed to fall short.

Even my claim to ownership of the place lay more in the realm of imagination than as a child I cared to admit. Several of my wealthier friends had summer cottages on perfect northern lakes, and it gave me some satisfaction in fourth or fifth grade to refer to "our cottage," but the state leased out the land, which was part of a state forest, and the house belonged to old family friends, descendants of the original Hoosiers, who

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lived in Arkansas — too far away to make the annual trip in the days when the Interstates were country roads.

So almost every summer my family piled into the station wagon and drove from Chicago to the village of Manitowish Waters, the four children competing with each other to spot the final symbol of the eight-hour journey, the fire tower rising high above the forest. From there it was a mere half-mile to the dirt road leading to the cottages with the hopelessly old-fashioned names the Hoosiers had given them: Jest-a-Rest, Bide-a-Wee, Wagoner's Wigwam, and our cottage, the vaguely patrician Pinecroft. (I once glued birch-bark letters spelling that word to a slab of wood and mounted it on a tree.) The first thing I did when we arrived was run out on the dock to make sure everything was in place: the mansion on the opposite shore with its grand lawn, the driftwood trunk beached on the grass, the throne-shaped stone grill the man from Indiana had built near the water.

Up at the house, the screened-in porch was the real living space. It had a green canvas swinging couch strung across one end and a round table where we ate pancakes every morning and hamburgers, corn and tomatoes every night, or so it seemed, on a set of dishes and matching cups in pastel colors. (The girls fought over the pink set, which the boys scorned.) Assorted fishing rods, nets, monstrous lures that must have come from deep-sea fishing trips to Florida, and posters from Carlsbad Caverns and Mammoth Cave decorated the inside wall, but on the other three sides the forest and the lake provided more dramatic scenery: a doe frozen still near the clothesline where wet bathing suits flapped in the wind; railstones the size of walnuts bouncing off the porch steps; a loon's cry piercing the heavy silence of the night as I sat on a plaid chair that slid back and forth on sleigh-like runners, trying to act a part in the grown-ups' conversation.

It seems now that I spent every day of

every summer of my childhood at Rest Lake, though I know it was really only two or three weeks and not every summer. The year that I was 16, and finally able to drive my brothers 30 miles to the movies, the complicated negotiations over the land lease that had been under way for years came to a head, and the state reclaimed the land. Our place was the first to be torn down, but within two years the rest of the Hoosier cottages fell to the reclamation order, and a few clearings and some dock pilings were all that remained of the little settlement. I know this because friends visited the area not long afterward and foisted their findings on me in a chatty postcard.

For several years I cherished visions of a miraculous reversal of events in which I, orating like a teen-age Clarence Darrow, defeated the evil state bureaucrats. When I finally believed that the house and land were lost forever, I felt the same maddening blankness I would later recognize as the accompaniment to death. It was my first

hint that the grown-ups had bungled the world and that everything was not — as they had always promised — going to be all right.

Schooled in the conquests of superheroes and adept at creating and destroying skyscrapers or whole cities in a few minutes, my own children have a less apocalyptic view of the inequities of daily life. Last August the trip from our motel to Rest Lake was no voyage through time for them. Neither they nor my husband knew I was breathless with anxiety as we turned off Highway 51 and drove into Manitowish Waters.

SURPRISINGLY, the little town looked the same. The post office had moved across the street, and I noticed a few satellite dishes, but the Pea Patch Bar and Motel ("Best Burger by a Dam Site") and Hanson's Hardware were right where they should be, and La Porte's I.G.A. still dominated the main block of stores. (It rents videos now.) After all these years, I wondered, could there still be La Portes and Hansons running the businesses? The fire tower was gone, but even without my Pinecroft sign it was easy to find the road to our cottage, or the sunny patch of grass and wildflowers that had taken its place. Though they had removed every trace of the five cottages, even the State of Wisconsin didn't have the power to make trees grow in a mere generation where buildings had been.

We parked in what must have been the Wagners' front yard near picnic tables and a bulletin board with nature posters. Down at the waterfront, I pointed out the posts of our pier. But across the lake, the mansion with its sloping lawn remained unchanged, and my son, hacking through overgrown brush, led us to the grill, now half sunk in sand. You can still see straight to the bottom of the lake, where crayfish and tadpoles dart back and forth.

While my husband watched the kids paddling in the lake, I paced the hill, hoping to trace the course of the path down to the shore or come upon a stray stone from the hearth. I found no mementos to carry away and couldn't match the arrangement of buildings and paths in my mind with the clearings and clusters of trees before me, but I had begun to understand that the landscape of the present simply overlays the landscape of the past. The state took away the cottage, but there is a field of wildflowers where it used to be, and as I sit here months later remembering my return to Rest Lake, I conjure the cottage as easily, as the field. To leave a place is to begin its story, and in stories, places endure.

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