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A PLACE IN TIME

# Lodged at Pine Island

**CHARLOTTE GRAY** chucked the Must Have list when a 1904 log cabin caught her eye

OTTAWA

My husband George hankered after Canadian Shield. I wanted to be less than one hour from Highway 401. We both fancied an island in a large lake.

When George and I arrived at the point in our lives when we were ready for a cottage, we seemed to be heading for disappointment. The Must Have list ap-

peared to include incompatible priorities. He looked north of Ottawa, where we live, yearning for Group of Seven iconography of bent pines and rugged rocks. I looked south, on the assumption that our adult children would be more likely to visit if we were within easy reach of Montreal or Toronto.

My priority looked impossibly expensive. There is plenty of water south of Ottawa, within easy reach

of the 401, but most of the big lakes were out of our price range. Sagging porches and Early Sears décor distinguished anything we could afford.

The premier lake on the Rideau Canal system, for instance, is Big Rideau Lake, which has been a favoured getaway for government mandarins for three generations. They still dress (that is, change out of swimsuits) for dinner there. The starting price for an attractive old-fashioned cottage, with a septic tank, decent dock and mouldering New Yorkers, is \$400,000. Other lakes are marred by overdeveloped shorelines, poor access roads, or

an irritating lack of islands.

George turned up his nose at most of the cottage country south of Ottawa, anyway, because it is perched on a gentle, fertile landscape. His affection for the Canadian Shield filled me with gloom. I've read and written about enough Canadian pioneers to know the unforgiving nature of that layer of granite lurking only inches from the ground surface, and the merciless climate. Each 10 miles that one drives toward the Arctic circle from Ottawa lops a day off the cottage season.

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL  
FRIDAY, JUNE 27, 2003

# 'I want to buy an island'

PINE ISLAND from page G1

However, a spur of the Canadian Shield loops south and west of the city.

Its craggy rocks, rearing up out of gentle pasture, complicated Colonel John By's efforts to build the Rideau Canal between 1829 and 1832. His sappers and engineers spent weeks blasting through the unyielding rock as they struggled to create the Ottawa-Kingston waterway. We focused our cottage search along the spur.

Three summers ago, a friend lent us a cabin on Big Rideau Lake. As we sipped our drinks and listened to the loons each evening, we revisited the conversation we had been having for years. Should we buy a cottage? What kind of cottage? What were the Must Haves? Could an existing property ever fill all the requirements?

The following day, my husband walked into Rideau Real Estate at Portland. "I want to buy an island," he announced grandly. He didn't get a chance to start reciting the list of Must Haves. "I have an island for you," the real estate agent replied. "Here, look at the photos of Pine Island."

Of course, it was far too expensive. We decided to think about it.

"Negotiable," urged the real estate agent; "They need to sell." We had guests awaiting us at the cottage, but George carefully noted the island's position on a map of the area.

Two days later, the sun shone and we took a trip out of the Big Rideau, through two Rideau Canal locks, and into Newboro Lake. When we located Pine Island, we discovered that its dock guarded



the entrance to a waterlily-filled bay. Beyond the bay was a Tom Thomson peninsula — bare rocks, pine trees, a carpet of needles. As we tied up, a pair of ospreys called indignantly from their untidy nest above our heads: They resented visitors.

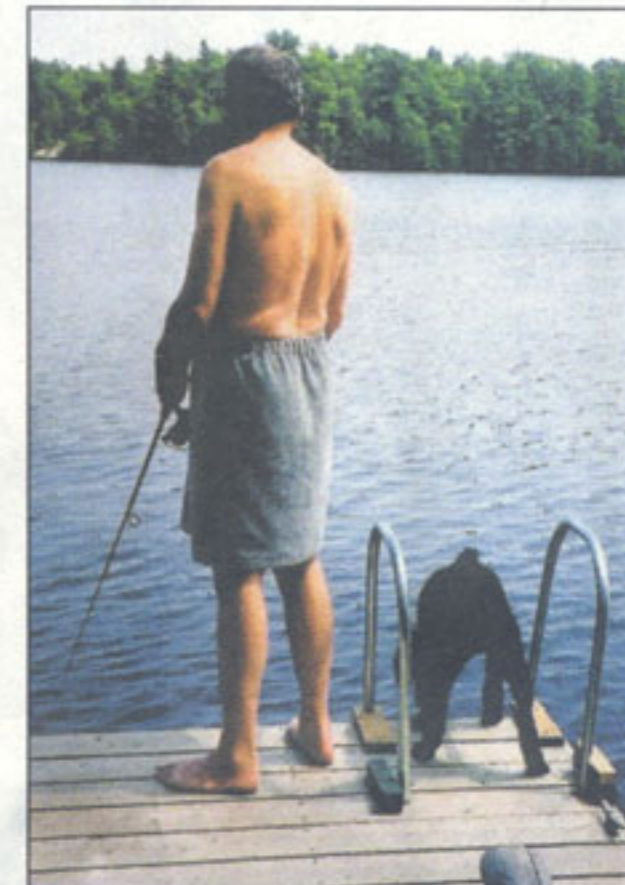
We scrambled up a steep hill, along an overgrown path, rounded a corner — and finally saw the cottage. It was an old-fashioned Adirondacks wooden lodge, with a wide porch on three sides shaded by a vast, shingled roof.

On this first, illicit visit, Powhatan Lodge (as we discovered it was called) was locked up. Peering through badly screened windows we could see that it followed traditional Adirondacks style: a "great room" with a huge fieldstone fireplace and a plethora of animal heads hanging on the walls, and four bedrooms leading off it. Turn-



ing my back on the massive horizontal logs from which it was constructed, I ran my hands along the gnarled cedar porch railings and stared out at a thick screen of trees. Unchecked for decades, the

forest obscured any view of water. Huge white pines towered over me. Cicadas chirruped in the heavy warmth and there were rustlings in the dense undergrowth. It was so still, so private, so insulated



from breezes or the sounds of voices and boats. I felt as though nature had already reclaimed this lost domain.

It was our dream cottage. But, given that it was state-of-the-art 1904 (with only a handful of innovations by its most recent — and mostly absent — owner), it would need a bit of work.

"We have sons," my husband said. He sounded like a 19th-century immigrant to the backwoods, surveying the virgin bush from which he and his family had to carve a living.

Fast forward three years.

I lie in bed on Saturday morning. A humming bird hovers by the feeder suspended from the porch roof, and the lake sparkles through scattered oaks beyond. I savour the sounds of woodpeckers and blue jays, because I know they may soon be joined by a more intrusive racket: chainsaws and weed-wackers. Beating back nature comes at a price.

But unlike those poor pioneers, we at least have 21st-century technology.

Today, thanks to our three strong sons and the local plumber, electrician and craftsmen, we have indoor plumbing. We have a modern kitchen and a screened dining room. We have a swimming dock and we will soon have a sauna. Mighty trees (carefully selected) have fallen, and a breeze plays along the 60-foot porch. We have a wonderful landscape adviser, Kristl Walek from Gardens North, who has identified the carpet of flowers that greets us each spring (hepatica) and is teaching us how to groom nature without spoiling it.

The undergrowth has been cleared off the massive granite rocks of the Canadian Shield, and soon lavender will flourish in the cracks. Cinnamon ferns, which once clumped inconspicuously by an inaccessible inlet, have been transplanted to the swimming dock.

But the ospreys that greeted us on our first visit still return to their nest in the white pines in spring, and the blue heron still stands motionless amongst the lilies in the lagoon. Highway 401 is a 40-minute drive south, and a world away.

Ottawa historian and author Charlotte Gray's most recent work, *Flint & Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake* was nominated for the *Drainie-Taylor Biography Prize by the Writer's Trust*.

*A Place in Time* is an occasional series of essays by prominent Canadians about the places that have special meaning for them.