

# HANDS across the water

How a white male accountant and a brash Anishnabai woman bridged the great divide on Lake Temagami

By Christine Langlois Photography Derek Shapton











*Friends Walter Ross (above) and Vicki Grant (opposite, bottom) are the driving force behind the Temagami Community Foundation, a group that helps connect area cottagers, aboriginals, and townspeople.*

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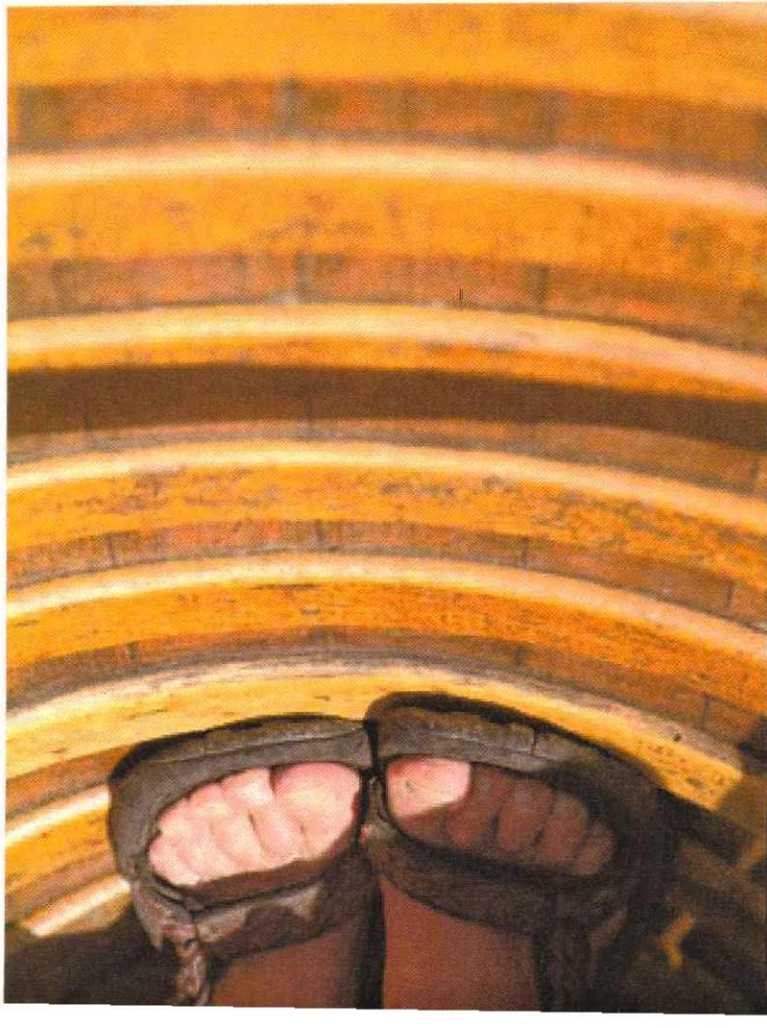
very cottage community has its uneasy divisions, but on Lake Temagami in northern Ontario, relationships are more complicated than most. The "place of deep water," with its five long arms that insert themselves far into dark forest, is ancestral homeland to the Teme-Augama Anishnabeg, who have lived among the vast stands of red and white pine on its shores and travelled its waterways for at least five thousand years. For a mind-boggling 130 years, the Anishnabeg have been in land-claims negotiations with various levels of government.

Cottagers started arriving on Temagami in 1906, shortly after the first Teme-Augama Anishnabai delegation made the long trek south to Ottawa to plead its case. When the railroad pushed north carrying miners and lumbermen near the turn of the 20th century, the island-dotted lake caught the imagination of adventurous southern travellers. The Ontario government had created the Temagami Forest Reserve in 1901 to protect acres of mainland forest for future logging but, in 1906, offered islands for lease and, eventually, for sale. Soon, rustic pine cottages sprang up, and a tiny village, also called Temagami, grew along the northeast arm and around the train station. >>







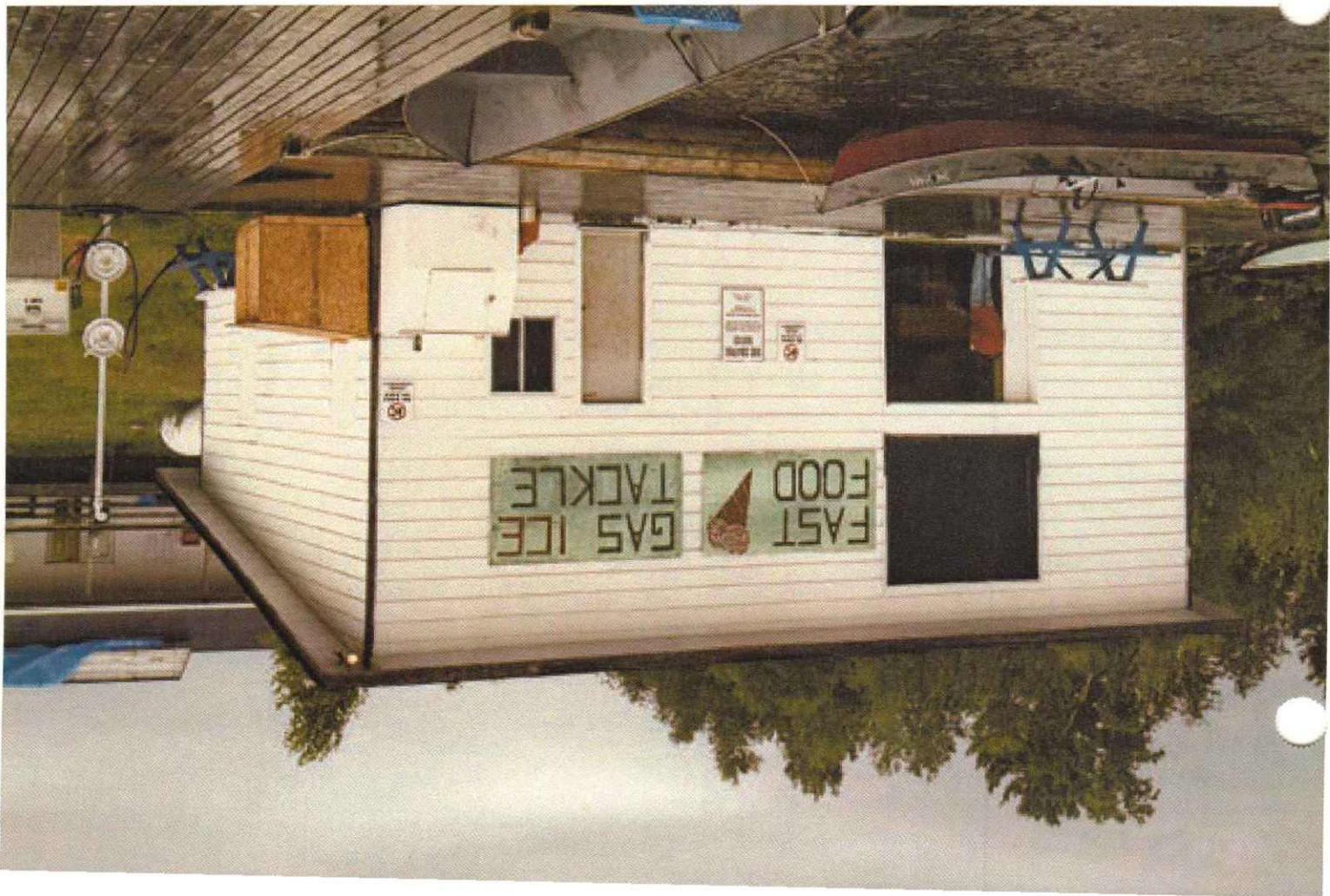




Vicki's cottage decor is inspired by her aboriginal roots. A tikanogan (often mistakenly called a papoose) and a piece of handmade stained glass, depicting an aboriginal woman, are both Vicki's handiwork (opposite).









The docks at Bear Island are home to a supply post operated by Vicki's son Fabian. A deer head watches over the Ross family's living room (below). They have no particular affection for it, but keep it to honour the original character of the place.

## "We talk about what Temagami means to us, why we are here, what our responsibilities are"

The relationship between aboriginal and cottager has waxed and waned for a century. Early on, cottagers relied on aboriginals as paid guides, then later as cooks and cleaners. Between the wars, well-to-do parents sent children north for the summer to learn to "paddle like Grey Owl" at Temagami's world-famous canoeing camps. (Grey Owl, who lived on Temagami for a time, was revered as a partly aboriginal conservationist whose writing and speaking tours reached millions all over the world—at least, until he was revealed, after his death, as a British impostor named Archibald Belaney.) During the fondly remembered '40s, '50s, and '60s, raucous Saturday night square dances in the Bear Island aboriginal community brought cottagers and locals together. But when Gary Potts, a new, young activist chief, with the backing of the community, managed to lay claim through a land caution to stop development on



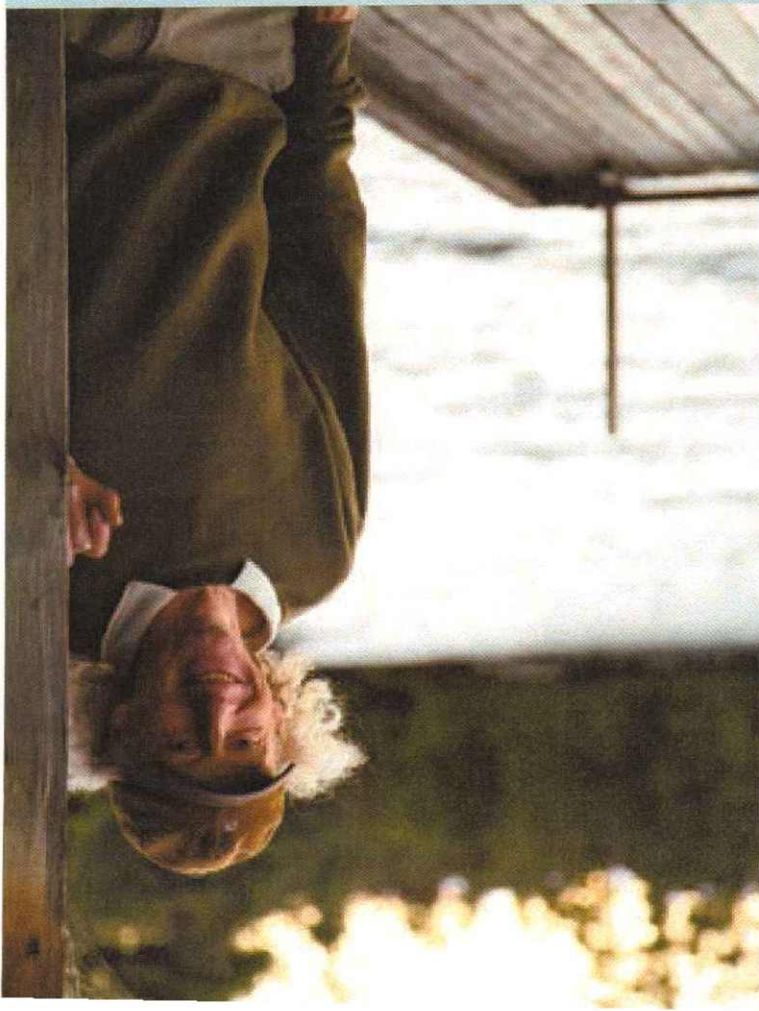
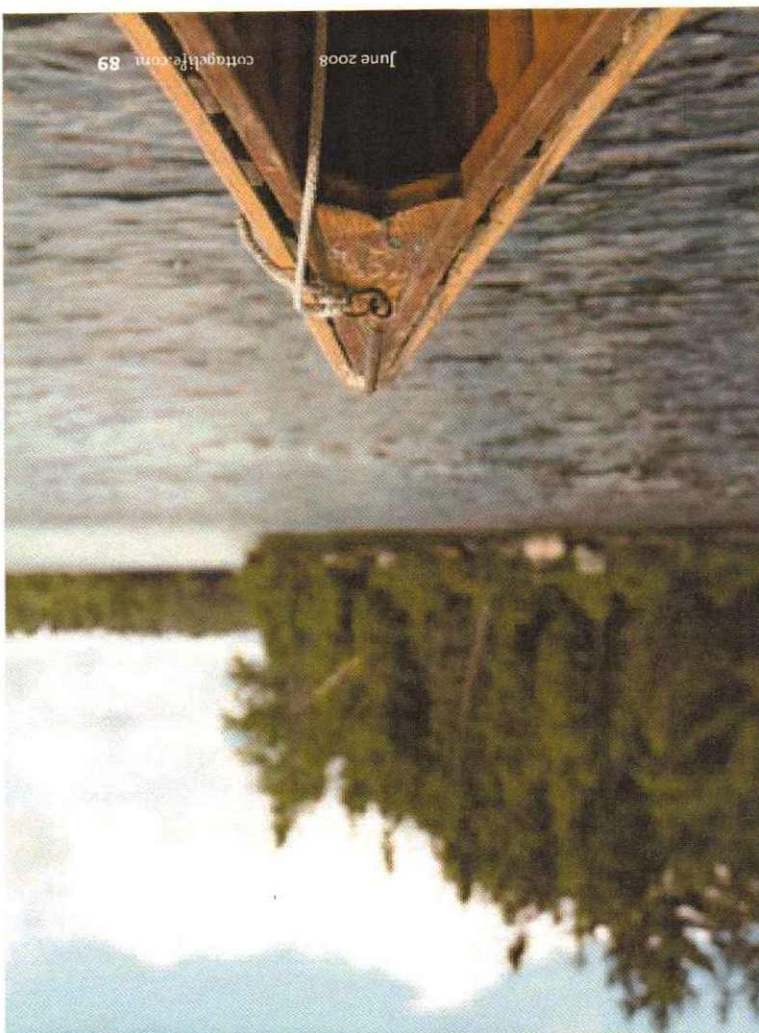
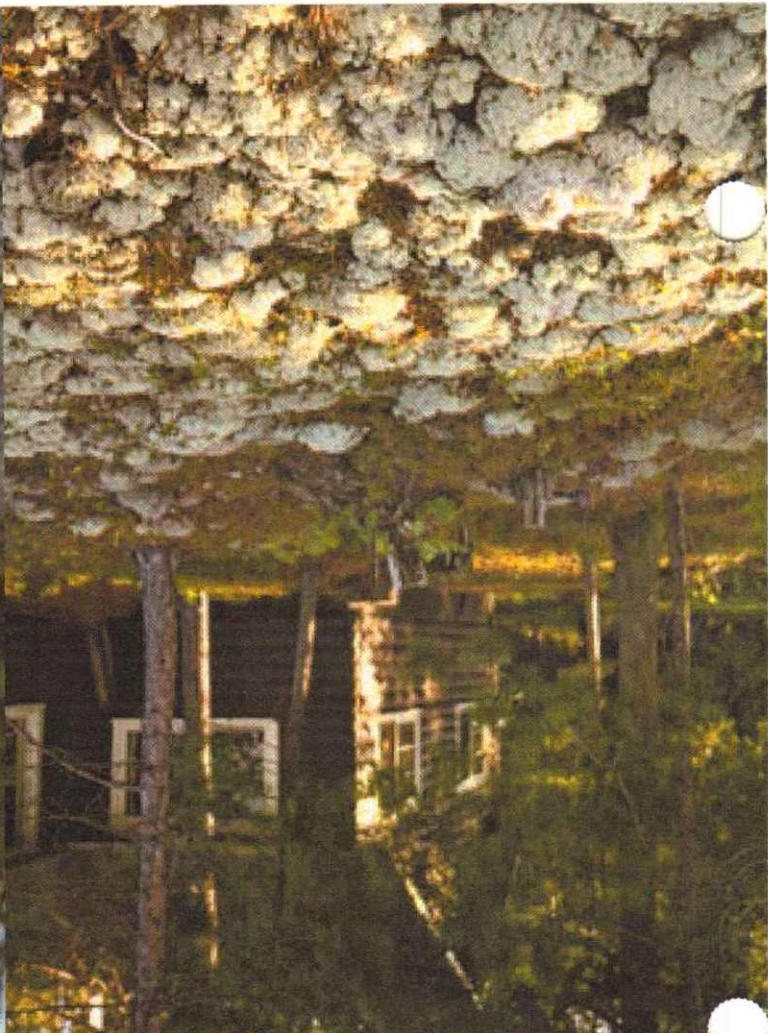


"The way we  
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Vicki looks out from  
St. Ursula's Catholic  
Church on Bear Island.  
The island was once home  
to a Hudson's Bay outpost  
and remains a pit stop for  
paddlers. Several kinds of  
lichen, including reindeer  
moss, grow on Walter's  
island (opposite).











*Birding and reading are favourite cottage pastimes for Walter and his wife, Joanne.*

## Little has changed in the Rosses' modest pine cottage since it was built in the early '50s

10,400 sq. km of disputed lands in 1973, the social connections started to weaken. Then came the angry blockades of the '80s, with aboriginals and environmentalists pitted against logging companies and governments. Cottagers often felt caught in the middle, and the two groups slid further apart into separate worlds.

Today, most Teme-Augama Anishnabeg in the area live year-round on a 2.5-sq.-km reserve on Bear Island, in the middle of the lake; cottagers arrive every spring at their island properties, and everyone travels the same lake routes to the shops in Temagami. But paths seldom cross. A case in point: A few years ago, island residents created a walking trail on Bear Island, and the band council subsequently decreed that for joggers' safety, the islanders' dogs had to be tied. Now cottagers take their boats to the island to walk or run on the trail while locals leash their pets and whiz by on their ATVs. As one Bear Islander puts it: "We don't talk. I've never caught a name."

Temagami is a landscape fraught with layer upon layer of ancient tension. This is what makes the profound friendship between 55-year-old Vicki Grant, an aboriginal raised on Bear Island and now a cottager, and Walter Ross, 66, a retired chartered



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accountant from Toronto and also a cottager, so remarkable.

"The way we love Temagami," says Vicki, flashing her trademark wicked grin, "it's a spiritual connection with nature. Even if Walter can't bring himself to say so." The two are sitting at the harvest table in the Ross cottage on a sunny August morning, sharing a breakfast of omelettes and Walter's homemade bread and raspberry jam. They're taking turns telling the story of the evolution of their friendship and the volunteer work that forged it, particularly the driving force of their pet project, the Temagami Community Foundation. As usual, Vicki is doing most of the talking.

"I first met Walter through my husband, Dick—they knew each other through business," Vicki goes on, "but it was only when Walter and I started to volunteer together that we realized we shared a really deep-rooted passion for this place, for Temagami. One night back in 1998, we were sitting on the deck at my cottage, and we got to talking about the strain of all the years of land-claim negotiations on the relationships in the community."

Both agree that it was a tense period. The current round of talks was just starting, after the last 10-year round ended unsuccessfully. Some major objectives had been agreed on: for instance, a plan to protect the forest on the shoreline, along with a 330 sq. km parcel of land set aside for Teme-Augama Anishnabeg settlement. But a lot of issues were still unresolved. "We realized we needed to talk together about what Temagami means to us, why we are here, and what our responsibilities are," says Vicki.

As Walter puts it: "I have a stake in this place."

In view of the situation's urgency, Vicki and Walter made a novel decision: They didn't want to wait for a resolution of land claims to start rebuilding connections. Instead, they realized that what they both wanted for the community was what the two of them already had—a friendship across political differences,

gender, race. "We wanted people to get to know each other better," says Vicki.

After all, if they could bridge their two worlds, they reasoned, others could, too. And bridging very different worlds was precisely what they'd done. That both are cottagers today on the "place of deep waters" only makes the difference in their backgrounds more dramatic.

Vicki—exuberant, quick to laugh, outspoken—belongs to the Teme-Augama Anishnabeg. Growing up, her whole world was the small, protected enclave of the reserve. She's the second youngest of six and the only girl, so "I was the queen," she recalls. She and her brothers attended a one-room school. Without electricity, they used coal oil and gas lamps and an old-fashioned cookstove. Indoor plumbing didn't arrive on the island until after Vicki went away to North Bay to attend high school. Her family lived a traditional life, spending the winter out on their trap line, until her eldest brother started Grade 1. After that, her mother stayed in the community while her father trapped in the winter and worked as a guide in the summer. "Residential schools were still a threat at that time," Vicki says, although her parents managed to avoid having any of their children sent away.

Counterintuitive though it might sound for an aboriginal child growing up in the '50s, Vicki always loved to see the cottagers arrive every spring. "They were a welcome intrusion," she says, "and you certainly understood that they were your livelihood." Much to her mother's chagrin, Vicki learned this lesson early. On a tour-boat ride with her family, 10-year-old Vicki, resplendent with her long, black pigtails, was asked by a tourist if he could take her picture. She agreed, for a dollar, and quickly discovered others would pay, too. But her mother quashed her entrepreneurial spirit as soon as she realized what her daughter was up to. "Oh, she was mad!" says Vicki, laughing at the memory.

The appeal of cottage living was something Vicki always understood. When she went with her mother to help clean a cottage, she'd find a way to duck out and sit by the shore and watch the water on the rocks. "I'd pretend that I owned the place—at least until my mother started hollering at me to come



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and help her." And when Vicki watched the campers paddle by Bear Island, she longed to be one of them. It wasn't simply a case of a working-class kid envying the idle rich. For Vicki, the notion of owning a private piece of the lake meant something far more fundamental: never having to leave Temagami.

When she was 13, Vicki told her best friend that she was looking for a husband who was tall and owned an island on the lake. Height was important: At 5'11", Vicki was almost the tallest person on Bear Island. And owning an island doubled the security and permanence. "I always used to think," she says, "that people who owned island cottages were happy." At 21, as a single mother of a four-year-old son, Fabian, Vicki met Dick Grant, a young lawyer from Toronto who had become so enamoured with Temagami when he was a camper that he decided to settle in the area, first as co-owner of an educational camp for adults, and later as a lawyer in town. Standing almost 6'4" and being the owner of Deacon's Island, he met both of her teenage criteria. Two years later, they were married on Bear Island at the tiny, Catholic St. Ursula's Church, which was packed with 200 people.

Two decades back and a culture apart, Walter Ross was making his own way toward the universe of Temagami cottage life. Walter, who was attending Upper Canada College in Toronto at the time, first visited the lake in the 1950s as a camper at venerable Camp Temagami. Every summer after that, Walter and his three sisters went to camp on the lake in July, and then spent August with their parents in a rented cottage on one of the camp islands. His childhood memories are not so much of exploring Lake Temagami as of spending a couple of days crossing the lake at the start and end of long canoe trips up through the waterways to the north. "We were wiry little voyageurs," he says. Although the campers followed traditional aboriginal routes, which took them past Bear Island, where Vicki lived, they didn't know much about the aboriginal community or have any real association

with the people living there. "We were told to 'paddle quietly, like Indians,'" he says, "but that's all I remember."

In the early 1960s, Walter's parents bought their own cottage on a four-acre lot on Island 725, near the centre of the lake. Eventually Walter, who had become a partner in a large Toronto accounting firm, and his wife, Joanne, who had grown up hearing stories about her grandfather's experiences as a fire ranger in Temagami, continued the tradition of Augusts on the lake. With their three kids, they made the annual five-hour trek up the highway from Toronto,

**"I always used to think," Vicki says, "that people who owned island cottages were happy"**

then the 18-km drive down the gravel access road to the public launch and, finally, the 15-minute boat ride to their property. Walter says that in those days, when he left Toronto's financial district and disappeared directly to his Temagami island for short holidays, a friendship with someone on Bear Island would have been "inconceivable."

But convention was no match for Vicki. Early in their marriage, she and Dick made Deacon's Island their home, traveling by boat and snowmobile to work—he to his law practice in Temagami and she to Bear Island, where she worked as the first full-time band administrator. Then, a near-disaster changed that arrangement: Vicki, five months pregnant, and Fabian almost drowned when their snowmobile went through the ice at freeze-up. After that, the family spent more time in the town of Temagami and then moved to New Liskeard, Ont., and finally Stouffville, but continued visiting their island on weekends until December. {Continued on page 144}



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By this time, Vicki was working as a band negotiator for the current round of land-claims negotiations. Meanwhile, Walter had retired from his accounting firm and become a dedicated, behind-the-scenes philanthropist with several causes. Knowledgeable, analytical, and careful with words, he was comfortable talking in measured tones about "community investments" on Temagami, but discussions about spiritual connections did not trip easily off his tongue.

Then he really got to know Vicki.

By the time Walter and Vicki decided to start the Temagami Community Foundation, they had logged more than 100 years of lake time between them and had a wide network of friends and colleagues they could draw upon to help. They organized an informational meeting on Bear Island, attended by 40 people.

That first meeting was a bit stiff and reserved, but from that group came a 12-member board of directors from the cottage community, the Bear Island community, and the town of Temagami. Armed with a start-up grant and donations from local people and businesses, the group decided to subsidize local projects that would both fill obvious community needs and promote plenty of interaction. They funded strawberry socials and square dances, like the ones the old-timers among them remembered attending. They gave money to replace the aging wooden cross on St. Ursula's Church on Bear Island and donated funds to help restore the Temagami Train Station in town. Their largest and most successful project to date has been the week-long summer arts camp held on Bear Island or in Temagami, attended by Teme-Augama Anishnabai children, cottage kids, and youngsters from town. While the campers do arts and crafts or listen to elders' storytelling, they also learn about each others' lives and become friends.

Another highlight for the foundation was this past summer's Angele Egwuna Project. The multimedia exhibit, mounted by North Bay's Kennedy Gallery and displayed at the Temagami Train Station, told the story of Angele

Egwuna, first wife of Archie Belaney, a.k.a. Grey Owl. Angele, an aboriginal born on Bear Island, met Archie when the two worked in service jobs at the Temagami Inn. Angele introduced Archie to her family, who taught him to hunt, trap, and speak their language. Eventually, after Archie left Angele, he made the remarkable transformation into Grey Owl. With his long pigtail and buckskins, he passed himself off as a mixed-blood aboriginal, and became perhaps Canada's first international celebrity, lecturing on habitat preservation and aboriginal rights all over the world.

Angele and Archie's descendants still live in the Temagami area. But until the Angele Egwuna Project was launched, the Egwuna family's role in the creation of the Grey Owl persona wasn't widely known outside the Temagami community. Vicki, as a high-school student, boarded with Angele and Archie's daughter Agnes in North Bay, and remembers Agnes joking fondly about her famous father's many romantic relationships. "She used to call him 'Lover Boy,'" Vicki says. "We all grew up knowing that Angele taught Archie Belaney his bush skills. A lot of famous people wouldn't have made it in this country without the help of aboriginal people, you know."

On a fine July evening, Walter suggests a sunset paddle around his cottage island. As he expertly manoeuvres his cedar-strip canoe in and out of the island bays (firmly suggesting his guest not bother to paddle), he talks about his family's Temagami roots and some of the ironies of cottage living on the lake. A case in point is his prowess in the canoe. Temagami's canoe camps, like the one he attended as a boy, have kept alive the traditional paddling skills first learned so many years ago from aboriginal guides, Vicki's father among them. The result? The majority of trippers now teaching canoeing in the lake's many summer camps are non-aboriginals.

The Ross family cottage is similarly traditional. Walter calls its style "minimalist"—no motorized toys, no Internet, no unnecessary projects. He and Joanne have kept alive some of the Spartan cottage traditions of the past, such as early-morning swims before breakfast,



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bathing suits optional. He's proud that little has changed in the modest pine cottage since carpenter George Angus built it in the early '50s. (Angus was so sure of the quality of his work that he used to say if a mouse ever invaded the place, he'd eat it.)

Back in the cottage after the paddle, Walter points out a black-and-white photo of his parents, Margaret and Grant, taken on their honeymoon, which they spent canoeing on Temagami. It sits on the pine mantel of the stone fireplace along with a large loon egg and a tiny white-throated sparrow egg. A stuffed deer head keeps watch. Walter and Joanne's armchairs sit facing the west window. Two pairs of binoculars stand at the ready on the sill to catch a quick glimpse of a passing bird. Beside each chair is a stack of reading material, planned for and gathered in the weeks before their cottage pilgrimage.

Along with the novels and the books on northern Ontario history, Walter's reading leans toward the political, especially aboriginal politics, which he considers "the most complicated issues we have going on in Canada right now." Non-aboriginals like himself, he says, have an obligation to understand aboriginal points of view and to foster relationships. "Generally, we're ambivalent. In a local community, that ambivalence becomes personal."

A couple of years back, Walter and John Turner, a Teme-Augama Anishnabai and then-board member of the foundation, attended a conference on community foundations where John was slated to speak. First, John told the audience a little bit of the history of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai, then he said something that shocked Walter. John noted that taking part in the Temagami Community Foundation marked the first time that the Anishnabai had ever voluntarily participated in a community organization. "It made me realize," says Walter, "that the mutual creation of institutions in partnership was the only way forward."

After a morning spent at the Bear Island band office, Vicki hustles a visitor into

her 16-foot Stanley for a fast ride to her cottage and a quick lunch. The Grants' cottage, unlike the Rosses', is in a constant state of renovation, as it's transformed from cottage to home to cottage again. Vicki's brother Mac, a builder, is updating and winterizing a smaller building on the property as a private refuge for Vicki and Dick, now that the main cottage has been given over to their adult children. And a short walk through the woods to the north side of the island, the couple's son Michael is clearing a spot for a little sleep cabin for himself and his new bride.

The cottage itself was constructed as a camp building and then added on to, but it has never lost its connection to the past. In Vicki's modern kitchen, beside a propane range, dishwasher, and cappuccino maker, stands an old wood-burning cookstove, exactly like the one she learned to cook on growing up on Bear Island. "Homemade bread out of a cookstove—there's nothing like it," she says.

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acceptance**

The living room is similarly eclectic. An ultra-modern, orange sectional takes pride of place in front of the stone fireplace, while the walls are bedecked with pieces of her and Dick's handiwork—the hand-beaded moosehide tikanogan (baby carrier) they made together for their second son, and a beaver pelt stretched using the traditional method. In one corner of the room, Vicki has created a small shrine of personal artifacts: retired paddles and other objects, all watched over by a large wooden turtle—aboriginal symbol for Mother Earth. In another corner stands a piece of stained glass Vicki designed and executed, depicting an aboriginal woman doing a traditional dance. »



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But it's two pieces of Vicki's embroidery art that are most representative. One shows three children and two adults in a canoe. "That's our family symbol," she says. "That's what makes a family strong, when everyone is paddling together." The second piece is a representation of the tiny island that she sees every day outside her cottage's kitchen window. A granite outcropping barely large enough to hold a straggly pine and a dead tree stump, the island is a touchstone for her. "The fact that it survives out there in the wind and the rain and the snow, that really envelops what Temagami is about," she says.

With retirement approaching for her and Dick, Vicki dreams of turning the cottage into a salon and retreat, a place to invite friends and acquaintances to stay and share their thoughts on aboriginal affairs. "To put people together who don't normally associate with each other," is how she puts it—much as she and Walter have done with the foundation. "A cottage is such a special place to gather people."

Not to mention a place to bridge divides. Vicki's journey from girl growing up on Bear Island to cottager doing the long commute is one that has been touched at times by prejudice and racism, but with her strong personality, she has never backed down. "I'm mouthy. I'd just tell them that their shit stinks the same as mine," she says, with her bright laugh. Aboriginals deserve respect from cottagers, she says. And cottagers deserve acceptance from aboriginals. "Cottagers have a right to be here."

And for the latter part of that journey, her friendship with a retired, white accountant who weighs every word has sustained and nourished her. "When we dig deep enough," says Vicki, "Walter and I have no trouble talking issues out. We just hang in there till we get through it. Walter listens and he's open. We all could learn from Walter."

Says Walter: "What can I say? Vicki's Vicki." 🐾

*Christine Langlois once spent a week exploring Lake Temagami by houseboat and has taken every opportunity to return since.*