

An island by any other name . . .

What's in a name? The origins of a name often provide a window into the past, revealing a history long forgotten.

By Amy Johnston

Muskoka is filled with hundreds of unique names marking islands, lakes and other natural features. Each one has a story to tell, and offers a glimpse into the founding of the region.

Many of the names we're familiar with date from the late 19th century, when traders and surveyors, settlers and tourists first began to arrive here. In many cases, their names replaced those used by the native people, but not always. Some islands kept their original names, such as Dawhahmah Island, which means "sister" in Ojibwa. Peggy Island is another, which, although not itself an aboriginal word, is named after a local native chief and his family who lived on the island. His name was Peg-a-me-gah-bo, later shortened to Peggy.

Many islands in Muskoka were named to reflect either physical features or the natural environment, such as birds or trees. This is apparent in Eagle Island, named for the eagles that nested in a great pine tree before the tree was destroyed by visitors. For years following the incident, one or two eagles would return looking for their nests. One Tree Island located on Fairy Lake is another example, named after, you guessed it, the fact that it only had one lone tree. Today, the name is comical rather than representative, as the island's namesake no longer exists.

Others still were named after the pioneers who homesteaded in the area, such as Browning or Eilean Gowan islands, both of which are found in Lake Muskoka. The first was named after the Browning family who were prominent in the history of Bracebridge. The second has two parts: Gowan was taken from the owner, Sir James Robert Gowan, and Eilean is the Gaelic word for island. Many people assume that the island is named after the owner's daughter, but he and his wife had no children.

Other names are given to honour a loved one or to commemorate an event. An example of an island named in commemoration is Yoho Island on Lake Joseph, originally named Yoho Cucaba Island. One of the more unusual names for an island, it, at first, seems to be a word

with no real meaning . . . and it is. Yoho Island was named by the Muskoka Club, a group of young men who were part of the early tourist explorations of Muskoka. The Muskoka Club claimed Yoho Cucaba Island as their headquarters and created the name by combining the first two letters from five of their founding members names: Young, Howlands, Cummings, Campbell and Bain. Eventually, Cucaba was dropped, but the island will forever immortalize the once prominent Muskoka Club.

The Muskoka Club was also responsible for the name of Chief's Island on Lake Joseph. James Campbell was the father of one of the members and most of the younger men looked up to him as a "staid and dignified Old Scot," commonly referring to him as Chieftain or Chief. Campbell was in love with a certain Muskoka island and after he bought it, the members of the club christened it after him.

Dead Man's Island, situated on Mary Lake, was named in memoriam to a mariner by the name of Captain Cock who was given the island as free Crown land. Bill Clark, a resident of Mary's Island, tells the story of his grandmother's sister, Emma Ladell, who eventually became the wife of the notorious mariner. Emma's family had emigrated from London and settled on the shores of Mary Lake. In the



ON THE WAY TO BROWNING ISLAND: To take a tour of Muskoka's many islands, you'll need a boat and a good map. Most islands, unfortunately, don't have signs out identifying them, so nautical chart reading will come in handy. (Photo by Bev McMullen)

summer of 1869, Emma became pregnant with Cock's baby and they were quickly married the following October, despite the 40-year age gap; she was 22 and he was 62. When asked why a girl so young would marry a man so much older, and in such a hasty fashion, Clark laughs and says, "She was in the family way!" The newlyweds built a log cabin on the island, which came to be known as Cock Island,

and had five other daughters. Captain Cock died in 1889 and specified in his will that he was to be buried on the island. After his burial, the island became known as Dead Man's Island, because, as Clark says, "It was the only island in the area where a man had been buried."

Although some island names are easily explained, oftentimes there are differing opinions as to the origins and historical significance of a name. Such is the case with Old Woman Island on Lake Muskoka. Some believe it was named for a native legend which tells the tale of a young man who carved his lover's face on the stump of a tree in her memory. Over the years, fate separated them, but the man returned to the island wishing to gaze upon her lovely face only to discover that the aging of the tree had caused the lover's appearance to become withered and creased, resembling an old woman. An alternate, less-romantic version tells the story of a man who left his older wife on the island to run off and marry a younger woman.

Flora Island, situated on Lake Joseph, was named for love of a group of six girls known as the Flora Dora Girls, who performed a music hall act in the United

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A GOOD NAME will inspire its own story. Old Woman Island on Lake Muskoka has at least two different native legends attributed to its name. In reality, neither may be true and the origin could be something entirely different. (Photo by Nancy Thompson)