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Surf Lodge

by E. Joyce White

Surf Lodge has been a major player in Gabriola's social life for more than 60 years; providing visitors and residents alike with accommodation, meals, and a magnificent panoramic view of the Strait of Georgia.

The evolution of this resort began in 1940 when Alice and "Andy" Anderson purchased a house on land belonging to Mrs. William Darling.¹ The land was all part of a larger property belonging to the Darling family. The Darlings had several summer homes built on different lots in the area.

The Andersons remodelled the house to accommodate a dining room, kitchen, and office, and they built guest cabins on the rest of the land. They named it Anderson Lodge

The Andersons operated the Lodge from 1940 until 1946. The first years were during World War II and visitors then were mainly people from the Lower Mainland and Victoria; although there were some from a little further afield, such as Alberta and California.

Philip Keatley spent summers on Gabriola during those years. He remembers, as an eleven-year old in 1940, getting a morning "job" cleaning off the shingles on the roofs. Philip adds, "obviously Mr. Anderson was friendly to the tribe of summer children who hit Gabriola each year".

According to Philip, the Lodge was a great place for the overflow of weekend visitors who came to stay with their friends at the north end. The two families of Darlings—one on each side of what was then called

"Sandy Bay"—had sons and daughters who, in the early years of World War II, were in their late 'teens and twenties. Consequently there was a large influx of beaux and friends throughout the summer. As Anderson Lodge was next to the Clarence Darlings, it was the best spot to cache the overflow; and a short row across the bay to the Harold Darlings. Young men visiting included Lister Sinclair, Pierre Berton, and Eric Nicol; names that would hardly raise an eyebrow in those days, but are familiar to succeeding generations.² In the last year of the Andersons' stewardship, the trend changed, the war was over, and the guest book showed visitors from as far away as the Punjab.

The Andersons left in 1946 and Mr. and Mrs. O. H. Evans were the next owners.³ This lasted until 1948, when Ruth Underwood, her cousin Jack Tait, Dorothy Tait, and Kenneth Deas bought the Lodge.⁴

June Wark, Ruth Underwood's sister, says that this group stayed together for about a year and then Ruth took over on her own.

June recalls helping her sister at the Lodge in the summer of 1952, the name by this time having been changed to Surf Lodge. It opened on the Victoria Day weekend (May 24) and remained open until September 30. The cabins were unheated and there was no electricity. June chuckles when she recalls how some visitors would return year after year, but others would arrive, take one look

¹ Interview with Margaret Halliday, August 1987.

² E-mail from Philip Keatley, April 2003.

³ BC & Yukon Directory, Sun Directories, 47/8.

⁴ Interview with June Wark, Oct 2002.

at the place, and go back on the next ferry. It was too rustic for them.

Two guests who did return for subsequent visits were Carleen Stewart (now Carleen Gordon) and daughter Heather, who visited the Lodge for the first time in 1950. Carleen remembers it as a wonderful time. "They lived in cabins and there was no running water but nobody cared." Carleen was a war widow and she recalls paying \$29 per week for accommodation and meals for the two of them. She says, "Ruth was a wonderful cook."⁵

The wonderful food that Carleen remembers was prepared, according to June Wark, on a double wood stove in the kitchen. There was also a smaller oil stove where water was boiled for evening tea and cookies.

Each cabin had an enamel bowl and jug for washing. The guests left the jug outside the cabin at night, and the next morning, around seven o'clock, June would knock on the cabin door saying "Good morning, hot water", and fill up the jugs.

To keep meat fresh, ice was brought over by ferry. June recalls driving the truck along the dirt roads to the ferry terminal, picking up the blocks of ice, and then driving back as fast as she could before the ice melted.

In September 1952, Ruth married Norman Nash, and between them they began developing the main lodge. June says, "They made a wonderful team." Ruth drew up the plans and Norm carried them out. Bruce, June's husband, adds, "There was nothing Norm couldn't do mechanically."

July 20, 1955, was a special day on Gabriola because that is when electricity came to the island. This then made it possible for the

Nashes to do major renovations to the Lodge; extending the dining area, introducing indoor plumbing, and adding another floor with five guest rooms. With the advent of indoor plumbing, the accommodation rating was upgraded, and they were able to get a liquor licence.

The appearance of the Lodge changed significantly too, from a white frame structure to a log building. To lift the large logs off the beach, Ruth drove the truck on to the sandstone shore and, with the aid of a derrick rigged up by Norman, they were able to haul them up. The rock fireplace in the lounge was also made from rocks hauled up from the beach.

Later the swimming pool was built. Building it was extremely labour intensive as the cement was mixed by hand in a wheelbarrow. Tennis courts and badminton courts were added later.

Bob and Connie Gray first visited Gabriola in 1959, and they recall evenings spent at the bar in the Lodge. On Fridays and Saturdays, there was piano and guitar music, and the guests sang along. At closing time, Ruth and Norman invited everyone into the main lounge where there was a roaring fire, and coffee and sandwiches "on the house". On some occasions, there was dancing that went on until two or three in the morning.

The Grays bought property on Seagirt Road, opposite Surf Lodge in 1964, and Bob remembers watching Norm picking up logs in his old army truck. Bob says, "It was incredible to watch what he could accomplish with chains, pulleys and this old truck. All of the logs used for the cocktail lounge were hauled up and put in place. Norm did the plumbing and electrical work and," Bob adds, "this was satisfactory just as long as Norm was around because he 'knew'

⁵ Telephone interview with Carleen Gordon, Spring 2003.

how it all worked, but for those that followed it was a nightmare.”

At high tide, he pumped up saltwater for the swimming pool and toilets!⁶

June kept the property until 1967, and then she sold the resort to Eric and Jo Kenny. The Kennys ran the Lodge for the next eight years, adding four more guest rooms. There were now nine guest rooms in the Lodge and a total of nine cabins, one of the original ten cabins having collapsed.

During Eric and Jo’s tenure at the Lodge, a ritual was played out after dark, known as the “skeeter hunt”. As Jo explains, “the ‘skeeter’ is a little animal that runs up a tree. It makes funny noises, first in one tree then in another.” The guests get quite excited as it wanders through the bush but, rather like the fish in Stephen Leacock’s pond, no one is ever successful in catching a “skeeter”. People returning for a second year take part in the hunt but never let “the skeeter out of the bag” on this mythical creature.

As well as “skeeter” hunts, guest activities organized by the Kennys were tennis, volleyball, archery, and fishing. Once a week, Eric Kenny took the visitors to Twin Beaches for a picnic. Jo says, “We packed a big lunch with jugs of lemonade a huge chocolate cake, and sandwiches.” Eric also brought along sports equipment. The picnic and sports day at Twin Beaches became a tradition. The Lodge opened from Easter until October and many guests would book a year ahead.

In 1975, the Kennys decided to take a second retirement. Eric’s first retirement being from the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1967 when they bought the Lodge.⁷

⁶ E-mail from Bob Gray, April 2003.

⁷ Interview with Jo Kenny, Spring 2003.

David and Margaret Halliday were the next owners. Their wish was to get away from the city, and David from his computer business. The Hallidays made no structural changes to the Lodge but they upgraded and modernized. They also turned it into a year-round facility, renting by the night or the week.

In 1983, tragedy struck when David was killed in a motor vehicle accident on the island. Margaret, who has since also died, credited the help and support of Islanders with her ability to keep the Lodge going. She provided for up to 45 guests at a time with food and accommodation.⁸

Margaret operated the Lodge for another seven years, and then sold in 1990 to a consortium consisting of Tom Marcus, Dennis and Melanie Deacon, and Ray Beckman. Brain Colby joined later. Tom Marcus says they upgraded the Lodge for fire prevention; drilled a new well; improved plumbing and electrical work; and renovated cabins and rooms. They also brought live entertainment to the Lodge and hosted weddings, family reunions, business meetings, and seminars.⁹

This group owned the Lodge for the next six years, and then sold it to the present owners Heather and Graham Mules.

Graham sums it all up by saying, “We live with a million-dollar view every day. We see a lot of marine activity; whales, sea lions, seals, otters, and eagles. Gabriola is a wonderful place, and we are privileged to live here.”

That’s a thought we islanders all share. ◇

⁸ Interview with Margaret Halliday, August 1987.

⁹ Telephone interview with Tom Marcus, Spring 2003.