

# “Starting with nothing was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

*As we drove down Kean Road, it became narrower and the houses grew further apart. We neared the home of Gerald Nadeau, a long time bush craftsman who has lived in the Ottawa Valley all his life. The glow from within the Norwegian style log home he built himself looked warm and inviting on this cold winter night.*

*by Amy Mark and Neal Watts*

“Living by the Ottawa River is my first memory. We lived on a small farm. It was just a small clearing with a log house and two stables. McQuestion Point, where we lived, was a stopping place by the river. Teams of lumbermen used to come to the old house. I think there’s only three logs left of it now. There were quite a few of these places used for overnight stops, what you would call keepovers. From Sheenborough up to our old house was one day’s trip so people would come that far and stay the first night. Then they’d go as far as the Swisha [Rapides des Joachims] which was another day.

All of these places were ports for travelling lumbermen. There was no hydro, telephone or radio at the old house. The only furnishings in the house were six chairs at a table, a box stove for night firing, a cookstove, a cupboard, three beds, two or three water pails and some pots and pans. We didn’t seem to need any more. But life was easy because we had lots of time, far more than we have now. We just lived season to season; nothing ever made

you hurry, so it wasn’t important if it was eight o’clock, nine o’clock or ten o’clock.

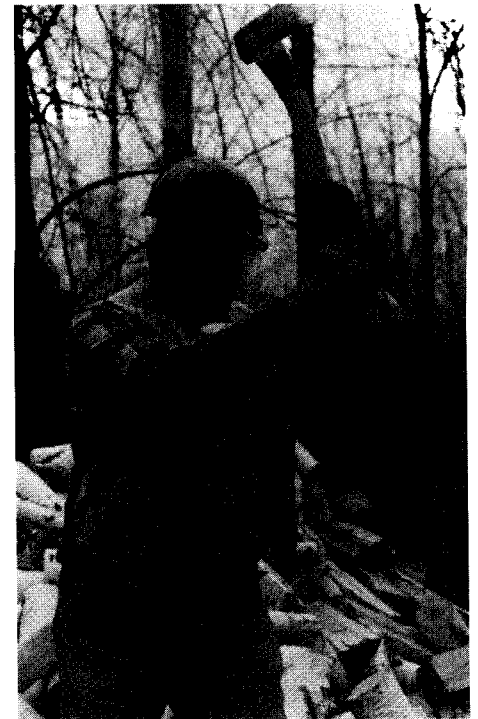
The closest house was about a mile and a half away and the roads were never plowed. In those conditions if you were able to do anything like chop wood, get water, or any of those other chores, you did them willingly.

---

## **We’d be better off to bust all the dams in the river and get our power from nuclear reactors.**

---

The dam at the Swisha has changed things so much now. It is ruining the river [Ottawa]. Since the dam was put in, the ice isn’t safe anymore. When the dam wasn’t in, the river ice was three feet thick. Now you can hardly cross the river walking. The spring water isn’t free to come down like it used to. All the sticks and floating stuff that normally went way up and lodged on the shoreline now remains in the riverbed, ferments and causes silt. The river is collecting mud, bark and vegetation. When the river had it’s normal flow the water would be



**Gerald Nadeau at work**

four feet deeper in the spring than it is now. We’d be better off to bust all the dams in the river and get our power from nuclear reactors.

We used to look after McLeod’s lighthouse which was on an island [McQuestion Point near where AECL is now]. The island was a beautiful spot. It was best in the springtime — the whole island would just be covered with dandelions as thick as they could grow and the grass would be cut down because of the cows grazing on it. You’d hear the ice come down the mountains. The gather of ice would melt in the spring and it would just keep

flowing down the mountain until finally it got so heavy that it would break away with whatever trees would come with it and it would tumble down onto the ice on the river. It would almost be like thunder. Every second spring, you'd hear it and the next day if you went to the river you'd see all the trees out on the ice where the big icicles had broken.

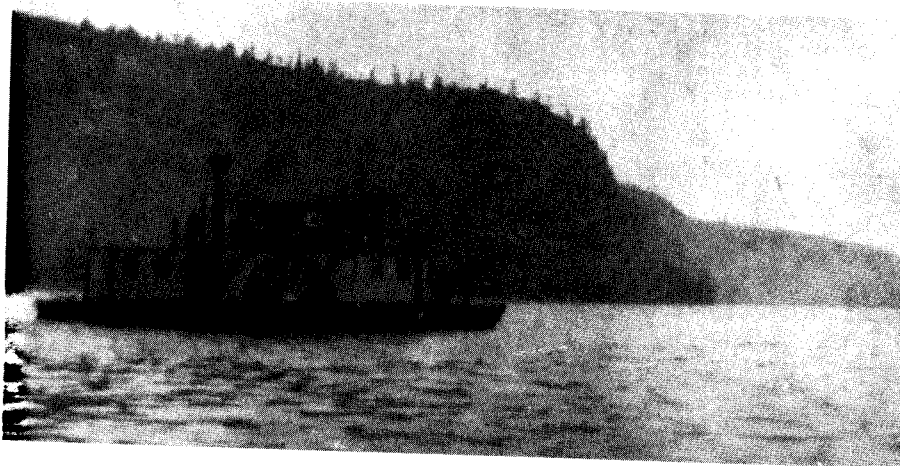
The lighthouse had a globe

---

### Some of the pike were up to five feet long.

---

about twenty inches high and it burned about two quarts of oil in twelve hours. Each evening you had to clean out the lamp glasses,



### The Pollox at McQuestion Point

trim the wick and check the wick for length. The wick was about two inches wide and there was two of them in the globe which was housed in a square glass enclosure. The two wick adjusters were side by side. If one fire went out then you always had the second one. You had to light it and then turn

the wicks up until the globe got warm and then you'd turn it down so that there was no smoke from it. The coal oil had to be carried down in the spring. It took three, forty-five gallon containers to fill the tanks in it. They used to give us twelve dollars a month for looking after the lighthouse. You had to go down every morning and blow the light out. I never went alone, because I was too young and the lightstand was quite high. You'd have to get up on something to reach it.

The lighthouse was put there because the river is quite narrow in that spot. It was built some time after the 1850's for boats towing logs. The first big boats on the

river were steam driven.

There used to be a big red river boat, an old tow boat, thirty-five feet long with the engine taken out of it. It had been set adrift and had become wedged between the lighthouse island and the river shore. It stayed there until it had rotted away. The sides

would be about three feet high and they got warm by the sun beating against it. The pike would lay against the side and sometimes you'd see eight or ten fish all beside the boat. Some of the pike were up to five feet long. We used to catch one fish each spring and that was enough for one week, as much fish as you wanted to eat.

My first job was working on the Ottawa River when I was twelve. We swept logs from Pembroke to the Hydro dam on the Ontario side and from the dam to Pembroke on the Quebec side of the river. The job I worked at one year would probably be the job that got me the following year's work. If you get used to working like that I think it's better than working on a secure job because you don't lose interest. If you don't know that you will be doing the same job next year, you give a better effort.

I never had job security — it wasn't important to me. I never

---

### The fires were always on the weekends.

---

felt I needed it. Some jobs you get into and find you're in the wrong line of work after a short time. Even though you wish you had never started, you have to finish. I didn't have many of those, luckily. It wasn't hard to find work when you're self-employed.

I was fortunate enough to meet some good people who helped an awful lot in different

ways. In one case I worked for the Federal Forestry, which would be PNFI now. The chap I worked for had sons about my age. When I went to work for him I guess he treated me like one of his own. He

had a little more patience when I started to work for him.

At the Federal Forestry we used to have a fire crew that looked after the army campgrounds and I used to be the

have to roll up all that wet hose that was all black and scattered through the fire, carry it out, dry it all, wash all the ashes off it and pack it all back in hose bags. That was very tough work. You had to



**Rapides des Joachims before the Hydro dam**



**The lighthouse at McQuestion Point**

spare fire tower man. There were two fire towers, one tower was at Racehorse near Montgomery Lake and one was at Highview. If a tower man got sick one of us would have to go work on one tower or the other. There were four of us that were on a fire crew that used to look after telephone lines to the towers, fire equipment and fire pumps. The heat would kill you, the flies were bad, you had no drinking water. The fires were always on the weekends! Always at five o'clock when you had just worked all day and you wanted to go home, the call would come in that there was a fire.

There was nothing pleasant about fires. After the fire, you'd

take a hundred feet of hose and roll it on a frame that would fit in a pack and wind it back and forth

---

**Ninety-nine times it's right... and if it wasn't right you'd look for another job.**

---

from a thing that looked like a knitting machine. It was a bigger job getting the equipment ready for the next fire than it was actually fighting most of the fires.

In the fire tower was an instrument called a range finder. When you spot a fire you turn the range finder to the direction of the fire or the smoke. Then there's another tower opposite you, and



**One of Gerald Nadeau's restoration projects.**

he also does the same thing. It can be fairly accurate — if you have no wind drift. Sometimes the smoke would stay close to the tree tops and would drift for a long piece and then rise. Those can throw you off quite a bit but ninety nine times it's right... and if it wasn't right you'd look for another job.

The fires could get as large as ten acres and could take as long as fourteen days to put out. With those fires it wasn't the size of fire that made you work so long but it was because fire burns underground before it comes up. You might water the fire and all the surrounding fire-line, come back two days later and have three or four smokes coming up in the middle where the roots of trees had burned way underground.

One time a crew cutting baselines, which were lines that

cross the forestry, made a fire at lunchtime to make tea. It was in a mossy place and about a month and a half later the fire burnt up. It had remained in the moss for that time.

The first years I worked on the tower we had no radios and our phone lines used to cross the firing ranges. You'd get to the tower and find the phone would be cut off so then you had no communication. Sometimes, 'cause we had to look after the phone lines to the towers, we'd get up on the phone poles and find that somebody had given us the wrong firing orders. They'd start to shoot and the shells would be landing not far from where you were so we had to climb down and run! Sometimes you'd come in the morning and find the phone poles were cut right off so the phone wires between two poles were

holding the center pole up. A shell had burst right under the pole. Things were not quite as safe as they could have been. I think you could make mistakes like that in those days and nobody worried. Nowadays, the safety people would come.

I've planted about seventy thousand trees. I hope to get a hundred thousand planted but I don't know if I can. Planting is quite a lengthy process and it's not cheap to replenish nature. People must harvest with more care and take less when they take the clear-cut route. Replanting is intense labour because you have to do hand-planting which is a lot of work. It would be much better to let the pine seed themselves and let nature do it's own thinning. It makes you think someone has taken a bit too much at once when they clear-cut, when you see those

trees. They represent about eighty or a hundred years of growth. Most people I have worked for wouldn't want clear-cutting done and if they did I don't think I would work for them. That's only my opinion though and professional people might have another.

I built this house myself and I've lived in it for four years. Some logs came from around here, some came from Golden Lake, some from Quebec and some came from Lake Dore. It took me two years in my spare time. I've built twelve or fourteen houses. There was only one of those houses that I had someone working with me.

My everyday work now is

my hobby. I do what I want. Restoring log buildings is the most interesting thing to me. My restoration of the Kean Farm was very rewarding. The restoration of other old buildings in the area, like King's Farm, is very important."

*Gerald Nadeau is now planning the construction of the only authentic covered bridge in the area, crossing the Chalk River beside his home. Construction begins soon.*

*When asked what he considered to be the most valuable thing he ever had, Gerald answered,*

*"Starting with nothing was the best thing that ever happened to me. Learning to make out on my*

*own, the best I could, making all the mistakes along the way."*

*Mr. Nadeau plans to live the rest of his life in the only home he's ever known — the bush. He is very conscious of conservational methods and the effects of changes on the wilderness in the area, especially the Ottawa River and the local forests.*



**Gerald Nadeau's log home**