

Looking back in time

A favorite visiting spot during periodic pilgrimages down into the Ottawa Valley is the public information centre at the Deep River plant site of the Nuclear Energy of Canada Ltd.

I have seen the displays in the centre many times. But that is not the prime reason for visiting. I always head for the viewing platform on the top of the building. From this vantage point there is a fine panorama of a section of the Ottawa River which was known as La Riviere Creuse (Deep River Reach).

This is the 24-mile stretch that extends from Rapides des Joachims at its northern extremity to High View a few miles downstream from the atomic plant. The old rivermen claimed the river was more than a mile deep along the stretch. Actual measurements made near the nuclear plant showed a depth of some 230 feet.

It was said these exaggerated depths were derived from demonstrations given for the benefit of visiting city folk to the region, by crews manning the early timber rafts on the waterway. Reputedly they would lower lengths of boom chains into the river and allow them to pile up on the bottom giving an illusion of great depth.

But enough of history, Now back to the view because that is why we came to the site. Looking down along the Ontario shore there is a long narrow point of white sand. It was named Pointe au Baptême by the early French travellers along the river.

Apparently it was customary to baptize the aboriginal peoples into the Christian faith at this point.

Almost directly across the river on the Quebec side of the river, an outcropping of the Laurentian hills rises about 1,300 above sea level and is known as Oiseau Rock. The valley people call it Weeso. That's how we said it.



Gord McCulloch
Pine Cones

And in valley vernacular Rapides des Joachims was simply Da Swisha.

Indian legend has it that an eagle swooped down and carried away a young maiden from the top of the rock, thus giving it its name.

When the passenger boat Oiseau plied the Ottawa between Pembroke and Da Swisha it would traditionally stop in front of the rock and blow its whistle to let the passengers hear the echo from the sheer rock face.

Sorry I have digressed again. But you see when I stand on that viewing platform at the nuclear plant site, I can go back in time to when I was a young boy. And it is always a treat to be young again even if it is only for a few brief moments.

And I am playing again in the sand on Pointe au Baptême with the Wallace kids from Pembroke. They had a summer cottage on the site. Or I could be listening for the first time to a radio broadcast at the cottage of J.P. Miller which was also located on the point. When the reception was marred by static which was almost always in those times, Mr. Miller would say, "The wildcats are howling."

No one plays on the point these days.

Signs proclaim a risk for trespassers, presumably from nuclear waste products. Sad, eh?

The sand was so white and clean.

We lived for a few years across the river at Oiseau Bay in the shadow of the big rock.

My father was employed by P.K. Smith, an American businessman from Painesville, Ohio, who developed a spread from an old farm site on the bay.

He demolished all the old buildings and replaced them with new structures including a big log cottage for his family, a new house for us and a barn and stable for the limited complement of livestock comprising horses, cows, and sheep, which were maintained at the place.

It was an interesting time. Everything was new and everything was modern. And it was a vast change from life on a lumber depot. Eventually we acquired the services of a private tutor because there were no schools nearby. It sounds terribly exclusive but that was common practice in those days for families living in outlandish places.

I wish we had remained there. But a restless soul and habits deeply ingrained drew my father back to his old haunts.

As a mature man I revisited the place with my son Peter and chatted with the owner. He hauled out some old pictures of our family. He was 99 years old at the time and said he and my father were the same age. My father had died 27 years previously. He died the following winter.

Years later I was invited by Joan Smith, a former Temiscaming girl who had married, to visit the place which she and her husband had purchased and used during summer months. I never managed it.

But I still go to the viewing platform to stand and stare across the river transporting myself back in time.

Someday I'll go back again to the Wesos.