

Forest Lake – A New Family Adventure

It was the summer of 1971 when we accelerated north down I-75 at a pretty good clip tugging our little utility trailer behind that was packed to the top. Ropes tied down old mattresses, bedding, food, cleaning supplies, some furniture, and a mountain of things we would find useful at our newly built cottage. Truthfully, our trailer looked more like a junk wagon on its way to the city dump. Our two young boys ages 5 and 6 in the back seat couldn't care less as they were eager to finally see their new cottage at Forest Lake.

It seemed like the ride took forever but we finally arrived. Although our cottage looked nice from the outside, it was little more than a garage as the whole inside was unfinished. All rooms were defined by 2 X 4's and nothing else. Also, because we were determined to pay cash for everything and not go into debt, we had not drilled for water yet. During the early years at Forest Lake, it was not uncommon for people to build before they had water. But in looking back, it was obvious that this was not a good idea. Even more disconcerting, we did not have any electricity as the power company went on strike that summer and new customers were not able to get hookups. All these negatives might have seemed a little daunting to two inexperienced city slickers, yet our youth helped us to overcome the many obstacles we ran into. Our boys, however, didn't seem to mind as all they could see was a huge sandbox to play in and a lake for swimming.

After sweeping mountains of sawdust out through our front and back doors, we slowly unpacked the trailer. It was a boiling hot day and trying to balance and carry mattresses that kept leaning sideways soon had us both soaking wet. Since we didn't have room in our trailer this trip for any bedroom furniture, we laid tarps on the floor and put our mattresses on top of them. This turned out to be a bad move in a cottage shared with critters yet we really had no choice.

The water problem turned out to be the hardest to live with. Lucky for us, our neighbors down the hill had a flowing well and they were willing to share their water with us. Hauling buckets of water in your trunk made a big mess, even driving slowly. The easiest yet most physically demanding way was to haul water by hand. Tom could manage two full buckets, but I could only fill mine half way. With a bucket of water under each arm, going up the hill to our cottage felt more like climbing a mountain.

After a short swim in the lake and a decent meal on a camp stove borrowed from our parents, we began to get ready for the evening. Since we had no electricity and just two small flashlights, we brought candles to place around the cottage. We quickly found out how little light is given off by candles. The extreme quiet, total darkness of the surrounding woods, heat, and relentless mosquito attacks quickly put us in the mood to jump in bed and cover our heads with sheets.

As the air cooled down, we finally fell asleep. In the middle of the night, however, I woke up to the shuffling of little feet over our heads. In a panic, I shook Tom awake. He turned on our flashlight which illuminated an audience of mice looking down at us with big beady eyes – at least I thought they were

big and beady. In desperation I pleaded with Tom to “do something.” He did! He turned around and went back to sleep. Truthfully, I have never been afraid of field mice. I always thought they were rather cute. They take on a whole different dimension, however, when scurrying around you while you lay on the floor in a pitch black room. The next morning couldn’t have come soon enough. A short time later we met our new neighbors who had just built their cottage and were also getting water at the flowing well. After exchanging stories and getting acquainted, life turned sunny again. They had a newborn baby and had to change diapers by flashlight during the night.

I admit those early years at Forest Lake were a struggle. They didn’t seem so difficult, however, because many of our neighbors were facing the same challenges. The beauty of the area plus all the fun we had doing things together as a family far outweighed any hardships we endured not having all the luxuries of our home back in the city. Today when people visit our cottage, they sometimes ask me what that little mouse is doing up on our kitchen cross beam peeking down at everyone. “Well” I say, “here’s the story!”