

Memories of Waskesiu Lodge

By Harold B. Madden

(Harold Madden (1920 – 2015) is the son of Edward G. Madden (1890 – 1957), the original owner of the Waskesiu Lodge, and Dora M. Madden (1900 – 1991). The following article was written in May of 1990 in cooperation with Harold's son.)

Prior to the Waskesiu area becoming a national park in 1927, we had been going there for four or five years. It used to take a minimum of two or three days. To make it from Prince Albert to Waskesiu, depending on the weather and road conditions. The only way you could get up there was by following the old Indian wagon trails which were west of the highway built prior to the opening of the park.

The year before the official opening, they built a highway into the park. The highway was all gravel right from Prince Albert up to Waskesiu – crooked, narrow and like all gravel highways, it was rough. But the trip up there wasn't too bad because it ran seventy or eighty miles from Prince Albert, which was a two and a half to three hour drive. Now it's altogether different again.

The year prior to the opening of the opening of the park, Dad was approached due to the fact we were acquainted with the area. There needed to be some kind of facilities to receive the public when they arrived. He was approached by the Superintendent of what was going to be the park through the Board of Trade in Prince Albert about having some form of business put up there to accommodate the public

The Lodge was built out of logs. It was built mostly by Metis and Natives, but they couldn't follow a blueprint. At that time, the blueprints had to be authorized through the parks division in Banff or Jasper before they were finally okayed in Ottawa.

It included rooms, a dance hall, restaurant, groceries, barbershop and the post office. We also had camp equipment for rent including tents, beds, stoves, and blankets. We eventually had one hundred and one tents.

Later on, during the first year, the verandah on the east side of the grocery store was enclosed. The rest of the verandah was all glassed in one or two years after that. The dining area was eventually put in the west verandah instead of the main rotunda which was also the dance hall.

Originally, we opened up on the twenty-fourth of May and closed up by the end of September. Eventually, we opened up the lodge a little bit later, closer to July 1st, and by the first weekend of September it was closed officially, although Mom used to stay up there quite late with some of the other staff. Nobody was ever turned away.

Throughout the whole summer, bears were plentiful. Of course, due to the way garbage was handled in those days, they were in every garbage can right behind the place and didn't think twice

of knocking a screen through and coming right into the kitchen if they smelled food. So there were different times they entered the kitchen area to obtain food. If you happened to have set a tent up any place, you had to be careful it wasn't in one of their walkways because they would just walk in one side and out the other side. That even happened down on the main campground where it was laid out as a campground. Everybody fed the bears.

There were deer. In the early days up there, you didn't have power, so anything kept cold, even ice cream, was kept cold by ice. You had to pack your ice cream in salt with ice tamped around it. When you drained that, all the water that came out of there was salty. The deer and all the wild animals would come up to that general area, where that water would run off, as a salt lick. There were always deer around there. There were also moose and elk.

Then, of course, before the tourists came in and after the tourists left, the foxes would come in. There wouldn't be too many of them when there were masses of tourists, but when there were just a few individuals, they would come around all the time.

You always had a major problem with squirrels. They could find any kind of hole to get into the place and, of course, if stuff wasn't fully protected, they would stock themselves up on groceries.

One time, we had a cook whose specialty was tarts. He was making these tarts and looked around and thought there were an awful lot missing. He started looking around. Here the squirrels had been coming in when he wasn't looking, grabbed the tarts, ran up the log walls, and up to the open beams in the kitchen. They had them all stacked up. There were dozens of them up there.

In the fall of the year, we had to take all the bedding, mattresses and stuff like that and stack them up. For the mattresses, we had this wire cage that we used to put over top of them. Pillows and blankets were stored in our glass show cases in the store to keep them from the squirrels and mice that would come in during the winter months. Tents had to be protected as well.

In the early years up there, I had to make sure the wood was in and the slops were emptied. Before the water system was installed, the water had to be carried up from the lake itself. I had to wash the windows. When you figured inside and out, I had 3,300 panes of glass to wash.

People didn't always return tents when they were vacant. When it was the due date for a tent to be returned, I had to go down to the campground and see that it was empty. If it was and the people weren't there, I had to take it down, roll it up and carry it all the way up to the lodge. When somebody came and wanted a tent, I had to go with them down to the campground, show them where to camp and how to set up a tent.

When I was in grade seven, I started managing the place. I had to do the bookkeeping, the ordering, the reservations, assign work to the staff, have meetings with the park Board of Trade and Park Superintendent, and make sure all payments were made.

Before that, Mom had help in managing the Lodge.

In 1930, it was rented to C. M. Smith because that was the year that Grandmother was ill with cancer and we went down to Kansas.

Then Dad hired A. E. McKee to help manage it for two or three years. After he left and went to work for Sanderson's, that's when I started managing it. Dad was busy with the grain elevator in the city and only came up on weekends.

At first, I only came up on weekends while school was in session and during the summer. When I started managing the place, I went up right after exams and started school a month late in the fall.

When you were working, you didn't have much time for fun. The hours were long because people would come in all hours of the night, so you had to be available when they came and then you worked all day. In the slack part of the season, you went swimming, fishing and hiking. There was good fishing in that country in those days.

In about 1934 – 1935, W. V. Magee had a little place just north of Prince Albert where he was making little horned candlesticks and things like that. Dad hired him to make some things. One thing led to another and so in a period of a year, they finally decided to build some chairs, a settee, a loveseat and a chesterfield. Mom went out and bought enough upholstery for the whole works. I think he made the turtle as a straight gift.

We stopped operating the lodge at the end of the season in 1940 due to the war.

About early spring of 1941, there was an elementary training school in Prince Albert which had a crew of New Zealanders in training. The ice was out of the lake early that year. They wanted to go for leave up to Waskesiu so I was contacted. I went up on my leave and opened it up long enough for them to have their big holiday and recreation up there. That was pretty close to a week.

Late in the beginning of the 1941 season, Wilkinsons decided to rent it and open it up since some of them were not of draft age. In the years that I had operated it, Vern Wilkinson had worked for me for two seasons. Naturally, he became interested in it. Then towards the last couple of years of the war, it wasn't operated in the summertime because the army had leased it for winter manoeuvres. It was sold before the season in 1945 after I came back from overseas.

Although we had nothing to do with the lodge after that, Dad brought Aunt Monica, Uncle Emmett, Louella and Edward Zehnder up there to see the lodge when they came up from Kansas to visit one year in the 1950s.

The lodge was resold once or twice after that. Then it burned down in the early 1970s. In 1974, all that was left was the chimney. There's a new building up there now.

(Edmonton, Alberta; May 1990)