

# Bonded for Life

BY JUDY OWEN

Photos by Merlin Braun

**I**t may have happened 79 years ago, but Jeanette Colantoni can still remember some details.

She had turned one years old in the spring of 1932 and made her second visit to her grandparents' cottage on the Isle of Pines in Lake of the Woods.

Her grandmother, Sara Bradburn, marked the occasion with an event that would literally cement her life-long connection to the island.

At the top of granite rock stairs leading up from the dock was a birch archway and sign with the words Isle of Pines and Bradburn. A concrete step was poured under the sign and Bradburn picked up the toddler.

"I remember being lifted up and I remember the magic of setting my little feet down in that wet cement and giggling," Colantoni says.

"It was like a magical moment to me. I don't know why, but it just was.

"And then granny took a big construction nail and put in the initials SSB and then my initials SJS. Then she put in some pennies.

"I became so connected with the island. I mean, that was it, we were bonded for life."

Her grandmother – they share the same first name – also put one of her own footprints in the cement. The sign rotted years ago, but the faint impressions of the footprints can still be seen.



Top: Jeanette's infant footprint.

H.H. Bradburn bought the Isle of Pines in 1903.

A big boathouse was built in 1916 to park the Big Gudahi, a 34-foot Ditchburn. The Little Gudahi later got its own smaller house.

Sara Bradburn (far right) makes cabbage hats for herself and children Thelma, Marjorie and Vernal.





Colantoni's decades of memories of the island – she's only missed two summers since she was an infant and is now its sole owner – are a glimpse back in time to an era and lifestyle far removed from modern-day cottaging.

It was back in 1903 when her grandfather, Hector Halbertram Bradburn (better known as H.H. Bradburn), wanted to find a place where his family could escape the hot summer days in Winnipeg.

One of the founders of what would become Texaco Canada Ltd., Bradburn had heard of Lake of the Woods through a friend and went out in a rowboat with a real estate agent to look at the property in Rat Portage Bay, Colantoni says.

After pulling up on shore, he scouted the four-acre island with its towering pine and birch trees. Shaped as a figure eight, the island has two beaches, one of the east side and another on the west. He figured the sandy spots would supply day-long fun for their three children, Thelma, 15, Vernal, 10, and three-month-old Marjorie, Colantoni's mother.

Although he tried to haggle on the asking price, he agreed to pay the then-princely sum of \$1,000. With the deal done, he headed back to Kenora, which nowadays is about a seven-minute ride in a modern-day boat.

Construction started that summer and it was no small feat.

"My grandmother arrived at Isle of Pines on a lovely sunny day with the children, a lady to help out, 13 husky carpenters, lumber and all the building materials, plus tents and a large woodstove that was deposited down on shore," Colantoni says of the story often told to her.

The first buildings that went up were of a practical nature – outhouses.

Soon it was time for Bradburn to return to Winnipeg for work, with the promise he'd be back in a week.

As his boat drifted away, Sara stood on the shore and waved goodbye with a white handkerchief – a farewell that's become a family tradition whenever anyone leaves the island.

It's also become a ritual for Colantoni whenever the MS Kenora tour boat makes its daily pass by the island.

"The MS Kenora toots its big horn and I ring a huge brass school bell," she says with a laugh.

"Everyone runs to one side of the boat – it's really quite funny – and everybody goes, 'There's the crazy lady waving the white handkerchief,' and they all wave back to me with Kleenex.

"And then the man on the tour boat points out the eagle nest on the island and everyone takes pictures."

Called "the big house," the main 2,500-square-foot cottage was built with a wrap-around verandah, initially only screened, but later glassed-in with hundreds of panes.

"Eight hundred. I've painted them – twice," she says.

She was planning a third go-round in the summer, as she doesn't have the luxury of servants like during the island's heydays. A family friend, Owen Pirre, stays on the island and helps her out.

The two-storey cottage with its then-rare plaster walls has four bedrooms upstairs, including a dressing area off the master bedroom that's part of the top level of a turret.

The main floor includes a kitchen, breakfast room, dining room, living room featuring a stone fireplace (her grandmother would visit in the winter) and a music room with a piano that's on the bottom level of the turret.



Jeanette Colantoni has a ritual of ringing a school bell and waving a white hankie to passengers on the MS Kenora. She and family friend Owen Pirre are prepping a totem for re-painting.



The grounds – which saw more than 20 trees fall during this past July’s tornado – include a smaller cottage called the “honeymoon cabin,” built for Colantoni’s mother and father, Marjorie and Charles Spencer.

A big boathouse was built in 1916 for a 34-foot Ditchburn boat called the Big Gudahi. A smaller boathouse was constructed later for



the Little Gudahi. Servants’ quarters were above both boathouses.

There was also a pump house, ice house and the “Chinaman’s cabin” for the former Chinese cook, which is now a cat house.

One stunning landmark on the island is an authentic nine-metre (30-foot) totem pole a friend of the Bradburns had shipped from B.C. as a gift. It sat on a point overlooking the main dock, but was taken down so Colantoni could repaint it.

Her grandmother’s creativity also blossomed on the grounds, with winding paths and rock gardens tended by two full-time gardeners. One garden featured broken china and glassware and there was also a wishing well with a solid brass train bell hanging above it from a pole. (The bell is now packed away.)

A tennis court was added for Vernal, but after he was killed in a car accident in 1935 Sara was so grief-stricken she had it taken down. A garden and log playhouse for Colantoni was built on the same spot, but the playhouse was stolen a number of years ago.

Colantoni and her parents had moved to California just before her seventh birthday so her father could pursue his singing career, but the yearly trips to the island continued.

The last leg to Kenora from Winnipeg was often made in her grandparents’ big, black sedan – complete with a chauffeur. Halfway to Kenora, they’d turn off the two-lane highway to have a picnic.

“Granny would throw down the blanket

and we’d sit out there,” Colantoni says.

“She always brought her small victrola and she’d wind it up and put the records on and play music. We’d all have cucumber sandwiches and butter tarts and fruit tarts.

“Then we’d pack up the whole thing and we’d head down to Kenora. It was a real excursion. It was not just packing up the car and you were there in two and a half hours.”

The fun of the four-hour journey was just part of grandmother’s lively nature, she says.

The island was the site of many parties, with women wearing chiffon dresses and men their suits. There were also costume parties, including one where Japanese lanterns powered by Delco batteries were hung in a ravine in the middle of the island. Guests wore kimonos and young girls carried platters of food down to tables.

“It was like being at Disney World,” she says, adding power came to the island in the 1960s.

The only summers she’s missed was the year there was a polio outbreak in Winnipeg and 1958 when her daughter, Shawn, was born. Son Christian was born in 1974.

Her grandmother died in 1949 of kidney failure. She’d become ill on the island and went into a coma. Her staff got her to Kenora’s hospital, where Colantoni, her mother and aunt Thelma arrived shortly after her death. H.H. Bradburn remarried and died of old age in 1958.

The death of Colantoni’s husband Rodney in January 2010 – they were married 60 years – hasn’t stopped her yearly trips from California to the Isle of Pines.

“It’s my life,” she says. “I have sacrificed so much to keep that island afloat. In my life I could have sold it and lived royally for the rest of my life on millions of dollars, but I cannot do that to my children.

“The greatest gift I can give my children is the inheritance of this special place in all our lives.”

She’s even written a book on the island’s history and is looking for a publisher.

“Unless you have lived it and been part of it, it’s probably just something you pass in a boat and you don’t realize the monumental history that’s imbedded in the buildings, the trees ...”

Another chapter in its history was going to be written in late August, as Christian planned to introduce his one-year-old daughter, Ciaya, to the island for the first time.

“This will be the fifth generation coming to the lake,” Colantoni proudly says.

“The first thing I want to do is pour some wet cement and put her little footprints in it and get a large construction nail and put in her name and date.

“Immediately, I want her to be bonded to the island.” **C**

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