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Who cares about Purk's Place? A lot of people.

Who'd have guessed months ago that a bait and fishing supplies business on Bala Bay would become one of the hottest items on Muskoka's political agenda?

I'm talking about Purk's Place, which has been supplying cottagers, tourists and locals with fishing items for as long as I can remember. Located just above Bala's north falls on Bala Bay, it is one of our local landmarks.

It may also soon disappear. If plans proceed for a provincially-mandated hydroelectric plant at the north falls, Purk's Place may not be at its current location one year from now.

Folks around Bala are just waking to the fact that a giant water intake pipe may change everything on the falls side of Purk's Place. It all hinges on a proposal to be voted on by Muskoka District Council on Oct. 14. The intake pipe would require blasting a 30-by-45-foot channel through Muskoka rock.

Defenders of the proposal say that putting the water intake on that side of the highway is the best of two alternatives. Putting it on the Moon River side, they say, would destroy the view for boaters and anyone living on the river. Far better to put it where only "an old bait shop" is affected, they argue.



This old swing-through door on the upper floor of Purk's Place was once used to receive goods from halted CPR trains.

Who cares about Purk's Place?



Purk's Place traces its history back to Sam Hurling who ran a Bala Bay boat livery and ice cream place in the 1890s.

Every time I hear that argument, I wish that we could bring all the previous owners of Purk's Place back to life for just one day to enter the debate.

I would start with Sam Hurling, one of the most colourful characters in Bala's history. In the 1890s, he owned an ice cream place and boat livery on Bala Bay. Bala's founder, Thomas Burgess, was still alive back then.

Sam's world fell apart in 1906 when more than 1,000 workers arrived in Bala to complete a CPR line from Toronto. Sam's boat livery was in the way, so it had to go. Some say the front of the present Purk's Place is that old building, or part of it.

Sam accepted compensation and moved the ice cream side of his business and his own resi-

dence to the Bala Falls Road where the Kee to Bala now stands. His business later became Langdon's Ice Cream Parlour, which was bought in 1929 by a young Bracebridge guy called Gerry Dunn. The rest is history.

The next owner of the relocated boat livery (where Purk's Place now sits on CPR-leased land) was John Hamill, a highly respected local contractor. Tourist booklets of the time show Hamill renting canoes and rowboats for years to tourists and cottagers.

Hamill was followed by George Adams, a Muskoka character if there ever was one. The bass who lived under his docks trusted him so much that he was able to feed them worms by hand. Adams also became famous for the growing pile of empty booze bottles at the



Bill Purkis is fascinated by the pencilled markings and instructions left on the walls of his old building by former owners. The building is almost a museum.

end of his docks.

The next owner of the boat livery was Mack Cunningham, one of Muskoka's best boat builders. He was also the genius who showed Gerry Dunn how to build his new pavilion in the winter of 1941-42. Cunningham built wood trusses that were able to carry the load of 75-foot wooden beams, a feat never before done in Canada.

Starting with Sam Hurling, every one of the owners I have mentioned so far was a strong Muskoka character. So who could follow Mack Cunningham?

Cunningham's successor was a Toronto newspaperman and Moon River cottager who bought the boat livery in the 1970s. I'm talking about Tom Purkis, whose booming voice and strong personality put him in the same mould as Sam Hurling and all the other previous owners.

I first knew Tom Purkis by reputation as the top travel ad salesman at the *Globe and Mail*. I was a reporter at the *Toronto Telegram*, and I well remember the day in the 1960s when we heard that our publisher, John Bassett, had talked Purkis into joining our newspaper. It was regarded as a major coup.

The *Toronto Telegram* ceased publishing in October, 1971. Soon after that, I was astounded, as a Bala cottager, to hear that Tom Purkis had just bought the old Cunningham boat livery. A top guy like Tom had many options open to him in advertising and publishing. Instead, he opted to start his own summer

business just up the river from the cottage that he and his wife Dorothy had loved for many years.

It didn't take Tom long to make Purk's Place one of the most prominent landmarks in Muskoka. A logo showing Tom's rugged profile became a familiar sight everywhere. An annual bass fishing contest became a must-entry for hundreds of local fishing enthusiasts.

Purk died in 1983, but his son Bill has more than lived up to his dad's image. When Bill Purkis speaks, you can hear him a block away – just like his dad. He and his wife Jennifer have expanded Purk's Place into a booming summer business.

Purk's Place is more than a business. Look inside and you will see old Bala everywhere. On one wall near the roof I saw this week a swing-open door where goods were once passed through from halted CPR trains. On that door were penciled marks with George Adams's signature below. Was George counting passing trains or empty bottles in the bay?

Contrary to what I have heard in the political debate, we are not just talking about an "old bait shop." Purk's Place is very likely the oldest commercial building still standing in Bala.

Does anyone in Bala care what happens to the old building where George Adam once fed his pet bass? I suspect the number is higher than our elected representatives suspect. Stay tuned.

P.S. The number of people who have signed a petition asking that the hydro-electric plant project be halted at Bala's north falls is now far above 1,000 and still growing. That is astounding for a town of just over 500.

REMEMBERING LMM:

Recent publicity about the tragic suicide of the author of *Anne of Green Gables* has led to a rush of visitors from the Golden Horseshoe to Bala's Museum to talk about the life and writings of beloved Lucy Maud Montgomery. We are reassuring them that the museum will be open 1-4 p.m. every Saturday and Sunday until the end of the Cranberry Festival. Groups wanting special tours can also arrange other days. Call 705-762-5876.