



Murray Bay

This Canadian Gem is its Own Legend

Judy Carmack Bross

The invigorating air of Murray Bay exhilarates like champagne without the effects the morning after.—PRESIDENT WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT

“Newport of the North” seems like an unlikely name for a sleepy town nestled on the shores of the St. Lawrence River in French-speaking Quebec, but not for some of the most legendary families of the Gilded Age in both the United States and Canada, who spent splendid summers there—and continue to do so. Iconic names like Taft, Tiffany, Sedgwick, Minturn, Vanderbilt, Harlan, Cabot and Fish occupied magnificent summer villas that they called cottages, but that was where resemblance to Newport ended.

During the 1890s, prominent families chose Murray Bay for its rustic appeal, and several descendants of those families return today for many of the same reasons. They continue to fish for trout in the streams of the region known as Charlevoix; golf at one of the oldest golf clubs in North America, where President Taft was also president; decorate their homes with handmade local textiles; and cultivate bountiful gardens.

The first summer residents arrived by large wooden paddle wheelers from Montreal and Quebec City to the dock at what was called Pointe-au-Pic, because the

roads were dirt until the mid-20th century. The French name of La Malbaie, used then for the contiguous town, now applies to Point-au-Pic as well, and there is a certain pride that the name Murray Bay cannot be found on any map. Tommy Hoopes, a Murray Bay historian and collector of local art and memorabilia, observed: “Murray Bay, like Nirvana, is not so much a place as a state of mind; the difficulty is not to locate it, but to attain it.”

Noted photographer Peter Taft, grandson of the 27th President, commented recently: “I have probably missed just one or two summers in the last 81 years. From the

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start, the Murray Bay summer community of families socialized as families, with two or three generations commingling on almost all activities, including picnics, sports, fishing, and dinner parties. This ability to cross generations has served all of us well for the rest of our lives, wherever we have resided.”

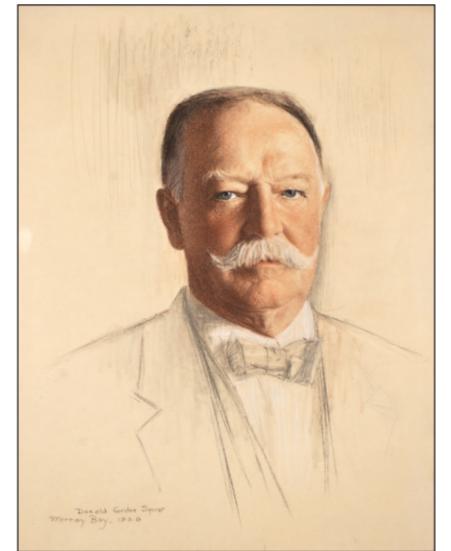
For many years, parents planned scavenger hunts that often began at the Murray Bay Golf Club. Today, an infamous water fight at a wooden fortress set behind a stately summer mansion once used for a Canadian television series, pits adults against children, each armed with buckets of water and hundreds of water balloons. A large August picnic at a Norman cottage features egg tosses and tug of war for the kids, and accordion music with rosé wine and lots of tourtière, a Quebecois meat pie, for adults.

Todd Schwebel, noted interior designer and owner of an historic Murray Bay villa and garden, declared: “With one fortunate

visit 25 years ago I became beguiled by this enchanted place! Mythical Brigadoon comes to life in Murray Bay, a privileged place where time stands still indeed.”

Although Murray Bay didn’t have the formality of Newport, early summer residents might change five times a day, with elaborate formal attire commanded for evenings spent in the homes of friends. To this day, it is cocktail parties followed by dinner in homes rather than restaurants that residents choose, always with the caveat to bring along your houseguests.

And what houseguests they were! Antoine de Saint-Exupery wrote two chapters of *The Little Prince* while visiting friends. A wealth of movie stars such as Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin landed in small planes close to the estate of Hearst executive Richard Berlin and his glamorous wife, Honey. The Reverend Endicott Peabody, founder and headmaster of Groton School, visited his daughter Helen, who married Robert Minturn Sedgwick.



Opposite: A storm brews over La Malbaie.

Above: This drawing of William Howard Taft has a special place in the home of Peter Taft.

Below: Reeve Schley painting at the Trou, one of the favorite picnic spots on the Murray River.



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Above: One of Murray Bay's grand houses, resplendent in the morning sun.

Below: Peter Taft and friend are all smiles after a successful day of fishing.

Andy Warhol's legendary star Edie Sedgwick visited relatives there. Mary Todd Lincoln, by then a widow, who spoke beautiful French, asked to be totally alone when she stayed at the Duberger Hotel in 1873.

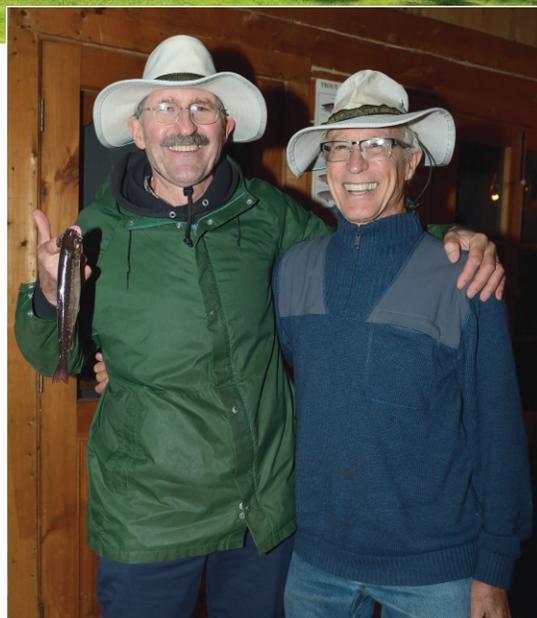
Life was ever peaceful and restorative there, as well as invigorating. President Taft, who first came to Murray Bay in 1892 following a wedding at Niagara Falls, wrote about his time there to Theodore Roosevelt in 1906: "I feel a boyish feeling—I'd like to jump and shout."

The Tafts lured Supreme Court justice John Marshall Harlan and his wife, Malvina, to Murray Bay in the late 1890s with the promise not only of the area's beauty but also of reasonable prices and the ability to hire excellent staff. Today his descendent, Edith de Montebello, and her husband Philippe, who headed the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, summer in the house Justice Harlan built.

From the fields of wild lupines to the lilacs and peonies in June, to the towering delphinium of July and the phlox and golden globes of August, gardens remain a top Murray Bay priority. Le Quatre Vents is considered by many to be the finest garden in North America.

Just as in the old days, painters and artists still capture Murray Bay vistas. Reeve Schley paints on the banks of the St. Lawrence while wife Georgie and friends enjoy picnics on the rocks. His recent showing of Murray Bay scenes was a sold-out success at Geary Gallery in New York, with the opening attended by many Murray Bay friends. The Schleys reside next to "the Studio," where Therese McCagg used to sketch other artists, including photographer Peter Taft and watercolorist Mac Mackay, descendent of Alexander Mackay, the Murray Bay Protestant Church's first minister.

In its earliest days families arrived with steamer trunks filled for four months of fun. Although families are staying now



for a month or even as little as two weeks, the new ability to work remotely from any location may reverse this trend. Some of the old homes, winterized by families from Quebec City, just two hours away, are enjoyed year-round for skiing in the nearby Laurentian Mountains, which turn a spectacular shade of purple at dusk. But it is in the summer that generations of residents and guests echo the words of author John Rathbone Oliver: "Of all the places I have gone, I have never known a place like this." 

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