

MOVING NATURES: Mobility and the Environment in Canadian History Edited by Ben Bradley, Jay Young, and Colin M. Coates

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Supply Networks in the Age of Steamboat Navigation: Lakeside Mobility in Muskoka, Ontario, 1880–1930

Andrew Watson

Around 1880, Francis Forge had a novel idea. Witness to a growing number of visitors from the city eager to spend part of their summer embracing nature in Ontario's northern wilderness, Forge recognized the perfect opportunity to market local farm products. Loading his rowboat with fresh foods bought and bartered from neighbouring farmers, along with whatever his own household had to sell, Forge rowed along the shore of Lake Rosseau selling what he could to tourists and cottagers. According to Seymour Penson, the son of another Lake Rosseau settler, Forge was "a kind of distributing agent. He bought from the settlers, for he could not raise nearly all that he could sell. And he sold to the islanders at almost any price that he liked to ask."¹ Instead of more rigorous farming, Forge preferred tending a few market gardens, raising chickens and sheep, and bartering with his neighbours for produce and dairy to sell. By all accounts, Forge was the first person in Ontario's

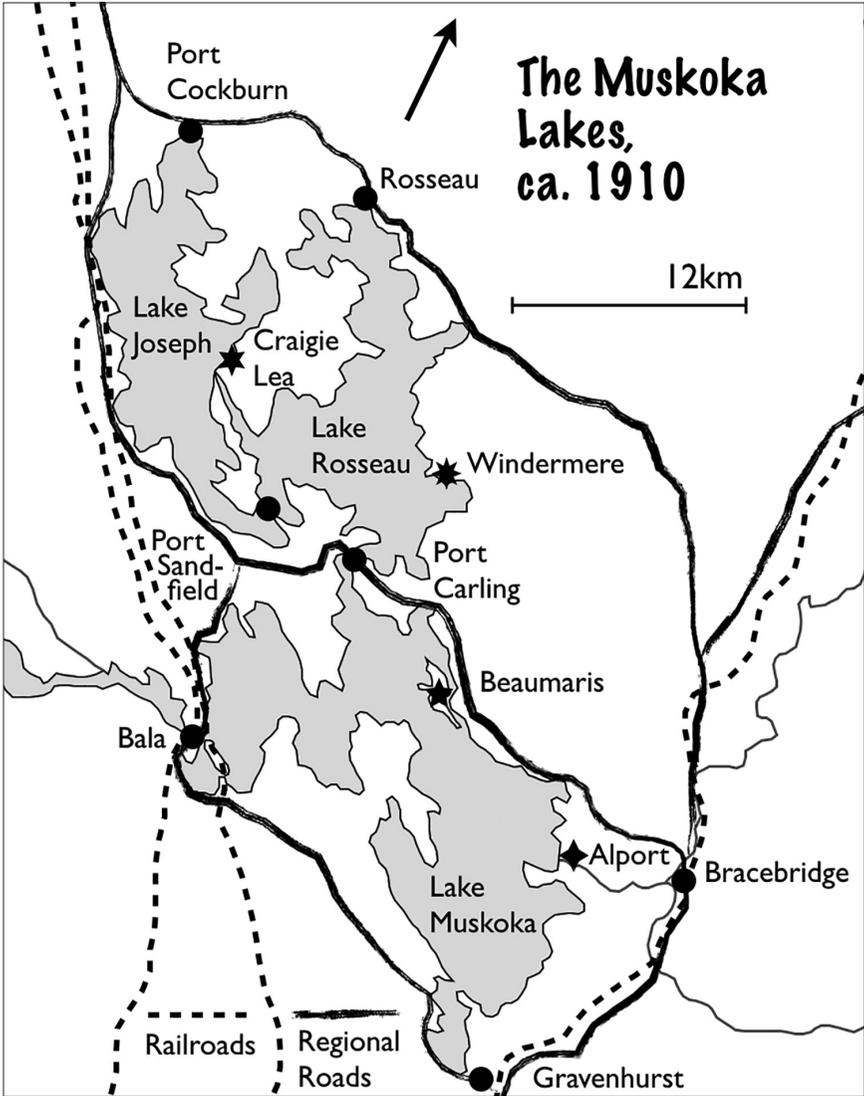


FIGURE 3.1. Ontario's Muskoka region, c. 1910. Map by author.

Muskoka region to realize the potential of linking the needs of tourists on isolated islands with the surplus of farmers along the shoreline. Over the next thirty years, other settlers and village merchants introduced

supply boats—including large, steam-powered vessels outfitted to carry a wide variety of provisions, supplies, and groceries, which functioned as extensions of their farms or general stores—and these quickly became fixtures of Muskoka's cultural landscape and local economy.

Supply boats in Muskoka offer a new perspective on the study of mobility. Historians often understand mobility as movement between and past places in a fixed landscape. This approach is perhaps most pronounced in the historiography of the North American railroad, where people and commodities are objects of mobility.² These studies treat places in the landscape as changing and dynamic, but also fixed, relative to people and things that are mobile. Likewise, the Canadian historiography linked to the staples thesis applies mobility to people and things, not *places*, in the landscape.³ In the case of Muskoka's local economy, however, mobility unfolded differently during the summer months in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a number of Canadian rural historians—including Douglas McCalla, Béatrice Craig, and Elizabeth Mancke—have shown, rural general stores were important sites for local market activity.⁴ Muskoka's supply boats acted as extensions of these specific places and attained a degree of mobility relative to their local environments, while individual household members remained fixed. Although supply boats made these farmers and merchants somewhat distinct, their role in the local economy and society was much the same as it had been throughout nineteenth-century Canada. In the Muskoka setting, however, a major segment of the local economy depended on sites of exchange travelling to consumers rather than consumers travelling to sites of exchange.⁵ Understanding why this unusual pattern of exchange developed in Muskoka is, as Tom McCarthy argues, what makes the study of mobility so useful and important.⁶ Supply boats were specialized vehicles that provided locally based, seasonal solutions to problems of economic exchange. On the one hand, farmers and merchants gained access to a steady, high-value, cash market for their products and goods. On the other hand, cottagers and some year-round residents easily acquired fresh foods and supplies that otherwise would have involved long, arduous trips by rowboat or road. By effectively replacing all the personal summertime energies required to mobilize customers on a regular basis,

supply boats represented a much more ordered system of exchange and distribution. These features of the supply boat network remained stable until the 1910s, when the internal combustion engine began to replace individual somatic energy and released household consumption from the limitations inherent in collective forms of lakeside exchange.

Muskoka supply boats also provide an interesting opportunity to explore sustainability in the past. As a concept, “sustainability” encompasses environmental, economic, and social categories of analysis.⁷ Yet it is an axiom without precision as an historical tool. Generally, the word sustainability implies stasis, or an unchanging condition. It is, therefore, more useful to define sustainability as the *potential* for stability while acknowledging that conditions are ever-changing. Thus, in applying a concept like sustainability to the study of the past, it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that nothing is *completely* sustainable, only *more* or *less* sustainable. In other words, the sustainability of relationships and arrangements between humans and their environment can only be assessed over time and in relation to one another.⁸ Supply boats were not completely sustainable, but the relationships and arrangements they made possible were more sustainable than what eventually replaced them, as well as many of the alternatives available at the time. From an environmental standpoint, supply boats utilized cordwood as a renewable and local source of fuel and encouraged consumption of local farm products. From an economic standpoint, they facilitated local exchange and seasonal markets for year-round residents. And from a social standpoint, they more fairly distributed fresh foods around the lakes and provided a space where various community members congregated. Without supply boats, Muskoka’s local environment could not have been made to support as many people, local exchange would have been less extensive, and fewer households would have interacted socially. As supply boats became increasingly redundant in the 1920s, greater quantities of nonrenewable fuels were used to move supplies on the lake, shoreline environments experienced increased ecological pressures from disaggregated personal mobilities, and neighbouring households became socially atomized. Using the concept of sustainability in this way helps to identify mobility features of past societies that better harmonized environment, economy, and society.

Supply boats were entirely seasonal. The navigation season generally lasted from the start of May, when the ice went out, to the start of December, when the lakes began to freeze over. But supply boats relied on the concentration of shoreline residents, both tourists and cottagers. And since the tourism/cottage season generally lasted from mid-June until the start of September, supply boats did most of their business during the warmest ten to twelve weeks of the year. Supply boats also provided mobility solutions during the spring and fall, but no collective form of supply network existed during the winter months. During the winter, sites of exchange once again became fixed and demanded that consumers provide their own mobility solutions to access supplies.⁹ The collective supply network represented by the supply boat broke down into individualized mobility solutions, including trips on foot and by horse and sleigh. Overland routes became much more important during the winter, and frozen water provided time-saving routes across the lakes comparable to the function served by open water for boats during the summer. But in contrast to the wintertime when the consumers themselves made the trips, during the summer the sites of exchange moved across the lakes.

The Rise of Supply Boats

The Muskoka region is centred on the watershed of the Muskoka River, which ties together the upper lakes near Huntsville, the lower lakes west of Bracebridge, and several smaller tributary lakes and streams. Located at the southern edge of the Canadian Shield, approximately 150 kilometres north of Toronto, Muskoka was colonized by Eurocanadians after 1850 when several Anishinaabeg First Nations signed the Robinson-Huron Treaty with the British Crown. Although colonization roads were built during the 1850s, and expanded and improved thereafter, Muskoka's waterways provided the primary corridors of human mobility during this period. Aboriginal peoples travelled seasonally by water between hunting and trapping territories in Muskoka and coastal fishing areas on Lake Simcoe, Lake Couchiching, and Georgian Bay.¹⁰ During and after non-Native resettlement, lakes and rivers continued to serve as transportation corridors. Human

mobility on the water depended on muscle power until the region's first steamboat was launched on Lake Muskoka in 1866. Less than ten years later, public works projects made the three lower lakes (Muskoka, Rosseau, and Joseph) internavigable, and dams maintained constant water levels. Steamboats connected several ports of call, making it easier to move people, material, and communications across the region. Pockets of arable soil made the east side of Lake Muskoka and Lake Rosseau capable of supporting mixed farming, but rocky outcroppings of granite, swampy lowlands, and mainly thin, acidic, poorly drained soils characterized much of Muskoka. Most general stores were also located on the east side of the lakes, where towns were closest to the Muskoka Road and, later, the railway from Toronto. For households situated around the lower lakes, mobility on water was the most reliable way to access places along the eastern shore.

Muskoka's first tourists arrived very soon after the region was opened for resettlement. As Patricia Jasen has shown, tourists in Ontario during the late nineteenth century sought escape from dirty, overcrowded cities in the summer.¹¹ In the hopes of rejuvenating their bodies and spirits, one of the many destinations tourists chose was the "wilderness" of Muskoka. In July 1860, James Bain and John Campbell of Toronto became Muskoka's first tourists. They returned two years later, bringing friends and enough provisions to last them several weeks.¹² Members of the Muskoka Club—as they called themselves—continued to return and grew in numbers. Although they consumed fish from the lake and huckleberries from onshore, for several years they brought most of their supplies with them. In 1871, Muskoka's first tourists also became Muskoka's first cottagers, when Campbell bought a remote island on Lake Joseph. Most cottage sites were unsuitable for farming, presented serious challenges to year-round living, and impeded mobility, so few were surveyed or settled by pioneers. Thus, visitors from the city easily purchased islands from the Crown, usually for just one dollar per acre.¹³ The same features that made such islands unsuitable for year-round residents made them perfect for cottagers seeking the privacy of undisturbed, rugged shorelines.

Throughout the 1870s and much of the 1880s, most visitors lived fairly minimalist lifestyles in Muskoka; they brought most of what they

consumed with them and only occasionally travelled into town for supplies or had any delivered. Tourism in Muskoka was largely male-dominated during this period. By the end of the 1880s, however, as Muskoka historian Richard Tatley observes, “visitors who had formerly wanted to leave their upper-class lifestyle behind when they came out to the wilderness now brought it with them.”¹⁴ Vacations and cottaging, in particular, became more family-focused. This turn towards a more domestic, albeit affluent, mode of living at the lake led to a new pattern of consumption and therefore new supply challenges.¹⁵ Entire families meant more mouths to feed and also the sensitive dietary needs of children, whose parents expected fresh vegetables, fruit, eggs, dairy, and meat in addition to staples such as flour and sugar. Since refrigeration and capriciousness posed challenges in transporting fresh items from the city, these new consumer patterns required an innovative way of transferring marketable farm products and general store goods from a few specific places to a great many locations on the lower lakes.

Getting fresh food was not a problem for all visitors to Muskoka. In fact, while many cottagers chose remote locations, an equal number rented or bought property from lakeside settlers and built cottages in close proximity to roads, wharves, and a steady source of supplies. Land near hotels emerged as a logical place for seasonal residents to build their cottages. In response to the growing demand for accommodations in the area, in 1872 Edward Prowse built a three-story resort hotel on his Lake Muskoka property, which he supplied with fresh vegetables, eggs, and dairy from his farm. By 1887, Prowse’s Beaumaris Hotel could take up to 150 guests and he had opened a small general store in connection.¹⁶ Beaumaris became very popular with tourists from northeastern American cities, particularly Pittsburgh. At the turn of the century, Beaumaris was the nucleus of a settler-tourist colony based on the direct interconnections between Prowse’s hotel, store, and farm and the neighbouring cottages. This arrangement remained relatively sustainable throughout this time because consumption occurred in close proximity to the site of exchange, which avoided the limitations imposed by individual human-powered mobility. Elsewhere on the lakes, however, the challenge of mobility posed obstacles to summer cottage living.

Fanny Potts had her finger on the pulse of life in Muskoka. She and her husband, Edwin, rented out cottages near Port Sandfield around the turn of the century. To those new to Muskoka, Potts advised that “there are no stores near, but the stores come to you instead of you going to the stores; they float up to your very doors, bringing you ‘everything under the sun,’ or, as that may be going too far, we will say, ‘everything we mortals can possibly need in Muskoka.’”¹⁷ In preparation for summer holidays at the cottage, women commonly ordered a supply of dry and canned food from Toronto. Yet supply needs were ongoing, and fresh fruit, vegetables, dairy, and meat were expensive and challenging to have delivered from the city unspoiled and as needed during these years. The closest proper general store for visitors who stayed with the Pottses was in Port Carling, over an hour away by foot or rowboat. Cottagers seldom travelled by steamer to buy groceries or supplies, for the cost was disproportionately expensive compared to the price of the rest of the holiday, and steamers ran on schedules that required an entire day to complete a simple grocery run. Entrepreneurs like Francis Forge alleviated the potential burden to each separate household by aggregating individual trips into a single trip made by the supplier. Furthermore, by mobilizing the site of exchange, Forge actually reduced the total energy output required to supply lakeside households. Embarking initially by rowboat to cottagers around the east shore of Lake Rosseau, Forge later purchased a small steamer, in 1888, which he used for three years to extend his services as far as Lake Joseph.¹⁸

Forge’s foray into steamboat supply services was no doubt inspired by a merchant from Port Carling who had introduced his own supply boat the previous year. In 1887, William Hanna decided to extend his store’s business by hiring a steamer called the *Lady of the Lake*. Others soon followed. In 1894, John James Beaumont enhanced his farm’s business on Lake Muskoka with the *Nymoca*.¹⁹ By the turn of the century, the Beaumonts employed several butchers, bakers, and farm hands.²⁰ Already well known for the quality of the lamb he raised, Beaumont used his supply boat to strengthen interconnections between the farm and seasonal households on Lake Muskoka by artificially reducing the distance between his farm and his customers. In 1890, a merchant

named George Henry Homer opened a general store in the village of Rosseau and relied on the Muskoka and Georgian Bay Navigation Company to deliver mail-order items until 1896, when he bought the steamer *Edith May*. With his own supply boat, Homer was able to reduce costs and attract more customers. After switching to a larger supply boat, the *Constance*, in 1902, Homer ran an advertisement in the Muskoka Lakes Association (MLA) yearbook that clearly characterized his boat as a link between isolated tourists and his store in Rosseau:

Tourists' Supplies

Homer & Co.

Dealers in DRY GOODS, GROCERIES, FRUITS,
CONFECTIONERY, CROCKERY, GLASSWARE, FLOUR
AND FEED—BOOTS AND SHOES, HARDWARE,
STOVES, TINWARE, Etc.

Our Supply Boat "Constance" calls at all Points, Cottages,
Camps and Hotels on Lakes Rosseau and Joseph, and is
stocked with a complete assortment of Fine Groceries,
Fruits, Confectionery, etc.

Save freight and all unnecessary trouble by purchasing your
Supplies from our Supply Boat, or direct from our stores at
GRAVENHURST AND ROSSEAU

Letter Orders have Prompt Attention.²¹

By the turn of the century, a variety of farmers and merchants were running supply boats on the lower lakes. They catered to the needs of both cottagers and the tourist industry by providing fresh produce from local farmers as well as goods from outside Muskoka.

Supply boat services in Muskoka developed in lockstep with the 1890s explosion in cottage culture. Between 1895 and 1915, more than three hundred new summer homes were built in Muskoka.²² Membership growth in the MLA—an affiliation of mainly seasonal



FIGURE 3.2. The *Constance*, the supply boat for the Homer & Co. general store at the north end of Lake Rosseau, c. 1900. Built at Gravenhurst in 1898, it delivered provisions on lakes Rosseau and Joseph until 1921. Courtesy of Muskoka Steamship and Historical Society.

residents and more prominent year-round residents—reflected a significant rise in the seasonal population. In 1902, the MLA yearbook listed 182 separate members. By 1913, membership had climbed more than 30 percent to 238 members, and by 1918 it had risen to 290.²³ Unfortunately, few records survive to document the exchange between supply boats and cottage households. According to one general store ledger, of the seventy-six households that kept supply boat accounts with Homer & Co. between 1896 and 1902, only four were cottagers.²⁴ Of these, only Mrs. W.E. Sandford, the widow of Canada’s “Wool King,” William Eli Sandford, kept an account that amounted to more than twenty dollars in a season. However, local histories attest to the popularity of the supply boats with cottagers, and cash payments likely explain their absence in Homer’s ledger.²⁵ Since only account information was transferred from the supply boat ledger (which no longer exists) to the general accounts ledger of the store, cash payments were

not recorded. Nevertheless, accounts hint at the prominence of supply boats to households in more isolated parts of the lakes. Of the remaining seventy-two supply boat accounts, thirteen cannot be identified geographically and thirteen were hotel proprietors. Another eighteen accounts were with settlers living on the east side of the lake where the majority of Muskoka's arable soil existed. The remaining twenty-eight were with settlers who lived in areas with poor soil, either on the west side of Lake Rosseau or at various locations on Lake Joseph. In the absence of records of cash transactions, these numbers provide only a vague sense of the importance of the supply boats. Nevertheless, the ledger reveals that isolated households—those located far from good agricultural land or villages where fresh articles were easily acquired—held 47 percent of identifiable supply boat accounts with Homer & Co. The mobility solutions provided by supply boats like the *Edith May* were much more critical for Muskoka's isolated households than they were for households in close proximity to a farm or general store.

As households throughout the lakes increasingly relied on supply boats, operators rushed to keep pace with the demand. In 1902, Fanny Potts observed that the supply boats' trade "has gradually grown to meet demand, which is increasing every year, and in consequence they seem nearly always able to supply just what is needed."²⁶ Accomplishing this, however, required merchants and farmers to invest huge sums of money and enormous amounts of labour in order to offer mobile extensions of their store or farm. At Beaumont's farm, butchers were up at 2:00 a.m. to butcher and dress lambs in order to have them in the iceboxes aboard the *Nymoca* by cast off.²⁷ For William Hanna's employees, stocking and preparing the steamer for the day began at 4:30 every morning. Hanna's men brought aboard a full complement of fresh and dry foods and a constantly changing list of hardware and mail-order items. The boat also needed a load of cordwood before the captain, engineers, butcher, and grocer all pushed off at 7:00 a.m. During the busy summer months, Hanna's second supply boat, the *Mink*, averaged about sixty calls per day; often it did not return to Port Carling until after 10:00 p.m. Once back at their private wharf next to Hanna's store in Port Carling, the crews unloaded all unsold foodstuffs until the next morning, when they repeated the process all over again.²⁸ Despite



FIGURE 3.3. Looking astern from near the bow of the *Constance's* lower deck, c. 1900. The butcher's counter was located at the bow, the grocery in midsection, and the dry goods at the stern. Courtesy of Muskoka Steamship and Historical Society.

these hardships, supply boats represented the most convenient and sustainable way to reduce the distance between consumers and site of exchange.

By utilizing renewable energy from Muskoka's forests and the muscles of various local settlers, steamboats were part of what E.A. Wrigley has termed an "organic economy." As Richard White notes, "there was nature in a steam engine's bowels, but it was far less obvious than the stunning nature . . . that could be seen out the windows of steamboats."²⁹ Year-round residents cut cordwood in the winter and then sold it in the spring to merchants and farmers to fuel Muskoka's supply boats. Since the boats had limited deck space, operators stored cordwood at various locations around the lake where it could be accessed as needed.³⁰ According to the company ledger, Homer's supply boat consumed

roughly 160 cords of wood each year between 1896 and 1900.³¹ During these years, operators made over fifty different purchases on lakes Rosseau and Joseph where settlers were in the process of clearing land. Cordwood sales to Homer for use aboard his supply boat averaged 15 cords, for which settlers were paid approximately twenty-eight dollars. These settlers felled, chopped, hauled, and stacked wood during the winter, when they had few other ways of generating income. In providing cordwood for supply boats, year-round residents sold energy from the sun locked up in muscles and wood biomass, which was then released through labour and combustion during the summer months. The winter work performed by these woodcutters, combined with the summer work of supply boat hands and steam engines, freed hundreds of households from individual trips for supplies during the navigation season.

By bringing the store and farm to customers, Muskoka's supply boats were more than mere distributors of groceries and provisions. As steamboat historian Harley E. Scott suggests, and as J.I. Little shows elsewhere in this collection, the supply boat was very much "a social institution."³² Supply boats replicated the kinds of social interaction that existed at many general stores elsewhere in nineteenth-century Canada. As a supply boat moved up and down the lake, its three-toned whistle gave notice of its approach. If settlers or cottagers wanted the boat to stop, they raised a white flag that signalled the captain to pull into the closest wharf. Visits by the supply boat were significant events; while the boat was docked at one wharf or another, neighbours would gather together to buy groceries and pick up orders, sell produce, visit with day-trippers aboard the boat, and socialize.³³ Although dances, picnic excursions, regattas, and other social events took place throughout the summer, visits by the supply boat remained important occasions. Mabel Croucher Ames, whose family lived in the relatively isolated area of Craigie Lea on Lake Joseph around the turn of the century, remembered, "it was always a big thrill for us children when the boat came in."³⁴ The presence of a supply boat could also indicate social standing. "When a prosperous cottage built a suitable dock then all his neighbours rowed over to shop on the supply boat," notes one historian of steamboats in Muskoka. "The steamer had to wait 20 minutes for

everyone in the neighbourhood to arrive. The large docks became a status symbol, which everyone just had to have.”³⁵

Fanny Potts called the supply boat “Eaton’s in miniature.”³⁶ That Potts chose to compare a supply boat with a mail-order department store in Toronto suggests that shoreline residents in Muskoka felt supply boats had made shopping convenient. Unlike Eaton’s, however, supply boats sold fresh farm products and often had finite supplies of the most popular items. As a result, supply boat grocers and butchers had to make deliberate efforts to distribute their fare somewhat evenly around the lake. Since households along the eastern shores of the lower lakes sat much closer to more fertile farmland, it was theoretically possible that these households would have first choice each week, thereby denying households on the other side of the lake the most popular fruits, vegetables, and cuts of meat. Yet an exchange between a customer and the butcher aboard the *Constance* reveals this was not necessarily the case:

“No,” [the butcher] says to one lady, “I can’t give you a hind-quarter of lamb to-day, you’ll have to take the fore-quarter. You had the hind-quarter last week. Everybody has to take their turn, for we can’t grow lambs with four hind-quarters even in Muskoka.”³⁷

In this way, items that would not normally have been available to some households were more evenly distributed around the lakes. The supply boats, therefore, compensated for some aspects of Muskoka’s uneven agricultural potential.

During the 1880s and 1890s, supply boats played a vital role in overcoming mobility limitations in Muskoka. After the turn of the century, changing patterns of consumption encouraged Toronto-based merchants, such as Eaton’s and Michie’s, to compete with supply boats for access to the lucrative cottage and tourist market in Muskoka. An advertisement featured in the MLA’s 1902 yearbook foreshadowed the influence that Eaton’s soon would have in Muskoka. On the inside back

cover, Eaton's clearly presented an alternative to supply boats that also addressed cottagers' mobility constraints:

The pleasure and comforts of your summer outing in Muskoka will be greatly increased if you have easy access to the things you want or would like to have. Shopping by mail is the secret. It's so simple, too. . . . Write to us for . . . things to eat, things to wear, things for the house and things for pleasure or sport. Our catalogue will help you.³⁸

The implications of this new avenue of consumption were not lost on supply boat owners. In 1905, Beaumont attempted to reposition his business in response to the added competition posed by mail-order deliveries from the city. In a four-page circular to lakeside residents, Beaumont made it clear he intended to compete with exogenous sites of exchange. Listing a wide variety of staples, nonperishable goods, hardware, soaps, and luxury items, Beaumont promised to keep "a more up-to-date stock than in previous years in every department."³⁹ But Beaumont's greatest advantage lay in the items that Eaton's could not provide reliably to households in Muskoka. In addition to fruits from his expanding orchard and gardens, Beaumont offered "meat of the best quality and variety. Butter, Milk, Cream, Fresh Eggs, Poultry . . . and vegetables of all kinds, fresh from our own farm." It is clear, however, that Beaumont worried about urban-based competition. Recognizing a growing preference in Muskoka for quality baked goods from the city, Beaumont hired a "first-class City baker" to prepare bread and confectionaries. He also appealed to his customers: "before ordering supplies from outside, give us a trial as we feel sure that we can in every department, supply as good quality, and at as reasonable price as they can purchase elsewhere." Beaumont did not specify where or whom he meant by "outside" and "elsewhere," but the timing of the circular suggests a response to increased competition from sources based outside the Muskoka region, such as Eaton's.

An Alternative to the Supply Boat

Despite new competition from outside Muskoka, supply boats continued to provide collective mobility solutions for cottagers and isolated households around the lakes until the end of the 1930s. Shortly after the turn of the century, however, the spread of convenient, affordable motorboat technology removed many of the constraints on personal mobility during the summer. That supply boats existed alongside motorboats in Muskoka for several decades obscures the fact that their role—to bring sites of exchange to lakeside consumers with limited mobility—became increasingly redundant as motorboats became popular. The adoption of the internal combustion engine offered a less sustainable alternative to the supply boats and led to a wide range of environmental, economic, and social changes.

Mechanical forms of private transportation on the water existed for only a few years in Muskoka prior to the introduction of the internal combustion engine. Steam engines were inconvenient to operate and extremely expensive to own, but combustion engines overcame these disadvantages. The much smaller, lighter, and simpler gasoline motors reduced the cost of production and operation and were more convenient to use because they required neither an engineer for operation nor preparation time to build up pressure. Internal combustion engines also consumed gasoline, which created on-demand power, was easier to handle, and provided a much greater fuel-to-weight ratio than cordwood. Steam launches, which never provided personal mobility solutions for more than a handful of the most affluent lakeside residents, were eclipsed quickly by motorboats. In 1902, the MLA yearbook listed twenty-seven noncommercial steam launches on the lower lakes, most of which belonged to prominent Canadians such as Timothy Eaton and Mrs. W.E. Sandford.⁴⁰ Just thirteen years later, Captain John Rogers compiled a “Directory of Motor Boats and Owners.” It listed fifty-one steam yachts and launches (those owned by private residents as well as hotels) and 404 gasoline motorboats. Slightly more than 56 percent of the people listed in the 1915 directory owned motorboats, compared to just over 3 percent who owned steam-powered craft.⁴¹ Early-model marine engines were somewhat unreliable, but as the technology

improved, Muskoka's famous local boatbuilders expanded production to meet the demand. Individual households overcame the limitations of their water-based mobility by the 1920s.

Fast and convenient personal mobility meant customers could more easily travel to fixed sites of exchange. Although the pattern of mobility changed quickly, the established exchange arrangements between merchants, farmers, and their lakeside customers persisted. Merchants still sold fresh local foodstuffs from area farms, and their establishments still provided important social spaces where neighbours could interact. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, Leena Riley and her siblings ran a boarding house called Scarcliffe on Lake Muskoka. Riley kept a journal of daily life between 1909 and 1914, which includes passing but increasingly frequent references to motorboat use. Her brother's experiment with motorboat ownership was short-lived, but Leena described many neighbours and cottagers using their own boats for varied purposes, such as meeting the train at Bala, picking up the mail, and making trips into Port Carling to shop or socialize.⁴² In Port Carling, William Hanna's store continued to thrive in part because of his supply boat business, but other merchants opened new stores that relied on customers coming to them. For example, John M. Whiting, a drugstore owner from Toronto, bought a shop next to the locks in 1911. In addition to offering ice cream and fresh fruit, Whiting's became a popular dance spot in the evenings.⁴³ Several years later, in 1927, the former hardware manager at Hanna's, Arnold Stephen, opened his own general store close to the locks. Aware of the new tendency of customers to arrive by water, Stephen built his store on the hillside next to the water so that he could provide two entrances—one above, next to the road, and another below, facing the dock.⁴⁴ As the motorboat provided new opportunities for personal mobility, fixed sites of exchange accommodated their customers' demands while still maintaining access to locally produced fresh foods, markets for neighbouring farmers, and social spaces for the community.

Despite such continuities, many owners did not integrate their motorboat use into the pre-existing system of local exchange. Supply boats had compensated for the lack of private modes of transportation capable of providing fast, flexible personal mobility. By aggregating

mobility in Muskoka, supply boats represented a more sustainable system of exchange. Making a few sites of exchange mobile replaced the need for several hundred households to be mobile. Supply boats continued to ply Muskoka's waters through the 1930s, but the rise of the motorboat added an entirely new, disaggregated transportation system to the region. Many families continued to purchase provisions from one of the supply boats still in operation while using their motorboats to travel into town for mail, groceries, and entertainment. Such a shift significantly expanded the overall budget of energy devoted to transportation. This disaggregation of mobility had ecological, economic, and social consequences that were less sustainable than the system of exchange represented by supply boats alone.

Although most of the motorboats in Muskoka between 1910 and 1940 were significantly lighter than their steam launch predecessors, many boatbuilders designed large, heavy crafts.⁴⁵ In addition to their weight, early motorboats had large engines capable of producing speeds well in excess of the average steam launch. As a result, motorboats created large wakes, which in turn caused social and ecological disruption around the lakes and rivers in Muskoka. In August 1915, William Rumsey of Huntsville wrote the federal Department of Marine and Fisheries to enquire about regulating boat traffic on the North Branch of the Muskoka River. He reported that "several accidents have happened, in this vicinity, from the wash of both Steamboats and Gasoline Launches running at what is considered by some to be excessive Speed."⁴⁶ Other concerns over large boat wakes joined worries over personal safety. In August 1917, T.M. Cullon, municipal clerk for the Town of Huntsville, wrote to the fisheries department regarding erosion caused by wakes along the North Muskoka River. "Owing to the speed at which the Steam and Motor Boats travel at certain points the River bank is being washed away very quickly," he reported. "And if it is not put a stop to it will not be long before it will encroach on a Street which runs along the River bank."⁴⁷

Motorboats also had indirect impacts on the Muskoka environment. Gasoline had many advantages over cordwood and coal, but its volatile-liquid state posed distribution challenges with ecological consequences. In 1919, Imperial Oil introduced the *Motor Queen*, a

2,300-gallon tanker that plied the lakes delivering gasoline directly to consumers.⁴⁸ Prior to this, operators had pumped gasoline from holding tanks at Muskoka Wharf and Lake Joseph Station into barrels and scowed them around the lakes to fill orders.⁴⁹ Regardless of the distribution method, spillage occurred. These consequences, when extrapolated for all of Muskoka, suggest the potential scale of the ecological degradation from motorboats.⁵⁰

The decline of the supply boat was gradual and began not long after motorboats became a regular feature on the lakes. Beaumont discontinued his supply boat business after about 1915, in part because of wartime conditions.⁵¹ In Lake Rosseau, the *Constance* continued to operate until 1921, when the Muskoka Lakes Navigation and Hotel Company purchased the steamer.⁵² Hanna's store ran two supply boats, the *Mink* and *Newminko*, until 1925, when the Navigation Company bought the *Mink*. The *Newminko* was the last supply boat in Muskoka and remained in service until 1940.⁵³ The steady decline of the supply boats had economic and social effects around the lakes. Households that relied on selling cordwood as part of their annual income were forced to look elsewhere as supply boats were repurposed and eventually abandoned. Lakeside neighbours who had once socialized aboard the supply boat and been tied together by its visit became increasingly atomized from one another, as resupplying the household became reliant on personal rather than collective mobility. While similar types of social spaces appeared elsewhere, close to fixed sites of exchange, seasonal households came to resemble the islands on which they were situated.

Conclusion

The supply boats of Muskoka offer a new perspective on mobility and environment in Canadian history. During the winter months, individuals journeyed across frozen land and water to acquire supplies. But during the navigable part of the year, people living along the shoreline of Muskoka's lakes often remained fixed in place, while the sites of exchange that provided them with essential foodstuffs became mobile. Supply boats consumed renewable local fuel in the form of cordwood

and effectively conserved energy by replacing disaggregated individual outputs with an ordered system of distribution. By World War I, however, greater individual mobility made possible by the internal combustion engine enabled a growing number of households to bypass the system of exchange represented by supply boats. This did not erode all of the most sustainable local interconnections, but over time it generated detrimental environmental, economic, and social effects that led to less sustainable arrangements. Confronted with limited mobility and uneven access to suitable land for farming, lakeshore dwellers in Muskoka developed their own strategies for addressing the area's economic shortcomings. Aided in large part by the summer influx of wealthy tourists and cottagers with money to spend, and recognizing the limited mobility of many households around the lakes, enterprising settlers and merchants took their farms and stores to the customer during the warm months of the year. By utilizing a mass mode of transportation in place of myriad personal ones, supply boats solved a critical challenge to life in Muskoka and provided a more sustainable method of linking isolated households with farms and stores that were beyond easy access by rowboat. The story of supply boats in Muskoka reveals that the past has important lessons to teach us about sustainability and mobility. While perhaps less convenient than personal modes of transportation, for people living in close proximity to large navigable bodies of water, steam-powered supply boats provided more sustainable mobility solutions for local communities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Muskoka, the prosaic work of supply boats played a key role in facilitating the emergence of one of Canada's most iconic recreational and tourist landscapes.

Notes

- 1 Seymour Penson, "Seymour Penson and His Muskoka Neighbours, Part II," *East Georgian Bay Historical Journal*, vol. 5 (1985), 185–86.
- 2 John Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).
- 3 Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (1930; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Donald Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence: A Study in Commerce and Politics* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1956); Liza Piper, *The Industrialization of Subarctic Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).
- 4 Douglas McCalla, *Consumers in the Bush: Shopping in Rural Upper Canada* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015); Douglas McCalla, "Retailing in the Countryside: Upper Canadian General Stores in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Business and Economic History* 26, no. 2 (1997): 393–403; Elizabeth Mancke, "At the Counter of the General Store: Women and the Economy in Eighteenth Century Nova Scotia" in *Intimate Relations: Family and Community in Planter Nova Scotia, 1759–1800*, ed. Margaret Conrad (Fredericton: Acadiensis, 1995), 167–81; Béatrice Craig, *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists: The Rise of a Market Culture in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 113–36.
- 5 In many ways, supply boats served a function similar to that of itinerant peddlers elsewhere in nineteenth-century Ontario. Brian S. Osborne, "Trading on a Frontier: The Function of Peddlers, Markets, and Fairs in Nineteenth-Century Ontario," in *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, vol. 3 (Gananoque, ON: Langdale, 1980), 59–82; John Benson, *Entrepreneurism in Canada: A History of "Penny Capitalists"* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, 1990).
- 6 Tom McCarthy, "A Natural Intersection: A Survey of Historical Work on Mobility and the Environment," in *Mobility in History: The State of the Art in the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility*, ed. Gijs Mom, Gordon Pirie, and Laurent Tissot (Neuchâtel: Éditions Alphil/Presses universitaires suisses, 2009).
- 7 Jesse Villard, Veronica Dujon, and Mary King, introduction to *Understanding the Social Dimension of Sustainability*, ed. Jesse Villard, Veronica Dujon, and Mary King (London: Routledge, 2009), 2.
- 8 Andrew Watson, "Poor Soils and Rich Folks: Household Economies and Sustainability in Muskoka, 1850–1920" (Ph.D. diss., York University, 2014).
- 9 For more on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century rural

- Canadian winter mobility, see T.F. McIlwraith, "The Adequacy of Rural Roads in the Era before Railways: An Illustration from Upper Canada," *Canadian Geographer* 14, no. 4 (1970): 344–60; Graeme Wynn, "Moving Goods and People in Mid-Nineteenth Century New Brunswick," *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, vol. 6 (Gananoque, ON: Langdale, 1988), 226–39; J. David Wood, *Making Ontario: Agricultural Colonization and Landscape Re-creation before the Railway* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 120–22; Piper, *Subarctic Canada*, 58–63.
- 10 Peggy Blair, *Lament for a First Nation: The Williams Treaties of Southern Ontario* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008); J. Michael Thoms, "Ojibwa Fishing Grounds: A History of Ontario Fisheries Law, Science, and the Sportsmen's Challenge to Aboriginal Treaty Rights, 1650–1900" (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 2004).
- 11 Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).
- 12 D.H.C. Mason, *Muskoka: The First Islanders and After* (Bracebridge, ON: Herald-Gazette, 1974), 12.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 14 Richard Tatley, *Port Carling: The Hub of the Muskoka Lakes* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills, 1996), 41.
- 15 These challenges were dramatically reduced after World War II, when cottages became much more accessible, financially and practically. Peter Stevens, "Cars and Cottages: The Automotive Transformation of Ontario's Summer Home Tradition" *Ontario History* 100, no. 1 (2008): 26–56; Peter Stevens, "Getting Away from It All: Family Cottaging in Postwar Ontario" (Ph.D. diss., York University, 2010); Julia Harrison, *A Timeless Place: The Ontario Cottage* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).
- 16 Barbaranne Boyer, *Muskoka's Grand Hotels*, ed. Richard Tatley (Erin, ON: Boston Mills, 1987), 36; "The Muskoka Country: Where Nature's Attributes Combine to Please the Artist's Eye and Captivate Every Artistic Sense," *Toronto World*, 14 July 1887, reproduced in John Denison, *Micklethwaite's Muskoka* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills, 1993), 13.
- 17 Ann Hathaway, *Muskoka Memories: Sketches from Real Life* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1904), 218. Ann Hathaway was the pen name of Fanny Potts.
- 18 Richard Tatley, *The Steamboat Era in the Muskokas*, vol. 1, *To the Golden Years: A History of the Steam Navigation in the Districts of Muskoka and Parry Sound, 1866–1905* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills, 1983), 245; Tatley, *Port Carling*, 36; Mason, *First Islanders*, 27–28. Ultimately, Forge was forced to return to his rowboat, because stiff competition from other supply boat businesses made it unprofitable to operate by steamboat.
- 19 As their businesses grew, Hanna and Beaumont went through a succession of boats; Hanna also ran the *Mink* and the *Newminko*, while Beaumont later operated the *Alporto*.

- 20 Tatley, *Steamboat Era*, vol. 1, 245.
- 21 J.D. McMurrich, ed., *Muskoka Lakes Association 1902 Yearbook* (Toronto: Oxford, 1902), 64.
- 22 Graham Smith, "A Room with a View: Cottage Architects and Builders," in *Summertimes: In Celebration of 100 Years of the Muskoka Lakes Association* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills, 1994), 137.
- 23 McMurrich, *1902 Yearbook*; Hugh Neilson, ed., *Muskoka Lakes Association 1913 Yearbook* (Toronto: Parker Bros., 1913); Hugh Neilson, ed., *Muskoka Lakes Association 1918 Yearbook* (Toronto: Parker Bros., 1918).
- 24 George Henry Homer, general store ledger, 1896–1901, box 35, Gravenhurst Archives.
- 25 Hathaway, *Muskoka Memories*; Tatley, *Steamboat Era*, vol. 1; Harley E. Scott, *Steam Tugs and Supply Boats of Muskoka* (Lancaster, NY: Cayuga Creek Historical Press, 1987); Mason, *First Islanders*.
- 26 Hathaway, *Muskoka Memories*, 226.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 245.
- 28 Richard Tatley, *The Steamboat Era in the Muskokas*, vol. 2, *The Golden Years to Present: A History of the Steam Navigation in the Districts of Muskoka and Parry Sound, 1906–Present* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills, 1984), 38.
- 29 E.A. Wrigley, *Continuity, Chance and Change: The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995), 37.
- 30 James Dickson, *Camping in the Muskoka Region: A Story of Algonquin Park* (1886; Toronto: Ryerson, 1960), 23.
- 31 Homer ledger, 88–90, 250, 326, 335.
- 32 Scott, *Steam Tugs and Supply Boats*, 10.
- 33 "Memoirs of Mabel Croucher Ames, 1884–1977," transcribed by Vera Gross Ames, 10 June 2006, p. 24, Muskoka Lakes Museum Archives, Port Carling, ON. Supply boats often carried passengers—usually day-trippers, who used the boats' circuits as an opportunity to see parts of the lakes they rarely saw otherwise.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 35 Scott, *Steam Tugs and Supply Boats*, 10.
- 36 Hathaway, *Muskoka Memories*, 218.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 221.
- 38 McMurrich, *1902 Yearbook*, back cover.
- 39 J.J. Beaumont and Sons, claimants, "Summer Supply Season, 1905: Supply Boat 'Nymoca' Calling Tri-weekly at All Points on the Muskoka Lake," 1905, James Bay Railway Company—General Claims, RG 30, file 1046-78-1, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (hereafter LAC).
- 40 McMurrich, *1902 Yearbook*, 62.
- 41 John Rogers, *Muskoka Lakes Bluebook, Directory and Chart, 1915* (Port Sandfield, ON: printed by author, 1915), 63.
- 42 Julia Riley, "Diary of Julia 'Leena' Riley—Diary of Pioneers at Milford

- Bay, October 19, 1909–May 31, 1914,” June/November 1911, drawer FC 1c, Muskoka Boat and Heritage Centre, Gravenhurst, ON.
- 43 Tatley, *Port Carling*, 54.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 45 A.H. Duke and W.M. Gray, *The Boatbuilders of Muskoka* (Toronto: W.M. Gray, 1985). In several cases, old steam launches were actually refitted with gasoline power plants. After 1916, with the creation of the disappearing propellor boat in Port Carling, much smaller and lighter motorboats—slightly larger than a rowboat—became available. Paul Dodington, Joe Fossey, and Paul Gockel, *The Greatest Little Motor Boat Afloat: The Legendary Disappearing Propellor Boat* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1994).
- 46 William Rumsey to the Department of Marine and Fisheries (DMF), 2 August 1915, RG 42, file 161-1-10, LAC.
- 47 T.M. Cullon to the DMF, 8 August 1917, RG 42, file 161-1-10, LAC.
- 48 Bob Petry, *Bala: An Early Settlement in Muskoka: A Pictorial History of Bala from the Late 1880’s* (Bala, ON: printed by author, 1998), 95.
- 49 Duke and Gray, *Boatbuilders of Muskoka*, 27.
- 50 By 1918, there were at least 464 motorboats on the three lower lakes alone. John Rogers, *Muskoka Lakes Bluebook, Directory and Chart, 1918* (Port Sandfield, ON: printed by author, 1918), 60–65.
- 51 Tatley, *Steamboat Era*, vol. 2, 41.
- 52 Scott, *Steam Tugs and Supply Boats*, 20.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 35, 38.