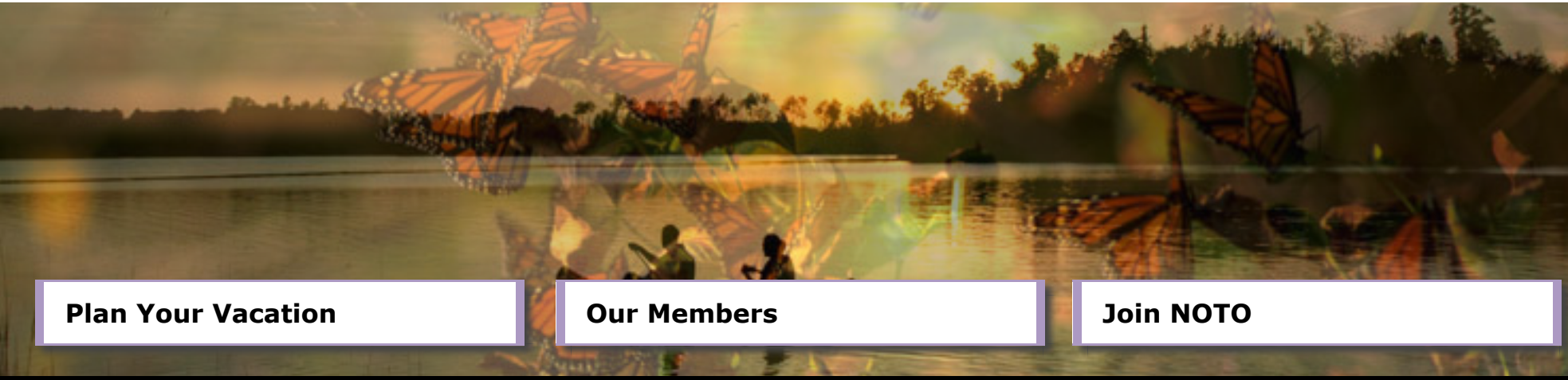




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The History of Melwel Lodge

Monday Feb 03, 2020

Author: Bob Kellum



Melba & Weldon Moore (1948)

Melwel Lodge: From Pioneering Days to State-of-the-Art Accommodation

In the summer of 1945, a young entrepreneur visiting the Thessalon area of the Algoma District was about to take his search elsewhere, when he checked one last property. In the pouring rain, Weldon Moore stumbled out of the bush onto a pristine, west-facing bay on a beautiful clear lake. The site exceeded his criteria for a tourist lodge: hardwoods to provide fall colours, highway access, a clear view of sunsets and a prevailing wind to control insects.

A decade earlier Weldon had serendipitously met his future bride, Melba Fleming, in the newly-created Algonquin Park where Weldon was helping his parents build rustic Killarney Lodge and where Melba was enjoying a cross-country ski with her sister. The couple married in 1938 and spent the intervening years managing large railroad hotels in northern Ontario, most notably the Kapuskasing Inn.

In the fall of 1945, armed with a clear vision of an American Plan tourist lodge, the Moores founded Melwel Lodge (Melba + Weldon) on Big Basswood Lake. Having purchased the land, the determined couple, with one young child and expecting another, bought a house in nearby Thessalon.

In March of 1946, the couple stood on lake ice in three feet of snow facing the bush they now owned. From that vantage point, they plotted what was still only a vision in their minds' eye. That same month three local farmers, employing a team of horses, cut 540 blocks of lake ice and piled it strategically where it would later be enclosed in an icehouse. With this foresighted act, an ambitious construction schedule ensued.

In June of 1946, a scant three months after cutting the first



Kitchen-Dining Room (1950)



Big Basswood Lake (1950s)



Melwel Lodge Postcard (1970)



Melwel Lodge Postcard (1970)



Melba & Weldon Moore (1980)

blocks of lake ice, Melwel Lodge opened for business with five rustic guest accommodations, complete with flush toilets and wood stoves to heat buckets of wash water. The Moores and lodge staff "camped" in tent cabins. Guests seemed to thrive on the lodge's pioneering spirit and demand soon required the addition of two tent cabins on the bluff above the beach. Construction continued on other buildings, most notably the kitchen-dining room on a site that offered a commanding view of both arriving guests and unfolding sunsets. The steeply-pitched hip roofs and eight-pane windows were characteristic of the dining room and the numerous guest cabins that sprung up along the lake shore. The "American Plan" included three meals a day and were prepared by a well-regarded chef named Keith Lough, who had followed the Moores from the Kapuskasing Inn. By the 1948 season, the new dining room was complete.

The years that followed saw the expansion and refinement of guest accommodations. Propane and reliable electricity were not available the first few years, so initially the lodge was lit with kerosene lanterns, food was stored in a "natural ice refrigerator" and meals were prepared on an oversized wood-fired range. Over time, the lodge grew to include 12 guest cabins, the main kitchen-dining room with added office space and cold storage, the owners' residence, numerous staff cabins, a laundry building and a storage garage, not to mention a minnow tank, dog houses and a half dozen docks mooring a slew of wooden boats. The lodge became a dining destination and economic engine for the neighboring communities.

Always an advocate for northern hospitality, Weldon became active with the Northern Ontario Tourist Outfitters (NOTO). Local hunting and fishing guides were available to guests and fishing boats were strategically placed at area lakes and along the Mississagi River. In the early 1970s, as interest in hunting and fishing declined, tennis and shuffleboard courts were added.

Throughout the lodge's development and operation, guests could count on Weldon's unflappable good nature and Melba's keenly managed dining room, prompting many guests to return for decades. Melwel's trademarks were its expansive vision, thoughtful execution and gracious hospitality. The Moores retired in 1981 after 35 years hosting guests at their home on the shores of Big Basswood Lake.

The first owners to take over Melwel Lodge from the Moores were a young couple from Sudbury, Ken and Shelley Machum. In 1985, Melwel was then sold to Mike Swanger, an American enthusiastic to own an authentic Canadian lodge. For the next 22 years, Melwel continued much as before, with cabins for rent and an operational dining room, though eventually dining hours were cut back.

In 2007, just as infrastructure maintenance was becoming critical, two well-heeled investors (Dale Harrison and Mark Tinnerman) saw the inherent value in the lodge's one-of-a-kind setting. Melwel was sold and an infusion of much-needed capital quickly ensued. While updating nearly every aspect of lodge infrastructure, the new owners aimed to preserve the quaint setting and functional simplicity of its essential structures. In 2015, Dale, a Sault Ste. Marie native, bought out his partner and put his own stamp on the lodge's identity. In 2017, after nearly 70 years serving lodge guests, the old character-laden kitchen-dining room was torn down and a new, state-of-the-art facility was built in its place. Going into its 75th season, today's Melwel Lodge is a seasonally thriving place, continuing much as the Moores had envisioned, but reflecting modern tastes in self-serve hospitality and recreation. (<https://www.melwellodge.ca/>)

- Bob Kellum (for a more detailed history, readers are invited to contact Bob directly at rfkellum52@yahoo.com)



New Kitchen-Dining Room (2018)



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