

Westermmain Woods

Westermmain Woods was incorporated in 1977 as a non-profit organization whose sole mandate is to care for two tracts of land on and near Lake of Bays. One of the tracts is Block B or Needler Point, which is 15.6 acres bordered by Lake of Bays on the east and South Portage Road on the West, Lot 4 of the subdivision to the south and Lot 3 to the north. The other tract, the 'Backlands' is 333.75 acres in size and lies on the west side of South Portage Road.

There are seven lake shore cottage lots associated with Westermmain, all fronting on Lake of Bays, three to the north of Needler Point and four to the south. Known as Lots 1-7, their owners make up the membership of Westermmain Woods.

A brief history

In 1908 George Needler purchased some of the "back lands". The Needler family also owned much of the shoreline to the north, selling off parcels from time to time. Upon his death in 1962, the estate transferred the ownership to his daughter Mary Needler Hinde, who then transferred ownership to Westermmain Woods in 1979.

In 1973 Ezra and Ann Schabas offered to put together a group of like-minded people to purchase the remaining waterfront and back lands from Mary Needler Hinde.. The original idea was to hold the lands in common with each party to build a cottage for their own use, but otherwise keeping the lands in an undeveloped state. They soon discovered that the lands would have to be subdivided if each family wanted their own cottage. Seven waterfront residential lots were created, leaving 900 feet of shoreline vacant to be preserved as Needler Point and 200 feet of shoreline, Block A, was gifted to the municipality on the northern boundary. It took six years to work through the details, complete the surveys, and settle the road allowances. Block C, with 50 feet of shoreline, was sold to the abutting northerly neighbor. Three covenants that ran for 20 years with title of the properties prohibited more than two motorboats, and two docks and boathouses.

In 1977 the nonprofit corporation of Westermmain Woods was formed with letters patent stating that the corporation was formed to "save and defend from waste the natural resources of its lands, soils and minerals, its waters, forests, and wildlife." A series of restrictions were subsequently added which prohibited any unnecessary noise, lights beyond the buildings, use of phosphate-based cleaning materials, guns, straying pets, smoking (unless sitting down outside) and other restrictions meant to limit the impact of human habitation on the natural state of the land. These restrictions also ran for 20 years and were not renewed.

In 1982 and 83, the two remaining waterfront lots were sold to families who also became members of the club. In 1985 WW purchased a fourth abutting parcel to add to the backlands.

All of the waterfront properties are now owned by second purchasers. The backlands that lie to the east of South Portage Road along with Block B are managed by WW under the Managed Forest Tax Incentive Plan. Selective logging was done on the north parcels of land in 1996/97 and in 2014 the whole of the backlands were logged to maintain the health of the forest and to provide revenue to pay the property taxes. Walking trails are kept clear for the exclusive use by the families owning the seven waterfront lots.

Summary of 1973 to 1979 Subdivision Approval

Creating and getting approval for the subdivision of the lands took six years as the group ran into a series of unique problems. Prior to the 70's, the land was in two Townships – Brunel and Franklin. These Townships were amalgamated into the Town of Huntsville and the Township of Lake of Bays when the District of Muskoka was formed. So the approvals had to come from two municipalities. There was thought of annexation into one municipality but the municipalities were not in favour. The approval for the registration of the subdivision would have been from the Province of Ontario but mid process the District of Muskoka took over the planning approval authority for subdivisions. Also there were changes to the Land Titles system that required registration of the subdivision twice.

Finally, the zoning approvals from the municipalities and the subdivision agreement approval from the District were granted but immediately appealed by three neighbors who did not want a park on Block A, at the north end, which was deeded to the Township. So an OMB hearing had to be held and the Township indicated it would not establish an active park on the lands due to difficulty of access. The boundaries of Block A were moved 50 feet south, creating Block C which was sold to the abutting neighbour.

Summary of Block B tax appeal and Settlement with Ministry of Natural Resources

In 2010 Westermain appealed the exclusion of Block B from the Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program. The requirements of the MTIP program in 2010 and today require that the size of the parcel is at least 10 acres and this area must be within one assessment roll number. Because Block B is in two municipalities there are two assessment roll numbers and thus it did not qualify.

We agreed to a settlement that included Block B in the MFTIP, thus reducing our annual taxes from several thousand dollars to several hundred dollars. The settlement permits the MNR to apply new rules to any new application. The settlement with MNR is to remain confidential.

History of Logging and the Managed Forest Tax Incentive

Pre 1900 – the southerly portion of the Backlands, Lot 31 and 32 Concession 3 were clearcut. The hardwood trees in the area were recently estimated by the forester to be 120 years old so the area would have been clearcut in 1887. This corresponds with the title changes likely linked to timber harvesting.

1979 – Westermain signs a Woodlands Improvement Act Agreement which allows the Ministry of Natural Resources to help manage the woodlands, primarily by marking the trees to be cut to ensure only selective logging occurs.

1993 – MNR advises to selectively log once every 15-20 years as a “selective improvement cut”. They will mark trees for cutting in a year or two.

1995 – MNR letter noting trees have been marked for cutting and are likely worth \$10-\$15,000. “Timber harvesting will change the appearance of the woodlot. More sunlight will reach the forest floor resulting in increased young growth. Remaining trees will benefit from increased light expanding their crowns and roots to capture a larger share of moisture and nutrients. Tops and unmerchantable trees will remain in the forest after logging is complete. These tops will break down in a few years and return valuable nutrients back to the soil.”

1995-96 and 1996-97 winter harvest by Fisher Firewood of the North Backlands. The cut resulted in 120,000 board feet of sawlogs and 590 bushcords of fuelwood. The main staging area is located south of the northerly access road, and just short of the Hemlock grove. It is still relatively clear. The revenue gained was \$15,000

1997 – Westermain participates in the Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program, all 333.7 acres west of South Portage Road. The Managed Forest Plan notes:
“In the past the North Backlands has escaped to a degree the harvesting of its forest and this can be seen in the larger area of mature forest it has. The south Backlands was earlier intensely harvested and is now in a recovery stage of growth.”

AND

“the largest trees in the area: White Pines, Basswood and Large Tooth Aspen are found in the North Backlands. Many large Hemlocks, Yellow Birches and Sugar Maples are also represented. The correct MNR selective improvement cut marking preserved representatives of these unusual large trees. A unique grove of supercanopy hemlocks has been preserved in entirety.”

AND

“Some trees in the North Backlands are more than 300 years old.”

2007 – Managed Forest Plan is redone by Peter DeVillers. It recommends no harvesting of Block B. For the North and South Backlands maintain and improve the trail system,

and current wildlife habitat. Also for the South, reassess in 2011 to determine the potential for harvest.

2010 -Westermain appealed the exclusion of Block B from the Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program. We agreed to a settlement that included Block B thus reducing our taxes from several thousand dollars to several hundred dollars. The settlement permits the MNR to apply new rules to any new application.

2015 – All of the Backlands were assessed. The southerly portion was logged with two staging areas just off South Portage Road. Revenue was \$22,600 for saw logs, \$6,400 for veneer, \$8,600 for firewood pulp and \$1,100 for other pulp for a total of \$38,800.

Financial Summary of the subdivision and WW incorporation costs

Schabas, Beardsley, Moscarello, and Laakso each paid to Mary \$15,000 for their lot. Along with Mary, they each advanced approximately \$8000 during the six years it took to establish WW and the subdivision. The total cost was \$40,000. which included a lot levy cash in lieu of parkland, despite the gift of Block A to the municipality. In 1977, the market value of the waterfront lands, including Blocks A, B and C was estimated to be \$220,000. Therefore, the levies for parkland were 5%, \$6000 to Huntsville and \$5000 to Lake of Bays

1983 Lot 6 is sold to Cos for \$37,500

1983 Lot 6 is sold to Shaw for \$42,000 with a take back mortgage of \$21,000 at 12%

1985 WW purchased more backlands paying \$18,000

1986- 88 Beardsleys, who built their cottage in 1986, wish to sell but WW offers them \$25,000 mortgage at 9% due two years later. The Beardsleys decide to stay, live year round from 1991 to 1993 then put their lot for sale, selling in 1995.

1991 WW purchases the bronze plaques for \$1237.65

1993 Cooke family purchases Block C, (created by moving Block A south as part of the OMB decision) for \$22,000

1995 Logging net was \$15000

2014 Logging net was \$38,000

Brief Biographical notes of the Founders

George Needler b 1866 d 1962. Professor of German at University of Toronto Department of German. He was a corporal in Queen's Own Rifles during the Riel Northwest rebellion and a major in WW1. He and his family were active Quakers. Purchased the backlands in 1908. Built a farmhouse on Needler Point named Robinsdale

Mary Needler Hinde, b 1900 d 1998 She retained ownership of lot 4, then passed ownership to Duncan Needler, her nephew. Mary earned her BA and MA from U of Toronto and her doctorate in Classics from U of Chicago. She taught classics until WW2 when she joined the WRENS. Mary had memberships and associations with many organizations including the Quakers and while in Toronto, the New Democratic Party. When she married she moved to Borden Saskatchewan often travelling back to Ontario to meet with Westermain woods members.

(This link to an obit of her sister Winnifer adds great context

https://www.brown.edu/Research/Breaking_Ground/bios/Needler_Winifred.pdf)

Ann and Ezra Schabas. Lot 5. **Ann**, is retired dean of the faculty of Library and Information Sciences at U of Toronto. She is the daughter of Margaret Fairley, writer, Canadian feminist and activist and Barker Fairley, Canadian Group of Seven artist and German scholar, participant with Arts and Letters Club in Toronto.

Ezra b 1924 d 2020, Graduated from the Julliard School of Music, served in France and Germany in WW2, was a professor at U of Toronto faculty of music and the Royal Conservatory, founder of the National Youth Orchestra of Canada, author of a biography of Sir Ernest McMillan (Toronto Literary award 1995). Order of Ontario and Order of Canada. Steve and Kathy Coxford bought the Schabas lot and the Needler Lot in 1998.

Barb And Bob Beardsley Lot 1. **Barb** b 1927 d. 2005 Graduated U of Toronto in English and Library Sciences, worked at Metro School Board and OISE. In 1972, Barb met Joan Lehman (who purchased her lot in 1995) at York University while working as researchers on school facilities. A feminist and political social justice activist, Barb ran in two provincial elections for the New Democratic Party.

Bob b 1926 d 2017 (Ralph) Bob graduated in English and Physics from Queens University, taught mathematics at various highschoools including Huntsville. He was a member of the NDP from its earliest days in the 1950's and ran in four federal elections. When Barbara and Bob retired in 1990, they settled in Prince Edward County. Joan and Bob Lehman bought their lot in 1995.

Lila And Ray Llaakso Lot 3 **Lila** was the head librarian for the library at Victoria College University of Toronto. She was a friend of Audrey, cousin of Mary Hinde

Ray b1927 d2007, graduated with a Masters in science, in Geological Engineering from Queens University, worked with Ministry of Natural Resources. Lifelong reader and writer, exploring history, philosophy and political science. Ownership of their lot was transferred to their son Leif, who later sold the lot. Lots 2 and 3 are now owned by Jeff and Beth Richmond .

Drs. Reva and Mario Moscarello, lot2. **Reva** (Rebeka) b.1933 d 2005 Graduated from University of Toronto in medicine and psychiatry, was psychiatrist at Women's College Hospital and assistant professor at U of T faculty of Medicine. **Mario** b 1929 d 2013, graduated from University of Toronto with degrees in physiology, medicine and biochemistry. Dr. Moscarello pioneered myelin instability research in the cause for multiple sclerosis. He was a staff doctor for the Hospital for Sick Children and was cross appointed to the department of pathobiology to U of Toronto. Reva and Mario had a farm property in Prince Edward county. They transferred ownership of lot 2 to their son Raphael, who sold it to Beth and Jeff Richmond in 2023.

Wayne and Susan Shaw, owners of lot 6, bought their property in 1983 and sold it to Jane and Chris Roper in 2000.

Ann and Aldo Cos, owners of lot 7, bought their property in 1983 and sold it to Lynn Oldershaw and Brian Davis in 2011.

The name of Westermain Woods is taken from George Meredith's poem of the same name. He was an English poet, born 1828 from Portsmouth Hampshire England died in 1909 in Surrey.

"Enter these enchanted Woods , You who dare."

<https://allpoetry.com/The-Woods-Of-Westermain>

Mary Needler's mother admired Meredith's poetry, even though his work is composed of inverted clauses and turgid stanzas. She thought that Meredith's work championed women and so Mary, in part to honour her mother, suggested the name to the founding group. In a letter to Ann, Mary wrote that the backlands "make a stretch (of forest) in which you can easily imagine your own feet are the first to have walked in these footsteps. For us, as children, the forest where you might get lost was an important part of our education- education in woodcraft and alertness, but even more, a growing space for the emotions and the imagination".

For a more fulsome history of the area refer to the Ruth Martin papers and to the Woodside article on place names on the Lake of Bays Heritage website.

