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Shoring Up Agnew Lake

Dad's methods were simple but very effective

by **Davis Swan**, North Vancouver, B.C.

My father, Toby Swan, spent more than 30 years working in Creighton Mine, an underground nickel mine in Sudbury. When you are more than a mile underground and don't have exactly what you need for a particular job, you have to improvise.

Toby Swan was very good at improvising.

In 1959, he and my mother Martha bought a property on Agnew Lake. I use the word "bought" with hesitation because the purchase did not actually lead to ownership of anything from a legal perspective. All of the lakeshore

property on Agnew Lake was legally owned by Inco, a multinational mining company. In fact, Agnew Lake was created by Inco through the construction of the Big Eddy Dam in 1929 to provide hydroelectric power for Inco's mining operations.

So what my parents really bought was squatter's rights to that particular section of shoreline. Despite the ever-present threat of eviction, the previous "owner" had constructed a cabin on the site, and like all cabins on Agnew Lake, it was quite rustic. After all, there was not a lot of motivation to improve a piece of property that

nobody really owned. No electricity, no running water, a 30-year-old icebox to keep food—and more importantly, beer—cold, and an outhouse.

The piece of land on Agnew Lake that we illegally occupied had a beautiful sand beach—a fairly rare feature not characteristic of most Agnew Lake properties. But this beautiful sand beach and shoreline had a problem: It was subject to erosion by waves in summer, and ice and snow in winter.

Shortly after my parents purchased the property, it became apparent that the front yard was being eaten

away at an alarming rate. If nature was allowed to take its course, it seemed certain that within ten years the cottage would be floating down the lake towards High Falls.

This eventuality was a frequent topic of conversation and finally, in 1963, Toby decided that enough was enough.

Toby did not have book learning; he had to leave school after Grade 6 to help his father working in the lumber camps. What he did have, and took great advantage of, was the opportunity to watch as university-trained engineers tried, and often failed, in the

construction of various containing structures to hold rocks.

From that experience, Toby developed an innate sense of what would, and what would not work.

So when Toby decided that the erosion of our shoreline had to stop, he didn't spend a lot of time taking measurements, calculating erosion rates or figuring out the mass of rock cribbing (a system of open boxes built with heavy timbers and filled with rocks to act as a retaining wall) which would be needed to stabilize the situation.

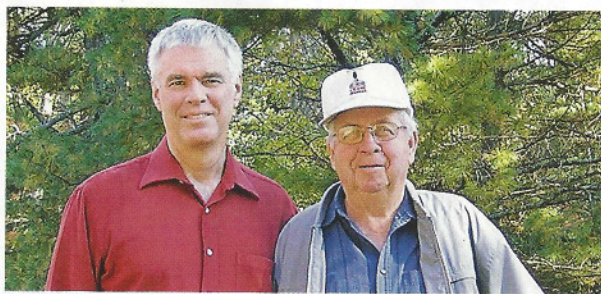
To be honest, he didn't spend any time at all doing those things. No, his approach was simple.

He started gathering pulp logs—eight-foot sections of tree trunk roughly six to eight

inches in diameter—that had escaped the log booms as tugboats towed them down the lake towards the mill in Espanola.

He wired, nailed and screwed them together to form a wooden cribbing more than 80 feet wide, three feet high and three feet deep.

We then set about filling that cribbing with rocks. We used a flat-bottomed boat built by my grandfather to gather the rocks. Crossing back and forth across the lake, we gathered large stones from a natural gravel pit exposed by the same forces of nature that were threatening our shoreline. My job was to sit at the back of our motorboat, armed with an axe. My instructions were simple yet vitally important—or so



A recent shot of Davis (left) and his dad, Toby.

my father told me. If Grampa's boat started to sink, I was to cut the tow rope so we didn't go to the bottom with the ballast.

After a few weeks and many lake crossings, the cribbing was full of rocks. We still had our lovely sand beach and the front yard was protected. I never got to use the axe.

The cottage was sold in the 1980s and I haven't been back since. But I have been told that the rock cribbing, now more than 50 years old, is

still doing its job.

My father taught me many things, and this story exemplifies one of his lessons. If you have to do a job, do it right the first time. A simple lesson from a simpler time, but as true today as it was back at the cottage on Agnew Lake. ■

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