

The Ottawa Valley the Hidden Gem

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It was in the late sixties when I fell upon the Ottawa Valley with its daunting vast space, rolling woodlands with many hiking and biking trails, its wilderness and wildlife, its postcard villages and mountainous hills, over 900 lakes and four major river systems, and butted against one of the largest rivers in the world the Ottawa River presenting unique opportunities for exploration which hadn't yet sunk in.

Coming from Toronto, Canada's largest City, I felt like Alice in Wonderland discovering a whole new world. I had no idea what kind, of rabbit hole I was entering much like Alice.

As beautiful as the Ottawa Valley was, I was intimidated. I couldn't fathom living in such an open concept. I wondered how people ever found their way, especially amongst the trees and mountainous areas. I knew what a compass was but I certainly wasn't a Christopher Columbus or as ambitious.

Living in Toronto I was sheltered by the tall buildings. I could use a bus, hop a street car, go underground to take the subway and pop back up to ground level when the street sign I wanted appeared.

To tumble down this rabbit hole and land into the Ottawa Valley was scary but once there I had no way out. It would change my life forever. I had arrived in the warmth of a wet spring with the budding of nature and a budding belly. I stayed in Alice for a month then moved to the town of Pembroke located in the heart of the Ottawa Valley.

I soon realized the Ottawa Valley was a hidden gem in more ways than one as I settled into a new life of babies, doctors, churches, schools, sports and music. I inhaled the fresh air and

a healthier lifestyle that gave me an appetite and intoxicated me with an uninterrupted sleep unlike the noise of the city and its people that put stress and smog throughout the air.

That first summer was hot and dry. I listened to residents talk about their golfing, kayaking, boating, fishing, and swimming. It was so different than city life where we talked about money, job opportunity, training, opera, and vacationing.

Life had certainly changed for me. I was constantly bragging and comparing Toronto and the Ottawa Valley.

The city was neat and tidy. I loved, the manicured gardens, the towering buildings that enclosed me, and the clean streets. Transportation was at my fingertips. I sat or stood in buses, street and subway cars for long periods of time. Everywhere I went took hours. It had been part of life and I accepted it.

My two living experiences were as different as night and day and it dawned on me how many hours of my life had been controlled by city transportation.

To go to work I had to travel from one bus, transfer to another, then race down the steep steps to catch the subway, then trek to the high-rise glass building of employment where I was swept to the twenty-third floor by the latest fast moving elevator to my office. At day end I would leave the building and tip-toe among the dead birds that flew into the glass building and died during my working hours.

I was in paradise loving every day I stepped out of my front door knowing I wouldn't be tip-toeing on dead birds though there were over 400 species of wild birds and animals that

made their home in the Ottawa Valley including bluebirds, thrushes, cardinals, wrens, owls, turkeys and the rare red-shouldered hawk.

In the valley, I no longer had to take a day off work or spend two to three hours on transportation to go to an unapproachable doctor's office. I acquired a wonderful family doctor who cared for me. I could walk to his office if I chose to. He believed in preventive medicine saying a physical once a year would catch anything in its early stages. He had a clinic next door to do most of the tests and if needed the tests was called in to him before I left his office.

How convenient was that. All this was done, a joke was had and a relationship formed and I was home in less than two hours. If I were in Toronto, in two hours I might be just entering the room to an unfamiliar doctor.

If I ever had the urge to go to the city, Pembroke was only 150 km to Ottawa, Canada's capital city, less than two hours away where I could enjoy all the amenities city life had to offer.

Anything I needed was just around the corner and if I really wanted I could walk. I no longer needed to reserve hours of my time for transportation. The hours wasted every day was now gratefully mine becoming significant to my daily life.

The clean, cool, crisp days of fall were my favorite time of the year. The Ottawa Valley's landscape was stunning. The brilliant greens turned to glorious reds and golds, which made perfect conditions for auto and cycle touring which I enjoyed. When the leaves began to drop

I took great pleasure in hiking through Algonquin Park, other park grounds and nature trails. I loved the crunching of the leaves under my feet.

I was amazed that the tradition of fall hunting took precedence over work. The factories had skeleton crews or closed down. City folk of Toronto would never understand this rural lifestyle that took hold of me.

Winter's cloak of cold temperatures spread its blanket of snow over the valley. I reveled in the great outdoors with seasonal activities designed to feed the Canadian spirit. I became a snow angel, made snowmen and tobogganed with my babies and loved watching their achievements in winter sports that were never too far away. I enjoyed cross country skiing and the babies excelled at downhill.

I was introduced to snowmobiling by travelling through the bush. Excited I sped up ignoring my instructions and before I knew it I had left everyone trailing behind me. As luck would have it I toppled into a soft snowbank. When the others showed up and I reared my head to laughter I swore a young tree had gotten in my way.

I had ice fished in a covered shack with my uncle once on Lake Simcoe. I couldn't concentrate on the card game while waiting for the fish to bite. I was petrified of the whole idea of boring a hole in frozen ice or having a fire heater on it.

I was now enjoying ice fishing in the open air by a camp fire watching my frozen stiff stockings standing on their own drying near the heat of the fire.

The Ottawa Valley was full of transit people whose minds were rich in knowledge. Their knowledge in the arts brought the theatre performances in full swing where people learned while enjoying life.

My babies had grown. They not only performed at Pembroke's Kiwanis Music Festival they relished in all sports at school and away from school in soccer fields and in Ottawa valley hockey arenas including Pembroke, officially known as Canada's 'Hockeytown' where three native sons were inducted to Hockey's Hall of Fame, and where the renowned Pembroke Lumber Kings compete at the Junior 'A' level in the Central Canada Hockey League. I watched many of their games and when I couldn't I listened to the games on the radio.

Soccer fields were run by great soccer coaches who settled in the Ottawa Valley from Scotland and into the fields of Pembroke, establishing the first games of soccer to the area where girls and boys played together. Every Pembroke team had green uniforms and was recognized by them anywhere they went.

The beautiful parks were at our finger tips to picnic. We'd sit and eat watermelon and see how far we could spit the seeds, stick our feet in the running water or drop a fishing line in the water that ran along the parks or the Ottawa River.

The Ottawa River became the whitewater capital of Canada offering world-class rafting, fishing, kayaking, boating, unspoiled beaches and breathtaking scenery. It was all in my backyard as was Algonquin Park where I photographed spectacular views, camped, canoed, and hiked.

I had fell in a rabbit hole and I now held onto a hidden gem that filled my heart and gave me a home. There is never a day goes by that I am not grateful for the opportunity of living in the prettiest little, now, city of Pembroke that freed up valuable time in travel and gave me a great safe place to raise a family. I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.