

Part Three: Growing up at the Oxbow

The rush to build cottages at the oxbow grew with the widening and deepening of the newly named Barge Canal. With the opening of the canal for the season in 1915, construction on the 31st cottage had begun. Residents and visitors swam, fished, and camped, and local companies held picnics and corn roasts for their employees on the oxbow's shore. The newspaper referred to the area as *"an ever increasing Mecca for Fairport residents... scarcely a day passes that the crowd at that place is not augmented by new arrivals."* The editor even proposed a new name for the wide waters, but "Fair Lake" was not embraced by the locals.

In the 1930's, the impact of the Great Depression caused a significant change at the oxbow, as many of the waterfront cottages became year round homes for those struggling to endure years of financial hardship. While many of the cottages had electric service, there was no running water. Telephone lines were installed, although most residents didn't own a phone. The most persistent problem was the lack of sanitary sewers or permanent septic tanks.

Bill and Georgia Gleason moved to the oxbow in 1938 with two young children in tow. They set up housekeeping in cottage 41, a very small home of 340 square feet. Bill died in 1941, and soon Georgia and the children relocated to a slightly larger cottage, located with two dozen others on a long sliver of land with water both in front and behind. A boardwalk was the only way to access the homes. It required considerable effort for the residents to keep these cottages stocked with groceries and supplies.

The Gleason children, Bill Jr. and Joyce, have vivid memories of living at the oxbow in the 1940s. To make ends meet, their mother worked long hours at the nearby Hart and Vick Greenhouses, where she made fifty cents per hour. Although many at the oxbow were poor, Bill Jr. considered the Jeffersons at cottage 18 to be rich, with walls adorned with paintings and statues in their gardens. And he remembers the thrill of being allowed to run the controls of the Main Street lift bridge by its operator, Ernie Stewart of cottage 15. Bill Jr. and Joyce both recall raising ducks and rabbits, and tending a large garden at the back corner of a pasture adjacent to the oxbow, kindly provided by a neighboring farmer. Bill also told me of the day he and a friend went fishing in a small rowboat. Testing the limits of American ingenuity, the boys started a fire in the wooden boat and cooked the fish as soon as they caught them, indifferent to the problems that might arise from such a scheme.

Dave Adams was born in 1941 and came to the oxbow as a young boy with his widowed mother a few years later. Desperate for a place to live, friends helped them to transform a small shed built from boxcar lumber into a home. He remembers always being cold in the winter. With no insulation, the wind penetrated the walls and floor, and a tiny stove struggled to keep them warm. Both Adams and the Gleasons recall pumping water from a well a good distance away from their cottages. In the winter months they used a sled to pull the heavy jugs back home through the snow. That is, when the pump wasn't frozen.

Caption

A fire in 1949 destroyed two cottages on the boardwalk, and severely damaged two others. Firefighters promptly responded, but were required to roll 1,500 feet of hose down the boardwalk to reach the blaze.



Caption

Dave Adams with his bicycle, in front of the home he and his mother shared at the oxbow. They eventually moved into a more traditional oxbow cottage.

