

Memories of Muskoka Lakes Public Library

by Adele Fairfield

I was invited to join the Library Board of Directors when I became a full-time resident of Walker's Point. A close friend suggested that it might be a nice, peaceful way to replace the Boards from which I had resigned when I left Brantford. Well, that was 1994, it is now 2021, and I am still involved with the Muskoka Lakes Township Library.

I will try and explain my shock and surprise when I walked into my first Township of Muskoka Lakes library to attend a Library Board meeting.

Many of you will remember the original community centre and know that it sat on the same piece of property where the library in Port Carling now sits. Many of us remember that it was a small building that housed many wonderful events such as the Straw Hat Players and other community events. At the front of the building was a small room that housed what was the Port Carling Library, the main library for the libraries in the Township. It was this the room that shocked me. It was not a very large room. It had windows, but they did not open. Good books were piled neatly on tables as there wasn't enough shelf space. I was shocked that this was considered THE library that served everyone in Muskoka Lakes.

The CEO was a diminutive-sized lady with a strong Scottish accent. It turned out she ran the entire township library system (there were five or six small outpost libraries at that time). I was introduced to a half dozen people who were capable, enthusiastic Library Board members for this unusual library. I quickly learned that the Scottish lady was Betty Glen. She did indeed run things. I also quickly realized that Betty Glen was the most valuable asset that Muskoka Lakes possessed.

It was certainly a pleasant surprise to find that the library was well stocked for reading enjoyment and was an impressive library in its content. The members of the Board were enthusiastic library members. I knew there should be substantial financial support because of the base provided by the population of Muskoka Lakes. Current members had donated a substantial sum of money dedicated to replacing the library. It became my mission to find out why this small, underserved facility housed our library.

The Board and membership indicated that the Council had no interest in spending money to replace the library. Subsequently, when I was invited to replace the retiring councillor, it seemed to be a good time to investigate this lack of interest. When I was elected to the Council I discovered that the Library Board and membership were absolutely right. The Council had no interest in discussing spending any money on the library. As you can imagine, a different approach seemed necessary.

I decided one day, when the Council had meetings all day, that I would buy lunch for the councillors. My one requirement to enjoy our lunch was that all the councillors had to go and see the library first. They needed to see what I felt was a shameful level of library service that we were offering the people of Muskoka Lakes.

The councillors learned first hand that the room was completely inadequate. In order to plug in the computer, the electrical cord ran from inside the library, across the entrance hall, through the main entrance of the building, and down to the far end of the building. This allowed it to be plugged into what

was laughingly called the 'Executive Suite'. The roof of this storage room leaked. Betty Glen, being diligent, had put everything necessary into storage containers so that nothing was ruined. This personal tour was effective. Council approved a new library for Muskoka Lakes Township.

I don't think any of us realized how complicated it would be, however, to build a new library. We had so many decisions to make. Where would the new library be located? What would happen to the well-loved and frequently used community centre? What size should we build the new library? Was the location to be for a library, a community centre, both or none? In her usual thorough manner, Betty contacted the Provincial Library Service to seek guidance.

The existing location was well loved. Financing a new community centre was not part of the Library Board's plan, and it had not been part of the Council's plan, either. Betty Glen, and Beth Samuel, the Library Board Chair, toured several newly built libraries. They based their recommendations regarding the required size on the experience of others.

The division between the needs of the community centre and creation of a new library had become a source of conflict. Community anger was building. In an effort to overcome this anger, Mayor John Young sent two senior staff members to visit the same libraries and provide their own report to the council as to the size that was required for our township. I remember walking into Treasurer Jim McDivitt's office with a heavy heart, wondering what problem they had for us now. Jim looked at me with his delightful smile and said, referring to the toured libraries, "They're not big enough".

While this did not help to heal anger, it did give the Library supporters encouragement to continue to plan and to search for an architect to design and hopefully, build a new library. The Library Board and the community centre had different requirements. They each chose different architects, and the community centre found a new suitable location. The Library Board selected Ted Handy as their architect.

This was now the time for significant fundraising. The architect saw far beyond what the Board had dared to hope for. The fundraising meetings began. Two of the library supporters, Phyllis Parker and Diane McKee, made a connection with someone interested in helping us with our fundraising efforts. He wanted to meet with us in two days, and he requested a complete list of our fundraising requirements.

I spent the next day, with the help of Betty Glen and Jim McDivitt, drawing up a financial statement. Fortunately, I showed this effort to my husband, who suggested that the formatting needed to be improved. Once that was done, we had the good fortune to meet Graham Alloway; he became our champion.

The combination of Betty Glen's talent and Graham Alloway's support was the reason for our outstanding success. Graham Alloway's support went well beyond the financial; he became a mentor for the new library, always available, and giving us the benefit of his capabilities. Planning meetings were interesting and constructive. I knew whenever Graham Alloway called me, that something interesting, and always good, was about to occur.

Whenever the architect had a design that Betty didn't consider the best for library use, they would talk it through, until there was agreement with all the partners. The key "partners" were Betty Glen, the architect, Muskoka Lakes Township senior staff, Beth Samuel (Library Board Chair), myself, (as I was appointed by Council) and, always nearby and available, was Graham Alloway. I remember these

meetings in vivid detail. Perhaps it is the memory of watching a petite, highly intelligent woman working until the men, who were to complete the build, agreed, or at least acknowledged, her perspective and worked with her.

Betty maintained her focus on the best possible service for the library members. Her attention to every detail, combined with the determination of Graham Alloway to pay tribute to his parents, are the reasons that the Norma and Miller Alloway Muskoka Lakes Library is unique, and continues to meet changing technology requirements, and continues to effectively serve its members. Cathy Duck and Lorna MacFarlane (daughter of Betty Glen) continue to provide TML with their expertise and enthusiasm. They brought the dream to reality, and have embraced displaying artwork from artists as special as Hilary Clark Cole.

I am privileged to have had the opportunity to be part of this project. My regret is that I did not write about this experience while Betty was still with us. After her retirement, when the residents of Walker's Point were trying to carry on volunteer library service to the community, Betty was our mentor. She was always there, and came and enjoyed many celebrations with us.

Betty Glen and her library staff were not considered Township of Muskoka Lakes employees until it was too late to benefit Betty. Her attitude never reflected that she had none of the usual benefits. After those many years of service, Betty retired without a pension.

The opportunity to be so closely involved with this special project is one that I treasure. There may still be scars on my back from those who disagreed, but basically I felt privileged to be part of this unique group of dedicated individuals.

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