

Windermere – Founding Families

by: R.J. Boyer

Jacob Bogart was in the nearby area first. Then two cousins both bearing the name Thomas Aitken arrived coincidentally in 1860. This was before the official land grant system was set up. Much of the early settlement in Muskoka was organized through the medium of this Free Grants and Homesteads Act of 1868. In order to obtain and hold property, the potential resident had to comply with certain requirements. The land granted to him was owned by the Crown and the new owner was committed to proportional land clearance as well as to the erection of a home stead. Both of these activities were to be accomplished within a specified length of time. When the immigrant had complied with these requirements, he could apply for his letter patent which confirm his ownership of this land granted to him for residency and cultivation by the Crown.

Both Jacob Bogart and Thomas Aitken tried to clear land which they had selected near Deebank. This was very painful work because it was covered with stones which had to be lifted and arranged into fence-lines. Thomas Aitken decided to move from his location to lakeshore property adjacent to that where the David Fife family were already settled. At this time, there was no road into Windermere. Steamboats began traveling up the Muskoka Lakes in 1864. When the second small steamboat the “Waubamik,” was put on Lake Rosseau, Windermere Landing was one of its ports of call. Windermere was, of course, named after Windermere, England. It has been suggested that this was done by a government postal official rather than the villagers themselves as this was the custom. Most of the settlers in Muskoka at this time were from England and the name was therefore more than scenically appropriate. It has been suggested nevertheless that the Lakeland area does scenically resemble Windermere, England. Apparently, the name was not formally registered until 1924 according to the information printed in the bulletin of the Muskoka Lakes Museum.

When Jacob Bogart and Thomas Aitken settled in what there was to become Windermere at the beginning of the 1860s, there was no post office there. The closest post office was at Muskoka Falls to which mail was delivered weekly from Severn Bridge. Jacob and Thomas took turns walking to Muskoka Falls.

The earliest tourists in Windermere were sportsmen who came for hunting or fishing. At this time, the word tourist was unknown in the area. The visiting “sportsmen” would spend the night in the homes of the settlers. They were perhaps most graciously received by the Fife family and the Aitken family each of whom would expand their facilities into hotels eventually. The sportsmen would also camp on the shores of the lakes or on the islands. Sometimes, they built small houses. Colonel D. H. C. Mason tells us in his book *The Fire Islanders* that the first settlers on the islands adjacent to Windermere as well as elsewhere on the lakes were in many cases descendants of these early campers and sportsmen. University students, a group of botanists in particular are recorded by Mason as having camped and done research throughout the Muskoka Lakes region in 1862, 1863 and 1864.

It was in 1871 that Windermere House became a functioning reality as a hotel. It was built and maintained over the years by the Aitken family, notably Thomas Aitken and his descendants. Produce for the hotel was obtained locally from the farmers. This included milk, meats, potatoes, carrots, beets, tomatoes as well as the very special Muskoka corn at a slightly later date. The Forge family would collect produce from the farmers by rowboat and deliver it to the hotels. Mr. Boyer remembers that the area of Watt township east of Windermere had always been the location of some of the best farms in Muskoka.