

FAIRYLAND

IT STILL HOLDS A MAGIC PLACE IN MUSKOKA'S MEMORY



The story begins one summer day in 1929 when two attractive young women – twins, it turned out – drove into Bala and pitched a sporty looking tent at what would become Jaspen Park. As locals watched with great curiosity, the women, accompanied by the young sons of one of them (Cyril, 12, Eddie, 2), pulled out stools and easels and began to paint the scenery around them. After a few days, it was obvious that the women artists planned to spend the whole summer in that tent, selling their own sketches and paintings to support themselves.

This touched off a big debate around town. Some argued that the women (from Toronto, of all places!) had no right to camp free on town property. Others objected to the way that they dressed. They were wearing men's trousers and knee-length riding boots. Still others objected to the fact that Marguerite was divorced (an indicator of flawed character in 1929). However, business people noticed that cottagers were coming into Bala to buy the paintings, and that they often stayed to have lunch or shop elsewhere.

Public opinion swung behind the twins. *"Let those painting ladies stay where they are! They're good for business."* Had Marguerite Boyce and her twin sister, Violet Hobbs, been forced out of town that year, Bala would have missed an enchanting experience over the next three decades. The twins purchased a cottage just a few hundred yards from where they had pitched their tent and turned it into one of the best-known and most beloved tourist attractions in Muskoka. None of that would have happened if the negative voices had won the debate that first summer.

Buying the cottage

In that first summer, Marguerite and Violet noticed a “For Sale” sign on a cottage property on the town side of the little bay. When they returned to Bala in 1930, Marguerite used \$100 from their painting sales to put a down payment on the cottage. By the end of that summer they had painted large hollyhocks on the side of the cottage, calling it Hollyhock Cottage. This marked the beginning of a love affair between the twins and Muskoka that would last close to three decades. Several generations of children grew up knowing Marguerite and Violet as either “the Twins” or “the Fairies”.

The Fireplace:

The first major decision of the twins was to build a stone fireplace to provide heat on chilly Muskoka evenings and to give the cottage a rustic charm. Local contractors guffawed, especially after the twins borrowed a library book to find out how to build a fireplace. They didn’t laugh long. Using the library book as their guide, Marguerite and Violet dug down five feet to lay a foundation of rock and cement. They ended up by building a masterpiece of cobble stone — eight feet wide – which could hold a four-foot log.

Building the log cabin:

The next decision was to build a 10 foot by 10 foot log cabin outside the main cottage, relying again on a library book. The logs came from a giant pine on their own property, which the twins climbed and wired so it would not strike the cottage when it fell. Everything went according to plan, and the log cabin still stands today.

A magic place:

At first Marguerite and Violet concentrated on selling their paintings. That was expanded into a gift shop and eventually a tea room. The twins also developed children’s doll exhibits in the gardens outside, including Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Little Red Riding Hood, Jack and Jill, and Mother Goose. Several generations of children regarded the Twins’ Studio as a magic place.



The Wishing Well:

An important part of the Twins' Studio was a wishing well, which was created at the beginning of World War II and which is still there. Visitors were encouraged to throw in pennies which helped to send more than 1,000 gift parcels to Canadian servicemen and prisoners-of-war during the war. Violet and Marguerite placed a card in each package. It had a photo of the wishing well on one side. On the other side was a verse: "Wishes are short sweet prayers – God bless and keep you in His loving care." The twins later published an Honour Roll listing everyone who received a parcel (included in the list are Bala historian and artist Lorne Jewitt, and also Linda's late father, Captain John W. Jackson)



Later years:

In 1954, Violet moved to Bala from the Toronto home that she had shared for years with her sister. Marguerite died three years later. Violet re-named their summer business "Fairyland" and dressed every day in organdy. Many children believed she was a real fairy lady.

Fairyland ends:

Early in the 1960s Violet announced several times that Fairyland would be closing soon, but she found it impossible to resist families who wanted to bring their children "just one more time". Her impromptu tours continued until shortly before she died in 1974, leaving the cottage to her nephew, Cyril Boyce. In 1976, his daughter, Kathie Boyce came to Bala with her own small children to help look after her ailing father. After her father's death a short time later, she became the owner and lived in the historic cottage for more than 30 winters before moving to British Columbia in 2009.

The cottage is the last remaining silent witness to Fairyland, the Twins' Studio, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and all the other precious memories of the last half century is the cottage itself.

DOORS OPEN 2011

The Doors Open event on Saturday, June 25th, will be the first time that the public has been invited back inside Marguerite and Violet's Hollyhock Cottage since Violet's death in 1974.

www.doorsopenontario.on.ca

Somewhere Marguerite and Violet must be smiling!

Mayor Alice Murphy and her husband Paul, purchased the historic cottage to prevent others from tearing it down. They have been slowly restoring it.

Photos by: Ed Boutilier, MuskokaBlog.com

Historical notes on the Twin Studio and Fairyland were written by Jack and Linda Hutton.

