

TOM PARRIS

As told by granddaughter Jacqueline (VanClief) Hatkoski

Thomas Watkins Parris was born on April 8, 1893 at home near Dwight, Ontario. He grew up on a farm which was located on the 10th concession between Angle (Devil's Angle) Lake and Dwight. As a boy of twelve, he began to work in road construction on the road being built from Dwight to Oxtongue. He did not have the opportunity to attend school, as before this he was needed to help at home. He married Pearl Wells on December 29, 1915 and they had three children – Dorothy (Quinn), Bertha (VanClief), and James.

Tom's knowledge of the bush qualified him for work with land surveyors locating blazes and old monuments in retracement work.

About 1928, Tom began to work as a Forest Ranger for the Department of Lands and Forests whose main office was in Dorset. Tom was assigned the area from Oxtongue Lake to Dorset and thus began to spend May to October at his little cabin at the mouth of the Oxtongue River. When he wasn't in the tower, he was clearing portage trails. Other days, he trekked two to three miles each day up to the wooden fire tower and its little cabin to spend his day watching for signs of fire or danger. One danger he often joked about was "staring down a bull moose on the trail to the tower" and then waiting to see if his captive audience believed him. He always enjoyed and welcomed visitors to the tower or to "Tom's cabin." He loved to "chin-wag."

His grandchildren looked forward to visiting Grandpa at his fire tower cabin. What an adventure it was to hike all the way up to the fire tower! They remember enjoying swimming at the river. There was Gerry the groundhog who ate bread and jam with him at his kitchen table while they watched quietly from the bunk beds (Gerry who was really Geraldine as they learned when her pups also came to eat); pretending to enjoy homemade pancakes for breakfast; sitting quietly in the canoe so that otters could be seen sliding down the bank of the river into the water; or just gliding along in grandpa's red canoe.

Although Tom knew very well how to properly paddle a canoe, he had a unique way of paddling for his visitors. His weight in the stern caused his canoe to ride "bow high" and everyone knew it was Tom approaching. He spent many hours visiting with friends on the lake where he paused to tell a "talltale" or two.

Tom laid out many of the cottage lots on Oxtongue Lake for the Ministry with the help of the prospective owners and this was the beginning of many friendships.

About 1933, Tom's wife Pearl began cooking for Mrs. Marion Blackman from Atlanta, Georgia, at Lewis Camp near the south end of the lake. Pearl spent part of many summers at Oxtongue Lake as chef and companion to Mrs. Blackman and her family. Tom was a weekly dinner guest at the Blackman camp.



TOM'S CABIN - late 1940's the "office" for Lands & Forest where Tom worked. Site of cairn erected in memory of Tom.



Wooden fire tower - manned by Tom Parris - on hill behind Harris Road - 1935

TOM PARRIS Continued

The wooden tower was eventually replaced with a fine metal structure that “swayed in the wind enough to make a man seasick” said Tom. About 1960, the tower was dismantled and then Tom worked at the Dorset tower until his retirement in 1962. He was one of the few people brave enough to paint the enclosure at the top.

Tom was a self taught man of the Earth who spent his winters scaling logs at lumber camps and the other seasons at his red and white cabin at the mouth of the Oxtongue River. He enjoyed nature, respected and loved the land. Tom died on May 2, 1965 at his home in the Pinery near Spring Lake at seventy-two years of age.

Tom was made an honorary member of the Oxtongue Lake Association. He treasured this certificate of recognition as ranger, trailblazer and friend which he proudly hung on his living room wall. About the same time, the road that led to the landing for Tom’s cabin (at Parkway Cottages) was named the Tom Parris Trail by Dr. Wm. Keith, a long time and faithful friend.

In August 1966, the Oxtongue Lake Association held a dedication ceremony as a memorial to Tom on the site where his cabin was located. The idea for the memorial was sparked by Fran Gower and was brought to fruition through the efforts of Dr. Boyer, Ray Smith, Bruce Keown, Bill Horn and Jim Keitch. Family and friends attended the ceremony and his long time friend Ferg McGuire of Dorset and granddaughter Georgina (VanClief) Crewson unveiled the memorial, which is a large rock with a bronze plaque. The carvings on the plaque are a white pine and a canoe, which were done by Bruce Miller. He carved the pine branches in an upward position, which denotes hope & happiness. Dr. Wm. Keith, Tom’s friend of many years, spoke at this ceremony. In his speech, Dr. Keith described Tom in these words “ he was a farmer, horseman, shantyman, riverman, woodsman, fire-ranger, road builder, scaler, conservationist, story-teller, and everybody’s consultant, one always got a kind, serious and wise counsel and advise”. The memorial site can be reached from Harris Bay Road or by water. It is a testimony to Tom’s dedication as forester and friend to Oxtongue Lake.

Tom’s love of canoeing is recognized each summer at the Oxtongue Lake Regatta when the Tom Parris trophy is presented to the male who achieves excellence in canoeing skills.

Tom’s family is honored to know their grandparents have been remembered as part of the Oxtongue Lake history. If any reader of this history has a “Tom tale” to tell, we would enjoy hearing from you at Box 1, Dwight, Ontario POA 1H0.



Tom Parris with his canoe and Land & Forest Posters - 1935



Pearl Parris - cook at Lewis camp - 1938

TOM PARRIS Continued

Presentation made by Dr. Keith at the dedication of the Tom Parris Plaque

I think that Tom would have wished that the feeling of this gathering today be one of what I would call “subdued happiness”. We are aware of the presence of his spirit here in the woods and on the waters.

Your committee knew that you wanted this memorial in this place and that you wished it to be true, simple, and dignified, even as Tom was. We hope, and indeed we feel, that it fills those conditions. The idea for this memorial was not a single one. The spark came from Frances Gower, the fruition is before you. It was because Tom embodied in his personality, industry, loyalty, gentleness, strength, kindness, tolerance, humour and above all a deep love of family, friends and all humanity, and all nature about him, that we loved him and placed this rock and inscription here.

He was born near here. He assumed Man’s estate at about 13 years or earlier. He was a farmer, horseman, shantyman, riverman, woodsman, fire ranger, road builder, scaler, conversationalist, story teller and everybody’s consultant. One always got a kind, serious and wise counsel and advice.

Eleanor and I were fortunate enough to have known him since 1946. When we bought the property across the river from Mr. Brown he said “one more thing Doctor, about half the value of this place is Tom Parris over there.” How true his appraisal.

You are all familiar with Tom in this environment. Here are two incidents from elsewhere. You all know about his potatoe patch and his love of potatoes. A few years ago he worked for the winter in a camp north of Sudbury. He lived on salt pork and beans for several months. He told me that when he reached Sudbury he spent the day going from restaurant to restaurant eating boiled potatoes, fired potatoes, baked potatoes and mashed potatoes, until he could eat no more.

Three or four years ago, he and Norman Van Clief took a trip to the “front.” The “front” is a proper term of the 19th century describing settlements along the Great Lakes. Incidentally, Tom found the Niagara River was running backwards. He thought rivers should run more or less south, not north.

When Norm reached the Q.E. cloverleaf, Tom said “oh, oh, you are in one of those eddies Norm, you’ll never get out” However, he added, “he did get out.” Some people exaggerate; Tom just illuminated his stories with the brush of a true artist.

Tom dearly loved his family. Dorothy and Bertha were his first “little Angels.” Jimmy was very greatly missed by Tom & Pearl. He had great love for, and interest in his grandchildren, and at the time when he was mistaken for President Eisenhower he was a proud great grandfather.

Pearl and Tom had a long and happy life together. I was fortunate to catch occasional glimpses of it. On one occasion four or five years ago, I was in the kitchen telling Tom I had bought a McCullough saw through a friend of my son’s. I named the price. Tom glanced across the room at Pearl. She looked up and said, “you can get one.” That was the whole conversation, but I was allowed to arrange the purchase.



Tom Parris Memorial by the Oxtongue River where Tom’s cabin was located - Aug. 1966

TOM PARRIS Continued

Tom's good humour and courage never deserted him. Even when he ruptured his ulcer in the Tower at Dorset, he took the long painful climb down to the ground. He was a patient and of course, the nurses loved him.

Two weeks later when he was recovering I visited him and he marched up and down outside the house saying "doctor, I think I am getting my good strength back."

The last evening of his life he spent with friends in our cabin, Ralph Blackwell and the late Dr. George Boyer among them. There was a mud hole in the road and he walked to his car in the quiet, still, cool night. I had a strong, firm handshake, a laughing "goodnight" and that was the end.

Dr. Boyer wrote the last letter of his life to me enclosing a cheque for this memorial. He said "I always felt better and with more faith in mankind after I had been with Tom"

We are grateful to Ray Smith, Bruce Keown and Bill Horn for their help, and especially to Jim Keech of the Big Eddy, who arranged for the plaque and installed it.

The late George VanClief was the first president of this Association. Three years ago he arranged that Tom be made an honorary member of the Association, and it was presented in person at the schoolhouse. He was proud of it and hung it in his living room.

It read as follows:

In correspondence with Dr. Boyer last summer he promised me this verse by Kipling. It could have been written for Tom Parris.

"B'en as he trod that day to God,
So walked he from his birth,
In simpleness and gentleness,
And honour and clean mirth."

His very long-time friend and telephone mate, Francis McGuire of Dorset, known to me as "Ferg," is now going to unveil the plaque. I would like you all to know that carvings of white pine and the canoe were done by Tom's friend, Bruce Miller, and that the pine branches are placed in the upward-looking position of hope & happiness.