

TRAVELER'S JOURNAL

Sisters map out family treasure along the Nova Scotia coast

In the Nova Scotia wilds, sisters find the 'treasure' on their map is the legacy their parents staked out.

By Laurie Mercer, Special to The Times

St. Mary's, Canada — BEING the two-years-younger sister to an accomplished firstborn hasn't always been a day at the beach.

Our parents, Jack and Eddy, gave us corny similar middle names (Joan for her, Jean for me) and identical dresses. Memory is selective, but most of my childhood take on sisterhood lies securely wrapped in matching gingham dresses.

Throughout adolescence, when I was feeling second best, I acted out by taking her clothes. I even dated some of Bonnie's boyfriends after she was safely off to college. We were competitive to our biological core.

Adulthood brought some respite. In time, I got over her cutting off my braids. And one recent summer, we quickly agreed to risk a long vacation together accompanied by the men who are now our partners in life.

There was nostalgia about it. Bonnie and I chose to travel to Nova Scotia, pursuing a mysterious map to land our parents bought here in 1970.

In a marriage that lasted nearly 50 years, our parents traveled the globe together, often on limited means. They would stay in youth hostels when they were young and Elderhostel as they grew older. In the 1950s, they took Bonnie and me all over Europe, traveling double on a Triumph motorcycle. We were in a double sidecar, usually arguing about the firstborn's right to sit in front.

They had rich lives of their own.

We knew little about their land in Nova Scotia. Notices of assessment and taxes from the municipality of the district of St. Mary's in Sherbrooke indicated the purchase was part of the Antigonish-Guysborough region.

Bonnie and I began paying the taxes, about \$50 annually, when we took over our mother's financial affairs in the 1990s. (My father died in 1988.) By then, we couldn't ask her anything about the property because of her advanced dementia. Why did they buy land? What was it worth?

Its true value was something we would learn on our trip.

Besides a hand-amended map drawn by our father, all we knew about the land came from a deed issued in 1927. The actual amount of land appeared to be about 2 acres with 300 feet of oceanfront; the cost was \$1,950. Thus equipped with purpose and destination, we prepared to experience the Canadian Maritimes for the first time.

Bonnie and I and our respective mates met in Halifax, Nova Scotia's capital, and secured for a week a 36-foot top-of-the-line RV that would make the trip more enjoyable. For \$2,000 plus mileage, we weren't roughing it. It

had a washer and dryer, two bedrooms and a lighted curio cabinet that neatly disappeared when the slide-out living room was retracted while we were in motion.

But even all the enhancements offer no escape when sharing an RV. And although our sisterly silliness soared at the chance to make a fundamental connection to the adventuresome spirits that had been our parents, Bonnie's husband, Alan, who likes his comforts, and my companion, David, an adventurer, expressed reservations.

"Why are we taking this trip?" each man had asked as we pulled out.

A more pertinent query would have been, "Where are we going?" Aside from the description on the deed and my father's map, I hadn't a clue.

Nova Scotia's landscape was riddled with coves and islands, beaches, harbors and more than a few places called Lobster Point. Always keeping the Atlantic to our right, we traveled as if we had all the time in the world. Having once watched Bonnie captain their 36-foot sailboat into its slip in Redondo Beach, David asked her to share the driving. It made me proud to see how easily she took the wheel.

In Yankee Wells by Fancy's Beach, around the corner from Lobster Point, we began to ask strangers to help us find the land. There are fewer than a million people in Nova Scotia, so finding someone to ask for directions was sometimes a quest in itself.

The map was a draw. We began to call it our "treasure map." People loved looking at it, even when they couldn't help us. Although the treasure map and the modern road atlas we had bought in Halifax bore some resemblance, Nova Scotia is vast and often unmarked, and we were never completely sure where we were. I enjoyed that lack of center; it made me feel like a child spinning to lose her balance.

The only way to discover the chunk of land that our map said was bordered by Long Pond and Smith Cove meant finding a person familiar with local geography, past and present.

Our wizard turned out to be Willard. We never did learn his last name, in Smith Cove Willard didn't need one. He was the local harbormaster and a practiced fisherman who knew the coast.

He directed us toward a dirt road a few miles back. After we passed a stark white church, the road degenerated from a farm lane into a cow path, meandering through creek beds and over primitive bridges that shuddered under the weight of our RV. Pine branches scraped the RV's sides and top. David, my man in the driver's seat, was not fainthearted, so we plunged ahead for several more gut-wrenching miles, stopping at an enormous pile of polished rocks that we learned was Fancy's Beach. This had to be it.

With the Atlantic in front of us, we prepared to see a vista our parents had come upon decades before.

We unlocked the RV door and descended the steps together, one great step for the Mercer girls and one more reason for the two men to suspect the women in their lives. Where were we? Alan remained at the RV for a nap, leaving the three of us to close in on our target in this vast, unpopulated place. It felt like the end of the Earth.

The treasure map helped us find our bearings. Our father had written on it, "Cellar Hole, ruined foundation on west side of road," and indicated a cemetery nearby. All the high-water marks mentioned in the deed, the cellar hole and even Ambrose Fancy's house had disappeared.

David, Bonnie and I walked, hunted, poked around and finally stumbled through pine groves to face what the map called "Baker Cove." We lined up the unnamed island on the treasure map to determine our 300 feet of shore. The view of water, shore and woods was seamless.

X marked the spot. We had come to the land that Jack and Eddy had bought.

As we journeyed to this place, Bonnie and I had wondered aloud what we would do with the land. Having discovered the beauty of its isolation, Bonnie got a dreamy, out-of-body look.

"Let's keep it," she said.

Given the vastness of Nova Scotia and the size of its population, it seems unlikely anybody would ever build on it. The water's so cold that even in August it's unbearable.

As night closed in, the three of us hiked back to tell Alan what we had discovered. Trucks now surrounded the RV; a bonfire of discarded lobster pots lightened the darkening sky. And there, amid a collection of families and locals of all ages, in the glow of the bonfire, was reflected the face of my brother-in-law, a usually reserved cardiologist, sipping whiskey from a jelly jar while singing "Sloop John B."

"They knocked on the door and asked me if I wanted some fresh clams," he said.

We joined in. We ate clams, drank whiskey and sang folk songs to the sound of a badly tuned guitar. The Fancy's Beach crowd turned out to be families and friends from nearby. Bonnie speculated later that our visit gave our guests something to talk about during long winters.

We promised to get in touch with one family's teenage daughter, who would be leaving Nova Scotia to work as an au pair in New Jersey.

And we hugged.

In the morning, Bonnie, Alan, David and I were unusually quiet. We had slept with the knowledge that Jack and Eddy, arriving on a motorcycle and sleeping in a tiny tent, had probably spent nights here in a similar fashion.

Even more than three decades years later, they were still showing us how to live.