About

Lake Superior's

# Isle Royale

By Joan Snell

The Ranger II

The Snells

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Our son asked if I would be willing to write about what I remember of my first visits to the island. He said it would be interesting historically. He said now most people stay only for a week or two instead of for the whole summer. "That must have been so hard…", he added.

The word "historically" brought me up short, and also the word "hard". The idea of my fist visit to Isle Royale having been over fifty years ago simply hadn't occurred to me. And it probably was hard for my parents-in-law. Then, I only did what I was told without having to plan for a whole summer without running water, electricity, cars, or grocery stores.

What stands out in my memory of that first visit, and always has, are the days I spent in the boat fishing with my husband's dad. He would rather have been alone. But my mother-in-law insisted, wanting some one with him, he being the age I am now, but not wanting to be out there her own self. My

husband was deep in translating a Russian Math paper.

My father-in-law hardly talked at all. When we'd leave the dock he'd give the usual explanation about how careful he had to be to avoid Art Mattson's fishing nets, but that was about it. No talking was a new experience for me since my own family was unusually talkative. ("Manic – manic," would say one of my aunts, an occupational therapist at the Massachusetts State Mental Hospital.) As the youngest, I didn't even try to keep up. And now there was no need. After going past the nets, he'd slow down the small motor. He only rowed once in a while now, which is what he was known for, his alternating strokes, trolling past the ends of the various small islands toward Blake's Point where the fish were most apt to be. We'd throw out our lines and settle in, to wait and to think our own thoughts. His were about the reality of the absolute, so he said. And I believe they really were, though he had been a writer. He'd decided he could support his wife and three boys by writing two books a year, adventure stories for teen-agers, thinking up the plots summers while fishing, then writing them over the winter.

And what were my thoughts? Now, I'm not sure I had any. The closest I had ever come to anything like this was bike riding, one lovely summer morning, with my grandfather in the countryside of southern France. We stopped to pick and eat nectarines from his orchard, about a mile from the house. But now I was doing nothing at all for a whole day, except holding a fish line, day after day. We brought coffee and sandwiches. If we got thirsty, in the boat there were metal cups, which we could reach overboard to fill with the delicious and very cold lake water. Once in a while we'd pull in a fish or untangle one of our lines from a rock. But he was pretty good at avoiding rocks and there weren't that many fish. The fish had to be hit on the head once they were netted and brought into the boat, which wasn't much fun. He had another big leaky boat. Once he went out by himself in that, wearing hip boots, rowing. He kept the fish alive in the accumulating water and then hit them all at the same time when he got home, though he did look tired. He always filleted the fish right away on the dock, surrounded by flying noisy gulls waiting to swoop down for the innards, which he threw into the water for them.

Our son asked, “How did he hold his pole while he was rowing?” He wasn’t rowing much anymore by the time I came into the picture, but I assume he braced his pole against the stick-prop which was in the side of the boat near the middle seat, steadying the bottom of the pole with his foot.

“Did he crisscross over the reefs? Circle over deep holes?” He always went along the reefs. Nothing else. Once on a quiet day we went out to the shallow spot beyond Blake’s Point, but we went along the reef there too. Early in the summer, a few times we fished around the islands near the Rock Harbor dock in Tobin’s Harbor, again just along the reefs. When we went around the other side of Blake’s point, he treated that whole area, called The Palisades, as one big reef. I don’t remember that we ever fished anywhere the other side of Scoville’s Point, probably because of the nets there.

“How did he know and what did he do when he caught a fish?” Well, trout are pretty easy to catch. At first they tug gently, as if they don’t believe they’ve been caught. Grandpa would know instantly if he’d caught a rock instead and he’d cut the motor. If not, then he, or I, whoever had caught the fish, would just reel it in, sometimes

wrapping the line around the stick-prop to help if it was a big fish. Once caught, a trout is mostly dead weight. Then Grandpa would hand the line over to me, if I didn't have it already, and pick up the net to scoop the fish into the boat. He always used the net. Once a fish was caught, he did not want it to get away. He was always the one to hit the fish over the head, too.

He had the reputation of being a good fisherman. Possibly he just spent more time at it than most. I think fishing was not what he was out there for (for the reality of the absolute, maybe?) not that he minded catching as many as he could. He didn't like to come home without any fish. That first summer, fishing was not very good. But we did all right. Always having two lines out instead of one could have made the difference. Having two lines out when one is alone, holding one and bracing the other, is possible but not easy.

All I did was be, out there in the middle of Lake Superior, feeling I was on the very top part of the world. I could imagine that once in a while I came close to being hypnotized by the sound of the waves against the boat, the quiet hum of the motor, the warming sun when there was one, though fishing was

best on cloudy days. I don't remember many days when we couldn't go out at all, that first summer. Each day the water was different. The waves were different, their size, their colors. Those differences don't show up in only two weeks. The island itself changes over the summer. Of course the trees stay the same, except when they fall down, and the shore and the rocks stay the same, except they too reflect, though less than the water does, the time of day and the weather. Sometimes a moose came to the edge of the water, or a mother with a baby or two. I never saw one in the water, though of course they do go into the water. There were many duck families and the loons kept themselves busy entertaining us away from their nests. It wasn't always easy to tell the difference between the calls of the loons and the calls of the wolves. We heard the wolves but never saw them. I don't remember any fox, though there are some now. There used to be coyotes, my husband says. We watched the various babies get longer and skinnier over the summer. The flying bugs got smaller. The fish got smaller and moved from the harbor farther out into the lake. Except one day near the end of the summer, not far out, my father-in-law hooked a big one that began jumping. He nearly dropped the line. Most of the fish are

lake trout, which don't jump. Getting that one into the boat took quite a long and exciting time, my silent father-in-law saying whoa and uh and even whee, giving me the line to hold and pull in, after wrapping it around the stick-prop to help, while he played the motor against the fish which sometimes jumped way out of the water as it went from one side of the boat to the other. The fish had scales and the meat, when it was filleted, turned out to be pink rather than white like trout. (My husband says some lake trout are pink….) That story was told the rest of the summer, every one in various stages of disbelief trying to guess what kind of fish it might have been (a silver salmon?) and how it had got itself into the lake in the first place.

My husband's niece has begun to compile a book of family recipes but she suddenly realized she didn't have any from Grandma Snell. (My husband remembers "sticky rolls". Grandma made them on the island but probably not ever on the mainland. All bread eaten on the island was made by her. Our share of the $160 bill for that entire first summer included flour and Crisco.) She only remembers rows of mason jars, full of rolled-up fish. "They sure looked funny," she wrote in her e-mail. Grandpa and I caught

maybe three or four fish a day. The extras were preserved in mason jars to be taken back to Wheaton, Illinois, where Grandpa and Grandma Snell lived. I remember the jars being sterilized in kettles of boiling water. But I can't remember what was done to the fish, if anything, before they were rolled up and put into the jars. And now the niece's recipe project has evolved into collecting recipes used on Isle Royale, with quite a few people helping out.

Grandma Snell kept very busy. There was a lot of cooking and cleaning to be done. For some reason housekeeping standards on the island were high. I was glad to be out fishing, unlike the rest of the island wives. Of course for most of them this was their home, more than a vacation place. Continuing to live and look ladylike mattered too, though in the woods and in a cabin. There are astonishing pictures of turn-of-the-century ladies presiding over outdoor fires and picnics in long skirts and white blouses. Grandma did wear blue jeans during the day. But every evening she got all cleaned up, using pitcher and bowl, and put on a pretty pink robe before our nightly game of Canasta.

Those were quietly wild canasta games, by the light of the late northern sunsets and then of the Aladin lamp. I guess it has to be said we all liked to win, a lot. Sometimes Grandpa Snell said he couldn't sleep afterwards. But he was always the first up the next morning, building the fires, fixing the "oats" and making coffee strong enough to wake the dead. The last one up was called a tapster, though no one seemed to know the origin of the term. First thing, I'd go down to the dock to raise the flag, once the old flagpole got replaced. We just happened to find a thin, long and straight fallen tree near the dock, which we peeled and to which we attached the rollers and the rope, figuring out how to set it all back into the end of the dock. Flags on the island were important; it was such an outpost. Probably Isle Royale belongs to the United States rather than to Canada because the maps of the time were inaccurate.

After raising the flag, I'd fill the drinking-water bucket. Dr. Clay, who lived in Rock Harbor, said nobody should be drinking the lake water, even back then. But nobody listened to him because nobody got sick. During the month of July, when the Glen Merritts were on their island across the inlet, Glen would come out when he saw me,

letting the screen door slam behind him, to yell wahoo. I'd wave and wait for Grandpa Snell to wahoo back. The other Merritts, who came for the month of August, were much quieter.

When the Glen Merritts were around, there were often last-minute evening gatherings, around the bonfire the Merritts would build on the great stone left in front of their cabin by the glaciers. They'd welcome all arrivals, helping tie boats to the dock or beach them, as was and still is the island custom. Then everybody would settle down, deciding on which side of the fire to sit according to where one wanted to be when a breeze upset the delicate balance between smoke and mosquitoes. Sometimes the moon rose directly over the mouth of the harbor and occasionally there'd be northern lights. And always there were the stars, more than anywhere else in the whole world, it seemed, no doubt because there was no electricity on the island. The conversation was mostly about fishing, and/or up-dates on wolf and moose populations, and/or the latest in what the benighted Park Service was up to now. But one time, Glen, who was the postmaster in Duluth, and Carl Dassler, who lived near Scoville's Point and had connections with the telephone company, got to arguing about

which made the most sense, a government-run operation or one run by private enterprise. Glen said it was crazy there were no telephones on the island. Carl Dassler said it was crazy to spend so much money getting mail to the island. The conversation gradually evolved into which was best, writing letters or talking on the phone, with input from all sides. E-mail was of course unheard of. And even now cell phones don't always work on the island. The mail boat still comes but the bag of mail just gets tossed over the rail to the dock at Hotel Island. It no longer gets put into the boxes, still there with the names of the residents from even more than fifty years ago. (When Mary, the Merritt's daughter, is around, she puts the mail in the boxes.)

You could hear the diesel motor of the mail boat, the other side of Blake's Point, and then its honk, in plenty of time to join the little fleet of converging boats, enjoying the stares of the mail-boat passengers, catching up on all the island and mainland gossip while waiting to pick up the mail and buy milk and eggs. Grandpa was pretty good at timing the end of his fishing day with the arrival of the mail boat. Then we'd continue on to where the home folks would be waiting to help us tie up, count the fish, hear the latest

and take the mail, milk and eggs back up to the cabin. Usually I stayed, first learning how and then helping to fillet the fish, deciding to go the whole way on that instead of becoming a vegetarian. Then up the hill we'd go, for supper around the table by the big window, held open by a hook attached to a beam in the low ceiling. Outside was our part of Lake Superior and the dock, the flagpole, the boats, the Merritts' island with their dock, flagpole and boats, and the trees and the sky and, best of all, the soul-restoring stillness except for an occasional gull on fish patrol.

Mostly of course we ate fish. It never occurred to even Dr. Clay to question their safety, eaten in such quantities, though there must already have been some question. And most frequently we ate the fish in slices dredged with corn meal and fried in bacon fat. A great slab of bacon lived outside in the "cooler", a small crate-like box nailed to a tree with its own little screen door to keep out the squirrels and chipmunks. Also in the cooler were the milk, eggs and margarine ("ohlie"). I think that's all. Potatoes were kept in the big metal container with a blue top under the porch that runs along the side of the cabin. Extra flour was there. Onions, carrots and

cabbages were probably kept there too, but I can't quite remember about that. Our supply of oranges, one for each of us every day, we kept with us in the guest cabin, bringing them to the main cabin a few at a time. Canned goods were in the bottom of the standing cabinet for dishes to the right of the kitchen window. Packages, like crackers, were kept on the shelves to the left or else in the window itself.

We ate lots of crackers, so there must have been more, maybe kept on a shelf in the main room. I can't quite remember about that either. Grandma Snell was a genius when it came to making meals out of nothing, amplified with crackers. Sometimes dinner would be a helping of shredded cabbage, carrots and raisins, with crackers (and peanut butter, if you wanted) on the side, followed by a big dessert like blueberry pie in August when there were blueberries everywhere. She even made a pretty good jam from all the thimbleberries.

Fortunately it was possible to send an order to the grocery store in Houghton, to be packed in a crate and put on board the Ranger (the name of the Park Service boat to the island). That must have been done at least once, but I didn't pay attention to the

details of the procedure. I expect a letter was sent on the mail boat, which went back and forth to Grand Marais in Minnesota, near the Canadian border. Probably packing and delivering groceries to the Ranger for people on the island was a service provided by the Houghton grocery store. You never quite knew when the groceries would arrive.

My favorite fish dish was baked fish, stuffed with crackers and with bacon slices over the crackers. Once in a while, the Glen Merritt family would come over for fish chowder. That was really good too. Afterwards we'd play Crazy Eights.

That first summer, Grandma Snell had to go back to Houghton overnight every two weeks "for pneumo". She had had TB. I first met her shortly after she had come home from "the san". She looked more worn then than she ever did again, and she lived into her nineties. They couldn't come to our wedding and my parents never did meet Grandpa Snell, though he and Mother, both enthusiastic letter writers, wrote to each other quite often. Grandpa wrote Mom a detailed description about fainting in the Chicago train station, on the way home from what turned out to be his last summer on

the island. It was quite a letter and I've still got it somewhere, I think. I hope.

So every two weeks Grandma got up early and was taken around to Rock Harbor, in coat, hat and gloves, for the ride across the lake on the Ranger, unless the weather was bad and she had to climb the hill from the end of Tobin's. It was the Ranger II, not as big as the Ranger III. The ride could be rough. In any case, she was not fond of boat rides. And back she'd come the next day. She'd bring with her lettuce and, in August, fresh tomatoes. There's nothing like a fresh tomato when you haven't had one for a while.

Some of the islanders may have been afraid of her TB. They did seem to avoid her. I know, when my mom was young, tuberculosis was a mysterious disease, ravaging families and communities. But by the time I was growing up, the disease was in control. Many of my parents' friends in Colorado Springs, a big center with famous specialists, were recovering from TB. So for me this was not a problem. I only became aware it might be when Grandma Snell and I were the last to be invited to look through the Emerson cottage – to see if there was something there we could use – before the

cottage was burned. That's what happened when private property was sold to the park service instead of being kept as a life lease. Not having been around previous summers, I was unaware of how different things were now, socially, for Grandma Snell. Originally she had come to the island because of her asthma. Essentially, she had to come. And she made the best of not being quite so much in on the island social scene any more. And even after Grandpa Snell died and she moved into a rented apartment, she would come to the island every chance she got, coming back to, as she put it, "the only home I have now".

So the person left in charge did invite us too to check out the Emerson cottage. And it must have been a lovely place, situated on one of the several small islands in the harbor. I seem to remember we retrieved a rocking chair and some dishes.

In 1931 Isle Royale became the first national park with so many privately owned properties needing to be bought out. Around 1900, the mining and even the fishing enterprises were not doing well. So tourists and then summer residents were encouraged to come, especially for the clear air if they had breathing problems like

asthma. A Mattson switched from fishing to the hotel business until the hotel was taken over by some one else. Then the hotel was sold to the Park Service. When Grandpa Snell heard about that, he sought permission to row one of the hotel guest cabins across the water to his place. He also picked up some lumber and windows for an extension, either from the hotel or from one of the other properties. He and his middle son, then 13, had already built an impressive extension on the main cabin. And at some point he put together another little place not far up along the trail, which joins the trail to Rock Harbor, where he could write – or nap. On our last visit to the island we went in, checking on the roof, which had collapsed after a winter of heavy snow. Along with a small wood stove, there was what remained of a desk and a chair and a bed.

Glen Merritt's family, one of the first, had built a place, still there in 1954, way out on an island near Blake's Point. Glen showed me the doorframe with marks on it from the years he'd been measured, growing up. But, said Glen, the women in the family announced they would rather be closer in. Most of the other families on the island came during the twenties. By 1932 the Snells must have been the last to buy

(though the Gales had yet to build), their deed including the three sons and an agreement to pay the back taxes. (Once the island became a National Park, there were no more taxes.) Grandpa Snell then began negotiations for receiving a life lease which would also include the sons. Working that out took until 1940. Other children of that generation who were not included on life-leases are trying hard to establish continuing rights on the island. Those born before 1940 have been added to the list of life leasees. (Alas, the oldest Snell grandchild was born in 1941.) And now the grandchildren have joined forces with the children.

Some one early on wisely pointed out that those who had spent their teen-age years on the island during the nineteen-thirties just might be hard to pry loose. My husband's two older brothers were part of a whole group whose doings continue to be told, such as the night they hoisted a fish up the flagpole on Hotel Island. And even I can still hear Mr. How calling "Jane – Jane…" when she should certainly have been home.

The hotel in Rock Harbor was sold to and then run by the Park Service through a concession. There were, and are, evening programs presented by the rangers or

invited speakers about the wolves, moose, birds and flowers, as in the hundred different kinds of orchids, on the island. But some of the old hotel events were going on still. There were still tennis courts. The one who had been in charge of that, Coach Orsborne, continued to live in the same house with his wife whom he called Angelique, the name of a partly real, partly mythical, island woman. There were also Sunday night hymn sings. That first summer, I was put in charge of the hymn sings when it was discovered I was a graduate of the Westminster Choir College.

During the days of the Hotel Island hotel, Grandma Snell, a graduate of the New England Conservatory, was often called upon to come play the piano with the daughter of the hotel owner. Grandma was sent for, to play the piano, during the tense time the Park Service officials were trying to decide if every one should be evacuated because of a dangerous fire in the middle of the island. (It was finally decided not to evacuate.) A few years ago, the Merritts' son, Grant, found the granddaughter of the hotel owner standing on the mail boat dock, along with others of her family. He brought his boat alongside and could hardly believe his ears when he found out who they were. They were staying in Rock Harbor but had come

around for a look. Later we met them too. The granddaughter said her mother had been concertmistress in one of the big symphony orchestras, though I can't now remember which one. So the concerts at the hotel must have been good. On another trip to where the hotel had been, the granddaughter was showing her own daughter where she thought she might have slept. Suddenly the daughter saw a glint of metal. The two started digging and found the remains of the granddaughter's old bed, which had survived the Park Service's routine burning process.

The Park Service decided to keep a few of the cabins. The one the other side of Tobin's, which belonged to Miss Kemer, a teacher and painter, was the first to be used as housing for the participants in a program for visiting artists. But the artists are now housed at the Dasslers' place, which can be walked to along the Stoll Trail.

The Stoll trail was named after the editor of the Detroit newspaper, so influential in publicizing Isle Royale. I remember the dedication of the trail. Even Dr. Clay and his wife showed up for the ceremonies at the end of Scoville's Point. Who knows how they got themselves there, they were pretty

old. It was a beautiful day and quite warm – very different from the wild day when we went to Scoville's after a storm to watch the waves crash on the rocks. That day, out riding the waves in a canoe was Louis Mattson, a teen-ager at one with his world and oblivious to becoming etched in anybody's memory.

Maybe the Clays were brought to the dedication by some one from the Park Service. It has to be admitted the Park Service people were, in fact, okay. The wife of the superintendent even went to the trouble of putting on a luncheon every summer for all the island ladies. I remember Mrs. Gale in her boat collecting those of us in Tobin's Harbor – first Miss Kemer, then Mrs. Merritt, Grandma and me (we had rowed over to the Merritts' dock), then Mrs. Mattson and Mrs. Dassler (who had walked to the Mattsons) – for the ride to the Park headquarters on beyond Rock Harbor, at Mott Island. We all had on skirts and maybe even stockings.

The one thing I didn't do on the island was read. I missed that, very much. There were two rockers on the dock, which I don't remember ever being used that first summer. I would have given a lot for a long

afternoon of sitting on the dock and reading. But if I weren't out fishing, there was always something else that needed doing, like beating the rugs. But Grandma and I would take time out for coffee, sitting on the bench that perched on top of what was left of a tent platform. The older boys had slept in tents when they were growing up.

Also it was time for the guest cabin to be repainted, so I did that, which turned out to be fun after all. Through the many windows around the cabin extension, I could see my husband at the little green table working away on his Russian translation and be glad I wasn't doing that! I was also glad no moose picked the nights when the paint was drying (it was gray) to rub against the cabin on their way to the water. Sometimes they even went out on the dock, mostly the young ones who hadn't learned not to yet. The year we pulled the shades down for the winter in the guest cabin extension, the moose saw their own reflections and smashed in all the windows, during the fall mating season some one said. We didn't go to the island the next summer, so we weren't part of the clean up and replacement.

My husband did get out once in a while, mostly to work on the woodpile. About once a week, on a calm day we'd go off in one of the boats to collect long pieces of the sun-dried wood that washed up on the outer rocky beaches. No matter how much we collected, there would always be more, from trees that could grow only so high in the thin layer of dirt over the island rock before they fell over, or from old ship wrecks or the remains of a failed logging business. We'd drag the logs up from the dock to the area between the cabins. Sometimes I'd help saw, but he did most of that and all of the splitting with the heavy ax. By the end of the summer, even with our steady use the woodpile rows expanded across the whole space between the cabins.

Then there was laundry day, requiring all hands. The wooden washing machine, still around in a heap last time I was there, really did work once. On what looked to be a good drying day, which didn't happen often, first the machine was filled with rainwater collected in a tub outside by the southwest kitchen corner. Grandma Snell called it "soft water". The water, already warmer than water from the lake, would have been heated more on the kitchen stove. Then the flannel sheets were put in and some one

would begin to push and pull the machine handle. The tallest available person (my husband) strung line around the trees in the sunniest possible places. Then all but the push-puller formed a kind of bucket line to the lake to fill the tub under the machine's wringer with rinse water. When the time came, each sheet would be wrung, rinsed and, after the wringer was swung around, wrung again, one by one, into another tub or directly into some one's arms who would go hang it up on the line. Towels and nightclothes followed and then shirts and blue jeans. At that point everybody but the push-puller would go in for coffee and hope the wind would come up, before taking coffee out to the push-puller. By then the water in the tub would have become – well, environmentalists now call it "gray water". Even the rinse water wouldn't be exactly ungray. In any case, the chances of anything more than the sheets getting dry in one day were not good. Items like socks and underwear, not part of laundry day, were washed and hung discretely at the time of, and in the sunny place of, one's choice. All gray water, including dishwater, was simply allowed to run downhill, soaking into the ground as it went. The tubs were kept under the outside porch. There was a lot of room under the porch. To celebrate clean

clothes, we'd fit in a trip to Rock Harbor where we could use the showers.

Calculating when to have a laundry day near the time of departure was a challenge: Putting somewhat used sheets away in the cupboard did trump putting away wet ones. Also, before the ¾-hour walk to Rock Harbor for the 8:30 boat, all blankets had to be hung over the cabin beams, so the mice and squirrels, who wintered in the cabins, wouldn't build nests in them. Departures, and arrivals too, tended to be traumatic.

First I'll describe the arrivals. You had to reach Houghton at least the day before, in time to buy provisions and get them stowed on the Ranger. And Grandpa Snell had to make sure the Evinrude (which turned out to be a boat-motor) was also on the Ranger. Sometimes it wasn't, in spite of massive correspondence with the proprietor of where it was stored for the winter. Otherwise every Ranger arrival at the island would have to be met until it showed up.

Once at the island, best was if some one who had already arrived happened to be at the dock to meet you. You could at least begin to transfer your provisions to the cabin. Or you could rent a Park boat. If the

weather was right, you could go around the outside and not have to get yourselves and basic supplies up over the hill to Tobin's, storing the rest in the Rock Harbor office of the Park Service.

That first summer, we had invited another couple to the island, planning first to take in a full eclipse of the sun near Houghton, but it rained. Grandma Snell was coming later, so I would be doing the cooking. I figured I could produce a tuna-noodle dinner no matter what. (I had to explain this to Grandpa at the grocery store, as he stared in disbelief at the can of tuna in my hand. Generally you don't bring more fish to the island.) At the end of our six-plus hours trip on the Ranger, luckily we were met but unluckily we did have to climb the hill to Tobin's because of the weather. Once at the cabin my husband took the covers off the chimneys and helped Grandpa build the fires. We were introduced to the outhouse and made the beds. And finally the tuna noodles did taste good, along with a can of peas, and I even produced some cornbread from a box. The biggest can of fruit was apricots, which became dessert. None of these qualify for a place in my niece's recipe book, though. I was thinking I might tell her about how Grandma made jello, taking it

down, in a covered dish, to jell in the cold water's edge near the dock. Even partial jelling could take all day. After a couple of hours Grandma would add pieces from a can of fruit cocktail, hoping that by then maybe the pieces wouldn't all just sink to the bottom.

Last thing before going to bed, Grandpa set quite a few mousetraps in both cabins. They went off all night and a couple of nights thereafter until the mice got the message. Now our kids bring have-a-heart traps, if any.

The next morning, fortified by my first shot of Grandpa's coffee, I made pancakes. The wood stove for cooking turned out not to be so daunting after all. My husband has vague memories of its purchase and installation, which must have been a mighty process.

And then, after doing dishes it was time to put the boats in the water – not to belittle doing dishes. There was a sink, with no stopper, which drained into the ground outside. Dishes were washed, with water that had been heated on the stove, in a plastic dishpan that fitted inside the sink, and then put into the dish drainer on the shelf built in next to the sink. Then the full

drainer was carried outside and placed on a stump. Boiling water was poured over the dishes from the big teakettle. Then the drainer was brought back inside and the dishes dried and put away. The wet dishtowel got hung over the line above the stove. Pots were placed upside down on the stove before being put away on the rack above it. Frying pans were hung under the window above the wood box. Finally, the water was dumped into the sink and the dishpan turned upside down on the drainer. The night before there had been no talk about washing dishes in advance of the first meal in the cabin that year.

For getting the boats to the water, there was a towline and track near the boathouse. First “Mother’s boat” was fitted in and eased down, a neat little rowboat used a lot by every one. My husband thinks it might have come with the house. Then came “Laurie’s boat”, heavier and which once had a sail. We even sailed it later in the summer, using a flannel sheet. It had been part of the closing sale of a cabin near Miss Kemer’s and cost $15. It’s possible my husband bought it with his own money, though he doesn’t remember. But why else would it have his name? He just might have been able to clear $15, selling moose antlers, moose

teeth and rowing people to Rock Harbor who weren't up to hiking back all the way they'd come.

We used "Laurie's" boat for fishing and all the big jobs. "John's boat ", as I remember, was stored near the water in a kind of lean-to. Grandpa's boat may have been stored inside the boathouse, or outside the boathouse in another lean-to. We didn't put either of those in the water, though eventually Grandpa's boat went down, the one in which he could keep fish alive. The year our son was born, Grandpa and I bought a fair-sized boat for $100, me chipping in with the $50 I cleared from church-choir directing, after paying the baby-sitter. Grandpa's old boat was overdue for the woodpile and he was elated to have found an ad for this one. More recently a grandchild sensibly persuaded the family to invest in a good-sized aluminum boat and also a bigger motor.

The boats had to soak before being used. But by afternoon, with the help of the fine mist in the air, "Mother's" boat was deemed lake-worthy and my husband took our guests out fishing. Supper was caught and I watched Grandpa prepare and cook my first lake-trout dinner. Mmm, mmm!

We took our guests back to Rock Harbor the next morning – by way of Tobin's Harbor, though the weather had improved considerably. After seeing them off on the Ranger, we managed to get the rest of our provisions over the hill and into the boat (having stopped to say hello to the Orsbornes on the way). As I remember, Grandpa took the boat home while my husband and I walked the trail back, hoping he could find the trail that turned off to the cabin.

After our friends left, my husband and I moved out to the guest cabin and Grandpa moved into the double bed where we'd been sleeping. The roof over the bed on the porch where he'd slept the night before had, as usual, developed a leak during the winter and needed repairing. (The first night, my husband moved the bed, which foresightedly had been covered with plastic, out from under and installed a temporary patch.) That the porch continues to exist, the loveliest room in the cabin, is a minor miracle as well as thanks to much work over the years. Off and on it has been suggested no one use the northeast door where the floor has always dipped. But something always gets propped up again, using the materials

Grandpa squirreled away under the outside porch or in and under the boathouse. Roofing is ordered from the mainland or else brought over to begin with.

Grandma Snell was coming the next week and we wanted the cabin to be as nice as possible. But of course when she came she added her own touches, such as putting up summer curtains, changing bedspreads and, on the table where we ate, replacing the black oilcloth cover with a flowered one. And she started baking. Her sticky rolls really were good, my husband was right about that.

A few days before it was time to leave, the bedspreads, curtains and tablecloth had to be changed back to the winter ones. And the boats had to be hoisted up again – much harder than taking them down. I wasn't even sure it could be done until after it was over. But first, all the cans we'd used during the summer had to be taken across the harbor to be dumped at "Red Rock", where they still are in fact. They accumulated over the summer in crates, which my husband and I loaded into the boat. On the way back I noticed the outhouse was tilted at a rakish angle, leaning on a tree. Grandpa had dug a big hole a little further on and was

transferring the outhouse contents there. What a job! Afterwards Grandpa and I went fishing one last time. I don't remember that we caught anything, which was just as well. Grandma had emptied a couple of cans of Dinty Moore's beef stew into a pan before the trip to Red Rock.

As I was setting the table for supper I also watched Grandpa check out his fish line, which he unreeled and looped between the two pegs on either side of the front of the cabin. Every once in a while he would stop and lay a finger against his bad eye, up under his glasses. It was a characteristic gesture. Part of his face sagged, as if from a stroke. But none of the rest of him was affected. No one seemed to know what had happened or when. Only a baby picture shows him without the sag. He never complained about it, though he complained more than a little about his false teeth, his "choppers". He usually kept the choppers in his shirt pocket. Once he lost them but found them again, hanging on a tree by the trail up to his writing cabin. A tree branch must have picked them out of his pocket.

There was a long list of all the things that had to be done before leaving. That first summer, I seem to remember it took a while

just to find the list. Luckily Grandma found it, in the birch basket hanging on the wall of the porch.

The plan was to leave early enough to have breakfast at the lodge in Rock Harbor before boarding the Ranger. Some one would take Grandma around in a boat, along with what luggage wasn't already down there. It must have been a Mattson because, except for them, I think we were the last to leave the island. The three of us walked the couple miles to Rock Harbor, under a blue sky and by the shining water, scuffing through the already falling yellow leaves. On the mainland, getting into our car, which still worked after spending the summer in a parking lot, and then driving out into the traffic was quite a shock.

We drove the senior Snells to Duluth, where I met my husband's middle brother and his wife for the first time. Their graceful oldest daughter was about three, and number two was a cuddly baby. The next day we waved good-bye, on the way to a new job in Hanover NH. "My, how you dropped out of our lives," wrote Grandma in a postscript to Grandpa's first letter after they arrived back in Wheaton.

Three years later we returned to the island with our son. He spent his first birthday on Isle Royale. We rowed ourselves along with his birthday cake to the Merritts' dock to celebrate.

For our son, I think it was love at first sight with Isle Royale. Up until then he'd been a pretty serious person. But on the island, every picture shows him either with a big grin or enthralled, as when he was watching the blue jays from his playpen or the seagulls with Grandma. With Grandma he was on the dock and in the box we used for him when we went out in a boat. And he was happy in a playpen for the first and last time in his life. Luckily, we had brought his snowsuit. It was quite cold that summer.

I have no idea where the playpen and also a highchair came from, which were there when we arrived about a week after the senior Snells. I suspect the Merritts. We had our own fold-up crib, bought for the occasion along with a small plastic tub for baths, the size of the dishpan that fit in the sink. I also invested in paper diapers. I've succeeded in forgetting what I did with the used ones, perhaps burned them. I do remember it was hard to go back to cloth when we returned home.

The only real crisis occurred when we nearly ran out of baby food. We placed an order for more, which wouldn't get to the island before our supply ran out. Our son's appetite had essentially doubled. Then, we found out there was another baby over on Belle Isle. I'd heard of Belle Isle, where there had once been another hotel with even a small golf course. (It should be noted, I think, that the island hotels were more lodge-like than hotel-like.) The island grapevine got word to us to come get enough baby food to tide us over. So off we went, on a long and lovely afternoon/early evening boat ride, taking sandwiches, around Blake's Point and down through Duncan Bay to the McPherrin/Orsborne place way up on a point overlooking the water. Sally came down to the dock like a ministering angel, bearing a paper bag full of little jars. She said she and her family would be coming to Rock Harbor soon, so we could leave jars from our order, when it arrived, with her baby's grandparents, the Orsbornes.

That summer we left before the senior Snells did. Grandma, in tears, carried her grandson to the Ranger II dock. On the way back to New Hampshire, we visited my husband's oldest brother in Minneapolis, meeting the

two youngest children and becoming reacquainted with two oldest. The oldest daughter had been a flower girl at our wedding and is the one compiling the book of recipes.

The next year we were on the island briefly, on our way to California for a sabbatical. We helped close the cabin. There was a terrible storm the day we left, with lightning and thunder. It was Grandpa Snell's last time on the island. He and Grandma decided they'd better stay in Wheaton the following summer. He did know our second child was on the way before he died.

Our daughter was three when we returned with Grandma to Isle Royale, after a half-sabbatical at the University of Illinois. It was July so the Merritts were there. One morning, Glen was sitting out on his dock with a bag of peanuts. He called over to our son to come help eat them. So off our son went, alone in a rowboat for the first time. I'll never forget the two of them sitting in the rockers over there, eating peanuts.

One day we all went on a picnic to Raspberry Island. Our daughter, drawn by the sound of the waves, decided to investigate. I, sitting cross-legged by the fire putting a

marshmallow on a stick, didn't see her leave. By the time I looked up, it was too late to get into what unfortunately had become the game of me chasing her. I looked away to not scream. The week before a child had drowned by some rocks on the mainland. Dimly I heard Glen, with his laid-back authority manner, call to her that she'd "better get back here". She came back and sat on my lap to help toast the marshmallow. For me, those moments of toasting the marshmallow suddenly turned into a miracle. Well, I never quite loved the island again after that, though I've returned several times. Its beauty is haunting, but so are its dangers. New Hampshire is also beautiful. It has its own dangers, but they don't have to be dealt with so often. Plus there's time for the inner beauties of music and reading as well as for the outer ones.

So what have I forgotten? The one continuing subject of conversation over the years has been about pumping water from the lake up to the cabin. Needing to haul it up, frequently, does take getting used to. A pump could bring the water up about forty feet, which would be a bit more than half way. Two pumps might do the job… and that's the point at which the conversation peters off into other subjects.

Oh, and how could I have forgotten about greenstones! Along with sunset climbs up to Lookout Louise for the spectacular view down Duncan Bay, there were always trips to the beach near the lighthouse to find greenstones, those lovely semi-precious dark-moss-green stones with black spots on them. They can be found only on Isle Royale and somewhere in Russia. I have a little bag of them, from when it was all right to gather and keep them. We don't pick flowers anymore either, though I've never heard of any one being arrested. There was always a bouquet on the table. Oh well. Without the Park Service, there might now be a highway between Rock Harbor and Windigo, instead of the trail for serious hikers. There are no roads on the island, or cars. It isn't easy, for instance, to get to the island which identifies Isle-Royale (the one in the lake of the biggest island of the biggest lake…).

And I forgot about the lamprey. Maybe they hadn't come as far as Lake Superior, that first summer. They were a menace, once they did arrive. I was dismayed when, on a trip to France with Mother to visit her sister, her sister made her special dish, which turned out to be a lamprey in wine sauce! Actually it was very good but I did not get

the recipe. It would have made an interesting addition to the Isle Royale recipe collection.

I haven't mentioned planked fish. I only remember one, at the Merritts. A large trout is filleted and laced onto a board that has nails on either side to hold the lacing. Then the fish is thoroughly and repeatedly buttered with a brush and placed by the fire to cook. In fact, it's pretty hard to get the fish to cook, and to cook evenly. The time we went to the Merritts, we ended up eating the rest of the meal first, though the fish was certainly worth waiting for. Anyway, it was always fun to be with the Merritts. Their continuing generosity remains a treasured memory.

From his childhood, my husband remembers homemade ice cream at the Mattsons, who had an icehouse with real ice in it stored under sawdust. He also remembers the regattas, with Mr. Bailey as master of ceremonies.

A new outhouse has made the place tolerable for most of the great-grandchildren, and a small gas stove has significantly simplified cooking. And sometimes in mid-summer the water by the

dock is warm enough now for swimming, though still just barely.

For me, the one thing I can do on the island and nowhere else is to go out rowing in "Mother's" boat. Except for the wonderful new oars (well, no longer that new), it's the same old boat it ever was, so easy to row, so quiet to go with around the rocks and along the shore. As a reason to go, I use the same excuse Grandma would use – to get water from the middle of the harbor instead of by the dock, conspicuously swinging the drinking-water pail as I get into the boat. The water is "better" out there, at least theoretically. But even just from the dock, the constantly moving water is so clear you can look down and see every single pebble.