

Couture/Benson Family Cottage in South Beach, Gimli

Written by Michele Couture, March 2021

My paternal grandparents Eugene and Vera Couture purchased a cottage in South Beach in 1934. (He married Veronica Sarah Monica “Vera” Bernhart on June 27, 1927 in Winnipeg. After studying engineering at McGill University, he founded the construction firm of Couture and Toupin in Winnipeg in 1931.)

The cottage was moved a few times through the decades, with former sites being 167 Third as well as on a lot that’s now under water. I don’t know what year it ended up at 189 Third Street, but a guess is sometime in the late 1940’s or early 1950’s.





Pictured are Vera and Eugene Couture, who became South Beach cottagers in approximately 1934. This is the original Couture cottage on its location at 167 Third Street in South Beach, Gimli.

Eugene and Vera spent summers in Gimli along with their three children, Joan, Lorraine and Paul.



Carters, Strachans & Coutures, South Beach 1937



Paul Couture with his sisters and Carter girls, 1937



*Couture cottage (L) and the Couture guest house (R), (former **Camp Sparling** counsellor's cabin). Paul Couture is the person in the foreground, ca. 1950s*

Eugene passed away in 1960 and Vera in 1962. Paul followed his father into the construction industry. He inherited the cottage as both Joan and Lorraine had moved to the United States.



From left to right: Marjorie Benson, Ed Benson, Rosemary Benson, unknown, Paul Couture and Barb Couture

At this point, the cottage was still basically one room and curtains for separation. In 1964 an addition was built to accommodate the growing family. By 1968, the small, three bedroom cottage was the summer home to Paul & Barb, with children Cathy, Joanne, Mike, Michele and Doug, as well as the family dog, Candy. We used an oil burner to keep warm in the spring and fall and rain water for doing dishes. Our drinking water came from old the well at the corner of Third and Hansson. The horrors of using the outdoor biffy- home of at least 17 million spiders – was finally eliminated in the 1990's.

Switching gears now to 187 Third Ave, the cottage of my maternal grandparents, Ed and Marjorie Benson, Barb's parents. I can't remember when they bought the one bedroom beauty, but a best guess is the 1960's.



Old Benson Cottage as rendered by Dave McNabb

Having our grandparents next door was such a privilege! Hearing Grandma call “yoohoo” from her bedroom window over to our kitchen window, and seeing Grandpa at his homemade brick BBQ, are memories that still bring a smile.



Paul & Barb Couture, 2009

When both Ed and Marjorie passed away, Barb inherited the cottage. It was relocated to the country and Paul and Barb built the current house which became their permanent home in 1999. Now that Paul and Barb have passed on, the Lake House belongs to daughter Cathy and her husband Wayne Benz.

Daughter Joanne and husband Charlie Burns purchased the old Couture cottage at 189 Third and in 2009 tore it down to build their current lake home.

Joanne & Charlie Burns building their new home, November 2009 (in the background is their old guest house, which was originally a counsellor's cabin from Camp Sparling.)





Couture clan at Paul & Barb's 60th Wedding Anniversary, July 2014, taken at Joanne and Charlie Burns property. This is the former site of the Couture cottage

Some other memories....The old, wooden break-walls or groins gradually succumbed to decades of battering waves and ice, and is now completely gone. It used to be about 100 feet out and was between the current Couture and Stewart cottages. We always had to be aware of it's location when the water was high – so we didn't drive the motor boat into it!



Wooden groins, ca. 1950s

From enormous sandbars to record-high water, we have had a front row seat to the ever-changing Lake Winnipeg. In 1974 everyone was sandbagging the shoreline to protect both land and cottages. At times the water was deep enough to paddle a canoe from our cottage to the Benson cottage, and one time Paul evacuated the family when he heard the waves hitting the beams underneath the cottage.

The intense storms were, and still are, as fascinating as they are scary. Our sailing family knew not to mess with Lake Winnipeg as waves whip up suddenly and can be deadly if ignored. Watching thunderstorms roll in from the north became a favourite pastime, just from the sheer awesomeness of the beauty and power.

The old Barker cottage at the corner of Third and Hansson had a huge tree that everyone climbed. The gold standard was a blue flag that I think one of the Kozak boys tied around the trunk at a mystifying height.

The old gravel roads would get a fresh coat of tar once a summer. By then all the barefooted children had pretty tough feet, so it was quite a hobby to pop tar bubbles with our toes.

And finally, **Evans' Store** on Hansson Avenue. Nostalgic memories of Mr. and Mrs. Evans are so firmly entrenched in the summer fabric of Gimli. In my mind they were the friendliest, sweetest people. They sold all kinds of corner store necessities, but it's the penny candy that stands out.



For many years the Couture family participated in the Winnipeg Beach to Gimli 10 Mile Road Race, which took place during Islendingadagurinn. From back left: Paul Couture, Wayne Benz, Mike Couture, Doug Couture, Barb Couture. From front left: Michele Couture, Cathy Benz (Couture), Joanne Burns (Couture), and Lisa Benz.