

Blais Family Cottage History in South Beach, Gimli

Written by Joanna Blais, March 3, 2021



Blais Family Cottage, 37 Howard, ca. 1972

What we came to call “the cottage” was not a cottage when it was purchased in 1972. We believe the cottage was built around 1957. The house was home to a military family who had been stationed at the base in Gimli. When the base closed the federal government bought the homes of personnel who lived off the base in the Gimli area. The houses were auctioned off in a sealed bid process.

Leo and Esther Blais had been told that in a bidding process you should always go just above the round numbers in your bid. They bid \$3001.00 and were excited to find themselves successful.

Because the property was owned by “the crown” the grant reads “by HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN to Leo Lorenzo Blais and Esther Loreen Blais...TO HAVE AND TO HOLD the said lands unto the grantees and the survivor of them and his heirs, forever; saving, excepting and reserving unto US, Our Heirs and Successors, the free use, passage and enjoyment of, in over and upon all navigable waters that now are or may be hereafter found on or under or flowing through or upon any part of the said lands”.

Apparently if we ever become lake front Prince Phillip can access our property...

This is quite funny when you look back at the pictures. This tiny building was little more than a shack with three tiny bedrooms a bathroom and a main area that served as kitchen and living room. Many times, over that first year we wondered how the family that lived there got through the harsh winters. There was an oil heater and a chemical toilet that was probably only for emergencies as the outhouse was obviously well used.

It really did not matter to Esther and Leo that this was just a step up from camping. They were thrilled and this purchase gave them the place the place they most loved to be for the rest of their lives. They had three teenagers and an eleven-year-old when they took possession of 37 Howard. The next decade saw many weekends where hippies piled out of their cars and slept on the floor or in tents in the yard. The proximity to the beach made it a favourite.

Right from the beginning the cottage was a project. There were never ending goals and revisions. Most of the work was Leo and his buddies putting their heads together to solve a problem, this almost always led to another problem and so on. He had his best buddy Russell McInnis next door and Walter Bannister down the road and the three of them could spend entire weekends working on some project or another. There were of course mandatory “coffee breaks” when one of the guys would yell at the kids, or later grandchildren, to get three beer, from the nearest cottage to that week’s project.

Basic upgrades occurred over the years, everyone was excited when they added a toilet and holding tank although that meant constant reminders to

not run water. Leo believed that only Esther should take a shower inside and the outdoor shower should be used by everyone else. Esther believed only “the girls” should use the indoor toilet.

In the eighties Leo and Esther decided to put on an addition. Basically, the plan was to expand the kitchen eating area and make one bedroom bigger. With a growing family and grandkids, they needed to have more room. Leo got his garage and a covered porch, and he was as happy as a clam.

The cottage became Leo and Esther’s part time home when Leo retired. The minute the pipes could be thawed they packed up the truck and headed to Gimli. Thanksgiving was always closing weekend...whether it was balmy or freezing. Leo was a part of every activity in South Beach. He loved the Property Owners Association, making floats for the parade and organizing races at the picnic were a couple of his jobs.

On June 19, 1999 Leo got up in the morning and had his coffee on the deck. He remarked that this was his favourite place in the world and then he went for a swim at the end of the street. He suffered a fatal heart attack on the beach that day. His buddy Russell died later that summer after a long illness.

Esther continued to come to the cottage as did Patricia McInnis. These two friends kept each other company and the two families came together to look after the properties. Many afternoons have been spent trying to figure out what exactly Leo and Russ were thinking!

In 2001 Joanna Blais, Esther and Leo’s oldest daughter bought the cottage with the condition that mom could keep spending her summers there for the rest of her life. Several renovations occurred to make sure the cottage was accessible and safe.

After decades of enduring the mosquitos in Gimli we finally added a sunroom by closing in the covered deck. Whenever a new improvement would be made Esther would remark, your dad would be shaking his head and saying “it’s a cottage why do you need that”.

After Esther's death in 2016 Joanna and Cas took over the cottage and being retired it is their home for a significant part of the year. They now have grandchildren running to the beach and searching for frogs. The kids that Esther and Leo brought out that first summer became parents and their children grew up going to "the cottage" and now there are grandchildren who eagerly look forward to having a sleepover in Gimli. Such is the life of a cottage...this humble little building has been witness to our lives.

