

McKelvey Family Cottage History in South Beach, Gimli

by Judy McKelvey, September 2025

The McKelvey Family Saga: South Beach Gimli 1948-2024

How it began: In 1948 the McKelvey family purchased in South Beach, Gimli a portion of what was **Camp Sparling**, one of the fresh air camps along the west coast of Lake Winnipeg. Grandma Margaret McKelvey, Matron of the Camp, learned that the property was coming for sale because the property was seriously being eroded by the lake. Her children and their spouses (Bob and Cay McKelvey, **Howard and Alice McKelvey**, Harry and Myrtle Beally, Ed and **Bea** Shute, and **Norm** and Elinor Norrie) decided to purchase a portion of the camp. All of the original McKelvey members who purchased the property are gone, as are some of their offspring, but at the present time Dan and Diane McKelvey and Judy McKelvey own 2 of the original lots. Dan and Judy spent all their summers here as kids along with all their McKelvey cousins and Dan and Dianne carried on that tradition with their family. Dan and Diane are now permanent residents of South Beach along with two of their adult children and their families. Judy spends all her summers in South Beach and until his sudden passing in December 2024, her husband **Laurie Beachell** had been spending summers here with the McKelveys since 1977.

In 1948 a letter was sent to the Church owners of the camp [the United Church of Canada] offering to purchase a portion of the lakefront land and the buildings on the land. The offer of \$1250 was made and accepted. Thus began the McKelvey saga in South Beach.

The first few summers the families lived in the old camp dormitories. The family divided the lakefront property into 5 equal lots of 52 feet frontage. The dorms were torn down, and the lumber was used to build 6 cottages, one for each of the children and one for the grandparents. Ever a thrifty group we have been told that Grandpa William McKelvey's task was to straighten the nails so they could be used again.



Neighbour, Miss Hazelwood's cottage ca. 1945-50s

Why document this story now? Most of the children of the original South Beach McKelveys are now in their 70's or older and some have died. The history of the family experiences in South Beach has been for the most part shared orally over the years. Many stories were told around campfires or over the dinner table. Many stories have been told and possibly embellished, but now is the time to share what we remember so that the next generation can tell their kids about South Beach and the good and bad times had there. We all hope that some of the McKelvey offspring will continue to enjoy South Beach for many years to come.

Background on Camp Sparling (excerpts taken from Memories From the Lake by Ken Kristjanson 2015, find the entire article [here](#).)



“Sparling was so named for a prominent Winnipeg cleric who became President of Wesley College. The CPR pushed its successful rail system to the Lake Winnipeg beaches, eventually reaching Gimli in 1906. Camp Sparling was built and began operating around 1911. The property....would have been the size of a city block...The main building was quite large. [And] was set back from the lake with a large lawn in front. The property sloped to a magnificent sand beach to the east. It would have held over 80 mothers and children in a dorm like setting. The original formula was to bring the children to the camp with their mothers. This not only helped with the care of the children but gave the mothers a break as well. The stay was 2 weeks. Every summer over 1000 children and their mothers would make the trek from the CPR station located on Center and Hwy 9 (in front of where Sobeys is now located) to the Camp at the foot of Hansson Avenue in South Beach.

*Trouble was unfortunately looming for Camp Sparling. The buildings were built when the water levels were low. In the 1940’s the lake would begin to rise. Long -time South Beach residents Bob Strachan and **Paul Couture***

remember well trying to fight the lake. Their cottages were located 3 lots in from of our property on Benedict. Many like *Carters*, *Stachans*, *Coutures* and others had no choice but to hook up a tractor and move the structures. Camp Sparling was too big to move. The United Church spent a great deal of money erecting a break water. To no avail. The Lake was beating against the main building. The Church gave up in 1949 and sold the little remaining property to the *McKelveys*, *Strachans*, *Coutures* and others. These residents, along with us and others were able, with little Government assistance, to erect a formidable sea wall and stabilize the shoreline.”



Photo - Evergreen Public Library



Photo: Evergreen Public Library

Sharing Stories: We have asked current members of the McKelvey family to share stories they have heard or experiences they have had in South Beach. These need not be long, and it is recognized that some may remember the story differently, but we are not going to quibble over who is right or wrong, we simply want people to share their memories and experience. We hope to start a family blog or a group Facebook page to post these stories.

The Biffy by Laurie Beachell: Uncle Ed Shute told me a story about blowing up the old camp biffy. The story goes that as they were taking down the old dormitory buildings, they had to take apart the cement holding tank that was under the camp biffy. To do so they travelled to Selkirk, purchased some dynamite, drove carefully back to South Beach,

and used the dynamite to blow up the old cement holding tank. I trust they emptied the tank first but the phrase “let the shit fly” comes to mind.

Raising the Roof by Laurie Beachell: 177 3rd Street, South Beach (previously 25 Third Avenue) is the cottage owned by Judy and I. It is the only cottage remaining that was built with the lumber from tearing down the dormitories of Camp Sparling. The cottage has undergone many renovations over the years but the most extensive reno happened in 1998 when we took off the roof, the rafters, built and installed new rafters, roof and roofing and gutted the interior of the cottage and had it rewired. We would never have been able to do it without the able leadership and skill of the “old uncles”- Earl and Dan Christopherson (brothers to Alice McKelvey). The uncles both had a carpentry background, and they also were pretty set in the way things should be done. The rules were, we started work at 8:30 am, coffee at 10:30, lunch break of an hour at noon, coffee again at 3PM and we quit work at 5. No beer could be consumed until after 5pm. Our good friend Jan Burdon took on the task of organizing all the meals and cooked in a kitchen tent with some power from the neighbours. Judy and I had a group of friends who were willing to help but had little skill. We told them to come on down to the lake and bring a hammer. To keep things light we created the “dumbshit club” and every night at supper we inducted a new member of the work crew to the club for pulling the most dumbass boneheaded move that day. It was a fun 6 or 7 days and made a huge difference to the look and feel of the cottage. One of the strangest feelings was when the roof and rafters had been removed and we had dinner in the cottage and could look up and see nothing but the sky and trees. It actually made us dizzy to see the trees swaying in the wind.

A Tribute to Alice by Laurie Beachell & Judy McKelvey: We are forever thankful and amazed at the resourcefulness of Alice McKelvey. She was able to keep the cottage and property in South Beach even after her husband Howard died in 1958. She had 2 young kids -Judy and Bill, she had not worked since she got married; she took a job 2 weeks after her husband’s death with the City of Winnipeg and through diligence and determination she was able, through very tough times, to keep the cottage property and their home in Winnipeg. We have raised a glass many times in her memory and give thanks for her fortitude.

Rock and Cement by Laurie Beachell: Family bonds are made from shared events and memories. But the real bonding agent of South Beach are rocks and cement. The reason the McKelveys got the land in South Beach was because the former owners were losing land due to erosion. Protecting the shoreline has been a focus of much of what had to be done over the years. When I first came to South Beach in 1977 the rule was if you went for a swim you had to haul 5 rocks out of the water and throw them along the shoreline. In those days field stone from Albertsons was being used but now it is huge chunks of limestone that do not move as easily by waves and ice. Days have been spent getting rock hauled in and building cement retaining walls to protect the berm built by the municipality. It is a never-ending battle to ensure that properties along the lake front are secure. We have recruited a variety of friends to help us pour cement and they may have their own stories about the abuse they received.



