

The Mayor of Cache Lake

After 85 years in Algonquin, Tom Pigeon
was as much a part of the park as it was of him

BY EMILY WAUGH

If you needed help cutting down a tree, retrieving rental car keys from the bottom of the lake, or building a dock, Tom Pigeon was the guy to call. He could build anything, fix anything, and figure out the answer to any problem the Algonquin bush threw at him. No wonder, he was practically born there.

When Tom was just two and a half weeks old, his mother – who was born and raised in Algonquin Park herself – snowshoed him across Cache Lake to their pine-clad, A-frame home with no indoor plumbing and a foundation filled with sawdust to hold the heat of the woodburning stove.

For most of the next 85 years, Tom lived and worked in the park, starting each day with two eggs, cut-up bacon, and tea (no toast) right up until the week before he died in August 2022. Tom was as embedded in Algonquin as it was in him.

As kids in the 1940s, he and his brother Jake operated a thriving ice business, delivering cottagers blocks of ice, cut and stored from their rink on the lake – after the hockey season wrapped up. All winter, the boys played vicious games against the Ministry of Natural Resources men and the CNR and Highland Inn families, who were on the lake year-round.

The Pigeon brothers sometimes helped their father, an Algonquin Park ranger and occasional railroad employee, load ice under the seats to cool CNR passenger cars before they returned to Scotia Junction. They happily cleaned up the comic books left behind by the camp kids from Toronto.

Into his 70s, Tom could still be found at the top of a ladder, itself perched on top of an outhouse, as he used his legendary chainsaw skills to take down massive Eastern white pines.

Tom was a legend around Algonquin Park. Among others, Tom's titles included: Head of Jake's Algonquin (aka "Nightmare Construction") where his work building docks, cabins, and felling trees was as meticulous as the handwriting on the invoices he delivered by boat to cottagers; 10-year winner of the annual guide's race with his brother Jake – a feat that inspired Olympic medalists and fellow Cache lake brothers, Pat and Tim Turner to begin rowing competitively; camp carpenter and mentor at Camp Pathfinder, whose cedar strip canoe no. 9 bears a plaque with his name on it; the unofficial mayor of Cache Lake, where he helped cottagers with everything from igniting the pilot light on a propane fridge to saving a cabin from burning to the ground after a lightning strike; outdoors superhero; and Algonquin Park Hall of Fame inductee.

The last time I saw Tom was on one of his final visits to the lake. Perched in the bow of a friend's 9.9 hp outboard in an old aluminum frame lawn chair, Coors light in hand, the ever-present twinkle in his brilliant blue eyes told us he already knew something was funny, but we hadn't caught up yet.

That day, Tom kept us laughing with detailed anecdotes pulled from his still razor-sharp memory. But he was more often

the subject of the stories than the teller.

A favourite at our house was the time he and my father and two other Cache-lakers entered the war canoe race in the annual regatta. Paddling with all their might off the starting line, the four men propelled the canoe not forward, but straight down, still in stroke as their bodies sunk deeper into the lake. Then there were Tom's errant driving trips through the winter ice that led to friends teasing that his truck should have come with a depth-finder.

Whether you pronounce his surname "pigeon" like the bird as the locals do or use the "rhymes-with-Dijon" pronunciation more common east of the park gate and down the Madawaska – everyone who ever met Tom has a "Pigeon story." Here are some favourites from friends and family around Algonquin Park ...

Jake Pigeon, brother and manager of Algonquin Outfitters, Brent

"We never saw a light bulb until we were 12 years old." This is Tom's brother Jake who was born the summer after Tom and was paddled across the lake at nine days old. "I would think we're the last of that type of people."

As two of only nine or so kids at S.S #1, Canisbay, a one-room school run out of the Pigeon cottage by mom Mary McCormick Pigeon, Tom and Jake had to invent games – like "frogs on a board" or tree tag, using vines to swing like Tarzan through the forest. "We had nothing. So we had to invent, and make things better for our life."



Tom Pigeon on a 1990 cover of *Cottage Life Magazine*.
(Photo by Ron Watts, reprinted with permission from *Cottage Life Magazine*)



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Jake (stern) and Tom (bow) paddling a park ranger's canoe on Cache Lake; Tom and Jake in winter; Jake (bow) and Tom (stern); Jake (left) and Tom (right); and Jake and Tom on the dock at Cache Lake. (Photos courtesy the Pigeon Family)



The brothers were competitive in a few things, especially ping-pong matches in the basement of the old Highland Inn and some canoe races, but with so few other kids around, they *had* to get along.

The boys were allowed 30 minutes of radio time a day. Tom liked *Terry and the Pirates*, while Jake preferred the *Lone Ranger*, so they learned to share by alternating nights. They also shared the load of the constant chores it took to survive in their no-electricity, no-running water, boat-access cabin through all four seasons.

"Nothing was convenient," remembers Jake. "It was hard work." No matter whose night it was to bring in the firewood or shovel the walks or keep the fires going, they usually just ended up doing it together.

One difference between the two brothers was their approach. Whether maximizing turn speed on the toboggan runs they built down to the lake, or building a dock





ABOVE: Pigeon making shore lunch of fresh-caught splake on Hilliard Lake, 2003. (Photo courtesy Eleanor West) TOP RIGHT: Pigeon in his "Nightmare Construction" shirt. (Photo courtesy Dillon Cassidy family) BELOW: Pigeon felling a tree in 1997. (Photo courtesy the Pigeon Family)



in only one sentence it would be this: "Tom Pigeon was the greatest boss I ever had." Hurley, who worked with Tom for five fall seasons repairing cottages and felling trees in the 1980s, remembers Tom as neat, genuine, and honest, never cutting corners – even on things the customer would never see. He didn't talk a lot, Hurley recalls, "but when he said something, it was really funny.

"One time, a tree spun the wrong way and cut off the whole front roof line of a guy's house," Hurley told me. "And I thought, 'Oh God.' And Tom's standing behind me a little bit, and he didn't say anything right? No temper tantrum, no swearing, no 'the sun was in my eyes' – no excuses. So finally, I turned around to look at him and then he goes, 'Let's go to the mill'."

After the repairs, Hurley figured they'd gotten away with it so they wouldn't have to tell the owner what happened. Tom told him exactly what happened.

Mike Sladden, owner and director of Camp Pathfinder

For more than 30 years Tom did work at Camp Pathfinder clearing trees, building docks and tent platforms, while patiently sharing his techniques ("always flatten the sharp end of each nail before driving it into the board to avoid splitting") and his deep knowledge of the park.

Year after year, Mike Sladden learned things about Tom that surprised him: he'd lived in Australia, starred in a commercial, worked as a professional gambler, been



or shooting pool, Jake's style was more "wham, bam, let's get it done," while Tom thought everything through to the last detail. Tom's work was "perfect, no mistakes." At pool – which Jake describes as torture because his brother played so slowly – "he didn't miss."

"His method of doing certain things certainly outshone mine," Jake admits.

Jake was the better angler, though. Even Tom would cough that out under his breath when pressed.

Jack Hurley, Hurley Canoe Works, Dwight

If long-time friend and local canoe-maker Jack Hurley had to write a eulogy for Tom



TOP: Pigeon on his favourite trail – the airstrip between Lake of Two Rivers and Mew Lake in Algonquin, 2016. (Photo courtesy Eleanor West) ABOVE: Tom Pigeon and Eleanor West, 1999. (Photo courtesy the Pigeon Family)

door for a pee and looking at the sky in the middle of the night. It really meant something to him.”

Ellie West, partner

“What type of guy do you think you might like to meet?” a co-worker of Ellie West’s at the Lake of Bays township asked over wine and nachos one Friday night in the early 1990s.

“There’s a guy on the magazine rack at work and I really like the look of him,” West responded. Within minutes, her friend Peg was on the phone arranging a get-together with Tom Pigeon, who happened to be on that month’s cover of *Cottage Life* magazine, kneeling in his green cedar strip canoe on a misty Algonquin morning.

The day of the meeting, he picked up West and two friends at the Cache Lake landing. “He wanted to look cool,” West remembers. “He had on white shorts that were too short, mirrored sunglasses and an Aussie hat. He took us out in his boat across Cache and down the Tanamakoon River. The motor was so noisy I couldn’t hear him. He started pointing way up high in a tree and I finally caught on it was an osprey nest. I thought, ‘Well, that’s pretty interesting.’”

Over the next 25-plus years, Ellie began looking forward to the day the ice went out on Cache Lake, where she and Tom would spend six months of the year playing cards, hosting barge parties, hauling dishwater up from the lake and counting the mice they had caught. (The single-year record was 142.)

After a stroke took away Tom’s driver’s licence and the best of his eyesight, Ellie read to him, always books about Algonquin Park. No longer able to spend time on the lake, Tom exchanged fishing and canoe trip stories with the Cache lakers who came to sit with him on the sunny porch of his Huntsville home. Toward the end of his life, when the space between memory and reality occasionally overlapped, “it was always based on Cache”, says West. “That’s where his mind was.”

(Emily Waugh is a Toronto writer and Cache Lake leaseholder.)

warden of Arrowhead Provincial Park – and much more. He was an “unwashed, uncombed bush carpenter who could get all gussied up and play a great round of golf,” Sladden recalls. And he could drop a tree in one cut, somehow getting it to fall in the five available feet between the buildings and trees at the camp.

Like every other member of the Pigeon family, Tom was an ace bridge player. Sladden says he never won a hand of gin rummy against him. One night Tom almost knocked everyone over with a seemingly impossible sleight of hand. “All of us were just dumbfounded, like, how can this guy do all these other things and also do these insane card tricks?”

When a terrible storm took out 30 trees and all the camp’s power in 2007, Tom – then almost 70 years old – came over and worked for days to clear the mess. He refused to take any payment.

“He lived in micro-second increments of appreciation in the park” says Sladden, “Every little boat ride down Cache, every trudge on snowshoes to go shovel some guy’s roof and every step out the back