

Harris Family Cottage History in South Beach, Gimli



Whippoorwill Cottage, 2013

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In the early 1900's some of the first cottagers in South Beach were city professionals, including [Percy D. Harris](#) (b 1880). Sometime around 1912 he built Whippoorwill Cottage at 34 South Beach Road (formerly South Colonization Road.)



ca. 1912-13



Percy Harris was principal of Lord Nelson School in Winnipeg (ref, [Gimli Saga](#), p. 118). He was also the secretary of the [Manitoba Educational Association](#) from 1911-20 and then served as its president in 1920-21. He was an active member of Young United Church, serving as its Sunday School superintendent for many years. He enjoyed beekeeping in Gimli and golf.



Ca. 1912



ca 1938, Maxine Carter (Ward), Percy D. Harris, Sylva Carter (Benkelmen)

Percy and Nina May Harris had a son **George Harding** (1900-1976), and two daughters, **Florence Ada** (1903-1983) and Mary Elizabeth, nicknamed 'Bessie' (1905-1974). Both girls followed their father into the teaching profession. Long vacations for school teachers made having a cottage the perfect escape from the hot, noisy, and fume-filled city.

Florence taught at **Lord Selkirk School** (1929-41) and **Daniel McIntyre Collegiate Institute** (1946-62). After that Florence authored numerous school textbooks including **The Art of Poetry** and **A Packet of Prose**, published by McClelland and Stewart Ltd. In 1967, in commemoration of Canada's 100th anniversary, she was one of the recipients awarded a medal presented by the federal government to Manitobans for their meritorious community service.

Bessie married another teacher, **D. Harold Turner**. As well as teaching school, they offered drama training to inmates at Stoney Mountain Penitentiary.

Florence never married and had no children. She inherited *Whippoorwill Cottage*. Along with her wonderful teaching and writing skills she had a generous heart. Regularly she would invite all the children in South Beach to *Whippoorwill* to play.

Out of her wee kitchen Florence would emerge with KoolAid made with water hauled by hand from the artesian well down the road served in colourful plastic glasses carried in a wire rack. She sent us out on scavenger hunts and led us in crafts and games. She had the most interesting and unique toys. A huge farm set out on the grass. Betsy McCall doll and clothes, and paper dolls resembling her.

Suffering from a of chronic malady, some summer days she just wasn't up to having kids around. The days that it was okay to show up at *Whippoorwill* to play were the days when Florence would fly a Union Jack flag on the front of the cottage. This was her sign. I would run to the end of Hansson Ave to look down the road to see if I could see the flag flying. Even into the 1960s the Union Jack would fly on the odd day.

In the opening pages of the chapter on Norse Myths in her textbook *A Packet of Prose* (1967) Florence writes,

One chilly September evening on the shore of Lake Winnipeg, my father and I watched a brilliant show of Northern Lights. They were yellow and green that night, with a dash of mauve here and there. Every few minutes they would arrange themselves into a rainbow-shaped bridge, quivering with movement, across the whole northern sky. I was surprised to hear my old father say lightly, "There must have been a big battle somewhere today. See the Valkyries are carrying the souls of the dead warriors across the bridge to Valhalla. Only the bravest are chosen to go."

With ease I imagine the spot on the beach where they sat probably at the end of Hansson Ave, old Percy and his daughter. Perhaps he himself knew he too would soon cross the bridge to Valhalla, though being a Christian would have been more likely to call it Heaven. I have sat in perhaps that exact place myself admiring the aurora but most nights only wishing they would appear. Percy died in 1953 when Florence was 50.



Doing crafts at Whippoorwill Cottage

Whippoorwill Cottage still stands today behind a big white fence. No Union Jack flies there anymore.



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