

Caligiuri Family Cottage History, South Beach, Gimli

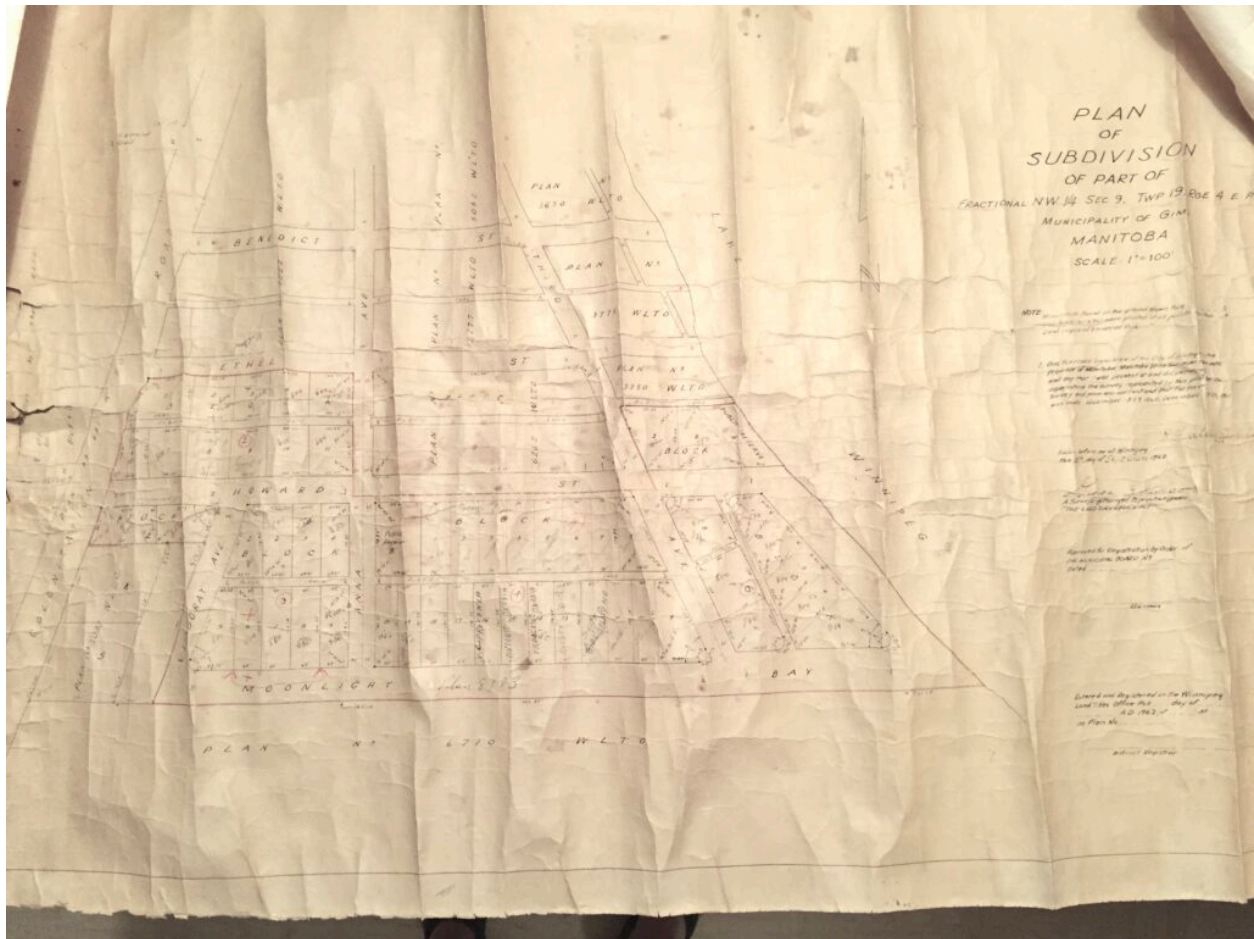
Written by Debbie Kryswaty, Jan 2021

Ralph and Josie Caligiuri are what I would call classic cottagers. They have been cottage owners in South Beach, Gimli for decades. In fact, they have cottaged here for more than five decades. They have cottage routines and rituals that are simply part of their day-to-day life. They have invested their time, energy and money into creating a beautiful, comfortable and enjoyable family paradise. In addition to this, they have generously played an important role in the South Beach cottage community. They were a little surprised when I asked them to tell me their story, but they graciously agreed to sit with me and share some details of their life in South Beach. Ralph humbly repeated to me several times that he thought I should be able to capture their history in twenty four words or less. I was not successful in that request.

Josie and Ralph were married in 1969. Not long after they were wed, Ralph said to Josie, "We are going on a road trip to Gimli, Manitoba and we are going to look for a lot to build a cottage." Josie promptly replied, "Where is Gimli and what is a cottage?" Fast forward to 2021 and Josie knows very well where Gimli is on the map and as far as being a "cottager", I suspect she could teach us all a thing or two about how to cottage successfully.

It all began when Ralph's father, Peter, was called by his cousin John Masi (The Masi Family is another long time South Beach cottage family) and was encouraged to look into buying a lot in South Beach. They had friends who cottaged in South Beach and had heard all sorts of great things about the area. Ralph and Josie bought their lot at 21 Howard Avenue. Peter and Ralph's brothers also bought building lots close by. The cost of each lot was \$250.00. Yes, that is right...two hundred and fifty dollars. This was a good chunk of cash fifty years ago. The man selling these lots in South Beach was Mr. Richard Howard. He lived on Third Street along the water and worked in Gimli. He was selling multiple lots on Howard Avenue and while I don't have confirmation of this, I am assuming the street was named after him. Mr. Howard offered a "rent to own" payment plan. He allowed Ralph and Josie to pay him twenty dollars a month until which time the lot was paid off. Ralph regrets not "buying up" more lots at the

time but is quite happy that they were able to take part in this great opportunity. Additionally, he was paying only \$11.00 per year in property taxes at that time. It is difficult to fathom that amount, compared to today's rates.



Proposed Subdivision Map 1962

When they purchased, there wasn't a drivable road on Howard Avenue. (The Caligiuris acquired a lot on the north side of the street.) Josie described Howard Avenue as looking like a big ditch. There was a walking path where the road is currently, as well as a path to the area where the lagoon was located (south of Moonlight Bay). The south side of Howard was more marshland than anything else. They would have to drive up to the cottage using Anna Street.

Peter built his cottage first (1971) at 23 Howard Avenue. Like all of the building projects, it was a family effort with various family members coming out to Gimli each weekend to lend a hand. In 1976 Ralph and Josie started building their cottage. At the same time, the Trizec Building was being built at the corner of Portage and Main. While many earlier cottages in the area may have been built with “kits” ordered from Eaton’s Catalog, Mr. Caligiuri was able to secure used lumber and other supplies from the demolition of older buildings on the Portage Avenue site. These products would be transported to South Beach every weekend (in the family car) and stored in the garage to be used in the construction of Ralph and Josie’s cottage. They also became well known customers at KC Enterprises and North American Lumber. Family members would join in to support one another in completing the building project. Ralph commented on the fact that he never understood why, when it came to working out here, “a person could work like a horse and never get tired.”

Ralph admits that he isn’t the handy man of the family. He says he “held the tape measure.” (Although, I am not sure that is entirely true as I have often seen him advising and offering support on projects with friends and family.) Luckily for them, his father was skilled in construction work and was helpful putting in the foundation as well as providing labor and management of the project. At various points in the build, a carpenter was also hired as part of the process. While the men would be working on site, the daughters-in-law would be cooking up a storm to feed the crew. Classic Italian dishes were prepared and no one ever went hungry. With different family members also building cottages, a typical day would be work, eat, build, eat, drink a little wine, and enjoy being with family. In addition to building structures, family relationships were also built as they worked together on construction projects.

The original cottage was fairly typical for the times; three bedrooms, a kitchen, living room, and a veranda. However the washroom, with indoor plumbing made the place “fancy”. The indoor washroom was part of the negotiations between the daughters-in-law and Caligiuri men. The ladies were very clear that “if they wanted us to come out here, there had to be indoor plumbing.” The negotiations were very successful as not only was there a flush toilet but also a shower! Friends would ask why the place was “so fancy” and Ralph would tell them, “If I want my wife to be here with me, it had to be this way.”



The original cottage, 1979

Ralph and Josie would pack up the car and their three children Cathy, Peter, and Jeff and head out to the cottage every weekend. They would leave the city early on a Saturday morning and stay until after lunch on Sunday. While they often worked very hard on the various chores that are part of being a cottage owner, they also took time to enjoy cottage life and create many, many beautiful memories with their children over the years. Often the kids would bring out friends or other family members (aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins) would tag along and it was a “full house” at the lake for the weekend.

Eventually the kids grew up and they started expanding the family with grandkids. Ralph and Josie are grandparents to twelve grandchildren! This meant only one thing. They would have to expand their South Beach retreat. A major renovation to the original building began and has produced a place that is very comfortable for their large family. The updated and renovated structure now has five bedrooms, a large living room, a beautiful washroom facility, and of course the heart of the cottage, a large kitchen and dining area complete with dining tables handcrafted by Ralph’s cousin Alfred. Outside there is a large deck with a screened gazebo and in the yard, there is a fire pit area. Family and neighbors are welcome to socialize and many have done so over the years. Also in the yard, there is a swing set and a trampoline. When everyone comes out for a visit, “there are people and kids everywhere”. It is not out of the ordinary

for up to twenty three people to be spending a weekend together. They have their cottage equipped and ready for family to visit and enjoy the best life at the lake has to offer. During cottage season, they see each other more in Gimli than in the city.



The renovated cottage as it stands today

Ralph has been very involved with the annual South Beach Family Picnic. The event is very important to both Ralph and Josie. They see it as an opportunity for South Beach families to come together and celebrate as a community as well as a great time for their family to participate in the community. The picnic is a “big deal” for everyone. The whole family comes out to the cottage for the September long weekend and attendance at the picnic is expected. Ralph is the Head Chef, manning the BBQ and invites everyone to participate in a friendly (but competitive) game of bocce.



Bocce Ball Tournament trophies

If I were to sum up my interpretation of cottage life for Ralph and Josie I would choose these words, **pride and joy**. The Caligiuris are extremely proud people. Rightfully **proud** of their hard work and what they have accomplished with the legacy they have created for their children and grandchildren. They do what they do for their family and with their family; it brings them incredible **joy**. A joy that is almost tangible when you have the opportunity to visit with them at their beautiful cottage. Ralph and Josie inspire me with a determination to work toward similar goals with my family and our cottage.

When I asked Josie and Ralph to sum up their cottage life, they readily replied, “Fifty years of a good life. Absolutely no regrets. We have enjoyed our cottage from day one, since we first stepped into South Beach.” (How about that... exactly twenty four words!)



Ralph & Josie