

Cobblestone Villa was millionaire's retreat

by Catherine Dunphy

When they rounded the sharp bend in the road that first time — seven years ago — and saw what the real estate agent had described as a "Millionaire's Retreat", it was love at first sight.

It is only now, as Harry and Verna Rapchuk sit in their renovated and restored home showing old photographs of the state of things in the beginning, that they admit that love should have been the last thing they felt when they first saw Cobblestone Villa.

True it had been the country-weekend retreat of a Toronto millionaire A.A. McQueen, but McQueen had died in 1968 and had bequeathed the property to the

Canadian Cancer Society. His idea had been to establish a place where cancer victims could live out their last few years in peace and enjoyment and the Society would be responsible solely for the upkeep. The Canadian Cancer Society seemed to be underwhelmed by this legacy however and listed the property with a local Lanark County realtor.

There it languished — at first overpriced for the market and later simply not a showpiece with no maintenance and grass growing unheeded and freely everywhere — until 1973 when the Rapchuks saw it.

He was the foreman in an auto body shop, she was an electrologist; they lived in Hamilton and they both wanted a change, a complete change and had been toying with the idea of owning and operating some kind of summer cottage income establishment.

They saw beyond the tall grass and disrepair and realized that Cobblestone Villa — with its five small houses and adjoining waterfront footage on Lake Farren — fit the bill.

"Besides," said Verna, "I've always loved stone houses."

They moved in during the winter of '73, earmarked the former servant's quarters and garage as their own home, furnished the other four cottages then put them up for rent and spent the time "living inside a Christmas card" as Verna put it.

They had been advised to go the easy route and rent out the stone cottages on a year round permanent basis instead of on a summer and ski seasonal basis.

One ad in the local Perth Courier and they were flooded with responses from young government workers, high school teachers and public school teachers looking for a nice place to live.

Any fears about being country landlords vanished after that response. The cottages are located in Bolingbroke, a tiny dot of a village consisting of about five houses, 18 miles from Perth, 9 miles from Westport and 7 miles from Maberly and while they may not be the centre of things according to a provincial map, it is not inconvenient for many people in the area.

There have been no more newspaper ads since the first one. That doesn't mean there have been no tenant moves, but it does indicate that the Cobblestone cottages are so desirable they are usually rented via word of mouth.

The Rapchuks, meanwhile, have used any breaks in tenancy to renovate and restore the old cottages.

"I think I have sanded 25 miles of trim since we've come here," said Harry.

The original cottages was built by a Charlie Keeley around 1936 using cobblestones or fieldstones from the area for the outside walls and for the living room fireplace. About 10 years later this unique house was bought by the Toronto industrialist who promptly commissioned Keeley to build another four cottages. Three would function as guest cottages and the fourth would be the headquarters of the servant staff.

Keeley built the cottages in much the same style as he did the original house — as two bedroom bungalows with living and dining areas, generous kitchens and full baths. He then added on to McQueen's cottage. The final result was a small but very charming complex of attractive

cobblestone cottages clustered on about 3 1/2 acres and worthy indeed of a millionaire's leisure time.

And worth restoring. The Rapchuks are now working extensively on upgrading the original stone cottage. The summer kitchen has acquired pine tongue and groove wainscoting as has the kitchen ceiling.

But the most extensive work is being done on the exterior stone walls. Because the back room of this cottage was basically unheated, the stones "sweated", causing the mortar between them to discolour.

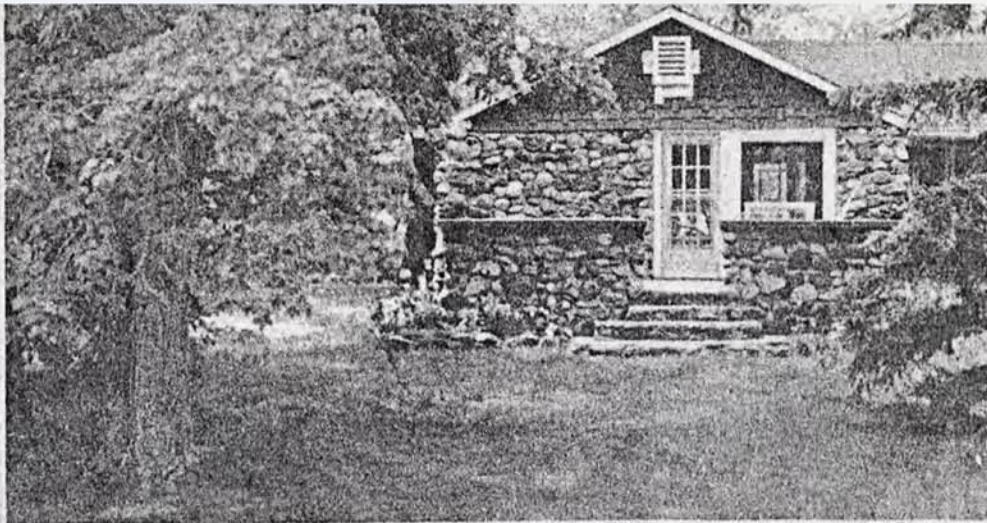
The Rapchuks are now stripping the stones and mortar of the many layers of varnish and stain in order to restore the original colour. They are also insulating the house to prevent the same thing happening again to the 14 inch thick stone walls.

There are economical as well as aesthetic reasons for this.

"Stone cannot work as a living area unless there is insulation," said Harry. "And the insulation wall has to be at least three to four inches thick. When a stone house is well insulated, it is more economical to heat than other kinds of houses, however."

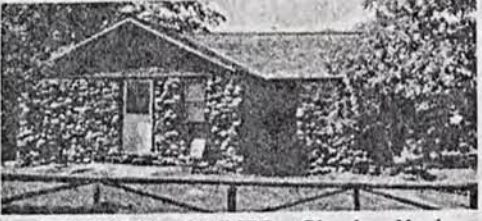
A well insulated stone house means a cool home in summer and a cozy retreat in winter.

And to the Rapchuks that just about sums up the whole attraction of stone. You've got to give it the best, but when you do that, you get the best in return.



Now . . .
FIRST OF FIVE stone cottages that make up Cobblestone Villa, near Perth, is home to Harry and Verna Rapchuk. The other four cottages provide steady rental income.

and then . . .



ORIGINAL OWNER, Charles Keeley, built the first building around 1936 using fieldstone from the area for the outer walls and fireplace.



DECADE LATER millionaire Toronto industrialist A.A. McQueen bought it and commissioned Keeley to build four more cottages for servants and guests. The villa was unattended from McQueen's death in 1968 until the Rapchuks bought it five years later.

