

Anna Lees Gemmell McLaren: Otty Lake Pioneer

Our story of Anna McLaren opens in the winter of 1937, when a teenager named Grover Lightford saw Mrs. McLaren pass his family's cottage on the north shore of Otty Lake. She was a woman of 53 years of age, driving a horse and cutter through the snow. Grover recalls that she was wearing a beaver coat and hat, and was wrapped in a buffalo robe. Grover never forgot his first sight of this remarkable woman, who lived a solitary life in the woods. Years later he would buy Mrs. McLaren's land beside Otty Lake to form part of the BurgessWood subdivision.

So who was Anna McLaren and how did she come to be living at Otty Lake when there were few cottages and no permanent homes on Otty's north shore?

Anna McLaren's Ancestors and the Last Duel

Anna was a Gemmell, whose grandmother Joanna Lees was intended to marry John Wilson. Wilson killed Robert Lyon in the last duel held in Upper Canada, on 13 June 1833, and as a result Joanna's parents forbade the match. In 1835 Joanna married Robert Gemmell. Joanna and Robert had a son Lawrence Gemmell, who married Elizabeth Kellock; Anna was born to Lawrence and Elizabeth in 1884.



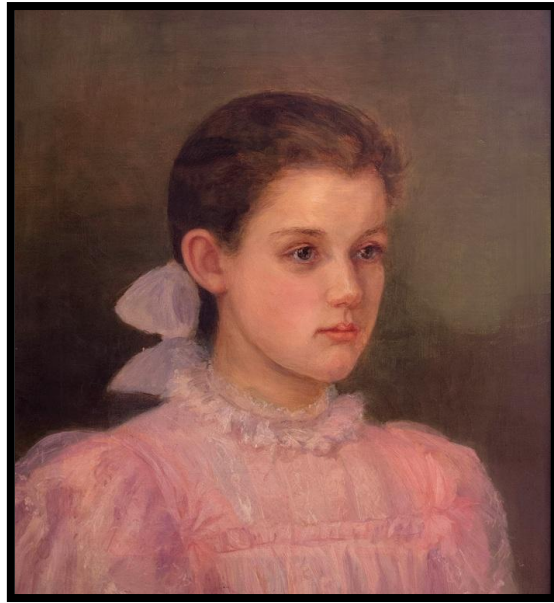
Anna Gemmell McLaren in 1885.
*Photo courtesy David Zimmerly,
photographer unknown*



Joanna Lees, Anna McLaren's grandmother in 1888. *Photo courtesy David Zimmerly, photographer unknown*

Anna As a Young Woman

Anna seems to have been an independent-minded person from the start. In later life she was described by her cousin Kathleen Pogue as a dark-haired woman with large eyes and a strong, independent spirit. Certainly the portrait of Anna at age 13 (she hated it because she had to sit for hours while the artist worked) shows a determined and beautiful young woman. It was small wonder that Willie McLaren fell in love with her.



Anna at age 13
Photo: Doreen Maxwell

Anna McLaren's Husband, William McLaren

Anna's husband William, known to all his family as Willie, was the son of Senator Peter McLaren, a powerful lumber and mining magnate who lived in Nevis Cottage (now Nevis Estate B&B) on Drummond Street in Perth. Willie was educated at Upper Canada College in Toronto, then returned to Perth.



William (Willie) McLaren, father Senator Peter, brother James. *Photo courtesy David Zimmerly, photographer unknown*

Willie and Anna married on 14 October 1910. The wedding was held at Anna's parents' cottage at Rideau Ferry, rather than at a church. The wedding was not ostentatious: Anna's brother was the best man, Willie's niece was the flower girl, and there was only one bridesmaid. Anna must have looked lovely, wearing a wreath of orange blossoms and heather under her veil, and carrying a bouquet of lily of the valley and roses.

The Newlyweds Move to Otty Lake

As a wedding present, Senator McLaren gave Willie and Anna a mining property on Otty Lake, on the present site of the BurgessWood subdivision at the west end of Kenyon Road. Willie and Anna decided to move onto the property, which in 1910 was nearly cut off from Perth in the winter, the road ending at Macmillan's farm on Otty Lake Sideroad, according to John Gemmell, Anna's nephew. The isolation, even much later, was highlighted by a note in the Ottawa Citizen in 1943 stating that area residents were concerned that their children might be attacked by wolves when bringing in the cows.

Willie was financially well off, and didn't really need to work. It appears that he and Anna simply chose to live in the country and run the mine.

The property had been mined for mica, which was used as an electrical insulator; and apatite, used to manufacture phosphate for fertilizer. Although 200 tons of apatite had been shipped from the site in 1870 and the mine was still active in 1883, it had been dormant until Senator McLaren had bought the property in 1901 and re-opened it. Roughly half a dozen miners lived in a boarding house at the site in the summer, extracting mica from the main pit, which was 75 feet deep and ten feet wide. The property was pockmarked by disused pits and trenches, making it dangerous to the unwary.

The mine operation comprised a complex of buildings, including the boarding house, a culling shed for trimming the mica before shipment, blacksmith shop, drive shed, horse stable, and several other buildings [a later article will examine the McLaren buildings, and how they survived in other forms after BurgessWood was built]. Willie and Anna lived year round on the property, and ran the mica mining operation in the summers until 1932, when the mine was closed for the last time.

Willie and Anna built a white frame house for themselves, which they called Forest Lodge. The front of the house was graced by a wide verandah, and inside the house visitors were greeted by four deer heads mounted on the wall, two of which had been shot by Anna McLaren. Roy MacSkimming has written that “to the right was a comfortable parlour, where Anna displayed her prized collection of fine painted bone china, porcelain, silver and glassware. It was her custom to give newlyweds one of her painted china bowls as a gift.”



Forest Lodge, with the sundial Willie built.
Photo: Doreen Maxwell

Later Willie and Anna moved a log house, built earlier than 1843, from its original location on Hwy 43 to a spot slightly behind Forest Lodge. They renovated and added two dormers and two bedrooms upstairs.



Doreen Maxwell and her aunt Anna beside the Winter House.

Photo: Doreen Maxwell

Willie and Anna slept in the log house in winter because it was easier to heat than Forest Lodge, where the kitchen was located. The log house was called the Winter House at that time, but later when it was used to hold artefacts that Willie and Anna treasured, Anna referred to it as the Museum. John Gemmell recalls that the collection included the pistol belonging to the first sheriff in the Perth area, spinning wheels, mineral samples, and an extensive set of Indian arrowheads collected by Willie. Willie had been interested in

Indian artefacts since boyhood, and maintained a journal cataloguing every item. Willie's collection and journal were donated to the Perth Museum.



Anna in later years in the Winter House,
Photo: Doreen Maxwell



Willie's arrowhead collection in the
Winter House. also known as the
Museum. *Photo: Doreen Maxwell*

Willie and Anna's Life at Otty Lake

Anna had an outgoing personality, but Willie was quieter. Kathleen Pogue told Roy MacSkimming that Willie preferred birds, animals, and nature to dinner parties and balls that Senator McLaren held in Perth, so Otty Lake was the right place for him.

Willie built a cedar strip rowing skiff which was kept in a boathouse at what is now 197 Lakewood Road, near a small log cabin that they called the Lake House, opposite Whiskey Island. On Sundays, Anna and Willie would sometimes take tea and sandwiches to the Lake House, which was also used as a place to warm up after venturing out on the lake aboard their iceboat in winter.

Anna used to say that she would never be afraid of being on a desert island with Willie, who could turn his hand to anything. He carved duck decoys and made furniture; Anna's niece Doreen Gemmell Maxwell and her brother Edward each have one of the chairs that Willie made.

Willie and Anna had strong artistic interests, and displayed many paintings in the Winter House, including watercolours by Charles E. Hannaford. The McLarens were hosts to two members of the Group of Seven, according to John Gemmell. Willie painted watercolours, and sketched the Indian artefacts that he recorded in his journal.

The Gardens

Anna took pride in her flower gardens near Forest Lodge, surrounded by fences to keep out the livestock. John Gemmell recalls the trellis that led into the garden, covered with honeysuckle. The trellis also had less happy memories; Anna told John that she and Willie had buried their stillborn child under it. They had no living children.



Willie's Death

Anna and Willie lived together at Otty Lake from 1910 until 1932, when Willie passed away at age 53. The funeral was held at Nevis Cottage, his family home. John Gemmell says that Anna never forgave the Lord for taking Willie so young.

After Willie died, Anna hired Fred Devlin and his wife to maintain the property and live in the boarding house formerly occupied by a crew of miners who had worked the property's mica mine each summer (the mine had been closed for nine years), Anna was to remain there for 37 more years, without her loving Willie while continuing to be assisted by Fred Devlin and his wife.



The boarding house where the Devlins lived after Willie died.
Photo courtesy Grover Lightford, photographer unknown

Anna's niece Doreen Gemmell Maxwell and nephew John Gemmell visited her in the summers after World War II. Anna made a strong impression on both of them, and the sketch of her life at Otty Lake after Willie's death is drawn mainly from their recollections.

Jobs For the Day

Anna was very organized, and every day was planned. Each day started with a good breakfast: ALWAYS bacon, eggs, and fried potatoes with onions. Then John would have a list of chores to do, such as cleaning up the road so the branches wouldn't scratch Anna's car, splitting the winter's kindling, or getting the carbide system going.

Carbide provided a better source of light than kerosene lamps. A carbide generator dropped calcium carbide into water, causing a chemical reaction that produced acetylene. The acetylene was piped into the buildings, where it gave a strong, bright light when burned in lamps. Fred Devlin didn't like to work the generator, so it was only for a few weeks each year that Anna had good lighting when John made the generator work.

The Devlins

The Devlins tended the vegetable garden (the flower garden was Anna's domain), and kept the cow and two pigs named Jack and Ted, who were replaced each year.

Although Anna and the Devlins lived beside each other, they lived separate lives. John Gemmell doesn't recall Fred Devlin ever entering Forest Lodge unless something needed fixing. Anna treated him as a workman rather than a neighbour or friend. The result was that Anna lived a solitary life in winter, although in summer she would often drive to do shopping in Perth or to visit relatives at Rideau Ferry.

Driving

Acquaintances in Perth told Doreen Maxwell that Anna was a great horsewoman, who could easily harness a horse in winter and drive her cutter. Driving her car was another matter. Anna was a fast driver, who hugged the ditch, causing Doreen to say after one outing that they "could have mailed a letter in every mailbox along the road". She appeared to believe that she always had right-of-way, and Doreen believed that although she never had an accident, she probably caused a few accidents when other drivers tried to get out of her way.

When Anna drove into Perth, she always circled until finding a parking spot without meters, because they cost one cent. Doreen didn't realize, until someone told her, that Anna also kept hunting for a parking spot until she found one that didn't require her to back up the car.

Anna's Horses

Anna kept three horses: Con, Kitty, and Stroller. She rode Stroller, who was smaller than the others and was Anna's pet. Anna fastened wire around the verandah at Forest Lodge to keep Stroller from bothering people by begging for sugar. When Anna could not keep the horses any more, she had the vet destroy them rather than sending them to the glue factory.



Two of Anna's three horses kept at Otty Lake

Photo: Doreen Maxwell

Visiting Relatives

When at home, Anna dressed in flowered long dresses with bloomers, but when going to visit, she wore plain and tasteful suits. Anna required

Doreen and John to be well turned out, or she wouldn't let them in the car. The visits were formal affairs, which John recalls as "tea and sandwiches".

In the Evenings

Anna kept a piano in Forest Lodge, and was a good pianist who played the popular tunes of the day. She was happy, intelligent, and a great story-teller who kept John and Doreen fascinated.

Anna, like Willie, kept a diary. Her diaries finally numbered more than a hundred, and she could quickly find the date when, for example, John had caught a large pike. Sadly for Doreen and John, Anna destroyed all the diaries.

Courage and Fear

Anna did not like trespassers, though if you were a friend she was very hospitable. Doreen said "I do recall on one of our walks to Otty Lake meeting a hunter—Aunt Anna approached him without caution and told him in so many words to get off her land and never to hunt there again. I must say I was a bit fearful, as he had the gun, and I did not have her courage".

Doreen, as a city teenager visiting her formidable aunt who lived in the bush, remembers being wakened by Anna, who had heard a porcupine eating the whitewash off an outside wall. Anna asked Doreen to hold a flashlight while she shot the offending porcupine.

There are only two things that Anna is known to have feared: mice and fire.

John used to take Anna out on the lake in their cedar skiff. On one occasion she asked John whether he had checked under the floorboards for mice, and replied untruthfully that he had. On their return Anna heard a noise under the floorboards, and discovered a nest of mice. John's clear recollection is that Anna levitated her way onto the dock. She never forgave John for not checking under the floorboards.

Fire worried Anna because there was only one way in and out of the property, and she was concerned that trespassers might accidentally start a forest fire, such as the one that swept the area in 1870. Fortunately, her fears of fire were never realized.

Anna's Lighter Side

Although Anna may have appeared daunting to some people (especially trespassers), she was a happy person who made others around her happy. Doreen Maxwell remembers fondly the day when she and Anna were discussing the painting of Anna as a young woman that Anna gave Doreen. As they walked out the door of the Winter House with the painting, Anna's "drawers" fell down, and Anna asked, through gales of laughter, whether Doreen happened to have a large safety pin with her.

Doreen recalls the beaver hat that Anna was wearing when Grover Lightford encountered her driving her cutter through the snow in 1937. Doreen says Anna "tried desperately one day to have me take that beaver hat home—we both broke out into a fit of laughter when I declined. She was pulling out all of these old treasures to show me and each one had a story. I am now sorry to say that when I look back I do wish I had brought home that beaver hat".

Goodbye To Otty Lake

Grover Lightford recalls that the last year Anna McLaren lived at Otty Lake was about 1969. Anna died in Perth in 1975, and is buried in Elmwood Cemetery.



Perhaps Doreen Maxwell should have the last word:

“I felt happy whenever I did visit with Anna—I am told that we are much alike in temperament—and I think the sense of humour is inherited all around! She had a wonderful smile and did enjoy a good story, and always had one to tell. I certainly did not inherit her courage, as I do not think I could have ever stayed alone back in Forest Lodge, and she always said that she was afraid of fire, as there was only one way in, and one way out.

When I look around my home, I have memories of Aunt Anna everywhere, and feel so fortunate to have met her when I did.”

Information for Anna McLaren’s story was kindly provided by Doreen Gemmell Maxwell, John Gemmell, Roy MacSkimming (author of *BurgessWood: Evolution of a Community*, 2011), and Grover Lightford.