

Kitchen Connections

Our Tree that Saw the Changes

by Vera Kanigan



Our Doukhobor history in British Columbia, especially in Ootischenia, has spanned many years. My husband's grandparents, Savoonya and Polya Kanigan were part of the original settlers to British Columbia from Saskatchewan in 1908. Walter has lived in Ootischenia for eighty-three years and I have lived there for fifty-six and we have witnessed many changes. Since the demise of the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood in 1938, many of our Doukhobor families still lived on their homesteads, paying minimal rent, waiting for the resolution of the re-purchasing of the Community lands owned by the British Columbia government.

After the take-over of their settlement on the current airport lands, the Kanigan family moved closer to the mountain, to McPhee Road, still in Ootischenia and built their homes, barn, banya and other dwellings. In 1961 through the capable efforts of John J. Verigin with

the aid of a Kootenay magistrate, William Evans, the USCC was eventually able to negotiate a return of the lands to their rightful owners, mainly Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ (USCC) members and their descendants. At the time Walter chose a seven acre piece of flat land, which still had a Royal Anne cherry tree growing on it, a remnant from the communal farm lands. The rest of the property was treeless because initially wheat was grown and when the community disbanded, the land was abandoned as well. Actually, except for a few Jack Pines, most of Ootischenia at the time was treeless.

When the land issue was resolved, most people purchased land according to their needs and Walter's seven acre lot was sub-divided in half for him and his aunt Vera and Harry Voykin who also needed a place for their family to live in Ootischenia. When people started constructing their homes, and growing a garden, these hardy Doukhobor farmers became aware that in order to grow a garden, the depleted, sandy soil required nutrients and people often brought top soil from the Crown land that they called "The Third Bench" above McPhee Road, which is now the Tower Ridge residential settlement by the Castlegar Golf Course. The soil that Walter brought was from under the hazelnut trees. It was accepted by everyone that the soil there was fertile. They called the soil, "с под орешни" (under the nut-tree). On one of the top soil trips, he noticed a Ponderosa Pine tree and brought it home and planted it on the front of his property. This pine stood proudly on our property, witnessing the many changes of our community and of our family. It thrived happily, growing taller and taller until this last November...

When I moved to my new home with my husband in November of 1963, there were no paved roads yet and I even recall “getting lost” without signage or maps. To me, at the time, especially at night, it was difficult to find my way. On wintery days, as well, when the wind blew, the snow drifts would cover the dirt roads. As yet, the tree was quite small. Our married life commenced in Walter’s family’s home where we occupied a bedroom and later, in a small starter house on the Kanigan property where we were blessed with our two sons, Jack and Robert.

Our tree continued to grow on our property on Columbia Road and did not seem to be concerned when the land was excavated in (about) 1967 for the footings of our basement that we wanted for our new residence. After the excavation the pine was covered by a mountain of sand and peeked through while Jackie and Bobby (our endearing names for our sons) were driving their Tonka trucks and tractors and filling their buckets with the clean sand. Actually, unlike the style of construction today, we moved in to our new residence when the house was merely framed and the home still was not insulated. The pile of sand with the “child minding” pine tree, however was a perfect playground for a couple of young boys...

We moved into the basement of our home with the cemented floor and it was in the early seventies that the upstairs was made livable, the sand got cleared and the grass planted. By the time our daughter, Maya was born in the early seventies, more trees - birches, firs, pines, maples as well as many fruit trees were added to our property and our garden flourished with the top soil and manure from many sources, including Harry and Vera’s chickens and cows. Through the years Walter’s prolific growing abilities continued. He always used to respond to any inquiry that one of his favourite past times was to “watch things grow.”

With the community land sold to individuals and people’s new homes built, mapping commenced and the roads were paved. We started referring to our home as the second house past the Ootischenia Hall, the “house on Columbia Road with the pine tree in front”. Even when the spruces on each side of the driveway covered the opening, the pine was our recognized dominant marker. When our children moved away from their family home, they still loved to return to our “Kanigan Family Estate” with the abundant land, trees and Ootischenia skyline. A few years ago Walter decided to string Christmas lights on the tree and as it grew, the lights reached for the sky. His joke was that “Vera climbed the tree and strung the lights.”

Eventually, when Tower Ridge was being subdivided, one of Ootischenia’s long-time residents noticed from the ridge that the “tallest tree in Ootischenia was Kanigan’s pine.” That was an ominous message to us and each time the wind blew or a lightening storm ensued, our heritage pine faced the inevitable power saw solution...After a few years of deliberation, Walter constructed a long measuring ruler and from the thirty foot marker he saw that the tree had grown to over a hundred feet. Apparently a pine really needs a “huge back yard” to grow and on the average, according to information I found on the internet, may reach over a hundred feet to the sky, but falling it in this case was a concern as it was close to the power lines. Although our tree had a healthy trunk, 28 inches to be exact, we met a young tree faller that was willing to climb, power saw the branches, the limbs, climb up to the top and safely complete the task!!

During the tree clean up, apart from Walter, much help was required and family, mainly brother in law, Joe and our daughter Maya, drove from Kelowna and pitched in. Our wonderful neighbors

helped to transport the branches to the Community Complex for composting and the other neighbors happily hauled away the sawdust to make soft beds for their horses.

Our tree has witnessed many changes. Today's community of Ootischenia, with the abundance of water and good soil is home to many, many trees - pines, spruces, cedars, birches, maples, even mountain ash and some elderberry and I could continue... The community has transformed from one where people lived on large acreages to a residential area where the lots are smaller. As well, many business have emerged. Although we now have small lots, but the hearts are still huge and warm.

On our own property, we've had weddings, showers, baby blessings, retirement gatherings, family dinners and even community gardens. We are grateful that through our Doukhobor communal lands we were able to provide such an abundant place for our family to enjoy.



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