

Oconto Echo

November 2012



A tribute to Cliff Labbett

July 13, 1920 - June 10, 2012

We would like to thank the many, many Oconto alumnae who came to the visitation and/or service for my Dad, Cliff. Thank you also for the tremendous amount of support via cards, letters, emails, visits and phone calls. Your messages are sincerely appreciated. At the suggestion of many Oconto alumni that were at Dad's funeral, we will share some of the many words that were spoken by various family and friends. I had the honour of writing and reading the eulogy.

Some of the Oconto excerpts include;

Dad had a very clear understanding of what was important and valuable to him. Dad was careful with money, very careful. He taught us to always plan ahead and, to never spend more than we had. He taught us to be frugal, and to not waste. A few good examples of this; Brooms, store them with the bristles up! They will last a lot longer! T.P. or toilet paper, we were taught 2 sheets for #1 and 3 sheets for #2. Food, don't waste. The message was we were lucky to have any food, let alone so much good food. There are consequences for your actions. A dear friend cooked too much rice at camp for dinner...guess what we had for breakfast? Be mindful of others, give money to those less fortunate. If we spent money, we had to know where it went. Dad was practical, and lead by example. He wore clothes until they were beyond worn out, and if Mom insisted he could not wear something any more, it went to the cottage. There, you will still find the belt I made him at camp when I was 10, he wore it last summer. One day at the cottage, he was wearing a shirt with a small rip in the back and Karen was walking behind him, she reached up and ripped it wide open. He turned around and gave her a terrible look, and said "why did you wreck a perfectly good shirt?"

Make your life, work hard. It is up to you and no one else. Figure it out, ask for help when you need it. Everyone has to do grunt work. Everyone needs to be respected; from the cleaner, to the laborer, to the server. Respect them all. The K.I.S.S. principle - keep it short and simple. Say what you need to with the number of words you need. Don't waste words. When you need help, ask for it. The last year and a half has been difficult at times. Dad kept his sense of humor, and knew when to ask for help. Often, Mom would say to Dad in front of us, "We are so lucky, our kids have been so helpful, what would we do without them?" I will share with you a recent situation. We were moving Mom and Dad to Amica, for a trial stay. The morning of the move, we were talking about how they wanted to make the day happen (we were doing our best to give them some choices in their life, because recently they have had so few choices). So Dad replied with that familiar glint in his eye "Well, we sure can't do it, we need help so I'm just going to sit in the corner and watch." I did have to laugh. Remember, be realistic about your limits and be practical.



By the way, this is a very long list for Dad. Remember, keep it simple. But, I cannot simplify a life that had so much impact, so as he would say, "Bear with me..."

Dad served with the army, the navy, and the air force. When Kent was talking with our contact at Veteran's Affairs and countless others involved with his care, many of them said, "I work with a lot of Veterans and I will always remember your Dad". Friendships are so important to our parents. Make the best of a bad situation, enough said. Patriotism - his message was, "We are so lucky to live in a free country, to be able to work hard and enjoy "the fruits of our labour" but never, never, never take your freedom for granted. At Oconto, we sing "Oh Canada" every day. We don't just listen to it, we sing it. I try hard to get everyone to stand at attention, to sing loud and proud. Some mornings believe me, are harder than others to get people to do that. Some people are half asleep. I have been known a couple of times each summer to stop everyone and start again because they were not standing proud and not singing loud. That's because of Dad. Stand up for what you believe is right. Dad always did; not necessarily the easiest way but what he believed. He did not say a lot but he always meant what he said. He was true to his word, and followed through. If he said he would do it we knew to consider it done.

This past weekend, we had what we call a chickadee weekend. That is when 4 to 7 year old girls come to enjoy Oconto. I left the weekend about an hour early on Sunday, because I was called and informed that Dad's health was continuing to fail and that I should get back quickly. I drove to Southlake Hospital and when I arrived, Dad was lying on the bed with his eyes closed. He had no expression on his face. We were sitting and talking to Dad and Mom said in an effort to help me out, "Talk to Dad, Lisa. He can hear you. Tell Dad about the Chickadees". So I did. "Dad, we were out as a group in canoes, down the Nile and there was an abundance of wildlife; birds, frogs, insects, we saw 22 turtles in about 45 minutes. We even saw a beaver swimming with a branch, There were seven snakes sunbathing on a beaver lodge, you should have seen

the counsellors trying to be calm and cool! They were squirming in those canoes". That made Dad smile, just a bit, I could see him laughing to himself. He knew we were there.

Dad's remains are in this small box, made from an oak tree. It is made of oak on purpose. An oak is strong, long lasting, and it provides protection and influence to many. Whether you called him Dear, Dad, Teddy, Grandpa, Uncle Cliff, Cliff or Mr. Labbett, he will continue to guide us through his example, through the lessons he taught us every day. He was respected, he is respected. We will miss him every day. Good bye Dad. You are deeply loved.

Lisa



Bronwyn Wilson also spoke at the funeral and shared many personal and Oconto thoughts. The Oconto thoughts include;

My grandfather leaves behind an incredible legacy. A large and happy family that love him dearly and a career running Oconto that positively impacted 1000s of young girl's and women's lives. He accomplished all this with the support and partnership of his wife, June. Cliff knew that June dreamed of running her own camp and suggested that they run a camp together. June and Cliff knew Miss Halliday was looking to sell Oconto if she found the right buyer. June and Cliff bought Oconto in 1949 and ran camp for 33 years. Between 1949 and 1982, Oconto was the summer home for approximately 230 girls per summer. My grandfather is famously remembered for many things at Oconto. Many remember his banquet speeches where he would share camp details that not many people knew such as how many nails are in the dining hall or how many pounds of potatoes camp consumes over the course of a summer. These speeches were my grandfather's way of making campers and staff aware and appreciative of all the hard work done by people behind the scenes. A strong work ethic was important to my grandpa and he instilled the value in so many young people, especially during work camp.

Oconto staff fondly remember Cliff's Liver Lovers breakfast, the yellow folded paper in his breast pocket filled with jobs for the day, a certain birthday where barnyard animals waked into the dining hall as a surprise gift, and the way he said Hiawatha at Native Gathering. Even after retiring, Cliff continued to play an important role at Oconto by hosting campers without visitors on visitor's day, attending Chapel on Sundays and taking the youngest campers for rides on the party barge.



Over the past couple of days I have received several messages from Oconto alumni sharing their thoughts on Cliff. Alumni say that he inspired and motivated everyone around him to do their best and to work to their full potential. Former Oconto staff say that he always made time for them. Importantly, Cliff was way ahead of his time in his support of women's ability and recognition of the value of women's contribution. Grandpa, thank you for choosing to go on the camp director journey with June. So many people have benefitted immeasurably from your dedication and vision. Grandpa, I also want to thank you for the wonderful example you set for all who knew you. I know that all of your children and grandchildren strive and will continue to strive to lead lives with the same degree of honesty, integrity and care that you exemplified in your life. We all love you and will remember you every day.

Bronwyn Wilson

