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Northern solitude liberates woman

The isolated home halfway between Thessalon and Walker Road gives Gisela Roemer the lifestyle she always craved while growing up in Germany

By PAULINE CLARK

Special to the Sault Star
THESALON — We started out at noon last Saturday on a five-kilometre trek through the bush, not too far from the shores of Lake Huron.

Following "Trail B" as it's known to local mountaineering enthusiasts, my family and I walked along trails that had been recently built — some runs were all dirt that was mostly dried and had enough to walk on because of the heat.

Other spots were more grassy and although recently cut down, it was evident that the ridges had been waist-high not long ago.

Further along a deer was spotted as it ran off into the thick bush. Game could be heard at the lake shore in the distance and the kids dived trying to catch frogs and toads along the way.

The trail wound around as we passed the first marsh and then the second marsh. Then the built-dirt trail veered off to the right and almost a kilometre further we glimpsed her heading towards us.

Gisela Roemer — a 27-year-old German immigrant who dreamed her lifestyle in Germany for the Northern Ontario wilderness. It was fed up with European culture, always making money and they forgot their roots, she explains in nearly perfect English as she leads us across the rocks and up a trail to a modern vinyl-sided bungalow perched on a rock over the lake.

People here (in Canada) like money too but they still have a heart-time for others, she comments as she sits on the wooden bench attached to the deck that fronts her home. She has one leg pulled up to her chin and her hand, brother, shoulder-length hair that has fallen loose from a bun.

Lunch is ready for us but we decide to talk for a while first. Gisela jumps up and hurries into the house. In the distance, I can make out the huge conveyor at Thessalon Bay — the only other sign of human life around.

Her German husband returns with a pouch of tobacco and a sheet of paper to roll cigarettes. She rolls one and begins to smoke.

Her first trip to Canada, she explains, was on a hiking trip to British Columbia in 1981. Then in 1982, she began to take yearly canoe trips on Lake Huron where she eventually discovered "this dream home with a far side up on."

The exchange rate was extremely high so she continued to look for other properties but she couldn't forget the home halfway between Thessalon and Walker Road.

A return visit in 1987 showed her in price which convinced her to mortgage her home in Germany and build plans to return to Canada from Berlin in her native Germany.

Gisela recalls her first time staying alone in the wilderness. Loaded down with luggage, she got off the Greyhound bus and began the walk down Walker Road to a German friend's property where she would camp for two weeks.

She set her luggage down to rest her leg and looked up to see a moose bear and two cubs.

"My first thought was return to the highway," she laughs. "But I remembered reading that animals will go over from noise so I tied cups to my luggage to bang together and I sang all the way down the road."

Gisela says she has read a lot about native culture in Canada and felt sure many of its tenets. "When you're by yourself, you have to be very careful. You have to watch every step and train all your senses," she says.

While she has a cellular telephone now, she says she had and cut herself when she first moved here.

What could I do? I read my books to see what to do for the sound. I didn't sleep that night for the pain. Just now I'm more careful," she says.

Gisela takes me inside where I am surprised to see a carpeted living area and modern wooden cupboards.

A wood-fired cook stove stands gleaming and to the left is an upright piano with a guitar leaning against it.

There are three bedrooms — one in an addition that Gisela has built.

It is also a sunny room that is used as another best source. I can use an electric heater and kettle now," she explains. A small refrigerator sits inside a shell in the wall.

Electricity is provided by the solar panels on her property. Powered in expensive because of the high cost of getting it into the property but she's buying the newly-built trail will eventually provide easier access especially during the winter.

She has no running water. It all comes from the lake and drinking water must be boiled at least twelve minutes.

For now, she only uses the cook stove at night when it's a bit cooler.

She swims once or twice a day she says as she takes me across the rock to show me the little bay. "my bathroom-washroom — my sun of the right word" — It is sheltered from the wind and gets the warm morning sun and even has a flat piece of rock.

In the distance, she points out an area that has a sandy beach. Here, she where she swims, it is rocky.

Dislike kitchen sinks in the kitchen area provide a drain that sends the water back into the lake.

She does her laundry by hand, hauling water up from the lake. "I won't pollute the lake with laundry soap," she says.

She also has a composting toilet as much as she can.

I give back to the earth what I don't use and carry other garbage to town," she explains.

"People in Europe got stuck with their garbage. I want to help all I can," she says with a nod.

Although she has a kayak and canoe, she walks to town most of the time. The canoe is large and is best used with more than one person. Although the kayak is less tippy, she prefers paddling when the lake is calm.

A trip to town takes a whole day. Gisela explains that she doesn't start out until noon hour when she can usually tell what the weather will be like for the day.

On the return trip she hikes back with a backpack crammed with about 18 kilograms worth (40 pounds) of supplies.

The winter trip is often made on skis.

She has a radio but seldom uses it. "I make my own music when I want music," she states.

"Sometimes I do needle stuff," she says and takes me to the spare bedroom where she spreads out a rug she is working. She makes her own guitars and this one depicts plants for each month. It is based on native folklore and is similar to a totem.

A shelf in the room holds probably fifty or sixty glass panes, most of them from Germany.

She explains that she cleans the weather and keeps a record of her solar energy.

"Living like this, I have to keep a journal or I would never know what day it is," she laughs. Born in Berlin before the war, Gisela says she remembers always being very hungry.

"My mother took me to the country with her to trade sewing for food with the farmers. Trains were crowded and traveling was terrible."

Her brother died in the war leaving Gisela as an only child. They had to flee from their home often at a minute's notice.

"After the war, my favorite game was getting all I could grab in a minute and running away."

Living in East Berlin, she says they wouldn't accept her into university because she "wasn't of the right political opinion."

So she went to West Berlin high school and got her papers for University there. During this time she met and married a ship captain.

"I was lucky. I was on the right side when they put up the wall but my mother was in East Berlin and I couldn't even tell her I was having my first child. Later, the Red Cross helped her move."

After her kids were older, Gisela became a school teacher. She had teaching career in Germany furnished her with a pension.

Although she has always enjoyed hiking and nature — her two children could walk twenty kilometres and swim before they



Roemer has to hike into town on foot to stock up on supplies; the trip takes a whole day and she returns lugging about 18 kilograms (40 pounds) of supplies in her backpack



Although Roemer has a radio, she prefers to create her own music



Solar panels provide all the electricity Roemer needs