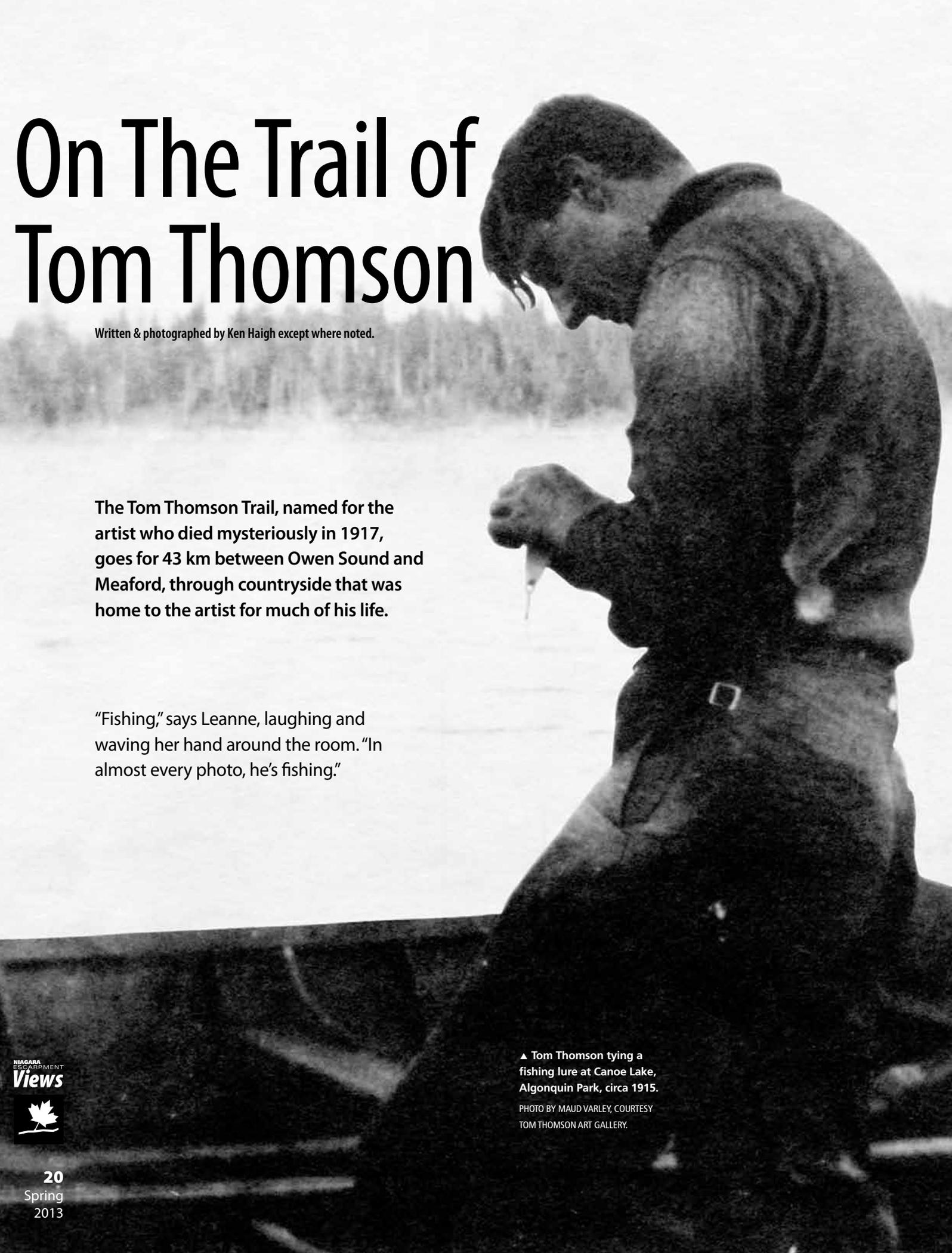


On The Trail of Tom Thomson

Written & photographed by Ken Haigh except where noted.

The Tom Thomson Trail, named for the artist who died mysteriously in 1917, goes for 43 km between Owen Sound and Meaford, through countryside that was home to the artist for much of his life.

"Fishing," says Leanne, laughing and waving her hand around the room. "In almost every photo, he's fishing."



▲ Tom Thomson tying a fishing lure at Canoe Lake, Algonquin Park, circa 1915.

PHOTO BY MAUD VARLEY, COURTESY TOM THOMSON ART GALLERY.

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would form the core of The Group of Seven, Canada's best-known art movement. Yet, for my money, Thomson was the best of the lot. Who knows what he might have accomplished had he lived longer?

Thanking Leanne, I get in my car and drive east, to the Bayshore Community Centre. From the kiosk behind the arena, the Tom Thomson Trail wends its way east over the

two existing rail trails: the Georgian Bluffs Trail, which starts at Owen Sound Harbour, and the Georgian Trail, which runs between Meaford and Collingwood.

Leanne Wright is the manager of marketing and development for the Tom Thomson Gallery in Owen Sound, and she has agreed to show me around the collection. I am planning to cycle a portion of the Tom Thomson Trail, a three-season, non-motorized trail for hikers, bikers and equestrians, which runs between Owen Sound and Meaford, and which passes the Thomson farm, where the artist grew up, and the churchyard where Thomson is buried. Before I leave, I am looking for some background on the painter. There are black-and-white photos of Thomson scattered around the gallery, sandwiched between examples of the artist's work. Leanne is correct. In almost every photo, Thomson is fishing. But then, that fits. Part of the Thomson mythology is of Thomson the outdoorsman, the canoeist and fisherman, who captured the real Canadian north in his paintings.

Tom Thomson is Canada's best known artist, and the Tom Thomson Gallery holds the third-largest collection of Thomson's work, after the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario. Canvases like *The West Wind* are iconic, endlessly reproduced on posters and t-shirts. Thomson has shaped the way we see our country and ourselves. And yet Thomson came late to painting. As a young man, he worked in commercial art, where he specialized in lettering. It wasn't until the summer of 1912, when he first visited Algonquin Park that he turned to landscape painting. Between 1912 and his early death in 1917 at the age of 39, Thomson produced all of the paintings for which he is famous. He also introduced his co-workers at Grip Ltd., a Toronto commercial art firm, to the beauties of Algonquin Park. After his death, these painters

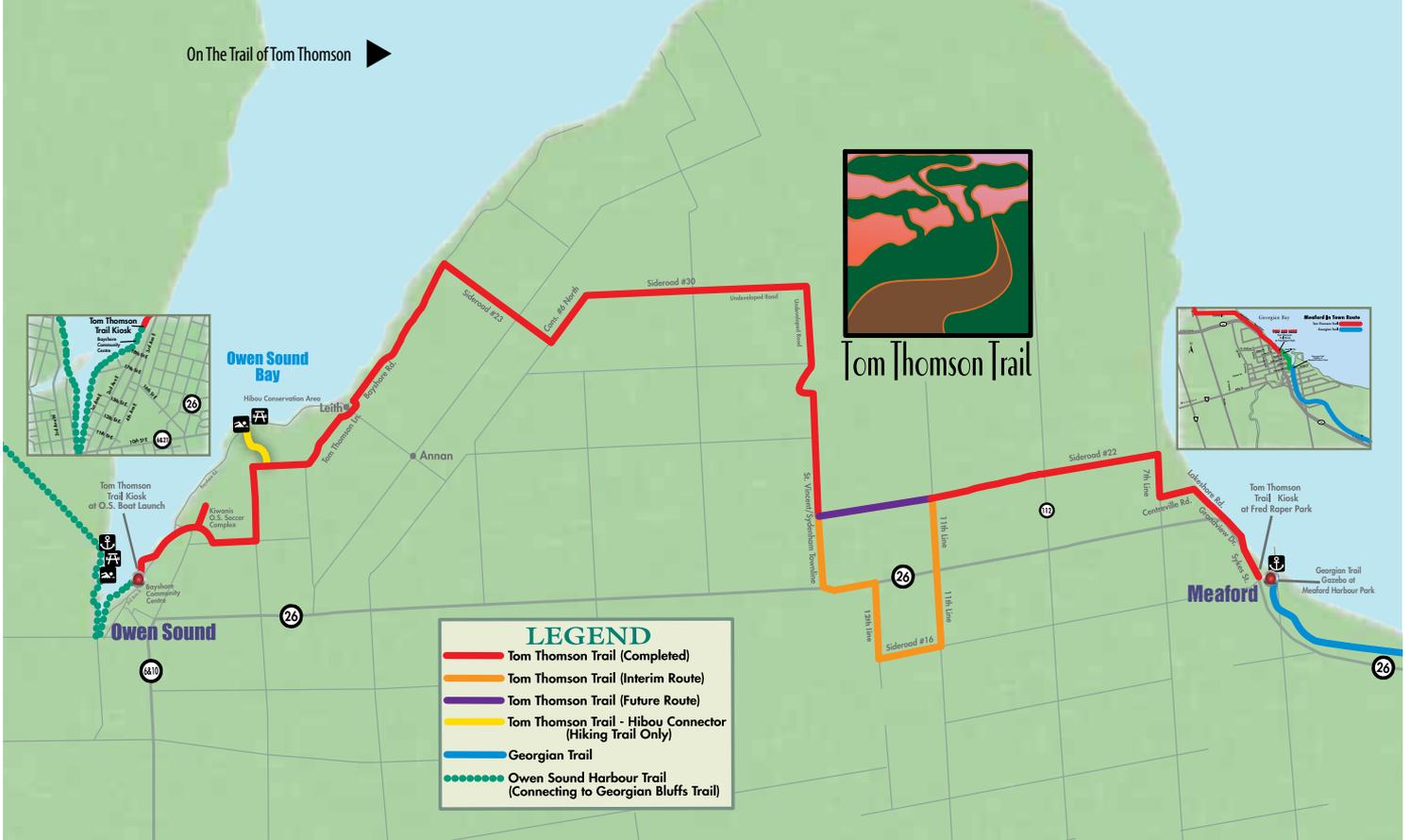


▲ View of Owen Sound Bay from Bayshore Road east of Owen Sound, a suggested route back from Leith.

Sydenham Peninsula. Earlier, I had spoken to Tom Hakala, the vice-chair of the Tom Thomson Trail Group, about the genesis of the trail. Hakala explained that the Tom Thomson Trail was designed as a bridge between

“The initial version of the trail was completed in 2008, but that was not the ideal route in our minds. The trail continues to evolve as we acquire new and





▲ The 43-km Tom Thomson Trail connects Georgian Bluffs Trail at Owen Sound to Georgian Trail at Meaford. Map courtesy The Tom Thomson Trail Group.





▲ Sign for Tom Thomson Trail.



▲ Historic Leith United Church where Tom Thomson is said to be buried.



▲ Mystery surrounds the death and burial of painter Tom Thomson. Some claim his body is not here despite the grave marker.

◀ Tom Thomson Trail below the Bayview Escarpment at the end of the 22nd Sideroad section.

better routes. Our goal at the moment is to have the complete trail north of Highway 26, so users do not have to cross the busy highway. There is still a lot of work to do to complete the trail, but we have a dedicated core of volunteers who will get the job done.”

I am not planning to cycle all the way to Meaford today, a distance of 43 km. Some sections, particularly those on the 22nd Side Road Extension, require a mountain bike to complete. My ambitions are much smaller, a short jaunt to Leith, the small community where Thomson spent the first 24 years of his life, an easy loop of perhaps 15 km.

I park my car, unhitch my bicycle from the carrier, and begin my journey. The first stretch is a pleasant glide along the water's edge on the bed of the former CN rail line. At the edge of the city, I leave the rail-trail and continue east on quiet lanes toward Leith. Cycling along the appropriately named Tom Thomson Lane, I pass a modern equestrian centre that was once the Thomson family farm, Rose Hill. A few minutes later and I've reached Leith United Church. The church is simple, but

elegant, now a designated heritage site under the Ontario Heritage Act and is in the process of restoration. Church services are still held here occasionally, and the church has become the venue for a local music festival. The surrounding cemetery is beautifully maintained, and I wander aimlessly up and down the rows of headstones searching for Thomson's grave.

An elderly couple is leaving, and I ask them if they know the location of the grave. The man smiles and points to my left. I'm standing right in front of it. I guess I was expecting something a little grander, for the gravestone is a simple granite rectangle, and Thomson's isn't the only name on the monument. There is a mountain of loose change spilling off the top of the gravestone.

"Why do people put coins on Thomson's grave?" I ask the couple.

"Don't know, but maybe we should put a collection box here," laughs the man. "We'd make a mint."

I thank them for their help and, after they leave, pause for a few moments at the grave. I'm not sure exactly what I should be feeling.

I sometimes think that the public's fascination with Thomson has less to do with his art and more to do with the mysterious circumstances surrounding his death. On July 16, 1917, Thomson's body was found floating in Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park. There was fishing line carefully wrapped about one ankle, a bruise on his temple, and blood issuing from his ear. The medical examiner ruled that his death was accidental, but not everyone agreed. In 1970, Judge William T. Little wrote that Thomson was murdered and



▲ On the Tom Thomson Trail near Leith.

maintained that Thomson's body was not in the Leith cemetery, as his family believed, but was still buried in the cemetery at Canoe Lake. Roy MacGregor, Thomson's most recent biographer, concurs.

Is Thomson's body in the Leith cemetery? If it isn't, then who is buried in Thomson's coffin? Does it matter? I hop back on my bike and continue into Leith, turning left towards Georgian Bay. A quiet journey along Bayshore Road carries me back to Owen Sound and my car.

For more information on the Tom Thomson Trail and a route map, see tomthomsontrail.com

- ▶ For more information on the Tom Thomson Gallery, see tomthomson.org. For information regarding ongoing special events celebrating the life of Thomson, click on "Canadian Spirit." Celebrations culminate in 2017 with the anniversary of Thomson's death, the 50th anniversary of the gallery, and Canada's sesquicentennial.
- ▶ For more information on the historic Leith Church: leithchurch.ca



Back at the gallery, I had asked Leanne whether she ever got tired of visitors asking about the mystery of Thomson's death.

"No," she had said. "It brings people into the gallery. They may come because they are curious about his death, but they return because they love his paintings."

And perhaps that is how it should be. **NEV**

Ken Haigh, author of Under the Holy Lake: A Memoir of Eastern Bhutan, is a frequent contributor to this magazine. His last article was "Mysteries of Ekarenniondi, The Rock that Stands Out," Summer 2011.