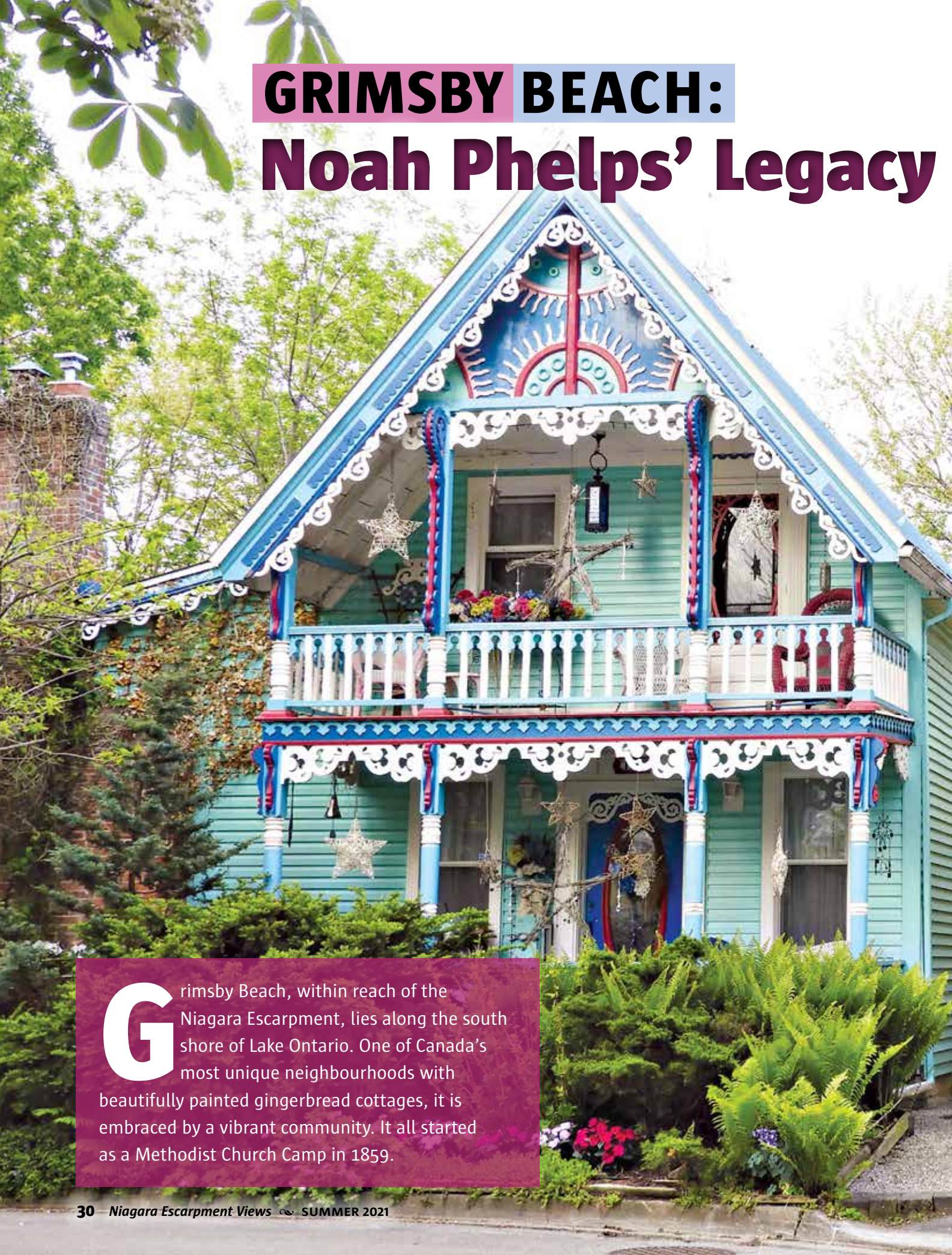


# GRIMSBY BEACH: Noah Phelps' Legacy



**G**rimsbey Beach, within reach of the Niagara Escarpment, lies along the south shore of Lake Ontario. One of Canada's most unique neighbourhoods with beautifully painted gingerbread cottages, it is embraced by a vibrant community. It all started as a Methodist Church Camp in 1859.

# in GINGERBREAD

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED  
BY BRUCE MACKENZIE  
EXCEPT WHERE NOTED



▲ The colourful gingerbread cottages of Grimsby Beach have been brought back to life from a decline in the 1930s.



◀ The “sunburst” feature of gingerbread under the peak is common and found in both refurbished and historic houses.



Today’s beautiful cottages replaced decorative tents that were the first accommodations for the members of the Methodist revival events known as “Chautauquas,” referring to a cultural movement that began in New York State. Leaders like Noah Phelps steered this community through an incredible journey.

If not for the collective efforts of dedicated homeowners, Phelps might not recognize what he knew as the Ontario Methodist Camp Meeting Ground on Grimsby’s Lake Ontario shoreline.

Phelps first visited the property in the mid 1800s and the first church meeting here was in 1859. After the inaugural meeting the property grew into a large campground and meeting place for churchgoers. By 1875 the annual weeklong meetings had turned into summers full of events.

In 1874 the Ontario Methodist Church Camp Company was formed, and Phelps became its first and only president until his death in 1900. It is doubtful anybody could imagine

what would transpire during his 26 years of leadership.

The campground was first surveyed in 1875 and the tent plots were identified. Not long after, the tents gave way to a unique and colourful cottage community and even today the deeds for homes refer to the tent plots that they sit on.

The church camp became a booming tourist attraction. Steam-powered ferries started to arrive at the newly built dock in 1876 bringing visitors from Toronto, Hamilton and Niagara. Trains and vehicles would bring others from as far away as the U.S.

Rules were firm: no alcohol, no foul language and lights out at 10:30 pm. Sunday was a day of rest and guests were expected to attend church services. An immense open-air pavilion, the “Temple” was built in 1888. It could hold 7,000 people and stood 100 feet high with a cupola at the top with windows in it for natural light. It was used day and night for lectures and entertainment.

Stores, a post office and two large hotels, The Park and Lakeview, were built. With cottages replacing tents and a wide variety of visitor attractions being added, the season for tourists went from spring until fall.



▲ The Friesen family and their house, showing a flair for fashion and heritage.



► One of the ferries from across Lake Ontario at the dock of Grimsby Beach. PHOTO COURTESY OF GRIMSBY ARCHIVES.



▲ An 1890 view of the Lakeview Hotel which burned down in 1918. PHOTO COURTESY OF GRIMSBY ARCHIVES.

### Grimsby Beach

In 1900, with the passing of Phelps, the church camp became the Grimsby Park Company. It continued as a successful resort attraction and by 1907 there were 180 cottages. In 1916 the property was sold to the Canada Steamship Lines and became known as Grimsby Beach. With each new owner, the church morals and values were diluted, and more investments were made in amusements with a midway, merry-go-round, roller coaster, casino, dance hall and theatre. In 1924 the Grimsby Cottagers Association purchased the property from the steamship line and sold the lots to the cottagers.

The steamships stopped in 1929 after almost a 50-year run. After 1930 the resort started to lose its lustre and became a place for residents to find more affordable housing. Many cottages with open porches and verandahs had walls built to enclose them to make for larger living spaces.

Fires took their toll. In 1914 one fire took 34 cottages and another in 1927 took almost 30 more. The Park Hotel likely burned in 1914 and the Lakeview Hotel was lost to fire in 1918.

The architecture was unmistakable. Front porches, second-level balconies and gingerbread adornments to the narrow cottages came into fashion and craftsmen were strongly sought after by the cottage owners. Built on narrow tent lots, the cottages were typically one-and-a-half storeys with living areas on the first floor, bedrooms on the second, with kitchens in the rear. A distinctive feature was a small balcony off the bedrooms at the front with a sunburst design on the gable end above the balcony.

Today, there is a small but significant collection of cottages that have been rebuilt to reflect the original designs. It has been a labour of love and often at great expense for the homeowners to bring a



▲ Camp visitors from the early days in front of one of the tents. PHOTO BY J.H. FORD COURTESY OF GRIMSBY ARCHIVES.



▲ Sue Anderson at her house, reborn from the 1920s.



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▲ Camp crowd in front of Park Hotel and the post office. Note the overflow crowd on the balconies. PHOTO COURTESY OF GRIMSBY ARCHIVES.



▲ Camp visitors waiting for the ferry to arrive. PHOTO BY J.H. FORD COURTESY OF GRIMSBY ARCHIVES.

cottage built in the late 1800s, meant for summer use only, to being year-round homes today. They are beautifully cared for inside and out.

### Preserving History

Today we are fortunate to have many photos of this unique

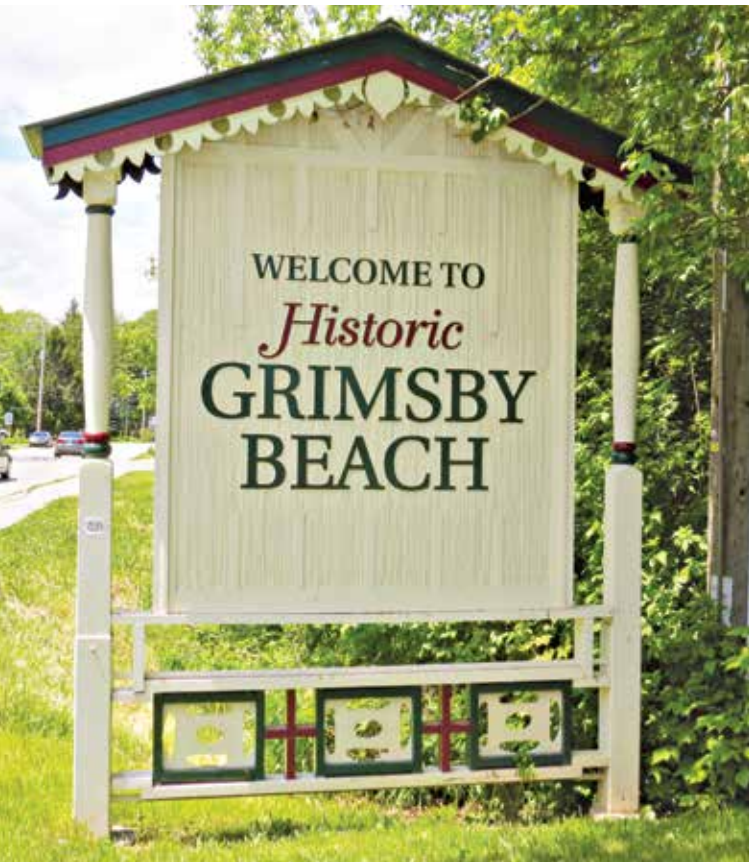
history. Many were taken by J.H. Ford who operated a photographic studio in the park. His residence still exists and is now called “Bellview” by its owners, the Mackays. It exquisitely illustrates the flair and distinction of Grimsby Beach cottages.

Every inch of change on the home and beautiful garden receives creative energy and a passion for the past.

Sue Anderson moved into her home in 2011. She visited Grimsby Beach as a child with her father, involving long boat rides from Hamilton in

the 1950s but wasn’t quite sure of her memories until her feet took her down the old path she used as a child. Then the memories came rushing back. She feels she is really at home now.

Speaking to homeowners like Bob Friesen, you hear



▲ Grimsby Beach can be reached along Lake St. west of Bartlett Ave., south of the QEW.

personal stories of what attracted them to the neighbourhood and the surprises they found in the houses when refurbishing was carried out. His beautifully restored cottage which has been moved from one lot to another, appears to have had a section added on that may well have come from another cottage. When you tear down walls, secrets are revealed.

There is limited parking for visitors on the outskirts of Grimsby Beach. Please respect the owners and their properties; look but don't touch. They have spent so much energy in preserving the past. Lake St. runs through Grimsby Beach from west of Bartlett Ave off the QEW.

Today's cottage owners are concerned about what tomorrow will bring. Recently the Town of Grimsby passed an interim control bylaw to allow time for a new planning study to be completed. Residents hope the plan will recognize the Grimsby Beach history and bring zoning parameters to reflect it. **NEV**

*Bruce Mackenzie's last article in Niagara Escarpment Views was "The Grimsby Wetlands," Spring 2021. Bruce resides in Grimsby and is a commissioner on the Niagara Escarpment Commission, vice chair of the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority and is a member of the stakeholders committee for the Grimsby Beach Land Use Planning Study.*

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