

What's in a name? Kawartha Lakes vs. Kawarthas

Many weeks ago, I attended a meeting about the promotion of cultural heritage in this municipality. Towards the end of the meeting, one of the participants pointed out that too many call this area “the Kawarthas,” when in fact it is called “Kawartha Lakes.”



Add in to this mix the municipality's official name “The City of Kawartha Lakes” – a name which seems rather misleading, given our [mostly] rural appearances – and the confusion continues.

So, what's in a name? Are we simply “the Kawarthas” or are we “the Kawartha Lakes?” What is the difference between “The City of Kawartha Lakes” and “Victoria County” (a name fondly

remembered by many of our citizens)?

To answer this question accurately requires us to become better acquainted with the history and development of the word "Kawartha," which itself is a linguistic misnomer. The original Anishinaabeg word is *Ka-wa-tha*, derived from "*Ka-wa-tae-gum-maug*," or *Gaa-waategamaag*, which means "land of reflections." By 1900, however, it had been anglicized to *Kawartha*, supposedly at the behest of those who were eagerly looking for a catchy slogan that would attract tourists to the area by both rail and water.

For those late-Victorian writers of tourist propaganda, "The Kawartha Lakes" *referred specifically to the lakes*. Here at the museum we have an ancient brochure promoting "Kawartha Lakes." This brochure is helpful in giving us a [118 year-old] definition of that term:

The Kawartha Lakes extend from Lakefield to Coboconk, a distance of Seventy-miles, covered with a good Boat service, and tapped by rail at Lakefield, Lindsay, Fenelon Falls, and Coboconk...For Cruising Campers a trip over the Lakes makes a delightful holiday. They possess a beauty of their own, a wildness, a variety, and a surprise...Take the water at Coboconk, and go through to Lakefield. No need for a ton of supplies, they can be obtained at Coboconk, Fenelon Falls, Sturgeon Pt., Buckhorn, Burleigh, Juniper Island in Stony Lake, Young's Point. Easy portages."

At this point, the keen student of geography will pipe up "But aren't Burleigh and Lakefield in Peterborough County? Isn't Buckhorn in what is now the Municipality of Trent Lakes? Isn't Stony Lake closer to Peterborough? Why are they included in a brochure promoting The Kawartha Lakes?"

Once again, we need to remind ourselves that "The Kawartha Lakes," at least in our earliest sources, refers to a *specific geographical feature*, not merely a *political region*, which

from 1861 until amalgamation in 2001, was broadly known as "Victoria County."

Nonetheless, the old Anishinnabeg-inspired word "Kawartha" continued to be used concurrently (if not somewhat casually) to describe not just lakes, but also the region as a whole: its physical geography as well as its culture.

"The Kawarthas," a term used quite liberally by the economic development and tourism departments in Peterborough, attempts to capture the essential character of the place and its people: "Discover a place where the people are down-to-earth, the beauty is breathtaking, and the activities are endless," we read on the website of "Peterborough & The Kawarthas."

Of course, the same descriptor could be justly applied to The City of Kawartha Lakes. In fact, "The City's" website rightly boasts that "Kawartha Lakes is home to more than 75,000 permanent and 30,000 seasonal residents. Nearly 1.4 million people visit us each year seeking the cottage lifestyle made possible by our 250 lakes and rivers."

Nonetheless, the qualifier, "The City," in "The City of Kawartha Lakes," opens up a whole other can of worms. It implies urban sprawl, congested highways, various levels of bureaucracy and other characteristics far removed from the "down-to-earth," romanticized language most people then and now use to describe this region.

Though governed as a single-tier city, I would hazard a guess that most of us continue to identify ourselves with the small towns, villages, and hamlets in which we live.

What's in *our* name? I'll let *Advocate* readers decide for themselves.