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## Fool's Paradise

On Sunday, May 29, 2005, at 2 p.m., a provincial plaque celebrating Fool's Paradise – a significant heritage property donated to the Ontario Heritage Foundation by renowned artist Doris McCarthy – was unveiled at 1 Meadowcliffe Drive in Toronto.

The plaque was unveiled by Doris McCarthy and The Honourable Lincoln M. Alexander, Chairman of the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

### **FOOL'S PARADISE**

This property sits on the ecologically sensitive, geologically significant Scarborough Bluffs that display sediments left by glaciers over 70,000 years during the last phase of the Pleistocene epoch. Aboriginal peoples may have inhabited this site as early as 8,000 B.C. Scottish immigrant James McCowan settled this land for farming in 1833, calling it "Springbank" because of the springs running from the ancient shoreline of Lake Iroquois (predecessor of Lake Ontario) to the north. In 1939, Canadian artist Doris McCarthy purchased the easternmost part of Springbank, which her mother called "Fool's Paradise" because she considered it to be such an extravagant purchase. McCarthy's home and studio grew over the years and in 1998 she donated Fool's Paradise to the Ontario Heritage Foundation for heritage and artistic activities.

### **« LE PARADIS D'UNE FOLLE »**

Cette propriété surplombe les falaises de Scarborough, écosensibles et géologiquement importantes, qui présentent des sédiments laissés par des glaciers pendant 70 000 ans, lors de la dernière période du Pléistocène. Les Autochtones ont peut-être habité ce site dès 8 000 av. J.-C. En 1833, l'immigrant écossais James McCowan aménagea cette propriété à des fins agricoles, l'appelant « Springbank » en raison des sources qui s'écoulaient de l'ancienne rive du lac Iroquois (auquel le lac Ontario s'est substitué), au nord. En 1939, l'artiste canadienne Doris McCarthy acheta la partie située le plus à l'est de Springbank, que sa mère appelait « Le paradis d'une folle », car elle estimait que l'achat était une extravagance. Au fil des ans, la maison et le studio de M<sup>me</sup> McCarthy prirent de l'expansion et, en 1998, l'artiste fit

don de sa propriété à la Fondation du patrimoine ontarien pour ses activités patrimoniales et artistiques.

## **Historical background**

### **Sense of place**

Fool's Paradise – the home of artist Doris McCarthy – is located on the geologically important Scarborough Bluffs. At their highest point, the bluffs rise 350 feet (106 metres) above Lake Ontario and provide a visual record of sequences of sediment deposition from glacial advances and retreats, mostly of the last stage of the Pleistocene epoch (Great Ice Age), thought to have begun a million years ago.<sup>1</sup> The first advance of the Wisconsinan stage (the last process) – begun some 70,000 years ago – left traces of clay and sand in the lower region of the bluffs.

With the glacier's retreat, deep valleys were created, traced in cross-section in the bluffs. Some 50,000 years ago, the glacier returned, this time overrunning the Toronto region, filling up the river valleys with boulder clay and depositing more of the material on top. The glacier advanced and retreated three more times over 20,000 years, each time leaving behind a thick layer of boulder clay on top of previous deposits.

As the glacier withdrew northward for the last time, some 12,500 years ago, Lake Iroquois was created (predecessor of present-day Lake Ontario). It remained for perhaps 1,000 years and was larger than Lake Ontario, its elevation averaging about 150 feet (46 metres) higher. Lake Iroquois' shoreline can be traced around much of Lake Ontario and is a prominent physiographic feature of the Toronto area (including Fool's Paradise). Wave action undercut and eroded the accumulated material of 70,000 years, forming the spectacular cliffs that now rise along the Scarborough lakefront.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Canada, the ice came from two main centres – the Keewatin, over Hudson Bay, and the Labradoran, over Labrador and eastern Quebec. Jointly they formed the so-called Laurentide Sheet, which covered Canada and part of the north United States with ice varying in depth up to 10,000 ft. (3,048 m). There were four main stages of glaciations during the Pleistocene epoch – the Nebraskan, Kansas, Illinoian and the Wisconsinan – but no records survive of the first two, having been covered by successive stages.

<sup>2</sup> Text edited from "Provincial Plaque Commemorates Geological History of Scarborough Bluffs," Background Paper, Ontario Heritage Foundation, 1994. See also, E. B. Freeman, *Toronto's Geological Past-an introduction* (Toronto: Ministry of Natural Resources, Ontario Division of Mines Miscellaneous Publications, 1975) and Nick Eyles, *Toronto Rocks. The Geological Legacy of the Toronto Region* (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2004). The period records "a time when woolly mammoths and giant beavers roamed southern Ontario," see p. 3.

## Early settlers

Aboriginal artifacts found in the early 1890s at a site near Fool's Paradise provide the earliest evidence of human occupation in Toronto – aboriginal peoples of the archaic period beginning approximately 8000 B.C.<sup>3</sup> European settlement of the area occurred later.

A diary entry of August 4, 1793 by Elizabeth Simcoe, wife of Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe, gave the area its modern place name, Scarborough:

We continued our ride beyond the Peninsula [Toronto Islands], on the sands of the North shore of Lake Ontario . . . & after rowing a mile we came within sight of what is named in the Map the high land of Toronto – the shore is extremely bold & has the appearance of Chalk Cliffs but I believe they are only white sand – they appeared so well, that we talked of building a Summer Residence there & calling it Scarborough.<sup>4</sup>

The area was settled soon after with a system of free land grants.<sup>5</sup> The first European settlers were the Annis brothers, arriving in 1793.<sup>6</sup> By the 1820s, land grants disappeared and subsequent British and Scottish immigrants bought or rented their land from the government or private real estate speculators.<sup>7</sup>

One of these immigrants was James McCowan, a bankrupt Scottish coal master who immigrated with his wife Margaret Porteous and eight children in 1833. They settled as tenant farmers on 35 acres of the “flats,” below the northern boundary of the prehistoric shoreline of Lake Iroquois, at the foot of the present-day Meadowcliffe Drive. The farm was named “Springbank” because of the numerous springs in the side of the remains of the shoreline.<sup>8</sup> (Fool's Paradise is at the most eastern end of what was Springbank.) James and his third son,

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<sup>3</sup> The artifacts were unearthed in the early 1890s one-half mile east of the farm “Springbank” (Lot 20, Concession B) by Ashley McCowan and his brother Harold. The artifacts are now in the Robert Ashbridge McCowan and William Harald McCowan Collection; they were exhibited at North York Central Library, Canadian Department (Toronto), October 2002-April 2003. See “10,000 Years of Toronto History,” [www.scarboroughrecord.com](http://www.scarboroughrecord.com).

<sup>4</sup> Edith Firth, *The Town of York 1793-1815. A Collection of Documents of Early Toronto* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, Ontario Series V for the Government of Ontario, University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 214. Colonel Simcoe was the province's first Lieutenant Governor (1791-96).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lxxxii.

<sup>6</sup> The Annis brothers and others blazed the Kingston Road between 1800-01 that became the main artery between Ontario's major centres – Toronto and Kingston.

<sup>7</sup> Randall White, *Ontario 1610-1985. A Political and Economic History* (Toronto and London: Dundurn Press, 1985), pp. 82-83.

<sup>8</sup> The McCowans were the first European settlers on this land (Lot 20, Concessions B and C and a small portion of Lot 19). Isolated from the main artery, Kingston Road, by two deep gullies and by the Lake Iroquois shorecliff apparently James McCowan blazed a trail up the cliff, down into Bellamy Ravine (a.k.a. Gates Gully), over the streambed and up the other side – fully half a mile to the artery. See, “Springbank, McCowan Farm,” [http://www.city.toronto.on.ca/torontoplan/lost\\_examples2.htm](http://www.city.toronto.on.ca/torontoplan/lost_examples2.htm).

David, died of cholera in 1834. The remaining family members continued to farm the land until 1848.<sup>9</sup> In 1876, the original settlement was purchased by the eldest son, Robert, and remained in family hands until it was subdivided in 1891. By 1905, the Electric Radial Line had been extended through Scarborough and by 1910, Toronto's gentry were building country residences along Kingston Road.

### **Doris McCarthy**

Doris McCarthy was born in Calgary, Alberta on July 7, 1910 and moved to Toronto with her family three years later. She studied at Williamson Road School and in 1921 entered Malvern Collegiate Institute, graduating in 1926. Although McCarthy planned to be a writer, she enrolled in a part-time junior course at the Ontario College of Art in her last year of high school, winning a full-time day scholarship for the fall of 1926. There she studied under Arthur Lismer, a member of the Group of Seven, graduating with honors in 1930.<sup>10</sup> In 1932, McCarthy joined the art department at Toronto's Central Technical School. Her enthusiasm for travelling began during her post-graduate studies in painting at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, England from 1935-36. McCarthy saw her first iceberg on her return to Canada that began a lifelong fascination with the Arctic and nature. She retired from teaching in 1972 and has produced a body of landscape works that speaks of all corners of the world. A published author<sup>11</sup> as well, McCarthy has served as an inspiration to countless artists and has been recognized with many distinctions and awards.<sup>12</sup>

### **A paradise found**

On November 2, 1939, while on a sketching trip at the Scarborough Bluffs, Doris McCarthy stumbled on her future home:

Today we went crashing around in the weeds and thorns and burrs and ended up in a heavenly spot, twelve acres on the corner between the bluffs and a great lovely ravine, nature on three sides, my beautiful lake, the ravine, the broad fields . . . it's a perfect spot! . . . I drew house plans and dreamed dreams.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The farm was managed by the 4<sup>th</sup> son, William. He and other members of the family later acquired additional land nearby. William McCowan's log house from Lot 13, Concession 4 was moved to Thomson Memorial Park and is now a museum. McCowan Road in Scarborough is named after the family.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Lismer (1885-1969) was then Vice-president of the Ontario College of Art. He later became Supervisor of Education at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now Art Gallery of Ontario) and McCarthy taught Saturday morning art classes in his program from 1930-35.

<sup>11</sup> Doris McCarthy has written three autobiographies: *A Fool in Paradise. An Artist's Early Life* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1990), covering her first 40 years; *The Good Wine. An Artist Comes of Age* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1991) covers her next 40 years; and *Ninety Years Wise* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2004) covers the summer of her 92<sup>nd</sup> year.

<sup>12</sup> See "Addendum: Doris McCarthy Chronology." Among her students were Joyce Weiland and composer Murray McLauchlan.

<sup>13</sup> McCarthy, *A Fool in Paradise*, pp. 217-18.

She paid \$1,250 for the property – a road down the hill and along the “flat” to reach it was thrown in. She recounted how her mother viewed the purchase as an extravagance for a young 29-year-old art teacher and termed it, “that fool’s paradise of yours.”<sup>14</sup> The name stuck. Inspired, “McCarthy with inimitable grace adopted it as an affirmation and set about transforming the place to suit the title.”<sup>15</sup>

Before the winter of 1940, a little white house with a blue roof was set up on brick posts and a 52-foot well dug. The clay, sand and stones that had come out of the well were used to build flowerbeds around the house. Well-rounded boulders, “souvenirs of Lake Iroquois in prehistoric times, made my first rock garden.”<sup>16</sup> Her architect/builder was Forest Telfer, whom she described as having “such sympathy for my vision of a dream house that he gave me the stone-faced fireplace that I had decided I could not afford.”<sup>17</sup>

The house was a simple weekend retreat, without electricity and running water. During the war years, she worked on the interior – insulating it, wiring it and lining it with knotty pine, shelves and cupboards. It became her permanent home in 1946. Other additions came: a cellar and cistern installed behind the kitchen and a studio-workshop added over the cellar with a garage behind it. The utility room became a bedroom with a big picture window.<sup>18</sup> The property was softened with flowerbeds and shrubbery, fruit trees planted with pines, spruce and maples along the boundaries.

During the post-war years, this area of Toronto was rapidly urbanized and erosion became a serious issue at the bluffs and ravines due to water run-off from suburban housing developments. The city instituted a comprehensive reforestation program and offered area residents, like McCarthy, seedling trees for their property.

In 1960, a larger studio was added on the house’s southwest side. In 1986, a bigger garage was built that included a workshop while the original garage was converted to living accommodation for a custodial tenant (usually an artist). At the far end of the studio, a “Chapter House” used as a writer’s den and retreat, was completed in 1994. An eat-in kitchen was installed in the former garage allowing the house to function as two self-contained residential units since 2002.

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<sup>14</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Crean, “The Female Gaze. A voice of her own: Doris McCarthy writes as energetically as she paints,” *Canadian Art* (fall 1990), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy, *A Fool in Paradise*, p. 231.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. She describes various additions as well as personally drawing plans to scale that she managed to get passed by the Scarborough building department, see pp. 242-43.

<sup>18</sup> Kay Kritzwiser, “Doris McCarthy,” *City & Country Home*, vol. 2, no. # (fall 1983), p. 149. The artist recounted how in those days, “positively no one had picture windows.”

## A gift

Fool's Paradise is a significant heritage site. The property is perched on a narrow plateau of the ecologically sensitive and geologically significant Scarborough Bluffs.<sup>19</sup> Scenically positioned between Cudia Park on the west, the Bellamy Ravine and Sylvan Park on the east, its northern boundary is the rock-faced shoreline of prehistoric Lake Iroquois and on the south is a sheer drop "sixty-five to a hundred feet" into Lake Ontario.<sup>20</sup> The buildings, set upon an expanse of lawn with reflecting pool, are framed by forest and sky. The bluffs and the adjoining Bellamy Ravine – the watershed for a large part of Scarborough – contain deep stream forested gullies providing habitat for regionally rare plant species, shore birds and small animals.<sup>21</sup>

To help conserve the site, McCarthy decided to donate seven acres of Fool's Paradise in 1986 to the Metropolitan Toronto Region Conservation Authority under the Erosion Control Agreement.<sup>22</sup> In her honour, the nature trail running through Bellamy Ravine on the east of the property was officially named the Doris McCarthy Trail by the City of Toronto in 2001. The sculpture *Passage* by Marlene Hilton Moore was unveiled in 2002, sited on a small peninsula at the end of the trail below McCarthy's bluffs; it commemorates McCarthy and her "place." *Passage* consists of 20 rib-like elements, which symbolically link Doris McCarthy's life on one side and the geological history of the bluffs on the other.<sup>23</sup>

Fool's Paradise is important to McCarthy for other reasons as well. A number of years ago, the well-known singer, Lorraine Segato (then a young unknown artist), came to housesit at McCarthy's home. As McCarthy wrote, Segato

Was in poor health and spirits, run down both physically and emotionally. The month at Fool's Paradise proved a time for healing and renewal. Her gratitude planted a seed that grew into my plan to turn my home into an artists' retreat.<sup>24</sup>

Because of this experience, McCarthy decided to donate Fool's Paradise to the Ontario Heritage Foundation in 1998. Important for its archaeological potential, its geological history

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<sup>19</sup> Located at 1 Meadowcliffe Drive, it is near Kingston Road and McCowan Road in the former Municipality of Scarborough. As McCarthy recounts: "In the early days, before the trees had grown and the vacant land had been built on, we named it Meadowcliff Drive, an accurate description. (I continue stubbornly to spell cliff the way the dictionary does, although even the street signs had added an e)," Doris McCarthy, *The Good Wine. An Artist Comes of Age* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1991), pp. 242-43.

<sup>20</sup> John Sewell, *Doors Open Toronto. Illuminating the City's Great Spaces* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2002), p. 213. The shore below is the very beach on which she and her father landed for a picnic together when she was 11 years old, see McCarthy, *The Good Wine*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> For example, the plant species of Downy Rye Grass (*Elymus villosus*) and Hitchcock's Sedge (*Carex hitchcockiana*) are found. It is a major stopover for migratory birds; over 105 species have been identified.

<sup>22</sup> Date of deed was May 5, 1986. The erosion issue is described in McCarthy, *The Good Wine*, pp. 242-44.

<sup>23</sup> "Sculpture. Newsflash. Walking Tour of 'Passage'," see <http://www.beamcowan.com/scultur.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Doris McCarthy, *Ninety Years Wise* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2004), pp. 65-66.

and natural features, its site of early occupation by Scottish immigrants and its cultural associations, Fool's Paradise will – because of McCarthy's generous bequest – be held in trust for the people of Ontario for heritage and artistic activities.

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