

Birds Hill Gold worth more than money; precious memories for Lois Swistun

Lois Swistun has spent most of her life in Birds Hill, with the exception of a few years. She grew up on Burton Avenue with the gravel pits so close they were almost her back yard. She married Bill Swistun and together they raised six children, three boys and three girls. They purchased the gravel pits Lois grew up beside and ran Birds Hill Gravel & Stone for more than five decades.



As told by East St. Paul resident author - Lois Swistun

Lois Swistun grew up in East St. Paul and her memories harken back to a time when life was simple and you made fun out of whatever was at hand. In a world where young and old alike are anchored to a smart phone, Swistun's youth is one to be envied.

There were no computers, no smart phones, very little money and cars were scarce, but life in East St. Paul some eighty years ago was more fun than you could shake a stick at.

Swistun remembers it well and even though it would be sometime in the 1960s before she and her husband Bill would purchase the town's gravel pits, she was already connected to them. They'd been mined for gravel since the 1800s, and "Birds Hill Gold", as the gravel was known, would shape Swistun's life from an early age.

"I grew up on the south bank of the gravel pit here. I lived up on Burton Avenue, we just walked out of the house and up and we were on top of the south bank and we could just run down and we were in the gravel pit", Swistun said.

"Basically that was the playground for most kids that lived in the town."

Swistun's dad taught his kids to swim in the pits, and they weren't allowed to be there on their own until they were around 11 years old, when they'd learned to respect the pits and not put themselves in danger.

"When he figured we were old enough and could swim good enough, then we could go down and join the rest of the kids that were down there," she said.

"All of the kids in the town all swam there in the summer time."

No local kids ever drowned in the pits, she said, but kids from the city who would ride their bikes out to Birds Hill to cool off from the summer sun, that was a different story. Overheated and in unfamiliar water, sometimes tragedies occurred.

The pits were the winter playground for kids too. It was the depression, Swistun said, and most kids didn't have sleighs. Even if you did, they weren't built well enough to survive the pits. But the kids knew they didn't need fancy sleds, they had Mr. Chudleigh's store.

"We went to Mr. Chudleigh's store here and asked for big cardboard boxes because cardboard boxes made a fantastic sleigh," Swistun said.

"You just hopped on that and when it wore out you went to the store and got another one."



Swistun's dad, who was killed in a blast gone wrong at the pits when he was in his 60s, worked there in the summer and in the winter he and his brother cut ice.

"They had these big saws and they would cut ice and put it on a sleigh and the horses would take it to the CN crossing just south of the village," she said.

The ice was put in boxcars full of sawdust and was used to cool passenger trains. Some, she said, might have also been shipped to Winnipeg where it was sold.

She remembers her dad and uncle coming home for lunch after spending their mornings cutting ice, their overalls frozen solid past the knees.

"They would hang them behind my mom's cook stove to thaw them out and then when they finished their lunch they would put their overalls back on to go back and cut more ice in the afternoon."

When Lois and Bill owned the pits - called Birds Hill Gravel and Stone - there were plenty of tough times. She remembers one summer, when her youngest at the time was just about a year old, she had to work at the pit weighing trucks. She would drop the kids off at the sitter's, and head down for the day. The sitter would take the kids back home in the evening to put them to bed, and when Swistun's dad came to relieve her, she'd go home.

They were struggling with the business, she said, and it was a time when they didn't know whether or not they'd make it.

"We had a big job and it was a case of either we made money on that job or we'd have to go out of business."

They survived and over the years, Birds Hill Gravel and Stone supplied gravel for many big jobs including the Nairn Street overpass, Winnipeg's north end sewage treatment plant and the St. James bridge approaches.

The pits were the family business, but just like when Lois was a kid, they were the family playground too.

"Our entertainment on a Saturday night for the kids, we'd go down to the pits and my husband would put dynamite into the water to loosen the gravel. This dynamite would blow up in the water," she laughed.

"My cousin, he'd phone over and say, 'well, are we going dynamiting tonight?'"

The pits had been owned by numerous others before the Swistuns - Bill's brother Don became a partner in 1964 and several sons worked there as well - including the City of Winnipeg, Fraser Sand and Gravel, Mulder Brothers and Ramsay and Bird, to name a few, but it was the Swistun's who last operated it. Today, the pits are known as Silver Springs Park and it was the Swistun family that made sure that when the pits could no longer be used for mining that they were rehabilitated.

It's fitting, that Lois Swistun's childhood playground remains just that today. The transformation from gravel pit to community park was detailed in The East St. Paul Centennial 1916-2016 book:

"This man-made park, that without the foresight of an East St. Paul family, would have been a scar on the environment after over 100 years of mining."

"If you want a modern civilization, you have to mine for material to build railways, roads and houses," says Michael Swistun, a member of the family that owned Birds Hill Gravel and Stone for over five decades.

"But mining companies don't have to walk away after the resource is depleted and leave a chronic eyesore on the land. They can take responsibility and rehabilitate the area."

This was the vision of Michael's late father, Bill Swistun Sr., and Uncle Don Swistun Sr. They passed this vision on to their children, who worked together to rehabilitate the landscape. Rehabilitation got started in 1983 with the sloping of the north bank and the development of a walkway in preparation for the housing subdivision that would overlook the area.

The aesthetics of the area were phased in with the addition of paths, trees and grass. The Swistun family was able to obtain small funding grants, but 90% of the funding came from Birds Hill Gravel and Stone's profits in an effort to give back to a resource that has provided so much for so many years.

Today, this park looks like a natural feature rather than a manicured city park or a retaining pond. Deer, foxes, muskrats, turtles, birds, frogs and other wildlife populate the area. People come in all seasons to walk the trails, canoe, skate and toboggan. East St. Paul owes a debt of gratitude to the Swistun family for their gift to our community."



Pictures:

1. Lois Swistun;
2. The east gravel pits were the last to be mined with operations coming to an end in the late 1990s; and
3. A steam shovel in the gravel pits, circa 1902.