

The Bala Bay Inn gets a new lease on life

By Jack Hutton

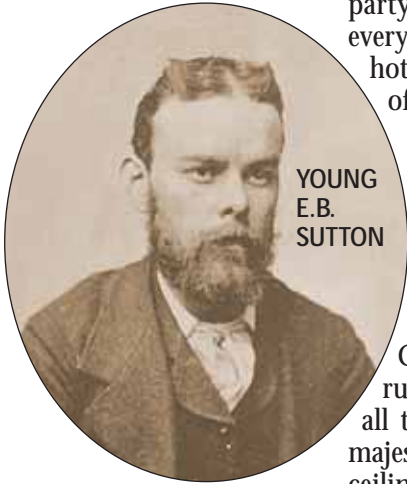
Have you ever seen a ghost smile? Take a look at one of the upper windows the next time you drive past the Bala Bay Inn. If you look ever so carefully, you may catch a glimpse of the late E.B. Sutton, who built that hotel in 1910. Sutton has supposedly been haunting the place ever since his death in August 1917.

Sutton, arguably Muskoka's most famous ghost, has every reason to be smiling broadly these days. Just a few months ago, Bala's rumour mill said a potential buyer wanted the hotel bulldozed to the ground. If he read the Muskoka headlines, I suspect that our Bala ghost visibly paled.

Well, folks, miracles still happen. Earlier this spring, the hotel was bought by someone with an entirely different vision for the Bala Bay Inn. Kimberley Ward, who owns a small chain of radio stations, including The Moose, with her husband, Chris Grossman, wanted to see the hotel reborn in a way that celebrates its rich history.

E.B. Sutton, wherever he is lurking around the Bala Bay Inn, hasn't stopped smiling since then.

One of Ward's first decisions after buying the hotel was to hire McMaster University graduate, Beth Ann Burgess, as her general manager. That said a lot because Burgess is not just a Bachelor of Commerce graduate with experience in Muskoka lodges and elsewhere; as the great-



YOUNG
E.B.
SUTTON

great-granddaughter of Bala's founder, Thomas Burgess, she is a direct link to Bala history.

Ward had only 48 days after her date of sale to have the old hotel ready for its first guests in mid-May. With the help of contractors and a team of volunteers that included family members, she pulled it off. When Burgess was hired at the beginning of May, her parents, Brad and Chris Burgess, joined the work brigade. Brad even rebuilt one inside corner of the bar.

On Wednesday, June 14, the Muskoka Lakes Chamber of Commerce was the first outside group invited to see what was happening. "There is no way that this hotel is going to be torn down," Ward told the audience. "That is not going to happen." The listeners, who included business people from Gravenhurst, Bracebridge and Huntsville, burst into applause.

I don't know whether E.B. Sutton was grinning ear to ear that day, but many of us were as we listened. Ever since its official opening on Friday, June 17, 1910 (a glorious

party involving almost everybody in town) the hotel has been a symbol of Bala's rich history.

The hotel has had its ups and downs, just like the town. Some owners gave up after years of trying to cope with the aging building. Others went bankrupt. But throughout all that time, the hotel's majestic stairwell and tin ceilings bore silent witness to the hotel's proud beginnings.

Twenty-three years ago this summer, Robert Boyer, the founder of *The Muskoka Sun*, asked me to write an encyclopedic history of the hotel. That 1983 article, written with the help of Lillian Sutton, E.B. Sutton's daughter-in-law, seems to have been the starting point for everyone who has written about the hotel since then (I keep rereading my own words elsewhere).

Now that the hotel has a fresh beginning, it's time to tell the story of the Bala Bay Inn all over again for a generation that does not know our town's history. This time around, my mentor was Lillian's son, Bob Sutton, who lives across the road from the Bala Bay Inn (actually just a bit south) in a home that was built by his grandfather, E.B. Sutton, in 1898, as a combination store and home. The heritage home, which Bob shares with his wife, Leda, is a priceless treasure of Bala's historical artifacts, including a small library of newspaper clippings.

Our story has to start with Ephraim Browning Sutton, one of the most colourful, energetic and

multi-talented individuals that Muskoka has ever known.

Sutton, born in Leeds, Yorkshire, England, on Nov. 8, 1854, died in Bala at 63. In his short lifetime, he managed to live several lives — as a businessman, writer, musician, composer, environmentalist, and non-stop promoter of Bala and Muskoka.

Sutton got his middle name from a famous relative, poet Robert Browning, who died in 1889, seven years after the younger relative left for Canada. Sutton, who left school in his early teens to work for a book publishing company in London, England, corresponded with author, Charles Dickens, until Dickens died in 1870.

In 1872, Sutton, then 18, married Rose Anna Grey, a cousin 10 years his senior who had a daughter from an earlier marriage. Sutton was working for a railway company and rose to become a station manager.

Ten years later, the Suttons felt they had to leave England. Clara, their first-born child, had just died as the result of unsanitary needles used during government-ordered vaccination. Two children, born after her, had both died young for precisely the same reason. So in 1882, E.B. Sutton, Rose and Rose's daughter, Jane, boarded a boat bound for Canada.

We don't know how Sutton chose Muskoka as his destination, but we do know that he met two important men after arriving. Thomas Burgess, the founder of Bala, and



STILL HAUNTING HIS OLD HOTEL? Some say that E.B. Sutton, who opened the Swastika Hotel in 1910, still lingers around the building as a ghost. He died in August 1917.

A.P. Cockburn, who is credited with starting tourism in Muskoka, both encouraged Sutton to settle at Bannockburn, north of Bala, on a Lake Muskoka site facing the northern tip of Acton Island.

Sutton wasted no time in building Camp Sutton, a vacation retreat that soon attracted sportsmen who wanted a fresh fishing location. One of Sutton's newspaper advertisements said his lodge offered 'good accommodation for a few boarders, by appointment only, very select party, mostly Theologians.' The rate was \$1 per day.

When I first heard of Camp Sutton in the 1980s, I thought of it as a shack in the bush. Then Lillian Sutton showed me a photo from the 1890s. It was a first-rate lodge that would draw crowds today. Two weeks ago, Bob Sutton pointed out to me something that I had been missing in that photo all these years. In the foreground of the photo, his grandfather is sitting in the middle of a tiny steam launch, with a puff of smoke above it. The launch could hold no more than three or four people!

E.B. Sutton did extremely well at Camp Sutton for more than 15 years, attracting many American sportsmen who had to come by steamboat from Gravenhurst. He started writing newspaper articles and columns for the Orillia newspapers in 1886. Unfortunately, Camp Sutton burned to the ground in 1897, forcing Sutton to start all over again.

In 1898, E.B. Sutton built a store on the main street of Bala, living in the back of it with Rose and

their young son Fred. That store is now the home of Bob and Leda Sutton, just across the road from the Chipper's Fish and Chips shop, and almost across from the Bala Bay Inn.

In 1901, Sutton started subscriptions and let contracts for the first telephone line to connect with a line operated by the Great Northwestern Telegraph Co. from Bracebridge to Port Sandfield. Every morning, Sutton would post the weather forecast for the day on a bulletin board outside the front of his home.

The year 1901 was a busy one for Sutton because he also published the first of his seven musical compositions. The 1901 composition was a declaration of love for Rose, entitled 'Sweet Wife'. (I teased Lillian Sutton about the fact that her father-in-law put his own photograph on the cover, not that of his 'sweet wife'.)

In his newspaper column, Sutton often mused about the possibility of electric light coming to the west end of Lake Muskoka. "After living in primeval darkness up to the present and deploring the waste of the greatest power of the lake system," he wrote, "we of the west side, at least, are ready for the light."

When Sutton moved from Bannockburn to Bala, the official population of Bala was roughly 50. But he kept predicting that the world would soon come to Bala and the future proved him right. The first CPR train arrived in Bala in June 1907.

Long before that first train arrived, Sutton was thinking about a new



IN 1872, SUTTON, then 18, married Rose Anna Grey.



THEY LOVED THEIR HOTEL: Fred and Lillian Sutton loved running Muskoka's first brick summer hotel between 1910 and the early 1940s. In particular, Lillian had great fun with skit nights and other spontaneous events at the Swastika Hotel, later called Sutton Manor.