

# Beckwith built home for research

BY CAROL NICHOLSON

**I**N 1961, Wendell Beckwith, an eccentric engineer and scientist, became a resident of Best Island on Whitewater Lake at the suggestion of fellow American Harry Wirth who wanted to build a wilderness retreat in Ontario.

Wendell's goal was to find a place where he could carry out pure scientific research away from the hustle and bustle of urban life.

If it wasn't for the assistance of the First Nation residents at Collins, Ontario, Beckwith probably would not have stayed alive in his early years on the island.

The community helped him survive and construct a large log cabin. The cabin turned out to be too impractical to heat, so it was used to display items of Ojibway life that Beckwith had collected.

Hence, he called it the museum. Beckwith then built a second cabin which was later expanded after Rose Chantry, Harry Wirth's former secretary, came to visit, and spent several summers at Best Island.

Beckwith's home became a popular place for wilderness travellers to stop, in particular those of the Outward Bound Wilderness Experience School.

When Wirth visited Best Island in the 1970s, he was upset about the large number of visitors. The two men disagreed about the purpose of the wilderness retreat, and Beckwith decided to no longer accept Wirth's money.

Beckwith's friends helped him with supplies and he continued to live at Best Island illegally until 1974.

An immigration officer visited him in 1973 and cleared him of any suspicious conduct. The officer noted Beckwith's research, and his great assistance to the Indian population of the area and the good opinion held of him by the people in the Armstrong-Whitewater area.

The officer also said: "Beckwith's



COURTESY OF THE THUNDER BAY MUSEUM

**Wendell Beckwith's second cabin proved more economical than his first, but nowhere near as efficient as the under-ground cabin he called the snail.**

work appears to be connected with the magnetic and electrical forces of our galaxy and their effect on human migration through the past centuries. He is attempting to forecast the effect they will have on future population movements and trends and also the effect on space travel and on interplanetary travellers themselves."

Beckwith refused to apply for landed status, stating that he was a "citizen of the world."

He was granted ministerial permission to stay at Whitewater Lake. He was also granted a land-use permit, which friends paid for annually after 1975.

In 1977, Beckwith began constructing a new cabin, called the snail, which, in his words, was "a new dimension in bush habitation."

He wanted to create an abode that would be easy to heat, use local materials, could be constructed by unskilled labour and completed in one building season.

The snail was constructed into a hillside using swamp spruce. It featured a unique spiral design with a skylight to allow the cabin to be naturally lit.

Beckwith was reported to say that the snail needed less than one eight foot length of dead spruce per day to heat.

Beckwith had hoped that he could construct more homes like the snail and have other researchers come to Best Island to conduct their own experiments and research and be able to share ideas while having the benefit of solitude.

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His idea was not to be.

Beckwith died at Best Island August 20, 1980, and is possibly interred in Wisconsin.

After his death, a court battle raged as to who owned the settlement at Best Island. Wirth laid claim to the site, stating he had provided the money for Beckwith's home.

In 1979, however, Beckwith had signed over his property to the Government of Ontario and the province won the court battle.

Beckwith's scientific notes, photographs, hand-made scientific instruments, unique furniture and other items were donated to the Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society.

*Looking Back is written weekly by one of various writers for the Thunder Bay Museum. For further information visit the museum at 425 Donald St. E., or view its website at [www.thunderbaymuseum.com](http://www.thunderbaymuseum.com).*