

**Going National:  
Taking *Cottage Life* Magazine Across Canada**

by  
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## Abstract

*Cottage Life* has enjoyed success as a service and lifestyle magazine for Canadian cottage owners. But that success is mostly regional: 77% of its subscribers live in Ontario.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, in an attempt to expand its readership, Cottage Life Media launched *Cottage Life West*, a new regional version with some shared and some original content. This new edition—not quite a distinct title—was a focused attempt to appeal to readers in Western Canada.

But *Cottage Life* learned that its editorial approach doesn't easily translate to Western readers, and catering to those readers from Toronto presents a unique set of hurdles. This is a story of a Toronto publisher gunning for a national readership and butting up against the challenges of regionalism.

This report examines how a regional magazine attempts to grow into a national one, with an analysis of the editorial strategy and recommendations for other Ontario-based content publishers.

**Keywords:** Regionalism; magazine; Western Canada; Toronto

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<sup>1</sup> Cottage Life CCAB Statement Summary, updated May 8, 2017

## **Dedication**

This report is dedicated to my grandmother Margaret Fulthorpe, who always encouraged me to use my words and believed that they were worth reading.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my two readers, Hannah McGregor and Leanne Johnson, who were critical in helping shape this report. Special thank you to Jo-Anne Ray, who helped me when I really needed her, even though she didn't have to. What would us MPubs do without her care and her kindness?

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## List of Acronyms

CL	<i>Cottage Life</i> magazine
CLW	<i>Cottage Life West</i> magazine

# Chapter 1. The history of Cottage Life and the beginnings of Cottage Life West

In this chapter, I will give an overview of Cottage Life’s origin story and how the brand’s beginnings in Ontario set it up for success in that regional market but also made national growth tricky to accomplish.

## 1.1. Cottage Life’s deep roots in Ontario

*Cottage Life* was born in the heart of Ontario cottage country. In 1985, Torontonian Al Zikovitz and his wife, Wendela Roberts, bought a new cottage and found a dearth of information on exactly *how* to cottage. Zikovitz was a magazine guy—in fact, he was recently fired from an advertising sales job at MacClean-Hunter. He saw a gap in the market for a top-tier service and lifestyle magazine to serve an audience of cottagers. “I realized there was no magazine for *me*,” says Zikovitz, “a white-collar worker who wanted to know more about docks, about septic systems, all the stuff you need to know to run a cottage.”<sup>2</sup> In April of 1988, he launched *Cottage Life*, a magazine for the cottage owner—advice for solving unique cottage problems and inspiration for living well at the lake. Although its audience is niche, its editorial content is wide-ranging, covering nature, food and entertaining, architecture and design, building and DIY, human interest topics, political and environmental issues, and cottage miscellany.

The magazine was an instant success. It tied together a community of Ontario cottage owners who had previously only been connected by the Federation of Ontario Cottagers’ Associations (FOCA). What’s more, the magazine defined what it meant to “cottage,” as a verb and a lifestyle, and it broadcast the appeal of that lifestyle to the rest of the world. (Zikovitz likes to say that the word “cottager” was added to the Canadian Oxford Dictionary only after the launch of *Cottage Life*.)<sup>3</sup> And though the magazine has

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<sup>2</sup> Al Zikovitz, interview by author, March 13, 2017

<sup>3</sup> This was hard to verify, but the point stands: *Cottage Life* helped usher in a language and culture around cottaging as it was still forming in Canada.

always been known for quality content (as evidenced by its 200-plus magazine awards, including Magazine of the Year at the 2017 National Magazine Awards),<sup>4</sup> Zikovitz insists that the magazine's early success all hinged on one thing: "the list."

According to Zikovitz, he wasn't the the first to dream up the concept of a magazine for cottagers. Apparently, at least two other major magazine publishers had it "on the drawing board."<sup>5</sup> But no one knew how to *reach* cottagers. For the most part, you can't send mail to a cottage. But Zikovitz figured out a way to crack the circulation code. He started by convincing FOCA to close its troubled members' magazine and provide Zikovitz with a list of its mailing addresses, on the promise that FOCA could send its messaging through the yet-to-be *Cottage Life* magazine. But that only gave him about 1,500 names. He knew that he would need a promised circulation of 75,000 in order to woo national advertisers. And so, on to phase two.

At that time, Ontario's tax rolls were publicly available to anyone who requested them—reams and reams of them, collected in many thick volumes. They included a person's name, address, and whether they owned a recreational property. Zikovitz figured out that all he had to do was comb through the lists and pull out all the people listed with a recreational property in cottage-country municipalities, collecting their name and home address. In fact, he hired "homemakers" to do this for him. By the end, he had a proprietary database of more than 300,000 names of guaranteed cottage owners, and he knew how to reach them at their home address. He started shopping the first issue of *Cottage Life* to advertisers, promising them a controlled circulation for the magazine of 75,000 people (the sweet spot).<sup>6</sup> This unusual early model had unexpected benefits. Zikovitz could convince advertisers to buy an ad in all six annual issues in order to reach everyone in the greater list of 300,000.

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<sup>4</sup> National Magazine Awards. "Announcing the Winners of the 40th Anniversary National Magazine Awards." May 26, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Zikovitz, interview.

<sup>6</sup> Zikovitz, interview.

Zikovitz says he first knew the magazine would be a success when he sold 40 pages of advertisements in a publication that didn't exist yet—all at the full rate. (“How can you convince people you believe in something if you're willing to give it away at a discount?” says Al.)<sup>7</sup> But there were other early signs, too. He wasn't interested in letting *Cottage Life* remain a controlled-circulation magazine. Zikovitz intended to convert his entire audience to a paid subscription, to make circulation a profit-making arm of the business on its own. And he did. He started by sending the first issue for free to only 75,000 people on the larger database. “We'd say, on the cover wrap, here's your first issue for free,” says Zikovitz. “If you want more, you've got to subscribe.” That first issue, more than 5,000 signed up to pay. For the next issue, he would change the list, sending it to the 5,000 who subscribed and only 70,000 others, people who didn't receive the first issue. And another 5,000 or so would subscribe. *Cottage Life* carried on like that and, within five years, its entire audience was paying to get the magazine.<sup>8</sup> To this day, *Cottage Life's* circulation is a profitable arm of the business.

Zikovitz's plan was successful, but also meant *Cottage Life's* efforts were focused solely on Ontario cottagers. Although he always believed *Cottage Life* could be a national magazine, he had his hands full in Ontario, dealing with regionalism within the province. Readers on Georgian Bay would complain that the magazine was too Muskoka-centric. Those in Prince Edward County perceived the magazine was too focussed on the Kawarthas. “Everyone seemed to have the same complaint,” says Zikovitz. “Why don't you write about *my* area? I thought to myself, if I have this problem now, there's no way I can go national. I've got to figure this out first.”<sup>9</sup> Zikovitz recognized that cottaging is a regional activity, and cottagers are particular about place.

As the years went on, the magazine continued to grow. The popularity and commercial success of *Cottage Life* the magazine spurred the growth of *Cottage Life*—the brand. Since its launch, that brand has grown to include, at various points, a clothing line (1989), a radio show (1990-96), a television show (1993-2006), books (1993),

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<sup>7</sup> Zikovitz, interview.

<sup>8</sup> Zikovitz, interview.

<sup>9</sup> Zikovitz, interview.

consumer shows (1994), a website (2000), a Cottage Life Mastercard (2002-6), and a calendar (2012). In December of 2012, Zikovitz sold Cottage Life Media to Blue Ant Media, a young broadcast company looking to add a legacy brand to its roster.<sup>10</sup> (Zikovitz stayed on as CEO of Cottage Life Media and the editorial team remained unchanged.) Under this new ownership, Cottage Life launched a television channel and put a new emphasis on growing the brand across Canada.

## 1.2. Cottage Life sets its sights on Western Canada

By 2014, *Cottage Life*'s business was strong, even as fellow magazines suffered from the economic downturn of 2008 and struggled to meet their budgets as advertising dollars shifted away from print media. Still, if *Cottage Life* was going to have a future as a profitable business, it would have to grow. The magazine had a healthy circulation of about 71,000, but its penetration outside of Ontario was limited—less than 21% of the total circulation.<sup>11</sup> And big national advertisers demanded national reach.

As the company looked to grow its audience outside of Ontario, Western Canada became the obvious choice, says Penny Caldwell, publisher of the magazine until 2017 and its longtime editor before that. There appeared to be limited potential in the Maritime provinces, where population density was low, and, says Caldwell, “we don’t address Quebec because of the language barrier.”<sup>12</sup> The Western provinces held the largest market with untapped potential.

The *Cottage Life* that Ontario readers loved so dearly—18,000 people have subscribed to the magazine for 10 years or more—just didn’t seem to have the same appeal to Western readers. “We were aware that people in the West thought that *Cottage Life* was an Eastern magazine,” says Caldwell. This awareness came from letters to the editor submitted by Western readers, as well as visits to Western provinces, where people would often relay the same message: your magazine is too

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<sup>10</sup> Cision. “Blue Ant Media Acquires Cottage Life Media Inc.” Dec. 5, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Cottage Life CCAB Statement Summary. Updated May 8, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Caldwell, Penny. Interview by author, March 10, 2017.

Ontario-centric. (Often, that complaint started with the very name. A cottage is mostly called a cabin out West, with a few exceptions.)

“The difficulty was that you had to find content that everybody would enjoy, that had national appeal,” says Caldwell. “So we would do stories about cottages in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia and the Prairies and the West. But you couldn’t *just* write about the West, and you couldn’t write about the West in every single issue. It was hard to please everybody in one magazine. And particularly the Western readers.” *Cottage Life* excelled as a regional magazine but was struggling to be a successful national magazine.

### **1.3. A new magazine for the West**

Cottage Life’s management team decided that in order to penetrate the West, it would have to make a magazine especially for Western readers. The plan was to make two editions of the same magazine: *Cottage Life* and *Cottage Life West*. These separate titles would be tailored to appeal to their separate audiences, while delivering one Canada-wide network to large national advertisers.

This has long been a goal for Canadian magazine publishers. Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith note that as long ago as 1928, magazines boasted of their “coast to coast” audience in order to draw major national advertisers.<sup>13</sup> Though *Cottage Life* could claim its audience size was on par with most medium-large national magazines, that audience was highly concentrated in Ontario. The magazine could increase its appeal to advertisers by expanding out West.

To gain a foothold for the newly conceived *Cottage Life West*, Cottage Life Media purchased a B.C. magazine called *Cottage* in 2014. The magazine was a small operation, run by a team comprised of one editor, one salesperson, and one part-time designer. “It was a profitable magazine because it ran on a shoestring budget,” says

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<sup>13</sup> Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith, *Magazines, travel, and middlebrow culture: Canadian periodicals in English and French*. Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2015

Caldwell. “The plan was to grow its audience.”<sup>14</sup> Now *Cottage Life West* had a B.C.-based editor and a local salesperson with contacts in the region, as well as a whole new list of subscribers to add to its base. Former subscribers to *Cottage* now received *Cottage Life West*, as did all Western subscribers to the original *Cottage Life*. A new magazine was born.

While *Cottage Life West* shared some content with the original *Cottage Life*—and was technically a Western edition of the same magazine, not a separate title—it was essentially a brand new magazine produced by the same team of people, with a few additions. Chapter 2 will include a more detailed description of the staff breakdown. What Cottage Life Media had now were two properties that together delivered a “national” audience to large advertisers, two regional audiences to local advertisers, and two distinct editorial packages, each one tailored to the regional audience it served. *Cottage Life West* was sent to subscribers and newsstands in B.C., Alberta, and Saskatchewan; Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritime provinces continued receiving *Cottage Life*.

Zikovitz and Caldwell decided not to lump in Manitoba with the rest of the Western provinces. “That was tricky,” says Caldwell. “We figured that in Manitoba there were so many people who had cottages in Northwestern Ontario that it made sense to keep sending them *Cottage Life*. Saskatchewan, Alberta, and B.C. seemed very different.”

Caldwell and Zikovitz called the new magazine *Cottage Life West*, even though more than one critic has suggested *Cabin Life* would have better suited the Western reader. But the team didn’t want to give up the association with the recognizable Cottage Life brand. “We wanted still to be strongly aligned as a Cottage Life product,” says Caldwell. “So we just added ‘West’ to make it Western.”

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<sup>14</sup> Caldwell, interview.

## 1.4. Cottage Life sets out to tackle Western regionalism

So here we are now. *Cottage Life* is a regional Ontario magazine (it still belongs to the International Regional Magazine Association) trying hard to expand its reach out West in order to grow into a national magazine. *Cottage Life West*, its special Western addition, is a novel solution to a phenomenon as old as Canada: Ontario's own lens of regionalism getting in the way of understanding Western audiences steeped in Western regionalism.

Regionalism is defined by geography. It is a phenomenon in which the people in a particular region within a larger community (in this case, the westernmost provinces in Canada) claims its own cultural identity, shared history, and common desires—which are distinct from the other regions in that community, and often distinct from the official national narrative. In Canada's case, Ontario regionalisms are often foisted upon Canada as part of national identity, largely because of Ontario's large population and because the political and economic centres are in Ontario (Ottawa and Toronto).

Western regionalism is both a collection of cultural particularities (and peculiarities) belonging to the westernmost provinces of Canada (for instance, calling it a "cabin" while Ontarians call it a cottage) and also a galvanizing of shared identity in the face of a larger monolith (Western rejection of Ontario-centric media). George Melnyk references a definition of regionalism by Jacques Vandamme, a jurist at Louvain University in Belgium, who calls it "the strivings of a self-conscious group for greater political independence and local autonomy."<sup>15</sup> Though Melnyk, in *Beyond Alienation: Political Essays on the West*, explains that this isn't the whole story.

"It is important to understand that the conventional equation of regionalism with discontent is a limited, one-sided perspective. Within itself, regionalism is content, seeing itself as a force for political equality, for positive social change, for regional security and development and ultimately for the continuation of the nation-state of which it is a part but in a mode that is more just."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Melnyk, George. *Beyond Alienation: political essays on the West*. (Edmonton: Detselig Enterprises Ltd, 1993)

<sup>16</sup> Melnyk, *Beyond Alienation*



It's the problem Zikovitz and Caldwell were butting up against all along. Though they didn't seem to know quite *why* the original magazine had a hard time picking up steam with Western Canadian readers, they weren't surprised by the problem. Caldwell gets to the heart of their hunch with this anecdote:

"I used to work for a company that owned *Canadian Yachting* and *Pacific Yachting*. It was an independent company, owned by a publisher that was based in the West. So we would often get together. And I would hear it from them: 'Oh you Eastern guys, you think you're the centre of the world' and, you know, 'everything is Ontario-based' and that the egos were huge in the East and that we didn't think anybody else in Canada existed. So I do think that there's a little bit of a chip on the Western shoulder."<sup>17</sup>

What Caldwell refers to as "a chip on the Western shoulder" is a common perception Ontarians have of Western regionalism, which has existed, in different iterations, since before Confederation. And publishing has long played a key role in its formation.

Fraser Sutherland summarizes the geographical history of Canadian publishing:

At first magazine publishing was centred in the Maritimes. Then it was Montreal's turn before the centre moved westward to Toronto after the mid-nineteenth century. There, for good or ill, it took up seemingly permanent residence. In the Prairies or British Columbia—or for that matter in Newfoundland—magazines were never as important as newspapers, and indeed the only the general-interest regional magazine to achieve national status, the *National Home Monthly*, in its early years Winnipeg's *Western Home Monthly*, ended up being edited in Toronto. Canadian publishing has been much more centralized than was the case in the United States. When, in this book, a magazine's location has not been given, it should be assumed that it's Toronto.<sup>18</sup>

That means Canada's national magazines have been coming out of the East for as long as Canadians have been publishing them. An Eastern perspective (mostly, an Ontario perspective) is foisted upon the rest of the country and touted as a Canadian perspective.

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<sup>17</sup> Caldwell, interview.

<sup>18</sup> Fraser Sutherland, *The Monthly Epic: A History of Canadian Magazines*. (Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1989.)

Publishing, of course, has not been the only factor contributing to a sense of Western regionalism. Early on in Canada's history, economic factors shaped a sense of Western identity—and Western discontent with the federal agenda. George Melnyk writes that in the earliest days of the colonization of Canada, the West was essentially “a battleground between [the Hudson's Bay Company] and its rivals” who were vying for control of the fur trade. He writes that “forces outside the region were moulding [the West], eyeing it, fantasizing about its potential or lack thereof.”

The trend continued. Later, Melnyk cites a period of “agrarian regionalism” in the West, in which the Western provinces were being exploited for their farming potential. Later still came a period of oil and mineral regionalism, which one might argue we're only just coming out of now, in which the West (particularly Alberta) fuels Canada's economic engine through its oil and mineral resources.

This is the history that *Cottage Life* steps into, only half-knowingly, when it tries to make a magazine in Toronto about cottaging in B.C., Alberta, and Saskatchewan. The magazine was very good at galvanizing a community of cottage-owners in Ontario, where the editors and the publisher lived and worked and cottaged. But doing the same thing for cottage- and cabin-owners on the other side of the country proved difficult from the very first issue of *Cottage Life West*. Newsstand sell-through rates consistently lagged behind those in Ontario by 10-15%, and the subscribership grew only marginally, as covered in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 2. Editorial Processes

In this chapter, I explain the editorial process for creating the magazine, how it's evolved over time, and reveal some of the challenges of publishing content for a remote audience.

### 2.1. The three editorial phases of Cottage Life West

For the first few months after Cottage Life purchased *Cottage* magazine, little changed. The magazine putted along as it normally did, simply with a new overlord. Then the company decided to rename *Cottage* as *Cottage Life West* and expand what was once a magazine for coastal B.C. cottagers into a magazine tailored to all of Western Canada, which the company defined as B.C., Alberta, and Saskatchewan. This new title, *CLW*, was sent to all former subscribers of *Cottage* and the relatively few existing subscribers to *Cottage Life* who lived in those three Western provinces.

Now-editor Michelle Kelly (who was executive editor at that time, second in command) explains the reasoning for the rebrand. “This decision came at the same time as the company launched the Edmonton Cottage Life and Cabin Show [a consumer show] and a national TV channel,” she says. “We needed another pillar out there in order to draw the audience into our brand.”<sup>19</sup>

The rest of this section details the three phases of how the company approached *Cottage Life West*'s editorial process: an initial phase of two separate staff teams creating two distinct magazines at the same time, an in-between phase where the editors explored sharing content, and the current phase in which one staff creates two magazines with lots of shared content.

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<sup>19</sup> Michelle Kelly, interview by author, October 5, 2017

## 2.2. Phase 1: Two distinct magazines

Even after the name change, *Cottage Life West* kept on its original editor, Peter Robson, who had been the sole, part-time editor at *Cottage* for years. Robson continued to work on the magazine from his home in Victoria. In the past, he would work on each issue alone and then, all in one day, work with a freelance art director to lay out each issue. This was very different from how *Cottage Life* works as a magazine.

But the company kept Robson on as a man-on-the-ground with a deep understanding of Western readers (or at least those in coastal B.C.) and institutional knowledge of local magazine publishing. The idea was to run *Cottage Life West* as an entirely separate magazine, but to elevate it, injecting it with *Cottage Life*'s bigger budgets, top-tier writers, and professional photographers.

“We needed to make sure the two magazines [*Cottage Life* and *Cottage Life West*] were in lockstep in terms of content,” says Kelly. “We wanted [CLW] to have top talent. Which was tricky, because we still weren’t paying that much for it. Because we didn’t have a very high circulation.”<sup>20</sup> It was a chicken-or-the-egg conundrum: the company wanted to upgrade the magazine’s content in order to attract a wider readership, but without the wider readership it couldn’t afford to sustain the cash injections it needed in order to afford better content. The model wasn’t working.

Meanwhile, Robson’s workload and workflow had changed significantly. He was used to working on his own, producing content with a meagre budget, using reader-submitted content, and mostly writing stories himself. Suddenly, he was part of a large team at a national magazine, adhering to a strict and demanding production schedule. He was also working on large InCopy files remotely, which were slow to transfer from the mothership in Toronto.

“It was difficult,” says Kelly. “We had all sorts of workarounds for making the Adobe suite work.” Files were slow to transfer to and from Robson’s remote home office on Vancouver island and, at the same time, he was learning to use InCopy files for the first time. It also became clear that *Cottage Life* needed something else in a Western editor.

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<sup>20</sup> Kelly, interview.

“*Cottage Life West* was now a different beast than *Cottage*,” says Kelly. The editorial process had changed from being completely separate to being more integrated—both magazines produced on the same schedule. At the same time, in order to save money on editorial but maintain a high standard, *Cottage Life* and *Cottage Life West* were going to have to share more content between them, and the editors would have to be strategic about how they achieved that. “We needed someone who could be embedded in our team, and we needed someone technologically accessible all the time.”

After five issues, Robson left and *Cottage Life* hired a new editor for *Cottage Life West*.

### **2.3. Phase two: Move towards integration**

The company still believed that having an editor on the ground in the West was critical for *CLW*'s success, but wanted that editor to be an integrated part of the editorial team. In 2015 they hired a freelance editor based in Victoria named A. Willis. Willis was not a cabin owner, but she was an experienced, skilled editor, and she felt she could represent the Western mentality at *Cottage Life* story meetings. She had 17 years of experience as an editor at *British Columbia* magazine.<sup>21</sup>

The plan now was to elevate the content of *CLW* while finding more areas for integrating with *CL* in order to save time and money. In the beginning, Willis was mostly at the helm of her own book. She had inherited a lot of stories that had been assigned before her time, and was tasked with bringing them through the publishing process, but to look for ways, going forward, of sharing more content with *CL*.

“The hope was still that *Cottage Life West* would catch on, become its own viable business, under her leadership,” says Kelly. “If it had, we could have put more money behind it, made it more regional, and have Willis take the lead on developing the following.” Hopes were high, because Willis was from Saskatchewan and lived in

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<sup>21</sup> Kelly, interview.

Victoria—she had a breadth of knowledge about and an authentic understanding of Western Canada. But even she had trouble cracking the code of making one cottaging magazine that appealed to readers across Western Canada.

“We initially thought what worked here would work there,” says Kelly. “But as it turns out, that’s completely not true. It’s a different market altogether. While we knew that, we may have underestimated it.”

For the Winter 2015 issue, the first under Kelly as the editor, Cottage Life decided to start printing both *CL* and *CLW* at the same plant. This meant that the book sizes were always going to be the exact same, and they would have to share even more content than they did before. “It was a commitment to having far less original content in *Cottage Life West*,” says Kelly. And so, after less than a year, Willis’ job changed. She went from heading up a book of mostly original content to one that was, as planned, more integrated. Now, she handled the remaining stories that were unique to *CLW*: her own editor’s note, one feature story, Nature Scrapbook, the back page, and a few pages in the front-of-book section. One of her key roles was helping the Cottage Life editorial team keep the Western reader in mind, for all its content.

But the editorial process of working with a remote Western editor still had its kinks. At editorial meetings, where the editors have a chance to pitch and discuss story ideas, Willis would call in on speakerphone. Unable to catch the visual cues for when to pipe up with her comments, she often had to interrupt someone else on the team in order to speak her mind. As well, her story pitches lacked the energy that can only be transmitted through body language and physical presence—sometimes a critical element of a successful pitch.

Furthermore, Willis could only handle a story to a certain point in the production process. After a story is in layout, there’s a fair amount of back-and-forth to be done between the editors and the art department. An editor will update the copy with edits, send it back to the art director with directions and questions, then receive it back in order to verify that those changes were made correctly. It’s a team effort. Rather than sending files back and forth with Willis in Victoria, it was speedier to have someone in Toronto handle her stories once they reached this stage in the process. This meant more work for the other editors, who were busy with their own stories. But it also meant that an

editor without the full range of experience and background knowledge of a story would be making small editorial decisions close to signoff. Inevitably, some mistakes slipped through the cracks. One example: when an editor was inputting last-minute fact-checking changes into one of Willis' stories for *CLW* on oil spills, they failed to convert a number to its proper cubic feet. It was a mistake that could have been avoided had the editor had more experience with the oil spill story. And one that Willis, the handling editor, would have caught had she been in the room working on the layout.

Another odd problem arose from working with a remote Western editor. Both *CL* and *CLW* have a "Your Letters" page, a collection of letters to the editor from readers. The vast majority of these came from readers in the East, mostly Ontario. *CL*'s Letters page would include the best recently submitted letters, with priority given to stories from the most recent issue. Each letter would close with the reader's name and the lake on which they cottage (even if they don't own a cottage). *CLW* is different. That Western letters page includes *any* letter written by readers in the west, of which there were few. After that, to fill out the layout, we include letters from Eastern readers about stories that appeared in both *CL* and *CLW*, but in those cases we erase the name of the lake and replace it with "via email" to take the focus off of non-Western locales. All this is to say that *CL* and *CLW* have independent Letters pages that share a significant amount of content, but are tailored to each audience. (References to Ontario are often edited out of the body copy of letters for *CLW* as well.)

The tricky part was that an editor in Toronto (in this case, me) handled *CL*'s Letters page while Willis handled *CLW*'s Letters page. This led to some confusing and even uncomfortable situations. For example, other editors who were copy-editing the two Letters proofs as they circulated in layout would edit one version of a story and then have to edit a second version. Willis and I had each edited the same reader's letter for two different versions of the Letters page, making small editorial decisions that eventually led to quite different letters. Other editors reading these two versions would often wind up confused and frustrated trying to apply the same edits to two different versions of the same letter. One version's text might be edited down to fit into a larger layout while the other version would be inflated in order to fill space. *CLW*'s version of a letter would have been edited in order to avoid reference to Ontario but leave out important information that the other editors had just read in in the *CL* version. The process led to much more debating and back-and-forth than was ideal—especially

since Letters pages are edited right before the production deadline. As it turns out, there's a good reason for assigning one handling editor to a story in order to make the final call on which edits to keep and which to toss.

### *Sidenote*

#### **How Cottage Life editors typically handle stories:**

One editor is put in charge of a story—sometimes because they are the one who brought the idea forward, sometimes because the story falls into their specialty or area of interest (ie. design, food, nature), or sometimes simply because they have the least work on their plate otherwise. That person is the handling editor and is responsible for:

1. Assigning the story to the writer (or sometimes writing it themselves)
2. Editing the first draft
3. Circulating the first draft among the other editors
4. Choosing which edits to keep and which to reject
5. Translating all of these edits into one cohesive plan for the writer so that they may write the second draft
6. Editing the second draft
7. Sending the story to fact-checking, or fact-checking it themselves
8. Approving the fact-checking edits and communicating them to the writer
9. "Finalizing" the copy and submitting it to art
10. Fitting the copy in layout by trimming strategically
11. Writing the captions for the photos (and sometimes the sidebars)
12. Circulating the story among three other editors, in layout, as "Proof 1"
13. Reading through the edits, deciding which ones to apply and which ones to reject, and updating the copy to reflect this, as "Proof 2"
14. Giving Proof 2 to another editor to check to see the changes were applied correctly
15. Sending the story to the writer for approval, then making these edits
16. Once this is finished, submitting the story to the art department for it to be turned into a "Final"
17. Submitting the Final to the editor-in-chief to read and approve
18. Making these final edits and having them checked by another editor, to assure they were done correctly



19. Signing off the story to the art department, which approves and sends it to the production department, which eventually sends it to the printer

#### **How it worked with a remote Western editor:**

With Willis handling stories from her home in Victoria, she could only do so up until a certain point. Usually at step #12, another editor would take over, printing out the story to have it edited in its layout and taking the story through most of its remaining steps. The problems with this method:

- Editors were suddenly burdened with handling extra stories on top of their regular load.
- They were unfamiliar with the nuances and history of these stories.
- They had ideas about which small decisions to make that would sometimes disagree with Willis' ideas.
- All of this took extra time that a monthly magazine on a tight editing timeline cannot afford.

In July, 2016, Willis and her husband decided to make a big life change: they quit their jobs and move. Willis left Cottage Life, and Kelly decided to take the opportunity to change the role of the Western editor again. "It was an opportunity to take a look and say, Do we really need this person?" says Kelly. "We have Western writers, we're more established in the market, we've got more visibility. Do we need a person on the ground? Or can we save money here and spend more on freelance writers and photographers?" And so, on to phase three, in which the Toronto-based *Cottage Life* team would be taking up the reigns of *Cottage Life West*.

## **2.4. Phase 3: One staff, two magazines**

Since Willis left Cottage Life, the company has not replaced her with a Western editor in the same capacity. Both Caldwell and Kelly agreed this was for the best, in terms of both saving money and easing the editorial workflow. They believed that the Toronto editors could absorb the extra work and could stretch themselves to collect good

story ideas from the West, leaning more heavily on freelance writers and photographers for story ideas.

This section outlines how one magazine staff—six editors and three art directors based in Toronto—makes both *Cottage Life* and *Cottage Life West*.

*Sidenote*

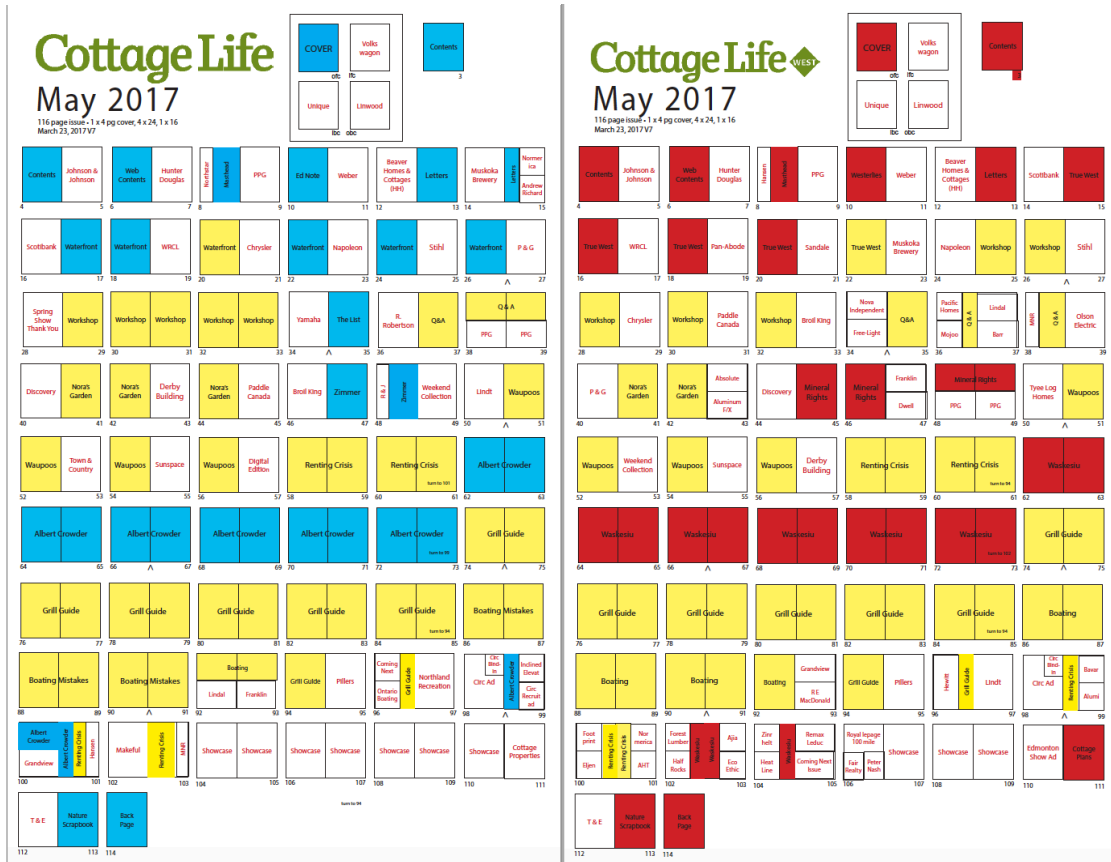
A quick breakdown of the editorial team and each member’s duties:

**Table 2.1. List of Cottage Life staff and corresponding editorial duties**

Name	Title	Responsibilities
Michelle Kelly	Editor	Handles the cover and writes the editor’s note. Represents the magazine to the public, manages all editorial staff, reads all stories, has the final word on all editorial decisions, works with sales to coordinate content with advertisers, determines broad themes, and decides on the final lineup.
Liann Bobechko	Deputy editor	Handles Feast (food section), standalone food features, boating stories, nature features, and some other features. Leads the team in Kelly’s absence.
Jackie Davis	Managing editor	Handles Waterfront/True West (front-of-book section), the List (a one-pager), Nature Scrapbook (recurring nature column), In Like Zim (recurring personality-driven column), some feature stories (often service features, packages, and Western features), and writes Q&A. Manages the editorial production schedule, leads production meetings, produces the annual calendar, keeps editors and the art department on schedule, and helps with some fact-checking.
Blair Eveleigh	Senior associate editor	Handles real estate features, most columns, Coming Next Issue, the contents pages, current affairs pieces, and other features as needed. Keeper of the Cottage Life style guide and lead copy-editor.
Braden Alexander	Associate editor	Handles Workshop (tools and DIY section), the back page, some feature stories (often design features and building- or fixing-oriented service features), and writes Style Ideas (a design column). Helps with some fact-checking, represents Cottage Life in media interviews, manages the internship program, and helps produce some online DIY videos.
Alysha	Assistant	Handles the masthead and letters pages. Does the majority

Vandertogt	editor	of fact-checking, administrative work, and helps coordinate the annual photo contest.
Kim Zagar	Art director	Designs the cover, the ed note, the List, most columns, and some features. Makes the final decision on all art considerations for the magazine.
Sandi Pilon	Associate art director	Designs the contents pages, Waterfront/True West, the letters pages, Feast, the back page, and some features.
Michelle Kenny	Designer	Designs the masthead, Q&A, Style Ideas, Workshop, Nature Scrapbook, and some features.

This team is responsible for producing both *Cottage Life* and *Cottage Life West* each month. The editorial directive is to share content that applies to both regions and swap in brand new Western stories for the *CLW* edition within a strict budget. The more ways we can do this for little expense, the better. On the following page are two flat plans, for *Cottage Life* May 2017 and *Cottage Life West* May 2017. Shared content is shaded yellow, Eastern-only content is shaded blue, and Western-only content is shaded red.



**Figure 2.1. Comparison of CL and CLW flat plans**

What follows is a breakdown of the special efforts that the Toronto-based Cottage Life editorial teams take to create *Cottage Life West* for Western Canada.

### Western editor

A few months after Willis left, Kelly hired a new Western editor, Jennifer Cockrall-King, a freelance food writer based in Kelowna, B.C. However, her duties are limited. She’s responsible for writing an opening essay for each issue of *CLW*, dubbed “Westerlies”—less an editor’s note and more a tone-setting piece for the Western book. She also offers ideas for stories and writers, and occasionally writes small stories on a freelance basis.

### Story ideas

The editorial team in Toronto is responsible for bringing in story ideas about Western Canada, which isn’t always easy from afar. Editors spend a lot of time following

leads, browsing social media, and reading local Western news sites. Slowly, the editorial team is starting to build up a network of freelance writers and photographers in the West who bring good ideas, but that network is still small. And since Cottage Life's editors spend little to no time in cottage regions of the Western provinces, we're not able to source stories that way, either.

### **Western feature stories**

For each issue of *Cottage Life*, one feature story from *CL* is swapped out and replaced with a Western-focus feature story for *CLW*. The main challenge is sourcing these stories. Once we find a good story and assign it to a trusted writer, the process for editing *CLW* feature stories is much the same as those for *CL*. In either case, all of the work is done through phone calls and emails. Often, with a smaller pool of full-time magazine writers to draw from in Western Canada, it's a case of having to take what we can get.

### **Service stories**

*Cottage Life* is a service magazine, and in most cases, service stories are applicable to cottagers in both Western and Eastern Canada. Info on decks, docks, cottage design, solar technology, grilling, keeping out mice, and buying a woodstove applies to cottagers anywhere in Canada. The challenge is for the writer to bring both Eastern and Western sources into the story. Most of the time, this is simply a matter of using Google to search for experts based there, but it still poses unique challenges. Unlike in Ontario, where the majority of people have at least heard of *Cottage Life* and are willing to speak to writers, in the West, fewer people are aware of the magazine and Western sources can sometimes be slower to call back and are less cooperative. They are, after all, providing their expertise for free. And if they don't instantly recognize the benefit of appearing in *Cottage Life*, they're less motivated to provide information for stories.

### **Front-of-book stories**

In *CL*, the first front-of-book section is called Waterfront. It's full of short, miscellaneous stories related to news, health, products, nature, regional oddities, pop culture, and

cottager anecdotes. In *CLW*, this same front-of-book section is called TrueWest. It's mostly the same content, with these exceptions:

- The opener (a story about local cottage-country restaurants and attractions dubbed "Top Stops") is swapped out for a similar story about a Top Stop in the West.
- In the slot called "Reporter," a roundup of cottagey news, one or two stories that relate to the East are swapped out for one or two stories that relate to the West.
- Any other one-off stories directly relating to Ontario-and-east cottages and cottagers are removed.
- A page called "Get to Know" is added to fill that space. This page puts the spotlight on different cottage regions in the West and provides information about their local real estate market.

## **Columns**

Between the front-of-book sections (Waterfront, Workshop, and Q&A) and the feature well, *Cottage Life* always includes a handful of columns. Every issue of *CL* includes the design column called "Style Ideas" and a personality-driven opinions column called "In Like Zim." Some issues may include other occasional columns such as "Cottage Coup" about cottager success stories, "Cottage Watch" about cottage-country topical issues, "Solutions" about practical answers to cottagey problems, "Cottage Legacy" about passing traditions and knowledge down from generation to generation, and "Boating" about, well, boating. Because columns are typically laid out in individual pages, not spreads, these stories are easy to add or remove for each issue when the book size goes up or down based on ad sales. In *CLW*, this is how columns get westified:

- "Style Ideas," appears in both books, because it's a service column that focuses on building and design. Some focus on a topic, like kitchens, and so will include kitchens from cottages in both the East and the West. In some cases, the main story will feature mostly Eastern locations and will include a sidebar from a location out West in order to provide balance. Other design columns are based on one particular location, like the bunkie made from old barnwood in Prince

Edward County, Ont. In these cases, the editors make special effort not to place too much emphasis on where the cottage is located.

- “In Like Zim” also appears in both books...most of the time. David Zimmer’s columns are funny and beautifully written, but they come from his personal experience. On the occasions where his column is too Ontario-centric (he lives near Huntsville, Ont.), the editors will replace it *CLW* with a one-off column about something very Western specific, often an environmental piece with relevance to B.C. or Alberta.
- “Cottage Coup,” “Cottage Legacy,” “Solutions,” and “Boating” are usually story-based or service-based, rather than based in geography, and can mostly appear in *CLW* as well as *CL*.
- “Cottage Watch” can appear in both issues when the topic is something such as, say, drones, and the story covers changes in federal regulation. However, in a recent “Cottage Watch” on the topic of wolves, the editors faced an unusual problem. The editors received a pitch from an Ontario writer on wolves. The writer wanted to report on how wolves in the province were being mistaken for coyotes and over-hunted (coyotes are legal to hunt because of their healthy populations in Ontario and the threat they pose to farmers). Wolves in B.C., however, face the exact opposite situation: the wolf population is so high that the province actively culls it to maintain healthy levels for the local ecosystem. In this case, the editors assigned both stories to the same writer, who shared some sources between both stories, but ultimately wrote two different stories to represent the differences in Eastern and Western wolf populations.

### **Nature stories**

For many years, the second-to-last page of *Cottage Life* has been occupied by a nature column called “Nature Scrapbook,” which spotlights a plant or animal found in cottage country—anything from grizzly bears to blueberries, lichen to woodticks. Tim Tiner writes every single column, formerly six per year. Since *CLW* launched, Tiner now writes 10 Nature Scrapbook pieces: two featuring plants or animals found across most of Canada (bumble bee, meadow vole), four mainly found in the East (morel mushroom, five-lined skink) and four mainly found in the West (dolphin, western red cedar).

## **The back page**

The back page of the magazine is called “Weekender,” and it tells a little story about something cottagey happening on social media: either a user (@bradenalexander), a geotag (Owen Sound, B.C.), or a hashtag (#maylong) that relates to cottage country. The page features users’ photos and some quotes. Often, this page has to be tailored to the East or West. For example, the Spring 2017 issue featured #CottageBound in CL and #CabinBound in CLW. In some cases, the editors choose topics that can apply to both issues, such as #CanadaCaptured for the Canada 150 issue in June 2017. But in most cases, the editors are working on two separate stories—one for each edition.

### *Sidenote*

#### **Regionalism and social media**

Digital publishing is often lauded for breaking down geographical barriers—what’s published online in Portland can instantly be read in St. John’s or Abuja. New communities are formed based on common interests and aesthetic. And social media functions as the ultimate circulation department—content is shared immediately with the people who want it, from Mexico to Mauritius. And yet, as I’ve discovered in working on the back page of *Cottage Life*, the reality is that regionalism persists online. Take, for instance, my attempt to celebrate the May long weekend in the 2017 May issue by featuring a collection of photos with the hashtag “#maylong.” In Winnipeg, where I grew up, we call it the May long weekend, or “May long.” What I did not initially realize is that in Ontario, it’s largely called “May 24.” And so, to properly reflect what’s going on in local cottage areas, I had to collect photos tagged with #maylong for CLW and #May24 for CL. The same thing happened when I tried to focus on #cottagebound. People in the west were using #cabinbound. So, despite the fact that Cottage Life’s social media accounts have followers from across the country (there is no specific Instagram or Facebook account for *Cottage Life West*), the regionalism in each area is strong enough that it must be recognized on social media.



## The cover

The cover is perhaps the most important element for *CLW*. The magazine strives to look—at a glance—like a magazine made *for* the Western reader. This is inherently challenging with the name—a truly Western magazine would be called *Cabin Life*. And the little diamond-shaped signpost that reads “West” on top of “Cottage Life” implies that this is a specially tailored edition of something intended for someone else. Still, we try to work against these factors. As we’ve established, retaining the name *Cottage Life* was crucial for growing brand awareness across the country. The cover’s newsstand impact isn’t only about sales, but also about penetrating the Western market and increasing awareness about the brand as a whole.

Creating *CLW* covers has been a process of trial and error, but the team has started to learn what works and what doesn’t after reviewing spikes and dips in *CLW* sales numbers. For instance, it’s vital to have the word “cabin” at least once on every cover, preferably in large type. For some issues, we will use an entirely different image on the *CLW* cover from the one used for *CL*, and the image will feature something very Western: prairies, ocean, mountains, even a barn and horses. Other issues will use the same photo on both covers, but the cover lines will be modified for the *CLW* audience.



Figure 2.2. Comparing *CL* and *CLW* May 2017 covers

For the May 2017 cover, our annual grilling guide, the same image of a grill was used on both issues. The case: grilling is a pan-Canadian pastime. Here’s a glimpse at how *CLW*’s cover gets westified:

- All issues of *CLW* now include the tagline: “For Western cabin living” in order to remove any confusion from the word “Cottage” in the title.
- All issues also include the “West” signpost.
- On the bottom left, a mention of the feature story that only appears in *CL* is swapped out for a call to the “Cottage Watch” column that only appears in *CLW*.
- The top cover line “Rental crisis on the verge” is modified to work in the word cabin: “Our cabin rental crisis.”
- “From barn to bunkie” refers to the Ontario slang for “bunkhouse” or guest cabin, so that line was modified to the more West-appropriate “From barn to cabin.”
- Mention of the Ontario Hydro story was removed (as it doesn’t appear in *CLW*) and replaced with a DIY story from the Workshop section about building a side table for the deck that doubles as a spare propane tank hide. One working theory is that “hammer-and-nails” stories are appealing to readers in the West.

## Contents page

Though it would be simple to use the same contents page image for both issues, the art director purposefully uses the page to feature a very Western-looking image as part of our attempt to make *CLW* look as Western as possible for anyone flipping through.

Table 2.2. Comparing *CL* and *CLW* contents pages

Cottage Life contents page image	Cottage Life West contents page image	Notes
 <p>The image shows the contents page for Cottage Life Fall 2016. The top half features a photograph of a modern, light-colored brick building. Below the photo, there are several article teasers: '72 The Ultimate DIYers', '82 Power for the Taking', and '88 We Love Woodstoves'. A 'DIY ISSUE' badge is visible in the top left. At the bottom, there is a photo of a person carrying a canoe and another article teaser: '94 "Don't Move! There's a Wasp!"'. The page number '7' is at the bottom right.</p>	 <p>The image shows the contents page for Cottage Life West Fall 2016. The top half features a photograph of a modern interior with a large black woodstove. Below the photo, there are several article teasers: '72 Inspiration on the Prairie', '82 Power for the Taking', and '88 We Love Woodstoves'. A 'DIY ISSUE' badge is visible in the top right. At the bottom, there is a photo of a person carrying a canoe and another article teaser: '94 "Don't Move! There's a Wasp!"'. The page number '5' is at the bottom right.</p>	<p>In Fall 2016, the art director chose a shot of a Quebec cabin for the <i>CL</i> contents page. The same story didn't run in <i>CLW</i>, so for that contents page she chose a photo of a fireplace from a service story. Though it's probably impossible to tell from the shot, the cabin was in B.C.</p>

Figure 2.3. *CL* contents Fall 2016

Figure 2.4. *CLW* contents Fall 2016



Figure 2.5. CL contents Winter 2016



Figure 2.6. CLW contents Winter 2016

Here, something unusual happens. CL's Winter 2016 issue features an image from Haida G'waii in B.C., while CLW features a shot from a snowmobile story in Northwestern Ontario. In this case, both stories ran in both editions of the magazine. The B.C.-based story on surfing cottagers was deemed interesting enough to appeal to Ontario cottagers far away. The snowmobile buyer's guide was a service story geared to appeal to the Western audience, who are thought to appreciate motor sports and adventure.



Figure 2.7. CL contents Spring 2017



Figure 2.8. CLW contents Spring 2017

The same feature about an Ontario cottage ran in both issues of Spring 2017. Since this photo had hammer-and-nails appeal, the team decided it could run in both issues.



Figure 2.9. CL contents 2 Spring 2017



Figure 2.10. CLW contents 2 Spring 2017

In that same issue's Contents, on the second page, the art director injected a bit of regional appeal by choosing a shot of a local cottage restaurant for each edition. The easiest way to signal to the West is to name locations in the West.



Figure 2.11. CL contents May 2017



Figure 2.12. CLW contents May 2017

For CL's May 2017 contents page, the art director chose a shot from our boating feature. It's a service story, and so it runs in both editions. But for CLW's contents page, she chose a shot from a feature story on a Saskatchewan lake. It's instantly recognizable as a prairie lake, with the forest reaching right up to gradual, sandy shores.

When choosing images for *Cottage Life West's* cover or contents page, the thought process usually goes like this:

1. Is there a photo from a West-located feature story that works in the layout? If yes, use it. If no, proceed to number 2.
2. Will a photo from an East-located feature story, or service story, that runs in that same issue work instead? Will it appeal to Western readers?
3. If none of these work, the backup plan would be to pick up a generic Western image from a photographer, unrelated to any specific story but speaking instead to the overall theme of the issue.

## Cabin Plans

On occasions where *CLW* requires an extra page or two of editorial, we will run a simple selection of cabin plans dubbed... “Cabin Plans.” This type of story is economical (the art is supplied by the architecture firm who designed the plans and they are happy for the promotion) and fairly easy to produce. But more than that, the original *Cottage* magazine used to include cabin plans in every issue, and its former readers have bemoaned the lack of them in *CLW*. (Though it should be noted that despite this feedback, the special cabin plans issue was not a great success out West.)

### *Sidenote*

#### **What do Western readers want?**

The editorial team has a few theories about what types of content our Western readers want to see. One of those is “hammer and nails” service pieces—service stories that involve tools, building, and DIY. This, Kelly explains, is a holdover from *Cottage* magazine, which focused on this type of content. Willis Willis also believed this to be true, from conversations she’s had with readers out West. Editor Michelle Kelly, however, isn’t completely sold on the idea. “Jury’s still out,” she says.<sup>22</sup> Regardless, this type of content is a staple of *Cottage Life* in general, so it will always be a part of *Cottage Life West*.

Another theory is that Western readers prefer stories about outdoor adventure and activity. This, Kelly says, has been somewhat justified by some of the covers that have sold well: one with two surfers, one with horses.

#### **Westification**

Besides these story swaps, the editors will also apply a general “westification” over communal stories where it makes sense. For instance, in a recent service feature called “10 Things Every Cottager Can Fix,” a writer likened a dent in a boat prop to “some monster muskie taking a bite.” Because muskies aren’t native to lakes west of Manitoba, the reference was changed for *CLW*: “some monster pike” instead. It’s a small example of the level of detail involved in making *CLW* as authentically Western as possible.

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<sup>22</sup> Michelle Kelly, Interview by author, October 5, 2017

## Chapter 3. Analysis

*Cottage Life West* is an experiment. The company is trying to determine whether Cottage Life can grow its brand presence in the West, opening up a new market and establishing a cross-Canada audience. The editorial team is committed to supporting this endeavour, through the myriad processes described in the previous section. Measuring editorial success is notoriously difficult, but the effort is worthwhile because if we're only ever going to convince Western readers to trust and engage with our brand if we publish content that resonates with them. This section examines quantitative feedback (circulation numbers) and qualitative feedback (letters and messages from Western readers) to determine if all these efforts are making a difference.

### 3.1. Quantitative analysis: What the numbers tell us

In 2013, the year before the company launched *Cottage Life West*, the total number of sales of the Spring issue (newsstand, subscribers, and sponsored sales, which include, for example, batch sales to Via Rail) for the three Western provinces (B.C., Alberta, and Saskatchewan, which includes a small number of sales in the three territories) was 8,309. This was just about 12% of the total Canadian sales (71,065) for that issue.<sup>23</sup> You can see why Cottage Life wanted to penetrate this market. Only 12% of its sales came from a region that houses 28% of the population.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, there was room to grow. In Ontario, that same issue sold 58,619 issues, 79.3% from a province with 38% of the population of Canada.

Three years later—three years of providing a magazine tailored directly to the Western Canadian market—the numbers have improved. But only slightly. The sales of the 2017 Spring issue totalled 9,454 in the West.<sup>25</sup> That's 13% of the total Canadian sales. It's also a 14% improvement from 2013. This small growth would imply our efforts have

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<sup>23</sup> Cottage Life CCAB Statement Summary, updated May 8, 2017

<sup>24</sup> Statistics Canada. "Population by year, by province and territory." September 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Cottage Life CCAB Statement Summary. Updated May 8, 2017



been working, but that there's room for improvement: a region in Canada that holds 28% of the total population<sup>26</sup> is only contributing to 13% of total national sales. And it also implies that penetrating the West (at least with a cottage magazine) is a long game—or, perhaps, a fool's game. But the editors aren't ready to give up trying yet. They believe that this small growth is part of an upward trend because of the glowing feedback they receive from readers out West, a few examples of which appear in the following section. It's also possible that *CLW* would benefit from a marketing push out West, to get the magazine into the hands of more readers. The editors' experience is that when readers out West do engage with the magazine, they recognize that it's reflective of their Western cabin-life experiences. And, finally, *Cottage Life* likely needs to try a few new editorial strategies to see what else might work to attract readers. Perhaps there's a whole aspect of cabin life out West that we're not touching on simply because the editors aren't familiar with it.

### **3.2. Qualitative analysis: What the readers are saying**

*Cottage Life* has a dedicated readership. The circulation department reports this based on of the high number of people who have subscribed from the very beginning: the renewal rate of long-term subscribers is 70%, even with a high per-copy rate of \$4.95 (almost as high as newsstand prices).<sup>27</sup> Every year, the most popular renewal period for subscriptions at the *Cottage Life Show* is the three-year period. And, according to Alysha Vandertogt, the assistant editor who receives letters to the editor and compiles them for each issue's manuscript, *Cottage Life* receive an average of seven letters from readers per month. Sometimes those letters are about information missed in one of the stories, or a general grumbling about bad behaviour in cottage country that they feel the magazine should report on. But most often, it's a glowing and emotional endorsement of the magazine that emphasizes how much readers enjoy it and rely on it for information and entertainment. (From an editor's perspective, it's a wonderful and remarkable feeling.)

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<sup>26</sup> Statistics Canada. "Population by year, by province and territory." September 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Williams. Circulation Manager. Interview by author, April 9, 2018

However, the vast majority of these letters come from readers outside the West. (By far, most come from Ontario.) So analyzing the success of our editorial efforts on *Cottage Life West* is hard to do. But here are a handful of examples of good feedback:

During a phone call with a cabin-owner in Alberta, the man told me he'd been subscribing to *Cottage Life* for years, since before *Cottage Life West*, but "really noticed it get better" in the last few years (since he started receiving CLW) and loved "that there are stories about people from my neck of the woods."

"I picked up your latest issue, excited to see 'The coziest Western hideaway' featured prominently on your cover. Imagine my disappointment when I saw only one western province and one territory represented. Your cover should have read "On the hunt for BC's coziest hideaway!" ... Thanks for your fast reply. I do love your magazine and was thrilled when the 'West' version was introduced."

"As a lifelong seasonal resident in Prince Albert National Park, I was delighted to read the article Take me to Waskesiu in the May 2017 edition of *Cottage Life West*. *Cottage* and cabin owners scattered around western Canada have been passing the word to each other to track down copies of the issue."

Recently, in a fact-checking call to a source for a *Cottage Life West* story on Hollyburn Ridge in West Vancouver, I spoke to a cabin-owner who loved the magazine. "I was so excited when I came across *Cottage Life*," he said. "I had to read all these back issues. And then it got even better when you started making *Cottage Life West*. People tell me, 'oh that's a magazine for Ontario.' But I tell them, 'no, look, it's a special magazine for the West. And it's really good!'"

Still, for every positive review, there are 10 blank stares in return to the question, "Have you heard of our magazine *Cottage Life West*?" This is what I ask visitors to our booth at the *Cottage Life* and Cabin Show in Edmonton that I have attended for the last two years. Many attendees have never heard of *Cottage Life* before, nevermind *Cottage Life West*. (In Ontario, most people at least know of *Cottage Life*.) Still, when I explain to people at the Edmonton show that we have a magazine with stories about Western cabin-owners *for* Western cabin-owners, the response is always positive and usually enthusiastic.

It's difficult to draw any definite conclusions from this type of qualitative feedback. My instinct is that we're on the right track with room for improvement and we'll have to sustain the effort while awareness of the magazine grows organically. Strategically, the editorial team is still learning from every letter from and conversation with Western readers. For instance, a recent letter that chided our Winter issue for not having enough Western images featured in the photo contest is a good reminder to put the emphasis on gathering those types of images next year. It may even be worth a special marketing push.

I think our editorial team needs to stretch in order to have more conversations with Western readers to find more organic Western stories and cultivate a richer understanding of the psyche of the Western cabin owner. One recent such push: we asked *CLW* readers to share photos of their cabins with us via email. We received about 12 responses, and each editor was tasked with following up on these with phone calls. From those phone calls, although we weren't able to source a new feature story, we were able to understand a bit more about what those readers liked and disliked about the magazine, and I found a new B.C. lake to feature on the back page.

## Chapter 4. Conclusions

In this chapter, I reflect on lessons learned and extrapolate a few best practices for other Toronto-based content publishers.

### 4.1. Reflecting on *Cottage Life West*

The editorial strategy for *Cottage Life West* started big and bold: the editors had to produce almost an entirely separate magazine full of original stories. Had this resulted in a boom in readership, perhaps it would have been worth sustaining. But since it didn't, it was hard to justify the financial cost.

Next, that editorial strategy veered towards integration: how can *Cottage Life* share more content between its two magazines more efficiently? This was a learning process that relied on insight from Willis, our Western editor, as part of the team.

Now, after learning a few lessons and recognizing that growth out West is going to take time, the strategy has changed. "The regionality continues to be a challenge for us," says Kelly.<sup>28</sup> That challenge, she says, is twofold:

1. The West isn't a monoculture. B.C. culture is different from Alberta culture and both are different from Saskatchewan culture. Likewise, coastal cottaging is not mountain cottaging and neither are prairie cottaging. One editorial strategy doesn't apply wholesale to all readers in the West.
2. Creating top-quality editorial content out West isn't simple. Vancouver, and in some cases Calgary, is a big enough urban centre to sustain top-quality magazine writers and photographers, so hiring people to cover stories in those areas is fairly simple. But when the story is taking place four hours north of

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<sup>28</sup> Michelle Kelly, interview by author, October 5, 2017.

Saskatoon, a city without plentiful high-calibre editorial freelancers, you have to factor in the cost of flying trusted writers and photographers over from, say, Vancouver. Stories suddenly become much more expensive to produce, and since *CLW*'s audience is smaller than *CL*'s, harder to justify.

3. The lack of brand power out West means fewer stories come in over the transom. In Ontario, so many people know of the magazine that when they have a good story idea, they write in to *CL*. That's often the way to get the best content, stories that feel very "inside" and authentic. Since fewer people are aware of *Cottage Life West* out in Western Canada—and even if they are, they don't necessarily think to send their story ideas there—*CLW* have to work harder to find great Western stories.

With these challenges in mind, Kelly explains the current editorial strategy. "We've got *Cottage Life West* down to a more manageable level of work," she says. "We've stripped it down to the essentials, the bare minimum we believe we need to make a good magazine for the Western reader. And now we start building it back up." But, she says, the editorial team has to be strategic so that they don't break our budget or overstretch our staff. "Little by little we're finding more capacity to make the magazine better, more authentic," she says. "You find capacity as you get better at what you do."<sup>29</sup>

She offers one particular section of the magazine as an example: cabin plans. The original *Cottage* magazine ran cabin plans provided by the architecture firms that designed them. It was popular with readers—the special cabin plans edition was always the highest seller. When Cottage Life Media took over the magazine, they wanted to keep this content, but elevate it. They paid an illustrator to redraw the cabin plans, so that the entire collection would all be done in the same polished style. Of course, this took a lot of time, effort, and money. And *Cottage Life West* didn't see the same results—for whatever reason, the special cabin plans issue of *CLW* sold no better than any other issue. And so, Cottage Life Media stopped publishing cabin plans altogether. That is, until more recently. "We realized that our readers probably don't care whether the plans are uniform," says Kelly. And so, Cottage Life started to run the plans as they came, for free, from the architecture firms. (The only extra effort: the handling editor,

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<sup>29</sup> Kelly, interview.

Blair Eveleigh, writes a new description of the plans based on information from the firm.) Now, *CLW* has affordable, flexible content that editors know the Western reader appreciates, without spending so much money that it's not worth it. "There's a history of the Western reader wanting these plans," says Kelly. "It's also very advertiser-friendly content, and it supports the Cottage Life and Cabin Show. So how do we make it happen? We just compromise our standard for content a little bit. And, once we try it, it turns out it's not much of a compromise at all. The plans look great."<sup>30</sup>

Going forward, this is the editorial strategy for *Cottage Life West*. The editors and the art team find as many little ways to Westify existing content—and to add good, inexpensive, authentic Western content—as possible. "The more we can respond to what's happening in the West, the better," says Kelly, who points to an upcoming 2018 story as an example: Nemeiben Lake.<sup>31</sup> It's a cabin community in Saskatchewan that was hit by forest fire in 2015. More than a quarter of the cabins were completely destroyed. And, despite the fact that these cabins were all built on leased Crown land, the cabin owners didn't walk away—they decided to rebuild. It's a story of resilience and community and love for the place where you have history. And, the editors believe, a highly relevant story to Western readers in both B.C. and Alberta, many of whom are faced with rebuilding from the ashes after a devastating fire. It isn't a cheap story to produce (*CL* had to fly a photographer in from Vancouver and pay for a writer to drive in from Edmonton), but worth it from an editorial perspective.

This, *CL* believes, is how we will grow *Cottage Life West*: by spending our budget on thoughtful, authentic feature stories, responding to feedback from Western readers, and otherwise providing as much local Western content as possible.

## 4.2. Takeaways for other Canadian content publishers

Many Canadian publishers are in the game of creating Canada-wide content from a Toronto base: *Chatelaine*, *Canadian Living*, *MacLean's*, *the Walrus*, *Elle*

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<sup>30</sup> Kelly, interview.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly, interview.

*Canada*, and *Fashion*, to name a few. And it's not just print—Buzzfeed Canada and The Beaverton are both creating content from their Toronto headquarters and sharing it with a general Canadian audience. Here's some suggestions on how publishers can better create content for Western Canadian audiences from their Ontario offices.

1. **Mine social media.** Instagram (and to a lesser degree, Twitter and Facebook) offer a window into Canadians' lives that can be searched via geotags or content-specific hashtags. These tools will help editors find Western sources and stories that would otherwise never be accessible. Editors can even gather images from users who are on the ground in these locations, so long as they secure permission (and, for print, high-res files).
2. **Turn sources into resources.** When speaking to Western sources for, say, an interview or fact-checking, use the opportunity to do qualitative research. Ask them what they know of your brand and what they like. Feel them out for stories in their location. Ask them to weigh in on a story idea you've been considering. At Cottage Life, one conversation with a Western source for the back-page feature turned into a second story in a subsequent issue about a DIY project: a mountainscape she painted on her cabin wall. Western content from a Western source.
3. **Find your keywords.** As soon as we started putting "Cabin" in huge font on every cover, in an attempt to use local vernacular to signal to Western readers, our newsstand sales picked up. Publishers would benefit from discovering the Westernisms that apply to their content streams. (Fun examples include:

“garburator” in the West vs. “garbage disposal” in the East, runners vs. running shoes, poster board vs. bristol board.)

4. **Take the time to tailor content.** Even purely service stories, with how-to content that applies to readers across Canada, can benefit from a little Westification. To start, make sure to use a mix of Western and Eastern experts as sources for these stories. But also, if printing two version of a book the way Cottage Life does, tweak the Western version in small ways that cater to the Western reader. Replace references to Eastern-specific animals or places with Western ones.
5. **Go heavy on the images.** Your visual language is the fastest way of communicating with your audience. Swap out Ontario images with Western ones wherever possible to signal to the West: “this magazine reflects your experience.”
6. **Hire a local expert.** Our Western editor, even in her limited role, helps plug us into what’s top-of-mind in the West. Consider hiring a local ambassador to help represent your brand, create authentic content, and report on what’s happening on the ground in the West.
7. **Lean on local contributors.** Encourage your Western contributors to bring you story ideas, and pay them for the ideas even if you ultimately hire someone else to write the story. Good ideas are invaluable.
8. **Get free money.** To cover the Nemeiben Lake story, we got funding from Saskatchewan Tourism to cover the cost of flying a trusted photographer from Vancouver and an award-winning writer from Edmonton. It’s often in the interest



of provincial tourism boards to have national media cover locations in their province and they have funds set aside to assist this.

Canada has never been and likely will never be a monoculture. Publishing does its job best when it acknowledges these nuances and works constantly to respond to them. Understanding the subtle ways in which audiences in Western Canada are different is just one way Ontario content publishers can speak authentically to more Canadians. And, it's worth keeping in mind, those differences aren't all-encompassing. As Gerald Friesen notes, "The differences between West and East today are not so profound that they challenge Canada's national existence... My belief is that, as happens from time to time in the history of a large and diverse country, Canadians' understanding of one another is becoming out-of-date." As publishers, it's our responsibility to update that understanding as we go.

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