

HOME OF THE WEEK 6235 WELLINGTON RD. 26, CENTRE WELLINGTON, ONT.

# Retired exec revives 19th-century farm

After getting lost north of Guelph, John Van de Kamer found the house, and career, he was always looking for

## THE LISTING

Asking price: \$2,250,000

Taxes: \$7,400 (2014)

Land size: 83 acres

Agent: Peter Bowers (Moffat Dunlap Real Estate Ltd.)

CAROLYN IRELAND

## The back story

In the late 1800s, an aspiring farmer by the name of Quarrie became the first homesteader on an expanse of land in the rolling hills of Wellington County north of Guelph. Mr. Quarrie and his wife named their domain Maple Ridge Farm and had a house built of local fieldstone in 1889.

The bank barn was built in 1879 or 1876, says the current owner, John Van de Kamer. He explains he's not sure which as he points to the spot - just under the peaked roof - where someone long ago proudly hand-carved the date of construction on the side of the barn. The last numeral is either a backwards nine or an upside-down six.

Lore passed down through the many years since says that Mrs. Quarrie thought the laneway would benefit from rows of trees on either side, so she set to work herself planting the Norway Spruce that still line the long drive. The columns are 85 or 90 years old, estimates Mr. Van de Kamer, who has counted the rings on the occasional fallen tree.

Mr. Van de Kamer believes the land stayed in the Quarrie family until the mid-1970s, but they deserted the farm some time in the 1950s for reasons that remain unknown. The lengthy drive, enclosed by Mrs. Quarrie's towering trees, became a lovers' lane.

In the 1970s, a new owner named Cy Wylie took over the land and brought the abandoned house back to life. In the intervening years, only a single squirrel has managed to make its way in. Mr. Wylie restored the farmhouse and added a coach house, horse barn, riding arena and driving shed.

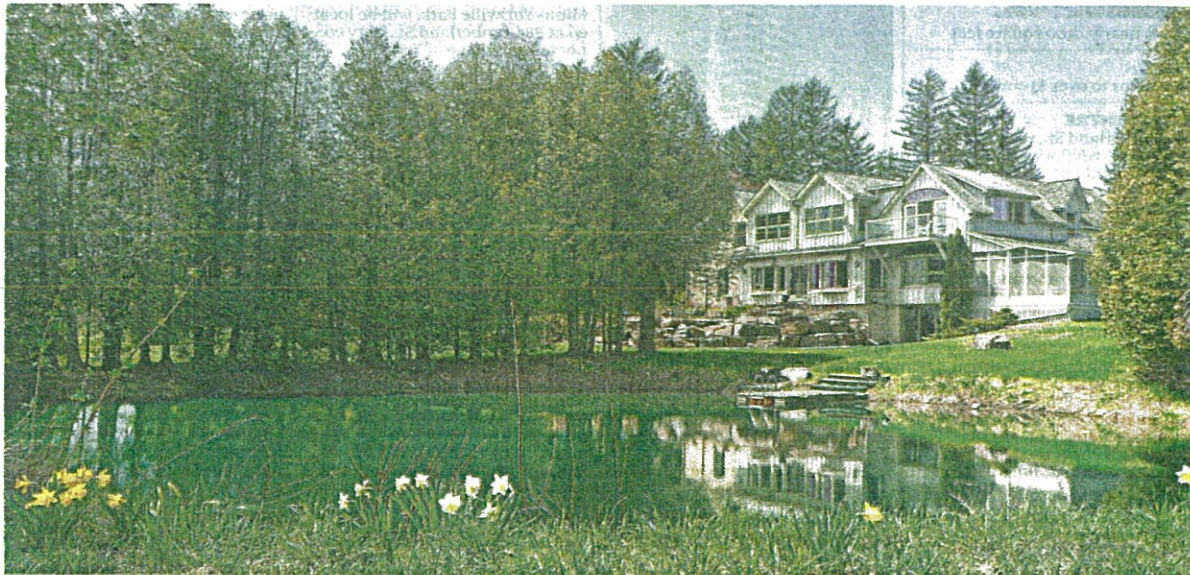
By the mid-1980s, an elderly Mr. Wylie was finding it difficult to keep up with the farm. Mr. Van de Kamer's research shows that he sold it to a young couple by the name of Williamson who extensively renovated the house with a new roof, additional rooms, modern bathrooms and a new kitchen.

But tragedy struck and Mr. Williamson died at a young age before the house was finished. Mrs. Williamson could no longer afford to keep the property and, in desperation, she sold the farm to an institution that planned to build two-storey residences around the big pond for use as halfway houses. The old stone house would become the organization's headquarters.

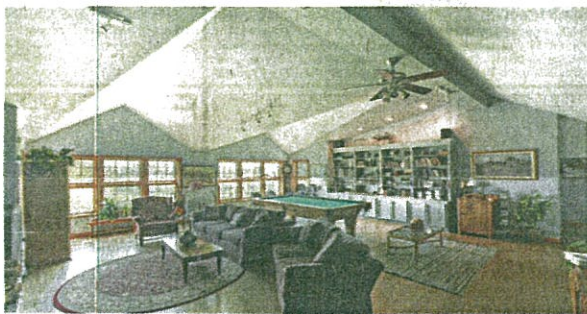
The surrounding community did not take well to the idea of turning agricultural land into a setting for halfway houses, Mr. Van de Kamer explains. Neighbours launched a court battle and won; the farm was preserved.

## The farm today

"I always wanted to be a farmer," says Mr. Van de Kamer, who -



The Maple Ridge Farm built in the late 1800s includes a rare bank barn from that time that has been recently restored by Mennonite carpenters.



until the 1990s - was a media and publishing executive.

In 1992, he retired as president and chief executive officer of Montreal-based Telemedia Inc. and bought a farmhouse in Acton with his wife, Ann.

In 1992, the couple got lost during a drive around tiny Fergus and ended up at the long driveway leading to Maple Ridge Farm.

"We came up the laneway gingerly to see the stone farmhouse," he says.

The unfinished farm had lots of potential, he recalls, so the couple purchased it and set out to refurbish it for themselves and their three children.

Today the house has been expanded far beyond the original footprint. There's a large, open kitchen with a brick fireplace and raised hearth. The family room has French doors leading to the patio overlooking the pond. The dining room has an original exte-

rior stone wall and the living room still has the antique glass in the Victorian-era windows.

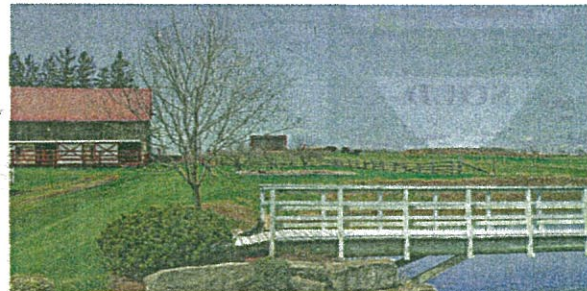
The addition includes a large master suite with an ensuite bathroom and a private balcony above the swimming pond.

There's also a sunroom, a large entertainment room and an elevator that glides between floors.

The old bank barn still stands near the rustic wooden chicken coop.

Mr. Van de Kamer raised thoroughbred cattle and the bank barn sheltered many young calves. In another newer barn, he points out the corner where he would sleep during calving season - ready to help the cows in labour.

"We were in the purebred business," he explained on a recent Friday, as the last cattle drive took place under his watch. The 13 cows and 13 calves were herded into trailers and sent off to be



sold by auction to farmers who value their bloodlines.

"You want a cow that's absolutely purebred," he says. "You want those genetics."

Maple Ridge Farm also has a full horse riding arena. The equestrian barn has stalls for 10 horses.

Beside the main house, a two-bedroom coach house provides living space over a four-bay garage.

The surrounding land has a large pond stocked with trout. A bridge leads to the island in the centre. Mr. Van de Kamer had a smaller pond dug for family swimming. Walking and riding trails wind throughout the property.

Mr. Van de Kamer recalls first wanting to be a farmer when he was a young teenager. While other kids were going to camp, he went to work with a farmer who practised mixed farming. As a young man, he thought that he might pursue a life on the farm but his wife was skeptical so he put the plan on hold.

When he bought Maple Ridge Farm, Mr. Van de Kamer decided he should start with the most gentle breed of cattle. He ended up with a herd of polled Herefords.

"I liked the fact that these were docile creatures."

He learned by surrounding himself with sage advice. "When you grow up not at your daddy's knee, you'd better learn to listen."

Now that he has spent many years in the business, Mr. Van de

Kamer's cows have won ribbons.

"The nice thing about farming is you can make a mistake and it will turn out alright."

A tradition has grown up around the annual apple day, when friends and family converge on the farm to help with apple pressing and play in the hay mounds. Mr. Van de Kamer customarily takes up to 30 kids out on tractor rides.

"Everybody goes home with a big bag of apples, cider and a stomach filled with hot dogs," he says.

Near the house, a dry-stacked fire stack is surrounded by stones.

"Each one represents a member of the family," Mr. Van de Kamer says.

He's also had a family-style golf course fashioned out of a long expanse of lawn.

## The best feature

The bank barn is a rarity in an area where many have fallen into ruin or been torn down through the years.

"The barn hadn't been used in 50 years," says Mr. Van de Kamer, who brought in a team of Mennonite carpenters to restore it. It became a sturdy, comfortable place for sheltering young calves, he says.

Recently, it was nominated for an award recognizing the finest, oldest working barns in the county. It ended up in second place.

"A dairy guy beat me out," says Mr. Van de Kamer with a smile.