A lifetime of wonderful memories of the Beach as recalled by Dorothy Ottaway (1933-2026)

Prepared by Susan Tonkin, November 2026



Dorothy Ottaway, early 1980s
Courtesy Ottaway Family

The following story is based on an interview that Susan Tonkin conducted with Dorothy Ottaway on May 21, 2026 with follow-up discussions in July. Sadly, Dorothy passed away on September 22, 2026, at the age of 93. Her legacy will live on through her numerous accomplishments, and in the many happy memories of her family, friends, former colleagues and the many students whose lives she touched.

Although she travelled extensively all over the globe, Dorothy Ottaway (nee Parsons) said there was no other place where she would rather have lived than in the Beach neighbourhood of Toronto. A long-time area resident, an active community member and a Toronto Board of Education trustee for 12 years, she had many fond memories of her decades in the neighbourhood.

Early years

Born in the Beach in 1933 to parents Herbert John Parsons and Phyllis Edna James, Dorothy grew up in a duplex located on lower Hammersmith Avenue. “It was such a carefree childhood,” she said of the 1930s and ‘40s. “It was a great place to grow up, in my time. We didn’t see ourselves as part of Toronto back then. We were isolated, but in a good way. It was like a little

hamlet on the east side of Toronto. Everything we needed was here. We didn't leave the area that much."

She recalled happy childhood summers spent mostly outdoors, riding around on her bicycle and playing with friends from breakfast to lunch and then all afternoon until dinner. She was allowed to venture as far west as Woodbine Avenue, but no further as the area, then known as "The Cut" (now Woodbine Beach), was a desolate, wooded area at that time. And her mother forbade her to go near the lake.

After dinner, she and her friends would play "buzz off" — a form of hide-and-seek. "You could hide behind the houses and in the garages on Hammersmith Avenue. It was very safe," she explained. There was baseball in Kew Gardens and the Boardwalk was always busy. Once the house lights came on in the evening, it was time to go indoors.

Milk and bread were delivered by horse and cart, and a rag-and-bone man would come by regularly to collect and recycle used items. Ryan's Hardware, which was located on the north side of Queen Street between Willow and Beech Avenues, supplied many household items to the neighbourhood.

Wild watercress grew in the northern marshy part of what is now called Ivan Forrest Gardens at Queen Street and Glen Manor Drive, but she found it muddy and spooky at the time. Tobogganing in Glen Stewart Park was a popular winter activity — as it is today — although dragging a toboggan all the way over from Hammersmith Avenue was not always easy.

Social Anchors

Back in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, the area churches served as community social hubs, in addition to places of worship. "There was no television and the churches anchored the Beach neighbourhood. They were always full," she explained. Although baptized at St. Aidan's Anglican Church at Queen and Silver Birch, she and her parents were attracted to the many activities offered at Kew Beach United Church (now Beach United Church) on Wineva just north of Queen. "The people at Kew Beach were having a lot more fun," she said, so, the family changed churches.

They became active members of the choir and attended numerous dances and other social events. "It changed my parents' lives. They had a wonderful time." Dorothy remembered running up the street in her choir gown to sing in the choir.

She also recalled particularly long lineups at Kew Beach United for the second and third services on special Sundays, such as Easter. People would line up all the way along Queen Street to get in. "Bellefair United Church was also a going concern," she said.

As far as treats and other entertainment were concerned, the Beach was never lacking. Nova Fish and Chips, on the south side of Queen Street, between Leuty and Wineva Avenues, had the best fish and chips and was the ideal spot to go after skating at the rink at Kew Beach.

“You could see a movie at the Fox Theatre for 20 cents,” Dorothy explained. Another five cents would buy you a chocolate bar. People initially balked at a price hike of just one cent more, however.

The Beach Theatre, located where the Beach Mall currently sits (on the south side of Queen between Waverley and Kenilworth) was another popular spot for movies. “You could see two full movies, a cartoon and a news reel during the war. So, you spent Saturday afternoon at the theatre.”

Remembering the War

While the Second World War didn’t affect her much as a child, Dorothy recalled that many food items were often limited due to rationing. Whenever the word went out that brown sugar or salmon or some other rare commodity was available that day at the local Dominion store (then near the northwest corner of Queen Street and Hammersmith Avenue), her mother would send her there to buy them.

At the start of the war, Dorothy’s father, a British army veteran and a textile merchant, wanted to enlist, but her mother intervened and he served as an air raid warden for the area instead. He was responsible for patrolling the neighbourhood, making sure that all blinds and curtains were closed, so that no interior lights were visible from outside.

Dorothy also recalled Victory Bond drives at school, and helping to make ditty bags for soldiers. These bags usually contained socks, toiletries and other home comforts, so Dorothy and her friends created little handmade books to add to them. The books included photos of and news about movie stars of the day, such as Rita Hayworth, Barbara Hutton and various others. She would also slip in pieces of gum.

When the war was over, she recalled her teacher opting to write the news out on the blackboard instead of announcing it. “I never forgot that, because she had the opportunity to say, ‘Wow! The war is over!’ And she simply wrote it on the board.”

After graduating from Williamson Road Public School, Dorothy went on to attend Malvern Collegiate Institute.

Post-War Days

After the war, there were plenty of jobs available. “There were good times here in Canada after the war.” As a high school student, she and her friends worked as reserve staff on Saturday

mornings at Eaton's and Simpson's department stores downtown. The stores closed at noon, and it was easy to get to them on the Queen Street streetcar.

She initially met her late husband Don, who grew up on Balsam Avenue, while at Malvern and then again at the Balmy Beach Club, where they enjoyed club dances. After high school, Dorothy and Don attended the University of Toronto where she studied physical and occupational therapy and he studied engineering. They both graduated in 1955 and married in 1956 at Kew Beach United Church.

Dorothy worked as a physiotherapist at the Toronto East General Hospital (now Michael Garron Hospital). She left after the birth of her first child but went back at night to teach pre-natal evening classes to expectant parents – quite a new concept in the 1950s. "It really was before its time," she explained.

House prices at that time were high in the Beach, but with the assistance of a National Housing Act loan (now Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation/CMHC), the young couple were able to afford a home in the then-new community of Don Mills.

"There was nothing much in Don Mills at the time, not many trees, but there were lots of kids, which was nice for my children," she said. Both Dorothy's and Don's parents still lived in the Beach and that helped draw the family back to the area after nine years in the suburbs. In the early 1970s, the couple briefly lived on Fallingbrook, quickly followed by a house on Pine Crescent.

"We liked the area, so we stayed. We didn't feel cloistered here and it worked for us."

Community Work

Both Dorothy and Don were active members in the community. Don served as Chair of the Board of the Ted Reeve Community Arena for 20 years. Dorothy's community involvement kicked off with the Malvern Home and School Association, where she served as president. "Not many high schools had a Home and School Association back then and we had a very thriving one." She and a friend introduced a dance policy to provide proper oversight at school dances. Malvern had wanted to cancel the dances altogether, but Dorothy recognized them as important social events for students to enjoy.

At the time, she was also doing refresher training to return to work as a physiotherapist. However, her career took a different direction when she was asked to run as school trustee for the area, after then school trustee Tom Jacobek vacated the position to run for city councillor in the 1982 municipal election.

Dorothy ran as an independent candidate because she wanted to remain non-partisan. She didn't believe that political party interests were pertinent to the role. Rather, she was interested in supporting policies that were in the best interests of students. As a result, she and her family

fully financed her initial and subsequent campaigns. The whole family, including her three children, all pitched in to prepare and post campaign signs and to help with door-to-door canvassing.

She remained as trustee for 12 years and, as part of that role, she served concurrently as vice-chair of the Toronto Board of Education. “I enjoyed it. It was the most interesting thing I’ve ever done and it was never boring. It was challenging too. We got good stuff done. People were very helpful and I liked dealing with the schools. I liked the teachers.” However, she said she wasn’t prepared for the inevitable political aspects of the job, which she found challenging at times.

During her tenure, she worked with staff to write many policies, including the safe arrival — or attendance verification program — to ensure parents were alerted when their children weren’t in school. “It was about ensuring that they were safe,” she explained.

While the Board wasn’t initially keen on the safe arrival program, it eventually became the norm. She also worked on several drug and alcohol policies. “I was looking at these issues from a mother’s perspective,” she explains. “All of these policies, of course, have changed over the years.”

Her work as a trustee also introduced her to some of the board members of the East Toronto and Beaches Historical Society (now The Beach and East Toronto Historical Society) on issues related to area schools.

After several years as a trustee, Dorothy wanted a break and started a new venture – her own decorating business — Dorothy Ottaway Interiors. Following that, she volunteered for many years at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre with the “Look Good, Feel Better” program, which supported women cancer patients by providing workshops and supplies relating to skin and hair care and makeup.

Other Issues

Dorothy remained active in the community, voicing concern about various issues, including the city’s posting of neighbourhood street signs in 1985 that proclaimed the area as “The Beaches.”

The pluralization concerned many residents. “There was a great controversy about this and we all wrote letters to the *Beach Metro News* strongly opposing the name change.” The campaign worked and the signs were removed.

A local plebiscite was held in 2006 so that local residents could vote for their name preference. The winning result was “The Beach,” and area signs have reflected the preferred name since 2009.

She was also a proponent of getting a new pedestrian bridge installed in 2007 in Glen Stewart Park, connecting Williamson Road to Pine Glen Road. She worked with former local councillor Sandra Bussin to help it come to fruition.

Dorothy remained in her Pine Crescent home for more than 50 years until her death in 2026. She continued to appreciate the neighbourhood, occasionally venturing down to the lake to enjoy the view, along with some ice cream.

“I’ve seen a lot of changes over the years,” she said. “But there is no other place I would rather be.”

Susan Tomkin began her writing career working as a journalist for six years before transitioning to corporate communications with government and then with various not-for-profit organizations for 35 years. She and her family have been Beach residents for 26 years.