# CLIMBING THE HILL TO SEE OVER THE TOP

## WITH SHAWN O'CONNOR, AACI, P. APP

**"EDUCATION IS GREAT, BUT IT CAN ONLY TAKE YOU SO FAR. YOU NEED EXPOSURE TO AND EXPERIENCE WITH EVERYDAY SITUATIONS."**

Shawn O'Connor, AACI, P.App is not your everyday appraiser. Although he spends much of his time in the office at his computer, much like other appraisers across the country, he also plies his professional skills in Ontario's famed Muskoka 'cottage country,' where he regularly uses planes, boats, snowshoes, ATVs, ice-breakers, safety harnesses and other not-so-common tools to get the job done.

"It comes with the territory," says Shawn. 'It can be dangerous work, but I enjoy the challenges and the lifestyle that Muskoka brings."

Through his one-man company – A1 Accurate Appraisal – Shawn has been meeting the real estate appraisal needs of his clients for close to a decade, since earning his AACI designation in 2006. Like the not-so-ordinary demands of his job, the road to his current position has been somewhat unusual as well.

Back in the 1990s, Shawn was on the path to becoming a Chartered Accountant. He had completed his BA (Admin and Comm) at the University of Western Ontario and followed that with two more years completing his Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) at the University of Ottawa. He then returned to his beloved Muskoka, where his entrepreneurial interests resulted in the start-up of a timely web design business. One of his clients was a real estate brokerage, which required considerable onsite work and dialogue that led to his becoming a real estate sales professional and his initial exposure to the world of real estate appraisal.

"I had no idea who appraisers were or what they did in the real estate marketplace," says Shawn.

As it turned out, the Appraisal Institute of Canada (AIC) was transitioning to an educational process that required a business degree or equivalent in order to earn a professional designation. Shawn had the business degree and the interest, so it was a natural fit, although there were some definite challenges.

According to Shawn, "I saw a need for someone to offer a full range of appraisal services in the Muskoka area, however, the region presented limited opportunities to acquire the appraisal knowledge and skills required to provide that service. I knew there was much more I could offer real estate clients and decided I had to move elsewhere to gain the exposure and knowledge that I needed."

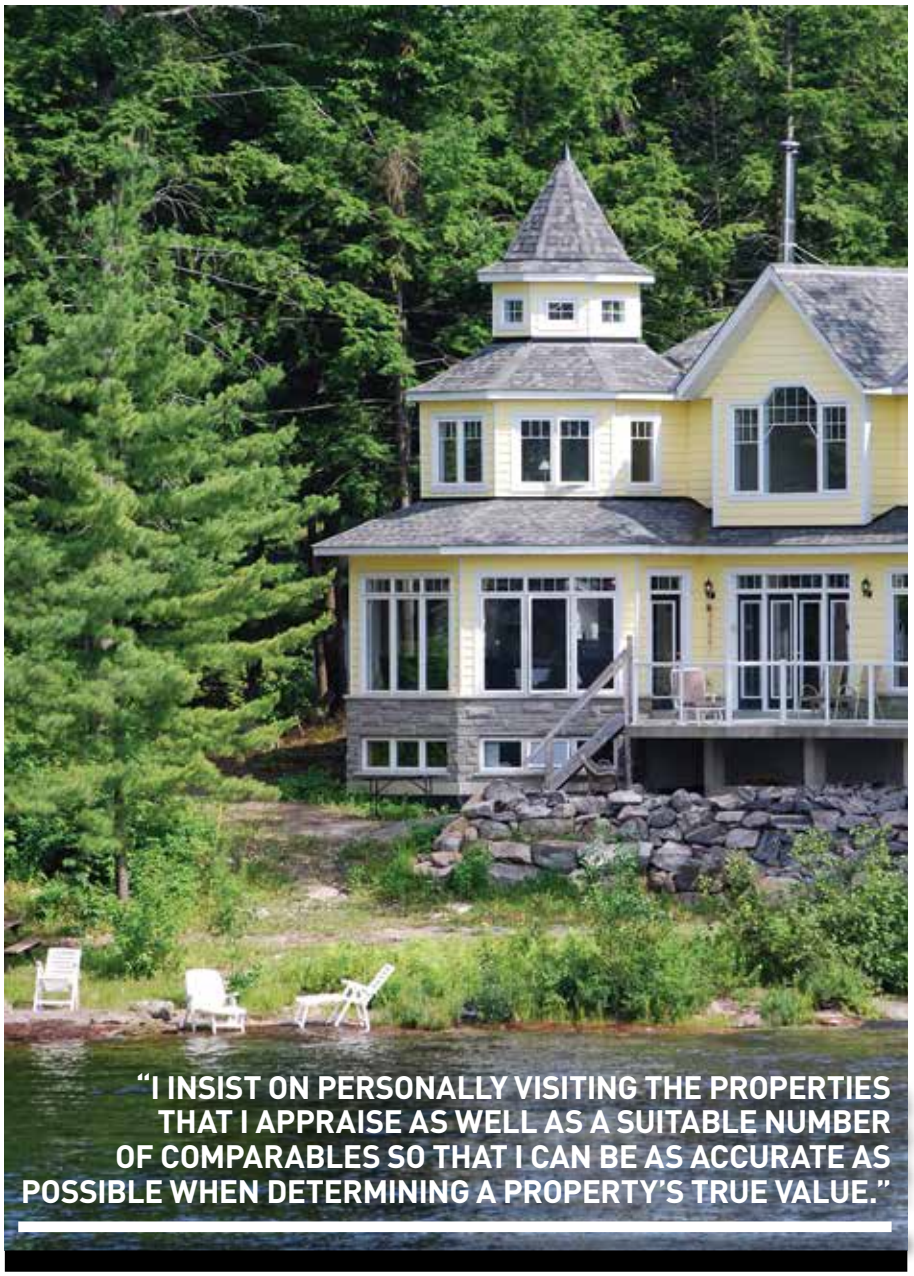
As an AIC Candidate appraiser, Shawn moved to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), eventually settling in Newmarket. "At first, I had my doubts about the type of work some appraisal firms and individuals were doing on a daily basis," he says. "I was not sure if the appraisal profession was right for me and what my business education had prepared me to become."

Fortunately, Shawn found himself at Central Ontario Appraisals, under the guidance of long-time appraiser Rick Christian, AACI, P. App. As a co-owner of an appraisal company that had originally been established in 1977, Rick and his team of professionals provided Shawn with an environment in which he could thrive – a well-managed company with a pool of professionals experienced in a variety of appraisal specialties and more than willing to share their knowledge with an up and comer.

"Gaining real-life experience is critical," says Shawn. "Education is great, but it can only take you so far. You need exposure to and experience with everyday situations. Rick was a wonderful mentor, particularly when it came to teaching me the little things that are so important to ensuring that an appraised value can hold up under review. His emphasis on the logic for defending value in a legal setting has proven invaluable with my business today."

Shawn earned his AACI designation, acquired a great deal of first-hand experience over his four years with Central Ontario Appraisals and even considered an ownership position with the firm because Rick was looking to retire. But ultimately, he adhered to his original plan of returning to Muskoka and beginning his career as a self-employed real estate appraiser. After opening A1 Accurate Appraisal, his initial efforts involved contracting three CRAs and hiring an administrative support team to focus primarily on residential appraisals. At that point in time, there was a high volume of work available through the banks, however, Shawn soon found that it was not sustainable over the longer term.

"The fees paid by the banks were far too low," he says. "In a geographic area like Muskoka, where properties are spread out in remote regions, the low fees could not begin to compensate for all the travel required to visit the properties and to research comparables. The risk and reward was not what it needed to be."




Describing himself as being adverse to risk, Shawn decided that the business and appraisal knowledge he had been accumulating over the years could be put to good use as a sole practitioner offering specialized appraisal services in what was a very unique geographic environment. Today, his thriving business specializes in litigation negotiation and settlement, aggregate resources, divorce and division of assets, and conservation easements. "A great deal of my work is with lawyers," he says, once again emphasizing the importance of Rick Christian's mentoring.

While business is good, Shawn is quick to point out that, being 'cottage country,' it can also be very seasonal, with slower periods in the winter months.

**"WE NOW HAVE TO PICK UP THE PACE IN EDUCATING THE MARKETPLACE ABOUT THE VITAL ROLE APPRAISERS PLAY IN THE VALUATION PROCESS AND WE HAVE TO KEEP PUSHING OURSELVES MUCH MORE AGGRESSIVELY TO GET BETTER AT WHAT WE DO FOR OUR CLIENTS."**

There is also the challenge of getting to some extremely remote locations, made even more difficult during the winter. "I have had to become a wilderness expert and to maintain a certain level of fitness," he says. "From using ice-breaker boats, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and snowshoes, to wilderness guides, airplanes and snowmobiles, I do what I have to do to get the job done."

Getting the job done and done well is a point of pride for Shawn. "I insist on personally visiting the properties that I appraise as well as a suitable number of comparables so that I can be as accurate as possible when determining a property's true value. If I am going to provide a fair but justifiable fee for the work I do, then the value to my clients must be there as well."

As Shawn's business continues to evolve, along with his knowledge and skill-set, he is always looking for ways to enhance that value to clients. In this regard, he is planning to take on review appraisals as a means of staying in touch with what other appraisers are doing and of enhancing his own knowledge. He also maintains an ongoing and open dialogue with lawyers and other clients who provide insight on what services they are looking for and what more can be done to meet their growing needs. He is adamant about staying ahead of the curve.

"The business world is constantly changing," says Shawn. "People want a professional approach and they are looking for appraisers to offer an expanded service and more thorough, comprehensive appraisals. Some of those people are willing to pay for that, while others are not. Under-valuing our service is not something we should be willing to do. It is our job to educate the marketplace as to what appraisers can bring to the table and it is then up to us to make sure we can bring it."

In meeting the ever-increasing challenges in today's marketplace, Shawn believes that the AIC is taking the right approach, although he would like to see the profession's evolution happen at a quicker pace. "Ensuring that prospective appraisers have an educational background in business was definitely the right way to go," he says. "The designation process as a whole is also a good one, with courses that give would-be appraisers a solid knowledge base on which to build. We now have to pick up the pace in educating the marketplace about the vital role appraisers play in the valuation process and we have to keep pushing ourselves much more aggressively to get better at what we do for our clients.

"As I like to say, we have to climb the hill if we want to see over the top."