The Personal Recollections of Lake Lucerne and Forest County in the 1920's

Written by Florence Delight Kuhn Galassini at age 90.

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The following article has been edited and submitted by Norman Henry Tribbett. Mrs. Forence Galassini contributed this article after corresponding with Mr. Tribbett. She adds to the history of the area with her personal memories. She wrote the following after reading the Russ Mallow article from the Pioneer Express, August 17, 1998 and the Social History of Planets, Wisconsin by Verol Tyler and Norman Henry Tribbett.

The abstract for our forty acres lists many previous land owners. But no one mentioned the Indians. The first date is 1888 for the Chicago, St. Paul and Fond du Lac Railway Co. and later the Chicago and Northwestern Railway Co. August and Ilma Uihlein are early owners as are Ida Uihlein Pabst and her husband Fred C. Pabst. Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company was a one-time owner and then the Keith and Hiles Lumber Co., the Page and Landeck Lumber Co., and still later the Menasha Wooden Ware Co. M.D. Keith and his son Harry P. Keith sold the land to us. Ward Wescott was the attorney for the firm, A.E. Germar was secretary. Marie Schenk was office secretary; Tom Schelp was the timber cruiser. The elderly M.D. Keith lived in a handsome white home of New England style. Harry famous for his bow ties and wife Edith Brubaker Keith lived on the shore of Lake Metonga. They had two sons, the elder named Marshall. I remember the large porch, the wall of linen closets, the Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar Allan Poe books they loaned to me, but especially I remember Edith Keith's lemon cream pies.

The Pioneer Express of August 17, 1998 told of the early trail, now Highway 32, traveling westward from Laona past Silver Lake Golf Course as something of a "high society" project for the Northwoods. I remember playing golf there until I got to the third tee which was near a low area where frogs were plentiful. I took out the golf balls and tees in order to put my green captives in the pocket on the golf bag and drove back to Lucerne to go fishing.

State Highway 32 was gravel and repaired checkerboard fashion with right side new soft gravel opposite a patch of old road with firm but rutted gravel. There were poles marking the new areas, but no barricades so you wove back and forth. I once zigged when I should have zagged and was mired in soft sandy gravel. No car in sight, of course. Out from the woods came two old cars crowded with Indian men, women and children. They pushed and pulled to extract the Plymouth, then advised me to drive around Silver Lake. I didn't know where the road came in or where it went so they told me to follow their one car. At a high rate of speed we drove a narrow road through the woods on hills and turns. I kept wondering where they were leading us, but evidently this was the Potawatomi Trail. We came out south of Laona to meet the other car with the children. In the Conner Store we ordered ice cream cones

all around. Whenever, we went to Laona that summer we met some of the family and again ordered ice cream cones. Even the next year we met some of the children and shared ice cream cones.

You mentioned "Rat Lake Block" and later referred to Wabikon Lake. The Indian name was Wabikon meaning muskrat. Early people translated that to Rat and the Lake was commonly called that. Because the name has an unpleasant association, I wrote the official map makers in Madison telling them that the name was unpleasant and incorrect. I was happy to see sometime later the lake was labeled Wabikon.

Sugarbush Hill was the name given to the highest hilltop, 1951 feet above sea level. A fire tower was built there and during the 1980's when forest fires ravished the Northwoods. My dad, a friend of his, and I climbed that tower. It was more like a farmers' windmill structure with metal strips crisscrossed and creaking. The rickety metal ladder reached a center trap door to a five foot wooden platform out in space. There was a wire around it about three feet up to keep you from being blown off. The Ranger showed us the telescope and area plat and we inspected the paperbacks he had carefully wound with wire. The fire worried visitors were not impressed with the security and permanence of that fire tower and sure enough the tower fell over the following winter.

I often wondered why a maple woods, where sap was gathered for making sugar was called a "bush". Why not a tree? Later, I understood that bush meant a wooded area where the Native Americans tapped the maple trees and boiled the sap to make maple syrup.

And how did we first get acquainted with this region. The Chicago Tribune had stories about various vacation spots including one source of their pulpwood, Laona, Wisconsin. The Tribune told of the Gordon Hotel, which had "rooms with bath". That sounded good to Dr. and Mrs. Kuhn and their longtime camping pals Wilbur and Ida Comstock. Since 1907 they had taken trains to jumping off spots, then traveled by horse drawn wagons to remote lakes for the joy of catching fish and living in the natural world. When cars became more common, they packed fishing gear and tents into open touring cars and headed for the rutted roads of the less traveled area. They pitched their tents and prepared food over an open fire. Sometimes, they found a farm family who would rent them a room for the night. There were no tourists and no tourist accommodations. But, here in the company town of the Connor Lumber Company was a hotel for its employees and company visitors. "Rooms with Bath" were heaven sent. Visitors found there was one bathroom for the entire hotel.

The three-story Gordon Hotel was on the corner. The dining room was large, cheerful with healthy plants growing on the wide windows sills. Four chairs surrounded each square table. The tall-backed chairs had a cloth cover, like a pillow case tied at the bottom with a bow. The colors coral, blue, aqua, and yellow made the room colorful. The snow white tablecloth and proper placement of silver gave a gracious touch in cut-over country. The food was always very good. Years later my cousin, Evelyn Peterson, met an auditor who traveled the Midwest to help companies with books and insurance inventory. Oh yes, he went to the Gordon Hotel. Every year the Hotel's inventory included "Deer head mounted on wall. One glass eye missing." In later years we often enjoyed the meals, shopped in the wonderful Connor store, saw a movie, and drove back to the cabin on black, deserted roads where pairs of shining deer eyes were watching us. From Laona my parents drove past Silver Lake, Lake Wabikon, then downhill from Sugarbush Hill to the forested shores of a lake in an alpine setting.

"The cathedral forests of the Master Artist, the true home of man….the isle-studded lake and trout streams, endless enchantment of the forest paths, deep glades under vaulted trees, real woods, unprofaned by commercialism, nature's temple screened and shielded from the rumble of a ruthless world." These phrases, author unknown, were printed in a real estate brochure called Asinigkagemag, the Indian name for Stoney Lake. The brochure was published by the Per Ola Land Company of Crandon, Wisconsin. Home sites could be purchased and in 1921 we did the same. We bought forty acres on the east shore two and one half miles from the head of the lake, the lake that "glitters in the dancing sunlight."

It took three years to build our cabin. Will Peters and Pankratz sawed the hemlock logs in two halves, for the full length of the logs was in some cases 40 feet long. This was hard work. One man stood on top of a wooden horse, while the other man, the younger one, stood below pulling the saw down and getting sawdust in his eyes. The two-handed saw followed a charcoal line that was made by snapping a cord the length of the log. The cord was smeared with charcoal and the sawyers hewed the line. Each log was cut and measured and numbered with a German style numbers, 5', 7', and laid out on the ground out from the wall, where it was being constructed. All of this work was done by man strength alone. No machinery was involved. The half logs were assembled to make a smooth flat interior wall as the curved bark side was to the outside. Into every two and one half feet of the lower log a hole was drilled and a dowel pin or ironwood was cut and fitted. The upper log was drilled with a corresponding hole to fit the pin. Detailed measurements, frequent fitting, lifting the heavy lot off and on again took time, patience and strength. Two men did this and it took three years. The inside was a smooth tight fitting wall. The logs fitted so tightly that in most places you couldn't push a silver table knife blade between them. In other places a sliver of light could shine through so a rope of plumber's oakum was tapped between the logs with a cole chisel and hand-made mallet. Because the logs lay out on the ground for the three years of construction the smooth half weathered. One winter Will Peters planed the walls. These walls were twelve feet high, sixteen beams were across the living room, each beam was twelve inches square. Only the bedrooms were covered by the attic floor so that the living dining area had a high cathedral ceiling. There were three bedrooms, plus the loft room, kitchen and back hall. Ten windows across the front plus two on each side looked into the trees. A cut stone granite fireplace was built by Mr. Ness. The fireplace was designed by Dr. Kuhn and won first prize in the state of Wisconsin.

For ten years we had no road so that all flooring, screens, furniture, bedding, and dishes were brought by boat two and one-half miles from the head of the lake. Halfway down the east shore of Lake Lucerne, the Bonnis had a cottage so we waved often. There was a brown frame building belonging to Dr. Ovitz of Laona. Rube and Verna Johnson occupied the building several summers and were our good and valued friends. Verna was a nurse in Laona. On the site now, is an all-year home built by Mr. and Mrs. Davison of Tree Farming fame. Before their arrival the town road ended at that point. Road construction extended the route. A slab lean-to shelter was a barn for the horses that built the road. It fell apart but broken logging chains and discarded horse shoes could be found there years later. Spilled oats grew abundantly in that area. The summer mail route ended at our mail box where I met the mail car each morning to give and receive letters, our only contact with the outside world. Mr. Lemke, the

mailman, explained the working of the summer service of the United States Post Office. The town road was a good gravel road but then one spring we found mud holes that took skilled maneuvering. Each rainstorm was a problem. The next year it was no better and the third year it was disastrous. We asked what happened to our road and finally someone let us in on the fact that the federally financed steel culverts had been stolen. Some people, it seemed, needed culverts on their private roads and took them. Later the town or county installed new culverts so our road became passable again.

On the west shore of the south end of Lake Lucerne was Windfield's farm with a rooster and a barking dog and a whippoorwill. Opposite from our home was the Radiola Resort. The resort was a small collection of housekeeping cottages with boats and motors. The combination of wind-up phonograph and battery radio was called a Radiola. This high tech equipment was the ultra in communications in 1920. The owners were Will Knott and Mary Knott. Her brother was Bob Whitehead, a guide who knew the best fishing spots.

Colonel Himes owned the Crandon lumber yard and had a home on the west shore of Lake Lucerne. Later he built a larger home at Three Lakes. There was an organization of property owners and we had annual picnics on the largest island Mark Anthony. (Cleopatra and Sugar Loaf were next in size.)

We drove 320 miles from the west side of Chicago to the cabin many times each year enjoying the change of seasons and different hours of the day and night. At first it required two days and we stayed over at the Hotel Retlaw in Fond du Lac. Railroads and highways connected the main streets of the towns in those days. Now the highways are routed around the towns. On one Fourth of July journey we could observe and be delayed by three or four town parades. And I can remember certain towns very well as those were where the car broke down. In Bonduel we had a hot box on the four wheel trailer. In Germantown we had a blacksmith make a leaf spring. Buicks and Studebakers required parts to be shipped from Detroit or South Bend, which pretty well cut into your vacation time. I used to think it would be advantageous to buy two identical cars at one time. You would drive one and tow one. In that way you would have a complete set of parts with you.

Wisconsin highways were always well marked but the gravel roads in the spring of the year were something of a horror story. Memorial Day was the very earliest we could possibly drive there and then the frost was coming out of the ground. Some highways had two planks for your wheels. The problem arose if you met an oncoming car or whenever you slipped off the plank. You didn't meet many oncoming cars because most people were not out driving. Many people put their cars up on blocks for the winter. Some highways laid slabs of logs across the road giving you a washboard effect. One time on Forest County K on top of the hill just before it met Route 55, we got mired. No planks of slabs there and the soft moist earth like kneaded dough locked the wheels tight so that movement was impossible. After a long wait and some despair, a man suddenly appeared with a team of horses. How fortunate that he had a team hitched up to plow the fields. No plowing, of course. He and the horses stayed in the brush waiting for their customers.

We often drove Route 32 and that had many hills created by the melting glaciers. Up and down, turn, up and down again, repeat and repeat. It was better than any carnival ride and had the same effect on your stomach. We dearly loved Route 55. Shawano had one stop sign and then it was 70 miles of

heaven through the Menominee Indian Reservation to Forest County. The road wound its way between magnificent pines. There were center strips of forest where the road divided. But this beauty and soul food was scorned by the speeders who regularly collided with pine trees that didn't budge an inch. Of course, the trees had to go. We also loved the meadows of Indian Paint Brush and Blue Bonnets and other beautiful works of the Creator. We liked to tarry along the Wolf River where on the first day of trout season you saw men with hip boots and fly rods. Don't get a toothache on opening day, all the dentists are out fishing. We always stopped at Keshena Falls and walked on the huge rounded granite boulders; the same rounded granite boulders that the glaciers gave to Maine and to Sweden. We passed Otter Slide and John Barleycorn's home and Burnt Shanty Rapids. In the Rez we often stopped at the Nomad's, a little log shop where Indian crafts were for sale. In 1942 I stopped to see what necklaces were available. "We don't have any beadwork," the Nomad said. "Why?" Can't get the beads. The beads come from Czechoslovakia and there's a war on." In 1975 in Kenya, Africa, I found the beads for their native craft work also came from Czechoslovakia.

Part of Route 55 was a military road built during the Civil War. We often stopped at a granite rock alongside the highway that was symbolic of the Menominee Tribe. The Natives believed when it would be totally disintegrated at some future date, the tribe also would be no more. We drove past Mole Lake to catch a glimpse of the wild rice growing in the water. Now there is a big casino there. We made a wide right turn and always looked for the eagle's nest. As we neared Crandon there was a high bank of trillium on the right and then at the intersection of routes 55 and 32 came the sign reading, STOP!

I have many memories of Crandon, the stores, the merchants, the library, the lovely white framed Inn furnished with antique furniture, the telephone exchange, the bank, the wonderfully rich Wisconsin ice cream served at the soda fountain in Hanson's Drug Store. I was in the hardware store (Luterman & Schmutzer) that faced the Court House square when a woman customer asked to purchase an article. The young clerk pulled the tall ladder with its trolley wheels on top from a far part of the store and rapidly climbed the ladder. He was halfway down with the object when the woman's cracked voice rang out, "I said BREAD pan, not BED pan."

We lived simply with Nature. No imported electricity or plumbing or disturbing radio noise. We had a small portable radio in later years but all we ever got was Waterloo, Iowa.

Many were the stories told around the fireplace of earlier Northwoods trips. Stories of Hayward and Watersmeet and Lac cu Flambeau and Clam Lake, of Phelps and Sayner and Ladysmith and Minong and the Manitowish Waters and of the Muskie and then the never to be forgotten skunk at Lac Vieux Desert who walked between the bonfire and people to eat the breakfast eggs right out of a paper sack. These were old favorite stories of vacations taken before I was born. Photos of Indians and their arched homes covered with birch bark, of lumber camps where the cook and the dog maintained order, of a simple wind-up phonograph and the frequently-played record of "Herd Girls' Dream."

And this reminisce will wind down with the story of my mother, Alma Kuhn, and her close friend Ida Comstock walking on the ridge alongside Lake Lucerne toward Sunset Point. A full view of the western setting sun was enjoyed each evening. They returned from the Point to find on the path they had walked over a few minutes before a live breathing fish. It was graceful, slim with a

herring-like tail. They picked it up and brought it back to their men folk. "You're out there fishing all morning long and we pick up the fish on dry land. There are so many fish in the Lake; they jump up on the path to get away from the crowds." My dad spotted tiny holes in the fish's back and concluded they were made by the talons of a fish hawk or eagle that dropped the fish when surprised by the sight of people. He knew it was a cisco and no one knew they were in the lake as they stay deep enough for lake trout. In the fall of the year the ciscos spawn and they can easily be dipped up. The priest from Crandon used his black hat.

And the final tale concerns a black 45 RPM phonograph record that my chum and I had placed on the seat of a chair. A guest sat there uncomfortable with the crackling he created every time he moved. Fearful of destroying the furniture, he sat straight and staring. Peggy Terrace and I, giggling kids, knew the record was cracking up and we were guilty, but could not explain what happened. We could only dissolve into gales of laughter. The name of the record? A singing rendition of "Bye Bye Blackbird." So it was Bye-Bye for the phonograph record and it is Bye-Bye for these reminisce.