

MY HISTORY OF THE THREE LAKES AREA by Larry Oakes

In the summer of 1941, a few short months before Pearl Harbor, my parents, Larry (Sr.) and Hilda Oakes decided to look for a cabin to buy. They saw an ad in the Duluth paper for lots for sale at Three Lakes, advertised by a realtor named R. A. Anderson who had offices in the old Lyceum Building in Duluth.

They drove up there from our home in Proctor and met Mr. Anderson who had a small 2-bedroom cabin on the corner of the Shaw Road and Pomander Walk, which is the road that runs down to the channel between Lakes Dodo & Elora. This little cabin was built in about 1933 as a real estate office by Anderson so he could be on site on weekends to show and sell lots which he owned on the south side of Lake Elora and also along Crescent Ave. & Elm Lane which bordered the south side of Lake Dodo. My parents found that Anderson had sold most of the lots, most of which already had cabins on them. However, to make a sale he offered them the real estate office, fully furnished and to make the sale it would include part of a large triangle lot with enough frontage on Lake Elora for lake access. He wouldn't sell the whole lot as he claimed he was saving it for his daughter. The sale of the office included the lot that it was sitting on, but not the whole circle of land bordered by the Shaw Road and Elm Lane, which was already owned by Carl Warner, who had a cabin on Lake Dodo.

My parents made a deal on the cabin/office and small lot for what I am sure was a small sum as I remember going with my mother to Anderson's office to make the monthly payments, which I remember being something like \$17.00 per month. I was born in 1936 so I was 4 years old and my sister Audrey was 9 years older which would have made her 14 years old at the time.

My father, with the help of my mother's brother set to clearing a road down to the shore of Lake Elora and my parents put in a dock and bought a new 16 foot Shell Lake cedar-strip boat with a 2 horsepower Evinrude motor from a fellow named Peter Chapik, who had a marine sales on Central Ave. in West Duluth. There were a lot of large popple trees to cut by hand to make the road to the lake ( this was in pre-chainsaw days) and many brush piles to burn, which my Dad did as soon as the snow fell that fall. An interesting side note is one of my earliest memories as a child. In early December of that year, my Dad went up to the lake to burn some brush piles and when he came home that Sunday night the news was on the radio about the bombing of Pearl Harbor, so it must have been December 7<sup>th</sup>. I remember him telling me to be quiet, as he had his ear glued to our little wood-cased radio probably listening to President Roosevelt announcing we were going to war.

During the next four years, while the war was going on, we spent most spring, summer and fall weekends at the lake. Sometime during this period, Mr. Anderson decided he would sell the remainder of the large lot to my parents. This gave us a buildable lot with now about 100 feet of lake frontage. Some time around 1945 or 1946 my parents decided to build a larger, better cabin near the lake and my Mother sketched out the cabin she wanted. We started doing it piecemeal, as building materials were in short supply during the war. We built the footings, sills and sub-floor one fall and didn't start the upper structure until the following summer.

My Mother's bachelor brother, Fred, who lived in Hibbing and was a talented craftsman, helped my Father on a lot of the construction. My sister graduated from Proctor H.S. in 1946 and sometime afterward my parents got the idea to move to the lake on a year-round basis. Over the next two years,

as the new cabin was more completed they decided to sell our home in Proctor and make the move to the lake. In June of 1948, when I was almost 12 years old and my sister was married we made the move, living in the small cabin while finishing the new one.

I think part of the impetus was the Gust Holmgren family, who had moved to Lake Dodo, some years before and were close neighbors. Gust was an electrical machinist and commuted the 35 miles to Duluth and had been doing it for about 6 or 8 years. My father's work as a Fire Inspector for the DM&IR railroad required him to travel from Duluth to all over the Iron Range, so living at the lake was a central location to his work. Holmgrens were the only family living year-around on all of the Three Lakes, so our family was the second one to do so.

Moving to the lake was quite a culture shock. There was an outhouse, outside well pump, no phones, no electricity, no mail service and no other neighbors, except Holmgrens, within 3 or 4 miles. Ole & Agnes Roberg had the Three Lakes Inn and John Swanson and family had the huge farm on the Three Lakes Road. John homesteaded there in 1905, starting with a small cabin on the south edge of the road (which was still there for many years).. I think it may still be there. He had a nice large farm house, many outbuildings and a large red barn and about at least a forty acre cleared field. He was a Swedish immigrant and was quite a storyteller. He sold milk and eggs and produce to the cabin folk and traveled back to Sweden on a couple trips, the last one bringing back a Swedish bride after his first wife had passed away. On a sad note, sometime around 1955, John was killed in a tractor accident on the farm. Holmgrens had a Kohler light-plant for electricity and would drive to Shaw at 9 P.M. at night when the DW&P Railroad passenger train dropped off the mail sack and all the locals met at Charlie Roberg's Store & Post Office to pick up their mail.

We finished off the new cabin with materials from Heimbach Lumber Co. in Duluth (half-log siding and knotty pine board paneling) milled by their Duluth mill. We installed wiring in anticipation of someday getting Rural Electrification and with Gust Holmgren's help & installation work, purchased a 1500 watt Onan Light Plant, made in Minneapolis. Because an electric iron required 1,000 watts, my mother could only iron clothes in the daytime and only with no more than one or two light bulbs going. For the first year or two we heated with wood parlor stove and augmented by a wood-burning cook stove. My Dad acquired a retired railroad speeder engine (one lugger-8-13 H.P.) which we hooked up to a 32 inch buzz saw and would that thing go through a stack of logs in a hurry. We later got a Duo-Therm oil burning parlor heater and after the REA was brought in, in 1951, an electric range and a small freezer.

With no regular electricity, my Dad built an icehouse near the lakeshore out of heavy railroad crossing planks and each winter we made a supply of ice for the rest of the year. He hired Howard Morris from Cotton, who had the Belmont Rug Works, just south of the old Roosevelt Tavern on Hwy. 53. Howard, who was Lorraine Hage's dad, had a homemade ice sawrig and would hire out to cut the ice and they would put up enough ice to last the following year. Covered with sawdust it was just as good in August as it was put up in the previous winter. Ole Roberg did the same on Lake Dodo every winter and sold ice to the cabin people all year. After later getting electricity, the icehouse became a storage shed.

About 1951, Northern Electric Co-op (REA) from Virginia started running a high-line in from Hwy. 53 to service the Three Lakes area. They got as far as about the Lake Dodo access and supposedly ran out of funds to finish cutting out the right-of-way any further. My Dad and some of the neighbors marshalled a group and cut the rest of the right-of-way by hand, about a mile, using axes and Swede saws. So by that fall, we finally got electricity and no longer had to rely on light plants for power. We then had a

yard light and unlimited use and about 1953 got our first T.V. (with a tall moveable antenna on the roof) which had to be turned to get WCCO from Mpls.(albeit with a lot of "snow") I think we had one or two Duluth channels also.

When I started 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Cotton school in the fall of 1948, Oscar Lorentson was our bus driver for the first two years. The route put me as the first one on in the morning and the last one off at night, riding 32 miles one way to school, even though I lived only 9 miles from Cotton. We went to Shaw, Long Lake, Whiteface and to Cotton and reversed the route at night. Over the next five years until I graduated, we had Bud Mayer and Frank Preston as drivers. One time, near Long Lake, a County dump truck roared up out of a gravel pit and the bus T-boned the loaded dump truck so hard, it rolled the dump truck over on its side. The bus suffered severe damage, but other than some bloody noses, none of the kids were hurt very bad. The bus driver was not at fault as the truck didn't stop before entering the road. Just one of many experiences, including spring washouts and bad snowstorms riding the bus in those days. The John Patzer family lived in a logging camp about 5 or 6 miles east of Shaw on the Stroud Rd., toward Hwy. #4. They had eight kids and the County paid them to deliver the kids to the Shaw corner to meet the school bus. John was a logger and sometimes all the kids piled on the back of John's logging truck for the ride home, as he hauled pulpwood to Cloquet on a regular basis.

There was another "feeder" bus route transporting kids from the Comstock Lake area, east of Whiteface. Our bus met them at the corner of the Shaw Road and they transferred them to our bus. Also, apparently it was an old custom for the bus driver to make about a ten minute stop every night at the Shaw Store to allow the remaining kids on the bus to run in to buy candy, which continued all the years I was in school but probably not on the schedule, but the bus drivers did it out of sympathy for the kids on this long ride.

In those days you could get a driver's license at age fifteen. When I got my license I bought a Model A Ford coupe for \$49.50 so from then on I drove to school most days. The owner advertised the car for \$45.00 but upped the price to \$49.50 because he had just filled the tank with \$4.50 worth of gas. That car started a love affair with Model A Fords. As of last count I subsequently have owned twelve more over the years. I sold my last one about two years ago.

A story of the Three Lakes would not be complete without mentioning the French Club, located on the far end of Lake Elora. That club was started in about 1923 by parishoners from the St. Jean Catholic Church in Duluth, apparently formed as a naturalization club to assist immigrants to obtain their citizenship. When I was a kid, I had a motor scooter and would ride up there to buy pop and candy from old Joe Burdage, the caretaker, who had a small confectionary counter there. Joe helped our neighbors cut the powerline in, also, to help get electricity to that side of the lake. There were many cabin owners of Catholic faith in that area, probably lured there as cabin owners because the French Club conducted Saturday night Mass in the summer months at the Club. Priests would come up from Duluth to conduct the Mass. I recall, one was a Father Pilon, who had a bachelor brother they called Shorty Pilon, who stayed at the Club in the summer as a sort of helper to the caretaker.

The nuns from The Order of St. Benedict in Duluth had a cabin a few doors away from the French Club. They had a tent built over the water by their dock so they could swim in privacy. We kids thought this was weird and would make jokes about it. In the winter we would hike to the French Club and ski & slide down the long hill in front of the clubhouse as that was the only hill of any kind in the area. A local "character" of that era was Clarence Johnson, who, with his bachelor brother Bill, owned an old family

cabin, about a quarter mile before the French Club. Clarence was quite hunch-backed from an accident in his youth and sometimes worked as a mechanic but mostly hung out at the French Club to drink beer (the Club had a 3.2 license, apparently) and visit with Joe the caretaker. He was known as "All Shot" Johnson, as that was his favorite saying when something was beyond his expertise. He was kind of a fixture at the Club and everyone liked him as he was very friendly and outgoing and loved to tease the kids.

While on the memory of "characters", I must not forget Charlie Mehrman who owned an elaborate property, fronting on the Shaw Road, two doors from our place. Charlie was a plumber who owned Atlas Plumbing in Duluth but was semi-retired and spent a lot of time at his cabin. He built an elaborate fence around his property, made of welded angle iron with old steel hot water tanks for fence posts. On top of each tank was the old style metal toilet tank float on the arm. Between the posts were real wagon wheels, which back in the day were probably pretty easy to find. These were the high, narrow kind from buggies of the horse era. All of this was painted silver and red accents so if you told someone you lived by the wagon wheel fence, they were familiar with the spot. His place was full of homemade gadgets but tastefully done. Sometime after WWII, he acquired one of the two original "Incline" cars from the railway that ran up the hill around 6<sup>th</sup> Ave. West in Duluth. These cars ran up a steep track with one car counterbalancing the other much like cable cars in San Francisco. This was dismantled in about 1939 and the cars, which looked like short fat streetcars must have ended up in a scrap yard. Anyway, Charlie acquired one and somehow hauled it up to Lake Elora and built a cinder block garage right on the lakeshore and mounted the rail car on top of it as a huge observation deck as it was all windows. Try doing something like that now. Thank gosh for zoning laws!

Sometime in the mid-fifties, Carl Warner, who owned the rest of the outlot between the Shaw Road and Elm Lane, passed away and my Parents were able to buy this land from his estate. In August 1962, My Dad suffered a coronary while helping Gust Holmgren with a repair on his well. He passed away a few days later at age 61, less than a year before his planned retirement date. My mother never drove a car, so she moved to Hibbing to keep house for her bachelor brother. My wife Carol & I continued to maintain the place and my mother would spend summers there as she was able to do things with her neighboring friends and we spent weekends with her, cutting grass, etc. while our kids practically lived in the lake. After we moved to Cass Lake in 1968, it became more difficult to keep up this routine, so we sold the main cabin to relatives of our neighbors, the Russ Johnsons, who owned Johnson Furniture in Duluth's West End. We kept the little cabin and outlots until about 1975, when we sold that to my close friend Marty Larsen, who owned an insurance agency in Duluth. I continued to visit once in a while during hunting seasons when they were using it.

During the forties and fifties it was unusual to see large boats with big outboard motors on the lakes. The Alworth's on their estate on Lake Dodo had an old inboard runabout which was the largest and probably the fastest boat on the Three Lakes. It was an old Dodge runabout, about a 1928 model with a 4 cylinder inboard. Us kids thought it was really something and when they started it up, you could hear it all over the lake. We would come running just to see it go around the lake. Also, Vic Filiatrault who had an old family cabin on Lake Dodo, next door to Alworths had a boat with about a ten or twenty horse motor and was quite fast compared to most any of the boats on the lakes. Most people has 12 or 14 ft. rowboats with 2 to 5 H.P. motors or none at all and just rowed around. My Dad who was considered one of the best fishermen on Lake Elora seldom used a motor, thinking it scared the fish. He was a plug-

casting bass fisherman, long before it became the vogue that it is today. He carved a lot of his own plugs which he called "Poppers" ,weighting them with lead and shaping them just right.

When I was about 14 or 15 years old I started working for the Alworth family at their Lake Dodo estate. I worked there off and on for about three summers as a sort of caretaker's helper. Mostly cutting grass, raking leaves and any odd jobs necessary. I had to sweep all the sidewalks and stairs every morning. One spring, before anyone was in residence, I was asked to paint the huge wooden dock that sat on about six large sawhorse supports to have it ready to be installed. I was given keys to the front gate and the whole place and worked by myself, after school and weekends, using many gallons of marine enamel. I guess those were the days when you could trust young people. Later when Mr. Alworth and some other investors built a huge parking ramp at Michigan St. & 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. West in Duluth and I was starting college, he contacted me, offering me a job there and I was on the payroll the day it opened in the summer of 1956. I worked there part time during some of my years at U.M.D.

Because of my family background with the D.M.& I.R. railroad, in my later years I have become a fan of the old steam locomotives used on the "Missabe", especially the huge "Malleys" as they were affectionately called by the railroad men. I have put together a presentation on these engines, complete with a DVD and have presented it at our local "Depot Days" here in Bemidji and also at Cotton to the Wednesday Seniors group. A Three Lakes memory I have of these large ore-hauling engines is as a small child I can remember the faint rather steamboat sound of their whistles as they whistled for the road crossings, probably around Paine along Hwy. #7, at night, as I lay in bed in the summer with the windows open in the old cabin. Cross country, this must be a distance of about 8 miles. During the war years, these engines "won the war" as they hauled the lion's share of the ore which built the ships, tanks & planes for the war effort. They regularly pulled 180 loaded 100- ton ore cars., a total of 18000 tons of weight, between the Iron Range and the Proctor sorting yards.

These are some of my remeberances of my days growing up at Three Lakes in the '40 s and '50 s. A simpler time but one I wouldn't trade for anything.

Larry Oakes

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