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## GROWING UP AT ALDER LAKE

by Ella (Loveless) Kassien as told to Sandy Engel

My parents lived during an age of wolves and logging camps. They were young when Wisconsin was young. They saw the forests still uncut, the lakes still unspoiled. They knew a world now gone, a world where I grew up, a world we called Alder Lake.

When my dad, Robert Franklin Loveless, was born the whole country celebrated: It was the Fourth of July 1872. He grew up in Balsam Lake, a town in northwestern Wisconsin. His parents came from Ohio: his father was a blacksmith; his mother, a housewife. They married at the end of the Civil War and had four boys and four girls. Dad was their fourth child.

### Getting Settled

In Balsam Lake, Dad finished three grades in public school. Growing up around the blacksmith shop, he became handy with tools. He also learned to hunt and fish. When he left home in 1891, still a teenager, Dad was ready for

adventure. He stopped first in the nearby Village of Turtle Lake and then moved 155 miles east to Woodruff, a rough and tumble whistle stop formed three years earlier.

He first became a hunter. He shot or trapped fox, mink, otter, beaver, muskrat, bobcat, and black bear. He earned bounty money by killing wolf and coyote. The hides he sold became hats, coats, and scarves. In one year, Dad earned over \$1,000: more than enough cash to buy 40 acres of land in 1898. Yet he wasn't ready to settle down.

Dad became friends with a Chippewa family on the nearby Lac du Flambeau Indian Reservation. He farmed and harvested with the Indians. They taught him what to plant, what to pick, what to dig. They helped him tap maple trees in early spring, harvest wild rice in late summer, track game in winter snow.

"Follow that owl and you'll find deer," his friend said. Sure enough, the owl led Dad to a winter yard—a grove of stout pines—with white-tailed deer huddled under snowclad boughs.

After a few years, Bob Loveless became a well-known fishing guide. His clients came to Woodruff by train and then to area resorts by horse-and-buggy. One of his regular clients was Marvin Hughitt Jr., whose father headed the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. Dad also guided for Richard and Ella Southgate, former owners of the Congress Hotel in downtown Chicago.

The forests during the 1890s still had virgin timber. The hemlocks, white pines, and balsam firs stood straight and tall like giants' legs.

"The woods then were so thick," Dad would say, "you couldn't see the sky." But loggers were about and soon those giants' legs would topple.

"A logger's life was hard," Dad once mused, "and you had to get along." Poles, Germans, Russians, and Scandinavians filled the logging camps. Few cared who you were. When Dad went to work for John Nichols and Ervin Frissell, he was assigned to help the cook—typically the most popular guy in camp. The cook baked a tableful of pies that first day. He then gave Dad a club. "The first one who takes a pie," the cook said, "you clobber 'im."

One winter day, Dad and some loggers rode into Woodruff to buy meat for the camp. Meat in those days was shipped north by rail. So, the men found a butcher and loaded quarter cuts of beef on a sledge. Once out of town, the men spotted wolves trailing them. After a few miles, their sledge was surrounded by the pack, forcing the men to throw off chunks of meat to get back to camp. "We'll never do that again," Dad concluded.

The money he earned from hunting, fishing, and logging went to buy more land. By 1900, he owned over 80 acres.

Then one day, Dad paddled his birch bark canoe up the Trout River and across South Trout Lake to an island resort. There he met Hulda Swain from Port Edwards, a river town 2 miles from Wisconsin Rapids. They married in August 1903 when Dad was 31 and his bride was 19. Now Dad had a reason to settle down.



## Cabin Life

Dad and Mother first lived in a cabin Dad built on Little Trout Lake, bordering the Indian reservation and today's Powell Marsh. The Southgates owned a summer retreat on the lake. One year, Richard Southgate hired Dad and some men from the reservation to build a boat canal and a plank walkway across two miles of unspoiled marsh. With the lake water held back, the men used horses dragging handled scrapers to scoop out the muck soil. The canal enabled the Southgates to pilot their launch--with a dozen or more guests--to Alder Lake, gateway to many lakes along the Trout and Manitowish Rivers. You can still find the Southgate Canal, or what's left of it, but cranberry bogs now separate the lakes.

My folks kept buying land. By 1908, they owned 91 acres along the east shore of Alder Lake, then part of Flambeau Township and now Manitowish Waters Township. More land was purchased along the lake outlet and a half-mile away along State Trunk Highway 10 that zigzagged between Hurley and Beloit. All of their land, about 250 acres, had been ceded by the Chippewa to the U.S. Government, who surveyed it in 1871.

The land in those days could be reached by river or horseback, though roads at first were scarce. Logging roads soon crisscrossed the state. Highways became "post roads" to shuttle mail. Stagecoach service brought the first summer tourists to northern Wisconsin in the 1880s. Passenger trains arrived from cities, reaching Lac du Flambeau in 1889 and Boulder

Junction in 1903. Soon airplanes would bring mail and passengers. Alder Lake was not so remote after all.

Dad and Mother called their estate Virgin Forest Park, for Alder Lake was rimmed with towering white pines. "The shoreline had never been cut," Dad bragged. The shore was nearly all sand and bordered 275 acres of sparkling water. One could swim out to the dropoff, where the lake bed plunged to 30 feet deep.

The shore around Alder Lake was "tax title land" meant for homesteading. When Dad went to the Eagle River courthouse to buy his first 40 acres, they told him to go back and "prove up on it." So he raked leaves, sowed beans, . . . and went back to the county seat. He paid \$10 per acre. When he wanted more land, he planted "bagies" (rutabagas) to "prove up on it" some more.

My folks built two houses, a sawmill, a dance hall, and six housekeeping cabins at Alder Lake. One house became our home, another was used to feed sawmill workers, and the cabins were rented in summer. They also rented boats and campsites, ran a general store, and built a saloon. Virgin Forest Park seemed more like a village than a resort.

The cabins rented for \$25 per week, including use of a boat. Rarely was a cabin empty in summer. School in those days ended in late May, so the tourist season started a few weeks earlier than now. In two years, my folks earned back what the estate cost.

Each cabin had two bedrooms, a living room, a screened porch, and a tiny kitchen with a wood stove for cooking and heating. Kerosene lamps provided lighting. Guests used an outdoor toilet and pumped their own water. Every

week we cleaned the cabins and furnished bed sheets and pillow cases. The guests brought their own towels. I helped Mother with the wash. My older sister, Leona, swept and washed the floors, until she became ill. A man was then hired to help with cleaning. Although each cabin was meant to bunk six guests, one party of 13 left their cabin a wreck.

Our cabin chores ended when school started in fall. Each weekday, we walked two miles past the Manitowish River to Woodland Drive, crossed the highway, and walked a few more blocks to a white building behind today's Deer Park Lodge. In winter, with snow 20 to 40 inches deep, we skied or snowshoed to school, each carrying lunch in a syrup pail.

On getting to school we huddled around the wood stove with its warm metal jacket, though the room's lofty ceiling hogged the heat. Up to nine kids—from first to eighth grade—met from 9:00 to 4:00 in that one-room school. I went through four teachers in those eight years and can still picture each one reading to the class, writing on the blackboard, scolding a frisky child, and marching us outside for recess. The school yard where we ate lunch, skipped rope, and played ball was itself a school around a school—a place to socialize and learn from other kids. When the school day ended, we hurried back through darkening woods filled with imagined wolves and black bears. Were we glad to get home!



## Milling Around

Virgin Forest Park began to change when Dad built a two-story sawmill at Alder Lake. He hired a half-dozen or so men to cut timber and haul logs on horse-drawn sleds. So huge were the trees that often just one log could fit on a sled. Dad also built a dam across the river outlet of Alder Lake. Lake water held back by the dam formed a "millpond," a cove where booms of chained logs were held for milling.

One by one, the floating logs were hoisted 12 feet on a chain-driven track into the mill, where they slid down a chute to a deck. The logs then moved through the mill on a second track, as first a circular head saw and then smaller chain saws cut the logs into planks. The lumber was then stacked outside the mill until sold. Many old buildings around Boulder Junction, Lac du Flambeau, and Manitowish Waters began at the Loveless mill.

"Stay away from that mill" warned Dad more than once. But the noisy mill became our playground. Leona and I would slide down the track or take our little brother, Lloyd, for "rides" on logs floating in the lake. One day my youngest sister, Dolly, fell off a log and had to be rescued by a neighbor boy, the fall ruining her new dress.

One log--big enough for the three of us to ride--became a boat, after Lloyd scooped out the pulp. One day after school, Lloyd took Leona and me for a ride in his "log boat." He was poling us away from shore when suddenly the lake bottom gave way and Lloyd, leaning on the pole, fell over. He bobbed up at once, and Leona grabbed for him but missed. She shouted for me to

paddle toward him, but all I had for paddles were my hands! Leona grabbed a second time but missed him again. I kept paddling and she kept shouting. On the third try, she caught his hair and pulled him into the boat. Dad never did learn what happened: We had had enough "paddling."

We had other close calls. One day, I took Dolly for a ride in Mother's wash tub. I sat Dolly into the tub a few feet from shore. No sooner had I put one foot in then the tub tipped over, trapping Dolly underneath. Oh, was I scared. As I tried to lift the tub, my feet sank into the sand. I was sure she had drowned. Then I got in a little air and the tub lifted. There was Dolly, sitting up.

Among our "guests" was a Holstein bull, kept in a fenced yard. Did we have fun with that bull! We would taunt the bull, and it would snort at us. We would dart into the pen, and it would chase us over the fence. It even treed Lloyd and Leona. They took the hint and were cautious after that.

### Stomping at the Shore

In May 1924, my parents opened a dance hall at Alder Lake. Known as Park Hall or Virgin Forest Pavilion, the 6,030 square-foot building could hold over 800 people. A generator provided electric lighting. Built with lumber from the Loveless mill, the hall had a 40- by 80-foot dance floor and a band stand with player piano. Flags and 30 deer heads adorned walls paneled in pine, birch, and spruce from the Loveless mill.



My parents rented the hall for wedding and birthday parties. But mostly they held public dances and charged \$1.10 per person, the 10¢ going "to the government." The pavilion had a kitchen to prepare snacks and meals: a cup of coffee and paper plate with sandwich, pickle, and cake cost 25¢. Why coffee? In this decade of Prohibition, coffee was legal though not the only drink. Working in the cloakroom at the hall, I sometimes spied a whiskey flask in a jacket pocket.

This was the age of jazz, of the flapper, of swing. And, so, every Saturday night Dad hired a 7- to 15-piece band. They usually came from Chicago or Milwaukee, though his first band hailed from New York. He even hired an Indian band, complete with tomahawks and feathered skirts. When no band was heard, the player piano--forerunner of the jukebox--belted out popular tunes on a revolving drum of punched sheet music.

Our lake pavilion, like the popular ones at South Trout Lake and nearby Plum Lake, drew teenagers and young adults. They wanted fun and we offered a variety of dances, like the jitterbug and a special "jitney dance" that cost an extra 10¢ per dancer. Some guests would slip out in boats and listen to a George Gershwin tune or a Benny Goodman stomp from across the lake.

Dad, himself, put on a good show. He sometimes wore a cowhide robe or strutted across the dance hall in Indian garb. Having once learned to walk a tightrope, he stretched a wire across the pavilion. But his antics almost killed him: shuffling across the dance floor in a bear hide, head bowed low and body swinging, Dad was about to be shot when someone yelled: "Wait, that's Bob Loveless!"

We had a lot of fun . . . before our house burned in 1928. We moved into one of the cabins for the winter, until Dad built a store along the highway, renamed U.S. Highway 51 in 1927. We lived in the back room and sold milk, bread, candy, and soft drinks in the front hall. When the stock market crashed in October 1929, business slowed and the cabins stood idle. The age of swing became the Great Depression, and people left the north for jobs--and bread lines--in the cities.

The center of family life then shifted away from Alder Lake. In 1932, Dad opened a larger "store" along Highway 51. It became the Howling Dog Saloon when Prohibition ended in December 1933. Ever the clown, Dad kept a caged bear nearby to entertain guests at the saloon. A few years later, he moved the sawmill to Highway 51 and built a house for our family.

Tragedy struck again one snowy January day in 1940. The roof over the empty dance floor collapsed, just missing the kitchen. The dance hall was never rebuilt. Soon the logs thinned out and the mill closed. The Second World War and Korea drew more people away. Years would pass before expressways and prosperity brought these veterans and their families north.

But they came too late for Virgin Forest Park.

In October 1942, at age 70, father died. Mother closed the resort and sold the land in parcels. By then, Dolly and I had married and moved away. (Lloyd and Leona had died in childhood.) Finally, Mother died in December 1949, at age 65. Life at Alder Lake--with its towering white pines and dugout canal, its cabins to clean and logs to ride, its sawmill and dance hall, even its snorting bull and caged bear--came to a howling dog end.