

LaFave descendents: The family's story continues

By Joyce Laabs
of The Lakeland Times

As we were delving into old resorts, we became intrigued with Abe LaFave, a Canadian who arrived in the Northwoods in 1888.

He had worked as a fishing guide for John Mann, who lived on Trout Lake, then for the Chippewa Logging Co. Then he returned to guiding in the Manitowish area, and - in 1892 - opened his Island Lake Resort on an island in the middle of Island Lake. Today, the area is known as Manitowish Waters, at that time it was just Manitowish.

In 1920 the State of Wisconsin took all the islands, but Abe was able to keep his as a squatter. In 1920, he started his mainland resort as he found many tourists were interested in driving to their cabins and wanted more space and freedom to vacation than the island offered.

Abe had homesteaded lots of land on the lake. He would live on it, improve it, and then give it to a member of the family. He was the second white man in the area, Peter Vance was the first. Abe also named two of the area lakes - Dog and Circle Lily.

Abe had two wives. His first wife, Mary Fernette, died in childbirth in 1896, leaving one son, Tom.

His second wife was Sarah Noonan.



Susie Bauer

He and Sarah had six children: Frank, Wilbert, John, Marie, Charles and Olive. Sarah brought three children to the marriage, Patrick, George and Dora.

In 1935, after Sarah died, he turned over the mainland resort to his son, John, (whose memories of growing up at the resort we have published) and his wife Sai.

John attended high school in Portage and business school in Chicago, but returned home to help his father. John, who was very shy, met Sai, when a friend called her and asked her to fill in for a couple of weeks as a waitress. She stayed on after the two weeks, and a year

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Abe and Sarah in front of their home.

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and a half later she and John married.

When they took over the resort they assumed \$19,000 in debt. But, by hard work they managed to pay off the debt, add four cottages (eventually the number grew to 10), and build a new lodge with five rental rooms. They ran the resort until they sold it in 1967. It is now divided into individual private residences.

They had three daughters, Olive, Jean and Susan. Sai died in 1971 and John died in 1973.

Abe had died in 1937, but before his death, he had sold the island to Louis Gensburg - he was a part owner of the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas. He occupied it as a private home until the 1960s. He then sold it, and it has since changed hands a couple of times.

We caught up with two of John and Sai's children (Abe's granddaughters) Olive "Ollie" Johnson, and Susie Bauer. Ollie is the wife of Forrest Johnson, who taught English and Journalism at LUHS for 40 years. Ollie taught business education at LUHS for 15 years. Both retired in 1989.

Susie married Jim Bauer, who taught social studies at LUHS and is now retired. Susie still works as a teacher's aide at North Lakeland Elementary School.

Today, both daughters still live on Island Lake. The town lines of Boulder



Olive Johnson

Junction and Manitowish Waters run through the middle of the lake. Ollie and Susie's homes are in the Boulder Junction Township, but their postal address is Manitowish Waters. Dr. Kate also lived on Island Lake.

"Everybody was poor when we were growing up," said Ollie. We lived in the old lodge and we really didn't know anything different.

"During the Depression, my mom, Sai, ran a pop stand at the intersection of then Hwy. 10 (today Hwy. 51) and today's Island Lake Road. I was very young, maybe two or three. She sold sandwiches and orange aid.

"One day a group of gypsies came up to her stand and tried to rob her. As one was trying to get into the cash register,



A 1970 picture of island. The former resort was now owned privately.

mom shut the door on her hand. She was very gutsy. Just then Al Koch (one of the owners of the Belle Isle in Minocqua) happened to drive up and that scared them away.

"At one time roving bands of gypsies were a problem in the Northwoods. We would usually know when they were heading our way for at that time everyone had "party" telephone lines, and someone would call and warn us."

Ollie remembered how cold it was in their home. "My dad would bank up the stove for the night," said Ollie, "but I can remember one night it was so cold in my room that my hair froze to the wall.

For Christmas we got one toy, something my father had made. We did get

gifts from the guests and those were the highlight of our Christmas.

"When I was 10 years old I got a bike. It remember it cost \$36, and that was big money.

"I remember our meals when grandpa was alive. Grandpa sat at one end of the long table. He was very self conscious because he couldn't read or write. But, he was the boss of the family and made all the decisions. At 6'4", he was strong and powerful. I was afraid of him.

Ollie never went to a city in her whole young life. She did go to the towns of Ironwood and Bessemer. but that was the extent of her travel.

She went to school in the one-room

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school house in Boulder Junction, and attended high school in Bessemer, where she lived with an aunt.

She won a scholarship to Northern Michigan University. It was for \$75 which covered her tuition. However, she had to come up with \$500 for her room, board and expenses. Somehow her mother came up with the money. She went on to earn her bachelor's degree.

It was at the university that she met Forrest. They married in 1948 and eventually had five children: Mike, who lives in British Columbia; Linda, who lives in Manitowish Waters; Mark, who lives on Maui, Lisa, who lives in Chelsey, Mich. and Susie who lives in Rhinelander.

After their marriage they lived with Ollie's parents for seven years before they built a home of their own - on Island Lake, of course.

In 1974, Olive began subbing at LUHS, earning \$18 a day. She also continued working at the resort.

Olive was 20 years older than Susie, so their memories are a little different.

"I started working at the resort when I was nine," said Susie. I worked at the candy counter at the lodge and was paid 50 cents a day. We all took our turns as waitresses, usually after we turned 12. I

could earn \$500 in a summer and I saved it for college.

"I mostly remember when we entertained it was friends or neighbors and when we went out it was to friends or neighbors.

"My mom did all the cooking for the resort guests. All the children and grandchildren took their turns working at the resort. Tom Frandy and my mom's sisters also waited tables at the resort. One of her sisters is still living - Sigrid. She will turn 96 in July. My mother died when I was 24."

Susie also worked at Paul Bunyan's in Minocqua. She bought a car in 1967. She eventually went to college at UW-Stevens Point.

Susie married Jim in 1968, and they had three children: Jack, who lives in Manitowish Waters; and Andi and Kari, who live in Neenah.

Both of John and Sai's daughters thought the Northwoods was a wonderful place to grow up, and they are content to continue living in the Northwoods. In fact, Ollie and Forrest live on LaFave Drive. They enjoy it, and their children would all like to live here some day.

So generations of the LaFaves will continue to be a presence in the Northwoods.

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The main lodge of LaFave's mainland resort.



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