

Fish Tales!

By Ruth Gardner

In the early 1900s, the logging industry was waning, and local residents needed to create a new industry for the Northwoods. What could come next to create a thriving economy? The Northwoods had an abundance of natural riches and heading the list was...fishing!

Local men turned their talents for survival into a great attraction for city dwellers. Not only could people enjoy the fresh, clean air and peace, but they could sail on pristine lakes filled to the brim with a variety of fish. Quick to take the lead was the muskellunge, a large, fierce fighting fish. It took knowledge and expertise to land one of these beauties, and the men of the North excelled at the game.

Fishing resorts sprang up in the area for tourists flocking to the woods and waters. Fishing guides were at the ready. At Voss's, we had cottages just to house the guides. While guides readied the boats and seined minnows, the kitchen crew busied themselves packing shore lunches filled with cutlery, plates, potatoes, bacon, onions, coffee and rich chocolate cake for dessert. The guide stored his long-handled fry pan just waiting to fry up the day's catch and some potatoes. Coffee was made over the fire complete with egg shells for clarity and a pinch of salt for taste. The chef might tuck in a few sandwiches just in case, but they usually came back untouched!

They guided President Eisenhower, Gypsy Rose Lee and many of the rich and famous of the day. Much like the loggers before them, these men were rugged and untamed, much as the woods they called home. An epitaph written by Les Jacobson is the best introduction to and description of these men, and is well worth reading. You can find it at:

http://ppolinks.com/mwhistory/2018_2_61%20Guides%20Epitaph%20Jacobson.pdf.

I grew up with these people as a big part of my life, and appreciate the richness and color they gave to my life. I was related to many of them, and the resort was always filled with them. I could watch the day of fishing play out from beginning to end. The memories and stories stay with me. To mention a few:

Jens Larsen—He tamed muskies and fed them out of his hand.

The Sleight Family—Four generations of this family have filled books and movies with great fish stories. I watched Dick Sleight catch a walleye and twirl it in the air as an eagle took it from his hand!

Chief Basil DeCoteau—He trained horses for the U.S. Cavalry and was one of the first to attend Haskell Indian Nations University. He and my uncle Lloyd LaPorte, upon the approach of a thunderstorm, would

grab their gear and jump in the boat to troll suckers for musky. Chief never motor-trolled; he always rowed.

Abe LaFave—Abe was a giant of a man, legendary for many things, fishing being only one of those things. His Island Lake resort was one of the first in the Northwoods and had the first bath tub up here.

Porter Dean—Porter was one of the most famous guides, known for never wearing shoes. At my Uncle Lloyd LaPorte's funeral, Porter hid in the woods to watch.

Mike Sullivan—He called himself the "Old Mick," and he told of shooting a hole in the bottom of the boat while attempting to shoot a musky. I'm sure he wasn't the only one to do that as most guides wore holsters with six-shooters to dispatch muskies.

Wally Pollus—A large man in a Stetson hat who would play his guitar and sing old classics like "Barnacle Bill the Sailor" and "Seven Beers with the Wrong Woman." At break time, he would "ride" his guitar around the bar, saying "Old Silver needs a drink," the Stetson hat open for donations.