

MANITOWISH WATERS AREA

HISTORY

A LOOK BACK

by Michael J. Dunn III



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A LOOK BACK...

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A look backward into Manitowish Waters history reveals a colorful and many-faceted past, stretching back from today's energetic cross-country skiers and patient fishermen all the way to calked-booted loggers, and birchbark canoeist Chippewas...and no matter what the era or who the participants, the focus of that history has always been the blend of woods and waters.

The Lake Superior Chippewa Indians were the first people to leave a significant imprint on this region. The Chippewa people had moved westward along the Great Lakes in quest of better hunting during the 1600's and 1700's, had become involved in the fur trade with Europeans and had come to depend on the European's trade goods, like guns, iron vessels, woven fabric, even whiskey. They were now venturing farther and farther inland from the Lake Superior shoreline to find supplies of fur-bearing animals to meet their trading needs. Between 1700 and 1750 they had routed the Sioux who had been their sometime rivals for the hunting in the region, and had established some sort of settlement at Lac du Flambeau.

Their traditional lifestyle was a cycle of moves with the seasons of the year: in spring they made sugar in their maple-sugaring grounds. In summer they moved on to their fishing grounds, where they fished for present sustenance and dried fish for later use, planted and harvested corn, and picked and preserved berries. In late summer they progressed to their wild ricing grounds, and in fall they moved on to their hunting grounds.

They traveled in birchbark canoes and when they stayed any length of time they covered sapling frameworks with birchbark to make wigwam-style homes, rolling up the precious bark and taking it with them when they moved on.

In the waning decades of the 1800's, though, the Chippewas were playing out the final years of this drama, perhaps without realizing it at the time, for the latter 1800's would see a movement to cluster them all on their government sponsored reservation at Flambeau and to settle them there.

Until then, however, some of the Chippewas had had a favorite encampment spot on the east shore of Manitowish Lake where Deer Park Lodge was later developed, and here they camped, fished and even buried some of their dead. They also gathered wild rice not far away up near Big Lake, which they were able to reach by canoe via Island Lake and Rice Creek, and they continued to gather rice there into the 1900's, well after they had ceased camping on Manitowish Lake. (Their impact upon the area is evident in the fact that Manitowish Lake is almost the only body of water labeled by name on the map made by the first surveyors in the 1860's. Manitowish is the word for weasel or muskrat in the dictionary of Chippewa language that Father Baraga compiled and published during his long career as a missionary among the Lake Superior Chippewas in the mid-1800s).

Government surveyors were the first white men who left a record of their passing through the area we know as Manitowish Waters; one party passed by as it established the boundaries for townships in 1860 and a second party crisscrossed the township in 1862, establishing interior section lines. They made systematic notes, and these notes acknowledge the valuable timber resources here and even note the fact that the logs could be floated down rivers to sawmills elsewhere. By 1872 people were putting in applications for lands near the chain of lakes and by the 1800's the lumber people were jockeying in earnest for control of large timber tracts.

By 1884, if we can relay on Peter Vance, one of the participants, a little flotilla of canoes paddled up the Manitowish River from the Eau Claire-Chippewa Falls area; after they passed the crossing of the Wisconsin Central Railway in Fifield or present day Park Falls, they were covering new territory.

They were sent to evaluate, or "cruise", the woods for timber and help plan the assault on the white pine forests, and their arrival also established a permanent white presence in township 42 North, Range 5 East: the present Manitowish Waters. The 1800's also brought pioneer white settlers who were not directly involved with this timber cruising.

What the lumbermen found- and coveted-were virgin forest so tall and thick that while they still stood uncut, a person could walk six miles downstream from the present dam toward Manitowish, on the little road that developed parallel with the river, and never leave total shade for direct sunlight!

In contrast, when all the loggers were done, twenty-five years later, a person could stand, say at Boulder Junction, and could see all the way across the logging and fire-ravaged landscape to Trout Lake or almost to the Manitowish chain.

A little rapids formed a threshold for the chain of lakes. In 1887 the state legislature authorized the lumbermen to build a dam there to pen up waters of the chain for logging and river driving. In 1887-88 crews built a camp below the damsite and began freighting in the first supplies upriver from the railroad at Fifield and Park Falls. They also began grading the earthworks on either bank and began building rock crib and timber dam tall and strong enough to hold back waters fifteen feet deeper than the chain had ever seen before!

White pine was valued for its fine lumber, but besides that, it was light enough to float indefinitely, and logs put into the water on the Manitowish chain could certainly stay afloat long enough to reach mills almost 200 miles away at Chippewa Falls or Eau Claire. So crews began cutting the pines in winter and putting the logs into the swollen lakes at break-up; and paddle-wheel steamboat herded them to the dam end or Rest Lake from all around the chain.

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Every few days a gate in the dam was opened and a large batch of logs was sluiced through, followed by a dose of water large enough to assure that the logs would float freely downstream but not enough to wash the logs ashore along the river's wandering course. The sluicing lasted only a few weeks, but took place every spring for ten to fifteen years.

As the logs moved downstream, log driving crews shepherded them to prevent jams and to get stray logs back into the flow. The most colorful fixture of the log drive was the wanigan that accompanied the drive. It was the kitchen boat that was built on the flat below the dam: A scow with a house on top to enclose the kitchen, supply space and sleeping quarters for the cook. Each evening the log drivers would gather at the wanigan for a hearty supper and maybe a little singing before they separated to sleep in little tents or just under the stars. All the dams below the Rest Lake Dam had gates big enough to allow it to be sluiced through, guided by its big oars.

The logs were boomed and sorted and fed into the huge sawmills of the Chippewa Falls or Eau Claire area, or some of them were sent on toward the Mississippi mills, and the wanigan was abandoned or dismantled.

Back at the dam here, when each drive was over, two and a half billion gallons of water had been penned up and then released; the lakes were down to their original pre-1887 levels; and raw, ugly, scarred new margin of erosion and stumps marred fifty some miles of shoreline.

Penning the water for the next drive began the next fall or winter; but after the very last drive around 1904 or 1905 there was consistent policy about water levels, and that often infuriated local residents-some wanted water high, some wanted it down, and one person even sabotaged the dam. At stake were fishing, esthetics, convenient access to the water.

Things were finally settled when a reservoir company bought the dam in 1912 and the state began prescribing water levels. The summer level is set at about 8 1/2 feet above the original level, and the winter level is five feet.

The reservoir company replaced the wooden dam with the present masonry dam in the mid-1920's

Left behind by the white pine loggers were all the other species of trees, many of which were also valuable for lumber. So the white pine lumbermen sold their "cutover" lands for another round of harvesting by different loggers.

Again the lakes figured in the harvest.

Two logging railroad spurs were pushed to the shores of the chain on Rest and Little Star lakes. Norway pine and other logs were put into the lakes of the chain and rafted by gas or steam tugs as quickly as possible to these two railroad landings and hoisted onto flatcars. These other species do not float as well as the white pine, so there was always a sense of urgency in rafting them, and rafting sometimes went on day and night. There was also a side track at Rice Creek Bridge where a self-propelled log loading crane could come and load logs rafted from the lakes of the chain or floated down from above Big or Round Lakes.

The Chicago & North Western Railway main line may have been the key to the development of this area.

It was built north in 1888 and where the track crossed the Manitowish River, the settlement of Manitowish developed (even before Mercer did!). It was a cluster of general stores, liverys, hotels, post office and homes. Supplies for the dam building crews, lumber camps and residents now could be wagon-hauled easily from Manitowish, or poled or rowed up the river in the bateaux that the Chippewa Lumber & Boom Company favored. For decades afterwards the railroad remained a lifeline, bringing up settlers, vacationists and supplies. Passenger train service ended just after New Year's later.

From 1906 till World War I travelers could ride a small connecting train directly to the waters of the Manitowish chain at a landing at Rice Creek Bridge. The train, which often handled freight and log cars ahead of his little coach, linked Buswell, Rice Creek, and Boulder Junction with the main line of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway at Star Lake (near Sayner)

Logging, rafting and even river driving were still going on when the first adventurous vacationists began coming up to enjoy the Manitowish Waters, and the trend eventually spawned several forms of hospitality or enjoyment: resorts, camping, summer homes, even group camps.

Resorts, as a result, have been an important part of the Manitowish Waters scene for over ninety years, and there have been resorts at over one hundred locations on the chain or nearby lakes during that time, divided between American plan resorts and housekeeping cottage resorts.

It was the American plan idea that the first area resorts adopted, usually in the form of a central lodge with dining room, lobby and perhaps a few sleeping rooms, along with a few separate sleeping cottages, and all with the trademark of the era: screened porches.

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The early host chose picturesque settings for their resorts. Abe LaFave perched his hotel and cottages on a little island in Island Lake around 1895, making him the first resort operator on the chain. Within less than five years George Washington Buck had opened a lodge at the narrows between Spider and Manitowish lakes (a resort better remembered as Koerner's), and J.A. LaMotte had chosen the eastern shore of Manitowish Lake, facing the sunset, to begin Deer Park Lodge. He blended ruggedness with gentility as he equipped it with a launch, fishing boats, a cow and a piano. Peter Vance ran a little "resort" about the same time, before burning out in 1903, but his was more a roadhouse or little inn with meals downstairs and a few sleeping rooms upstairs, on the shore of Rest Lake near the dam.

The "Teens or even 1909 brought three or four more resorts on the American plan format, and the "Twenties added several others, but then the development trends turned toward furnished housekeeping cottages.

Most likely the first host to rent furnished cottages without pairing them with a dining lodge was Henry Voss around 1911. He supplied some of his guests' needs from his garden, chickens, and cows - and added American plan facilities around 1920. By 1930 there were half a dozen housekeeping cottage resorts, and the early 1930's witnessed the first clusters of complete little homes with city conveniences built for housekeeping rental.

By 1936 many resorts were running full and turning away guests, and the optimism born of that situation resulted in a great deal of resort and cottage construction, as older resorts expanded and brand new ones opened.

Till then a group called the Manitowish Waters Association had been promoting and advertising the area, but in 1936 the newly formed chamber of commerce took over and issued the first regular edition of the vacation book you are now reading.

Campers were a small but interesting minority among early visitors, not as much the people who went off to rough it all by themselves as the families that returned regularly to the same favored spots year after year and brought a certain flair to their tenting (and often went on to build homes on the chain). One family, for instance, used to engage local people to help with the children, and another would bring their beds up from home, on the train with them, to make their tent more comfortable! Saloonkeeper Jim McKinney would rent tent space to campers before 1910 but Bob Loveless was the first to center facilities around camping, in the 1920s near Alder Lake.

Many of the people who built the earliest private cottages had received their introduction to the lake's region by coming first as resort guests of campers. So summer home development Big Lake, just northeast of the chain, received some of the earliest and most impressive developing, including the unique Manitowoc Club complex on a wooded point that the loggers had spared. There, on land that the club owned, several families from Manitowoc, Wisconsin, erected their own family lodges as early as 1900.

Summer home development on the chain proper began in or around 1900.

Rest, Spider and Island lakes received the greatest attention at first but in 1910 there were cottages on almost every major lake of the chain, and the elaborate establishments on Island and Rest one even boasting a hobby farm. As resorting gave the area many of its later summer home owners, so too did it give the area many of its summer homes, for after 1950, roughly, some summer resorts were subdivided for sale to individual property buyers.

Some early cottages were built of local posts or logs, but the proximity of sawmills at Buswell, Winchester and Winegar (now Presque Isle) made it practicable to build with frame construction after 1906. Construction activity from the "Teens" till the "Thirties" also helped keep a little sawmill in operation on Alder Lake and there were other brief sawmill efforts besides that one. Construction labor was one of the important sources of income for local residents, who also found employment in lumbering, caretaking, and odd jobs.

The area has also seen several types of specialized camps, not all of them leisure camps. A girls camp operated on Big Lake before World War I and another occupied a set of fine log buildings on Alder Lake in the 1930s. A private estate was converted to a boys' camp around 1948 and it came under "Y" ownership and became Camp Jörn soon after.

The Statehouse Lake youth camp, which passed its twenty-fifth birthday in 1986, is a state DNR summer camp that helps introduce young people to possible careers in conservation and the outdoors as they engage in forestry and stream improvement projects, for instance. It had a precedent of sorts in the CCC camps of the 1930s, and the Manitowish area had just such a camp along the river just beyond the Iron County line. Camp Mercer closed with the onset of World War II but many still remember its now-vanished tarpaper buildings with the white batten strips. Countless fire lanes and forest improvements are continuing a legacy of the CCC "boys" efforts.

Fishing was one key activity that lured pioneer vacationists. Then as now the musky was the principal prize, and anyone looking at the number of wooden boxes on the red and green, steel-wheeled baggage cart at the Manitowish railroad station could tell how good fishing was, as fishermen dispatched their fish packed in ice and sphagnum moss.

Walleyes then were thought of more as a shore lunch fish that the guides would cook at shoreside tables which the local guides association had set up and maintained cooperatively. (They also worked together to assure sportsmanship in fishing). In those days the guide was indispensable not just for his knowledge of fishing spots, his good company, or his shore lunch. It was he who seined minnows for bait, long before bait shops were innovated, and it was he who provided the fishing party's only propulsion - with his strong arms - before the outboard motor. The guides' favorite boat was a lapstrake rowboat with prows at each end for easy rowing. (It was introduction of the outboard motor that popularized the cut-off stern).

The guides added to the local atmosphere even by the way they viewed themselves. In the first annual issue of this Vacation Days, published in 1936, one guide advertised that he was the "chief musky tamer - all others imitations."

Maintaining good fishery was so important that the old dam was retrofitted with a fishway to allow fish to climb up to the lakes, and the new dam was teamed with a fish lock. The town of Manitowish Waters build a hatchery to raise muskies and a few walleye and suckers in 1932 and ran it till about 1942.

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Resort guests in the first few decades stayed longer than most guests today: from a month to a whole season, and there were more men, generally, than women. Cottage owners often came for the entire seasons, bringing along the season's supplies - "Kerosene lamp chimneys by the hundred," recalls one lady. Or they ordered things like groceries by mail from mail order grocers like Pieper's, Steinmeyer's in Milwaukee, and other things from Sears.

Getting here, in those days, wasn't any too easy.

North Western Railway Pullmans sped guests up from Indianapolis or Chicago or Milwaukee, but when they clambered down from the trains into the Manitowish dawn, it was a horse and buggy that awaited them, and a rough ride paralleling the river bank on the little lane to the damsite...the end of the road. Most resorts and some homeowners had big, gasoline-engined launches, and at the Rest Lake dam travelers and their baggage transferred to those for the last leg of the trip. (for travelers to Big Lake, two more transfers were ahead: an overland portage from Clear Lake to Big and then a boat trip on Big. Can you imagine moving up a piano in the face of such handicaps? (One party did - and it took days!)

Supplies for many resorts, cottages and local settlers came by rail and stage to the dam. About 1907 resorter C.W. Buck and drayman Sherman from Powell carved out a road from Powell to a landing on Little Star Lake, which shortened rail, buggy and water travel and appealed to guests from Buck's, LaFave's and other resorts.

The brief interval from 1906 until 1914 saw another colorful alternative: travelers could take the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway's trains via Minocqua and could shift to the nadir of all trains, the single-coach run between Star Lake and Buswell.

The train was so slow that its folklore even today has rumors of the train crew getting off to go fishing. What actually delayed the train so much was the fact that it often handled local freight cars or long strings of log or lumber cars from Buswell, in addition to the coach; but that frequent freight role was a huge godsend to people living around the chain or north of it. The track crossed the waters of Rice Creek right above Island Lake. Not only could launches reach it to meet a long-suffering passenger or two, but building supplies, groceries, and even beer that was shipped up in full boxcar loads could be transferred directly from train cars to lake launches or barges without any wagon haul at all.

The first automobiles appeared in the area around 1909-1910; draymen were among the first owners and the cars had to come in at first by train. Travel was possible toward Mercer by road before it was possible to the south, and the narrows between Spider and Manitowish lakes was an obstacle till about 1913. Travelers who somehow made it through by car before the road was completed via Trout Lake - and a few did - had to float their cars across the narrows on a floating dock till the first bridge was completed at the present site. Motorists making the trip from as far as Indiana were no longer a novelty by 1916, and by 1918 the state had numbered the road through town as Highway 10. It still had a curve almost every quarter mile or every mile as it followed section lines and property boundaries, but the federal highway program took it over in 1927 and gave it its straight course into the township by 1930.

Motorists back even in the Highway 10 days could find a bite to eat or a cold drink at pop stands along the road. These long forgotten conveniences and the resort dining rooms are the ancestors of the fine dining that is today synonymous with Manitowish Waters. Coffee shops and lunchrooms came with better roads, and the end of Prohibition spawned several taverns, some of which have evolved into supper clubs. (The earliest saloon was probably Jim McKinney's, on Rest Lake not far from the dam; at his island resort, Abe LaFave also had a taproom, both by about 1910).

At first the important social institutions that help shape the character of Manitowish Waters all required going outside of the limits of the present township: Schools, churches, town government.

Till 1910 the nearest schools were at Manitowish or Buswell, but around 1911 the first school opened right in the town, near Deer Park Lodge. A modern school, but still in one room, replaced it along Highway 51 around 1928. School consolidation brought a multi-town, multi-room school, in the early 1970's North Lakeland Elementary. High school consolidation in the 1950's had routed our students to Lakeland Union High School; before that they had been bussed to Hurley, and previous to that, families had to make their own arrangements to send kids to high schools and to board them near the schools.

For even more years, getting to church meant driving to Mercer or Minocqua, except for Catholics around the 1920s when some priests had a summer home on Clear Lake, complete with a little chapel, and many Catholics would take their boats over to Mass.

In the 1950s Protestant and Catholic congregations both arranged to use the original town hall for services while working toward the churches that they built in 1954 and 1958 respectively.

The township here had begun as part of Oneida County and the Town of Minocqua but became part of Vilas County and the Town of Lac Du Flambeau with the establishment of those. It was an unhappy arrangement, though, to have two population centers that had few interests in common and that were not even linked by a through road, and yet were governed as one town.

So in May, 1927 the state legislature accepted local arguments and set off a separate town, first called the Town of Spider Lake but renamed Manitowish Waters in 1940.

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Having an accountable government close by has meant a sequence of civic milestones from modest beginnings: a little town hall, a school, a fish hatchery, and a town cemetery, all within the first decade, and an airport, at the end of the second. The airport property has been the focus of civic development since 1960, with the addition of a community building, playground, athletic and picnic facilities and a town garage, and the property has made possible a central location for the fire department - which celebrated twenty five years of service about the time the new station was built. It has also allowed construction of a public library in 1987, promoted by the gift of the structure by the Koller family. The 1980s also saw park development beyond the airport limits: the Koller park near the dam and the planned water ski beach park off Highway W on Rest Lake.

In 1948 the post office department created a post office with the towns name. There have been two all-but-forgotten post offices in the township before, each for only a few years (1904-08 and 1927-29, roughly) and these were Spider Lake and Rest Lake, respectively. From 1890 till 1948, though, the principal post office activity was always based at Manitowish, the railroad stop for this area.

The present "downtown" business section continues the concentration of activity around the dam that began in the 1880s - and LaPorte's and Hanson's even occupy the original garden patch of the lumber camp at the dam. Those two stores both began in 1936 and have been rebuilt or enlarged since. The first gift shop in that area appeared around 1949 with the post office. The shopping district at the south limits of town first began developing in the late 1940s or early 1950s. The intervening years have seen a wide variety of specialty shops, from sporting goods to gift shops and art and handicraft galleries. The marina was opened in 1962.

One of the most unusual businesses in the township is the Trueflight Manufacturing Company, which dates back to the late 1940s and manufactures craft and archery feathers and other archery supplies.

In the many years between settlement and the establishment of local stores, what did people do for supplies?

When cars and all-weather roads made travel easy, they could drive to adjacent towns for groceries or supplies. Before that, residents took a horse and wagon, or simply hiked, to the general stores at Manitowish. Or they ordered from mail order houses.

More important, though, people created their won resources, especially be gardening. Most settlers had gardens; and all early resorts did - and they often had chickens, pigs, horsed, cows. Three or four landholders bottled and delivered milk. Resort kitchens would also sell meat and supplies to cottages before there were local stores.

There has not been much full-scale farming, however, except on the fringes of the township proper. The Plunketts near Manitowish sold produce to resorts as early as 1910, and beef to lumber camps. On Highway W toward Winchester, farmer Emanuel Wysocki began his landmark farm around 1917 (and in its eighth decade both the farm and farmer - by then in his hundreth year! - were still active). Near Wild Rice Lake three early farmers' struggles could not wrest a decent livelihood from the cutover land.

Ironically, on land that was hardly land at all, in the corner of the township closest to Wild Rice Lake, cranberry growers found a perfect setting in 1946 for very successful cranberry marshes.

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