

Musicians of Manitowish

By Kay Krans

In the early days of the Manitowish Waters region, having musicians living in the area was truly a gift for the many hardworking people. There was little or no professional dramatic or musical entertainment. Historically, people learned to play guitar, accordion, harmonica, violin and piano for entertainment for social get togethers.

Phonographs (think of the ones with crank handles) were widely available by 1913, but they were still a luxury. Radios came later, but without electricity, they had to be operated by expensive batteries. There was nothing more enjoyable than good live music, and some of the important musicians in the area were Paul Lange, Geraldine Andrews, Phyllis Andrews, the Koerner family and Anna May LaPorte.

Gerry Andrews

Geraldine Andrews was the oldest daughter of A.R. and Emma Andrews who came to Manitowish from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, following the call and opportunities of the logging and lumber era. The social life of teenagers and young adults was very active in the Manitowish region with many picnics in summer and sleigh rides and skating in winter. The young people socialized at their homes, and for entertainment, they were dependent on performing their own music. Andrews was very active with friends from Manitowish, Spider Lake, Powell, and Mercer. She became an accomplished piano player and that would lead to a lifelong love of music and influenced her life work.

As early as 1916, Andrews was teaching music at Spider Lake School and directing programs, featuring many pioneering families' children. The Valentine Day program included Ella and Leona Loveless, Lennert and Alice Bakken, Audrey and Lloyd Voss, Marie and Maynard Doriot, and Olive LaFave. The Christmas program that year was led by the Spider Lake School Orchestra under the direction of Mr. Koerner. Around 1926, Andrews was teaching at Manitowish School. In the late 1920s, she moved to Milwaukee to work at a hotel, but moved back to Manitowish during the Great Depression, teaching music at the Spider Lake School.

Musicians and artists were really hard hit during the Great Depression as were small rural schools. Music teachers lost their positions, and private lessons were one of the first expenses dropped by struggling families. During this time, nearly two-thirds of children from rural schools had no access to music education. Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Works Project Administration, and under this program created Federal Project One, which focused on keeping artists employed. Part of Project One was the Federal Music Project, and this kept music and dramatics accessible to the people of the Manitowish region.

Andrews was hired to teach and direct music for schools and community-based music programs, and she created an impressive list of accomplishments from 1935-1943. The Federal Music Project funded concert and dance bands, instrumental groups and choruses. Music appreciation was taught in the schools and communities. Those hired to direct the program were also exposed to further training through the program. "They were to instruct, guide, and direct instrumental and singing groups (children and or adults) in learning and developing musical skills and appreciation," according to a paper by researcher Terese Tuohey.

Andrews was tasked with the job to create programs and present to the largest audience possible. What better way than to hold community and school programs at the schools and local town halls? Under this WPA program, Andrews was able to teach piano lessons to interested students. Friday afternoons were a regular occasion at the schools for presenting music and singing, and many families of the area attended in addition to the student's parents. Usually, a skit was performed as well. In November of 1935, children from the Sleight, Laffin and Doriot families performed. Children were encouraged to join the Manitowish Music Club (1934) and work with Andrews. By 1938, there were 22 children enrolled in the WPA/FMA project in the Manitowish region. Olive LaFave and Jacqueline Doriot performed their piano pieces, *Wood Magic* and *Summer and Winter*.

In 1939, the head of the WPA Educational Program of Wisconsin visited Andrews to see the progress of her work and attend the Mercer School WPA recreation recital. "Dancing, singing, and music was given under directors Gerry Andrews and Ellsworth Voss," as reported in the *Iron County Miner* in 1939. In the same year, Andrews was directing the Melody Players, which created musicals for communities in the Manitowish region.

Andrews became a music teacher at Mercer CCC Camp 660 and worked with the Mercer Camp Glee Club. By 1941, she was holding rehearsals between the Camp Glee Club and the Mercer Co-Eds (a women's group she formed). They put on concerts under her direction and held dances together. She played piano while a CCC recruit performed *Young Voter of Camp Mercer* at the Iron County Citizen Program in Hurley in 1941.