



Barbara LaPorte at entrance to the grocery store 1963

The History of LaPorte's Grocery Store and Shopping Center

1937 - 2012

By Barbara LaPorte Bartling – February 2021

For three generations, residents of Manitowish Waters relied on the LaPorte Family for the food they put on their table. The story begins in the early 1930s when George and Anna Mattson LaPorte moved from their small farm and sawmill homestead on Bakken Road to what is today downtown Manitowish Waters. George built a home there for his wife and two children, Calvin and Dorothy. This first home was on the hill (currently fire # CTH W 5999) just to the north of what would be the original store building. They lived there when they welcomed their third child, Jim.



George and Anna's house on the hill 1933



George and Anna LaPorte 1948

Initially, George made ends meet by trapping in the winter and guiding fishing clients from area resorts during the other three seasons. It was apparent that the Town of Spider Lake, as it was known at the time (renamed Manitowish Waters in 1940), was becoming a destination for not only sportsmen but vacationing families. In response to increasing tourism and a growing local community, George and Anna decided to open a small grocery store on a lot beside their home. Great Depression suppliers were reluctant to contract with small seasonal operations, but the Red and White Brand stepped forward. LaPorte's Grocery

opened on May 27, 1937 just south of George and Anna's home on what was then US Highway 10, currently County Highway W (fire # CTH W 5995).



George in front of the original store 1939

Across the highway at that time was Schroeder's Rest Haven, an American Plan resort, and closer to the dam was the Win-Mar restaurant, bar and resort. Hanson's Hardware had opened nearby on July 4, 1936.

Early business was strong so George built an addition on the north side of the building to carry a larger variety of products. A short time later, the store was reconfigured to add a meat department. Ice was used to refrigerate the cold cases in the grocery store. In winter, ice was harvested from lakes and stored in "ice houses"-- small sheds where ice blocks were covered with sawdust to insulate them from melting. Ice was also sold to resorts and customers for personal use and used to pack clients' catch of fish to rail express back to their city homes.

By 1940, the LaPorte family lived in an addition built onto the back of the grocery store. Coming out of the Depression with limited cash but plenty of time on their hands, George, Cal and Jim scoured lake bottoms for logs left behind from the logging days when logs were floated to market from area lakes. They milled these logs as a source of lumber for their construction projects.

In typical pioneer fashion, the LaPorte family did whatever it took to make a living in the Northwoods. In the early 1940s, bait tanks were added to supplement the family income. Jim's first job as a youngster was digging worms and selling them for five cents a dozen.



Bait tanks beside original store. Living quarters addition on the back of the building. Early 1940s

Automobile travel to northern Wisconsin was not uncommon in the early 1940s, however, it was a long, full day on two-lane roads to get to our area from the southern metropolitan areas. As a result, traveling by train continued to be a common mode of transportation. For those traveling north via the train, George and Cal established a taxi service to shuttle passengers from the regional train depots to their destinations. After World War II, as automobile travel became popular and the use of outboard boat motors increased, gas pumps were installed in front of the store.

George, Cal and Jim continued trapping and guiding as part of the family business, leaving Anna to manage the grocery store in their absence.

Although the majority of the grocery sales took place during the summer months, LaPorte's Grocery remained open year-round to cater to the growing local population. By the late 1940s, as America was experiencing a post-war economic boom, George and Anna foresaw a need for a larger grocery store in what was now the township of Manitowish Waters. They also determined there would be opportunities for additional retail store fronts. In 1946, they began constructing a brick shopping center just to the south of the original store. The bricks were recycled from Silver Street in Hurley, WI. The 7,000 square foot building featured the grocery store, now named LaPorte's Self-Serve, as the anchor tenant. The store operated as a member of the Valley Queen Stores Cooperative Association.



Sinclair gas pumps 1940s



First LaPorte's Shopping Center 1948

Other tenants in the shopping center were Marie's Soda Saloon, owned by Marie LaPorte, wife of George's cousin Don, and Rest Lake Refrigeration, Radio and Electric owned by George and Anna's son-in-law Bill Bart. The shopping center opened for business in June 1948.

In the early 1950s, Bill Bart moved his refrigeration business to the original grocery store building and added an automobile repair service to complement the existing gas pumps. Jaeger's clothing and gift shop replaced Bart's shop in the northeast corner of the shopping center.



LaPorte's Shopping Center Early 1950s

On June 11, 1952, the original grocery store building and lot was sold to Chello and Toni Dalle Ave, becoming The Variety Store, selling toys, novelties, gifts, health and beauty products and, of course, gasoline.

After World War II, highways, roads and vehicles improved, as did discretionary incomes. In the 1950s, families began to take vacations up north, populating the many resort cabins for the summer. For most, this was their first exposure to the Northwoods and for many, the beginning of traditions that transcended generations or sometimes even ultimately leading to purchasing property here.

To fill a gap in local services, the LaPorte family expanded the shopping center in 1954, adding two front-facing units, one unit along the south side of the building and additional storage across the back. Jaeger's store relocated into one of the new storefronts. Bob Maletzke rented the other new unit for his new barber shop. Marie's Soda Saloon and the grocery store remained in their original locations. Northwoods Liquors, opened by Cal LaPorte, occupied the storefront vacated by Jaeger's. The LaPorte family established a coin-operated laundromat in the new space on the south side of the building.



After 1954 addition to the south (left) end of the building

As the family business continued to grow, Cal and Jim became involved full time, taking on more management responsibilities. This allowed their parents to take vacations and ease towards retirement. Tragically, in February 1958, George and Anna, along with George's sister Ruth and her husband Henry Voss, were involved in an automobile accident while on vacation in Florida. Anna, Ruth and Henry all died as a result of their injuries. George returned to Manitowish Waters, but by 1961, he stepped away from the grocery business and turned it over to his two sons. At that point, the store became LaPorte's IGA Super Market, and the supplier changed to Arrowhead Grocers of Duluth, MN.

Cal attended Chicago-based Coyne Electrical and Refrigeration School in 1944, so he and Jim did the installation, repair and maintenance on all the refrigeration equipment. Jim managed the grocery and produce departments, and supervised the employees. Cal, being a butcher, handled the meat department, the liquor business, and the business office. Customer store charge accounts had been

customary since the early days. Store charges, or “tabs,” provided a way for families to access credit as a convenience before the use of credit cards. This type of credit line also provided a safety net for locals when financial times were tough during the winter months.

As the number of summer resident accounts grew in the 1960s, posting of the daily charge slips became a large after-hour’s task. While Cal was completing office work, Jim was on the sales floor writing grocery orders, stocking shelves, sweeping floors or cleaning the laundromat. Their children, Barbara, Dave and Brad, spent time at the store after hours as well, enjoying two-wheel dolly races up and down the aisles, playing hide and seek in the many department corners, or building forts with the toilet paper and paper towel boxes in the back storage room!

LaPorte’s was one of several local grocers operating in the Northwoods in the 1960s. Others included Harry’s Supermarket and Ehlert’s Market on the south side of Manitowish Waters, Clear Lake Grocery at the intersection of County K and Clear Lake Road, Brandt’s in Mercer, Curley’s Red Owl in Presque Isle, and George’s Super Valu and Long’s Hillbilly Market in downtown Boulder Junction. As small operators, they often worked together to share product when inventories ran short between deliveries or to coordinate re-supplying runs to the Ironwood warehouses.

From the early mining days through the 1960s, the Ironwood and Hurley areas were population centers that served as the closest retail and wholesale sources for Manitowish Waters. It was common for the small grocers to drive up to Ironwood to replenish meat supplies from the Swift or Armour warehouses. Cal attended Hurley High School for several reasons: one was because it was a very large high school that provided a long list of academic and extracurricular offerings. The other was to pick up needed product for the grocery store on his way home. And he drove the school bus (a station wagon) while attending school!

In 1968, Jaeger’s sold their business to Henry and Anne Winter, and the clothing shop became Winter’s Resort Shop. The following year, Cal merged Northwoods Liquors into LaPorte’s Super Market, and Lakeland State Bank became a new tenant in the available unit. Dalle Ave’s sold The Variety Store by 1969 and purchased Marie’s Soda Saloon, renaming it the Village Soda Grill. In 1971, Bob Maletzke sold his barbershop to a Mercer barber who was in partnership with Dave Sorvald.

On June 30, 1971, on the eve of the July 4th holiday weekend, the busiest time of the year when all businesses had maximum capacity inventory on hand, the shopping center was struck by lightning. Most of the building burned. Those units not directly affected by the fire had significant smoke and water damage, and the roof collapsed onto them. At the time, Jim and his wife Marcia and their sons, Brad and infant Mike, were living in the small house beside the shopping center. It sustained no damage, thanks to good fire control by the Manitowish Waters Fire Company and other local fire departments.



Shopping Center fire 6/30/1971



July 1, 1971



Remains of Winter's Resort Shop

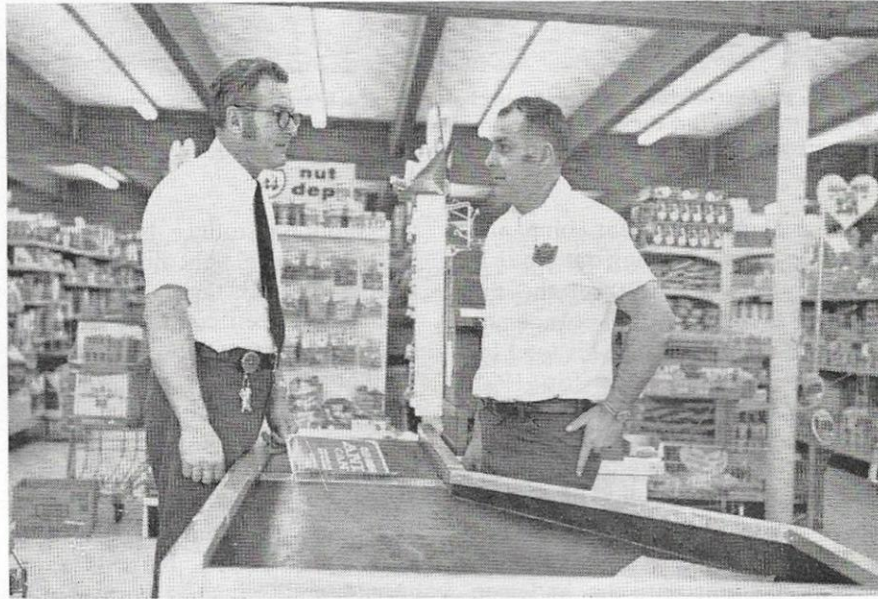


The fire started behind the laundromat. Note the washing machines in the foreground on the left and the large dryer behind them. The fire was hot enough to melt the quarters in the coin boxes.



The La Porte IGA store has three checkstands, which are not always needed in the winter months. But they are kept humming in the summer when the sales volume soars some 400 per cent higher than that during cold weather.

Cal and Jim immediately started cleaning up the damage and began working with their insurance company, grocery supplier and an Eagle River architect to build a new 15,000 square foot building. Seven months later, on February 7, 1972, the new structure was complete enough for the grocery store to open.



Calvin (left) and James La Porte stand at the front of their IGA store in Manitowish Waters, Wis. The new store is on the site of their old store, which was burned to the ground in 1971, along with other stores in the strip shopping center.

By spring, the other tenant spaces were finished. The new shopping center tenants were LaPorte's IGA Foodliner, the Village Soda Grill, Winter's Resort Shop, Lakeland State Bank, the Village Barber Shop, the Theodore North beauty shop, and LaPorte's Laundromat.



New shopping center after 1971 fire 1973

Over the next 20 years, Manitowish Waters continued to grow as a community and vacation destination, despite high inflation and an energy crisis. Many people could now afford a second home or cottage up north. As property values increased due to this demand, many resorts subdivided and sold their properties to these new homeowners who often spent the entire summer at their vacation house or commuted up on weekends. These families not only helped support the local businesses, but their working age children provided a strong seasonal workforce. LaPorte's grocery store was the first job for many of these young adults, providing them the opportunity to learn basic employment skills while putting spending cash in their pockets.

The businesses that opened in the shopping center after the 1971 fire remained, in some form, over the next 30 years. A few years after opening the Village Barber Shop in 1971, Dave Sorvald took over this location from the partnership he was involved with. Different clothing stores came to occupy the Winter's Resort Shop, namely, the Village Clothes Tree owned by Marcia LaPorte (Glashagel) and Beverly (Johnson) Trapp and later Cranberry Collectibles owned by Lois Smith and D'Arcy Jolin (Theiler) of Boulder Junction. The beauty salon, originally owned by Ted Thomas, was purchased in 1973 by Paula Lou Zeber Chamberlin, which she operated until 2013. Owners of the Village Soda Grill included, Cello and Toni Dalle Ave, Pat and Karen (Hayes) Murphy (1974-1978), Fred and Terry (Cagney) Theisen (1978-1990), Beverly Trapp (1990-1996), Nancy and Bill Crupi (1996-2010) and finally LaPorte's Café 129 (2010-2012). Although multiple mergers and acquisitions changed the ownership of the north corner rental unit of the shopping center, the business has always remained a bank. The sequence includes Lakeland State, F&M, Citizen's, First Merit, Huntington and Associated banks.

The grocery store underwent many minor interior remodels to accommodate changing products and equipment. An "in-store bakery" was added in 1976; cash register scanning equipment was installed in the mid-1980s (no more "stickering" the price on every item!); and VCR tape rentals were offered by 1986. In this era, the next LaPorte generation, including Dave, Brad, Barbara and Mike, was employed at the store during their summer vacations. Dave and Brad recall bagging and carrying out customers' groceries and receiving a 25 cent tip from the generous ladies. Mike has interesting stories about lighting fires in the large burn barrel (actually a big culvert stood on end) behind the store to burn all of the cardboard boxes on grocery delivery days. Unloading deliveries from the semi-trucks was a physical job. Every box was hand loaded to a roller track moving merchandise from the back of the truck to the backroom storage area where it was stacked and staged box by box with no air conditioning relief on those sweltering and humid summer days.

In November 1985, Cal bought out his brother Jim's interest in the business. Looking to retire, Cal hired a manager in 1997 to run the grocery business.

By the early 2000s, improved highways once again changed the business landscape of the area. Travel time to the Northwoods was greatly reduced, and consumers could more easily access larger stores and shopping areas in more populated surrounding communities. Most neighboring town's grocery

stores and retail shops (Winchester, Presque Isle, Boulder Junction) closed with Manitowish Waters becoming a regional hub for commerce.

In 1998, Cal's two children, Barbara LaPorte Bartling and Dave LaPorte, decided to continue the legacy of the family business and took over ownership of both the commercial rental shopping center and the grocery business. In 2000, Barbara assumed daily management.

The town of Manitowish Waters was transitioning once again to a different type of resident and consumer. Retired baby boomers were making the Northwoods their permanent residence. Conversely, because of job schedules, earlier school openings, mandatory school sport practice prior to the opening of the school year, camps, education programs and faster road systems, many summer residents no longer spent the entire summer at their Northwoods home. Many summer residents were now only in town for summer holidays, a week or two of vacation and a few long weekends. Additionally, some long-time summer families now shared their summer home with several family members, each assigned "their time slot." Area resorts were still operating but their numbers were greatly reduced from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

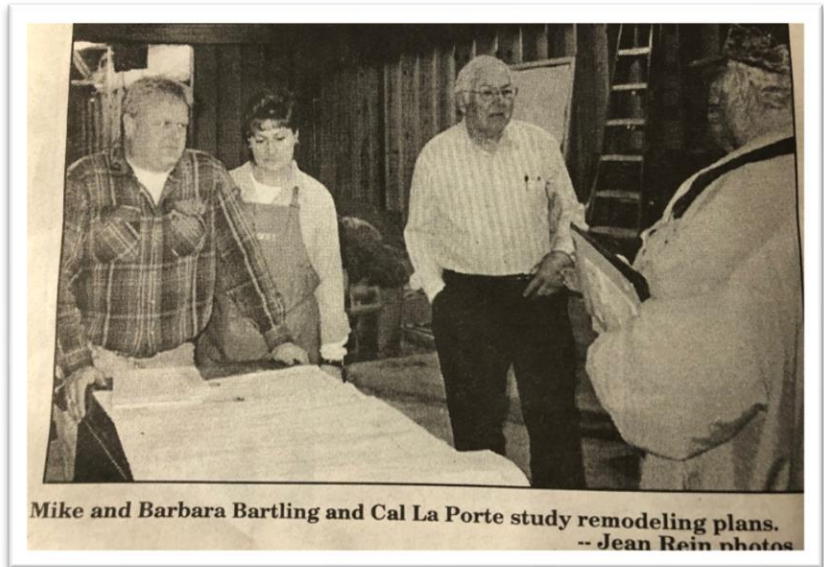
Changes in "lake house" occupancy patterns combined with accelerating lake front property values to create a shortage of entry level employees. Affordable housing became difficult to find, and the summer residents now tended to come and go rather than provide a season-long summer labor pool. The community and some businesses researched international help to fill the gaps. However, with a lack of available housing, this option did not get much traction.

Customer expectations had also changed. From the early days of supplying the cabin basics, grocery consumers now wanted familiar specialty products for their second home retreats.

The aging local population, condensed summer season, tight labor market, evolving customer expectations, as well as an aging facility required the LaPorte family to change and reinvest once again into the business. Dave and Barbara began a major renovation of the grocery store interior in 2001. The remodel expanded the footprint of the sales floor into the clothing store unit of the building then rented by Cranberry Collectibles. The added space was used to enlarge the store perimeter departments, specifically the deli, bakery, meat and produce sections. To accommodate changing consumer expectations, product lines were updated and expanded. Specialty coffee kiosks were added, the wine and liquor offerings were enhanced, the reconfigured meat department included a service meat counter. The deli was expanded to include a large selection of salads, meats, prepared sandwiches and hot foods. The bakery was tripled in size. New services included DVD rentals, ATM access, faster credit card processing and a remodeled laundromat with high efficiency machines. The shopping experience was also refreshed by adding air conditioning and featuring historical photos of the area. For added Northwoods ambiance, a fireplace with a seating area was added at the front of the store.

Mike Bartling, Barbara's husband, and Cal were heavily involved in the remodel logistics and sourcing needed equipment at auctions around the state. At this time, the grocery store left the IGA label and, as part of the renovation, was re-branded as LaPorte's Market.

In 2005, the exterior of the shopping center was given a new design and facelift, the first since the post fire re-construction project of 1971-1972.



Shopping center after 2005 renovation

The 10 years from 2005 to 2015 held significant changes for the shopping center. On October 31, 2006, barber Dave Sorvald retired after 34 years of being the town's only barber. Paula Chamberlain annexed that rental unit into her Accents 'En Fashion beauty salon.

In 2010, when the Crupi's closed the Village Soda Grill, the LaPorte family renovated the unit and opened Café 129 (129 being the County Highway W address of this location), continuing the tradition of being a coffee and ice cream shop, serving breakfast and lunches.

The year 2012 marked the 75th anniversary of LaPorte's grocery store in the Manitowish Waters community. In addition to supplying food and services, LaPorte's employed many local and seasonal residents over the years. While labor shortages may indeed be a current problem, the employment the family offered was a key contribution to the local economy during the majority of the LaPorte family business history. Given their position in the community, the LaPorte family was involved in many community projects and philanthropic causes. Donations to local food banks, fundraisers, community organizations and families in need were a regular part of business operations.

The LaPorte family also enjoyed being active in fun local activities such as the July 4th parades-- from "Soup to Nuts" car float to shopping cart drill teams, LaPorte's participated for many years.



Cal with early 1960s parade entry



Cal leading the LaPorte's float 1994



Shopping cart drill team 1994

In late 2011, with continuing business upside potential but no family succession interest, Barbara and Dave decided to sell the grocery and commercial rental businesses. Working with their grocery supplier, Super Valu, they secured a buyer and on May 12, 2012, T.A. Solberg Co., Inc. purchased all LaPorte interests in both businesses. After 75 years as LaPorte's grocery store, it was now Trig's Village Market.



Dave, Cal and Barbara on LaPorte's last day of business May 12, 2012

LaPorte's downtown commercial rental building

In addition and adjacent to the LaPorte's shopping center, the LaPorte family also owned a small rental building in downtown Manitowish Waters. When George and Anna LaPorte purchased property to build a home on Highway 10 in 1932, they also purchased two smaller neighboring lots. The original grocery store was built on one (fire # Cty W 5995), and George built a small house for his mother on

the other (fire # Cty W 5989). George's parents, Henry and Susan LaPorte, had a homestead in Manitowish, WI on what is now Murray Landing Road. After Henry died in 1929, their children wanted Susan to move closer to town, so George built her a house close to his family.



Susan LaPorte's home beside the shopping center 1949

business as LaPorte's Super Market, took ownership of the lot and building. Jim and Marcia LaPorte lived there with their sons Brad and Mike until moving to a home on Little Star Lake in 1971.

Since that time, the building has been a commercial rental property. The first tenants were Dave Evans Realty and Harry Hayes, Attorney. The building was renovated and divided so each tenant had half of the space. After many years as an office rental, Dan Perotti from Ironwood rented the building to house Perotti Wildlife Art shop.



Susan LaPorte 1950s

After Susan died in May of 1960, the house was used by other family members. In 1963, George's sons, Cal and Jim, doing



Perotti Wildlife Art Shop 1998

In 2005, then under the management of Barbara LaPorte Bartling and Dave LaPorte, this building was completely renovated and remodeled. The new tenant was Floral Consultants owned by Kae Nilsson of Mercer, WI.



Floral Consultants 2006

This building was part of the sale of the LaPorte's businesses to T.A. Solberg Co., Inc. (dba Trig's) on May 12, 2012. Floral Consultants continued to be a tenant until Kae retired and sold her business to Trigs in 2015. It is now Village Market Floral.