



AN ERA ENDS

By Liza Tuttle

"Keego." The name means 'big fish' in Chippewa, and probably at one time at the Keego Lodge big fish were brought in regularly by the club members. Early life at the Lodge is something of a mystery. Nothing but hearsay remains of a lodge whose guest list once included the name of the illustrious Lillian Russell.

Last week I wrote about the history of Manitowoc Club, a group of sportsmen from Manitowoc who formed the second settlement on Big Lake. This week I sought information about what is believed to be the lake's first settlement. Unfortunately, the history of Keego Lodge is not nearly as documented nor well-preserved as the Manitowoc Club. I spoke with "B" Fehner who, with her husband, bought the lodge in 1955 and continued its operation as a resort until 1969. "B"'s husband died in 1967 and after two tough years of managing the place herself, "B" sold out. The man who purchased the lodge and its property then quickly subdivided the seven and one-half acres of Big Lake frontage along with its two forty acre plots on nearby Keego Lake. There are now six owners on the original property.

With what has become of the property, one can only imagine what the grounds may have looked like at the turn of the century and in the early decades. Several of the original cabins still stand, but mostly as second or guest cabins in front of more modern structures. Most have also been considerably remodeled. The lodge's two distinctive features, a large boathouse and impressive communal building containing the dining room, kitchen and recreation room don't exist at all anymore. The family who bought that plot tore down the old main building and constructed their new home using the stones from the original fireplace for their own fireplace and for landscaping. Much of the original interior decoration has been retained such as two old wagon wheel chandeliers, an authentic Indian birchbark canoe, and many mounted wild animals.

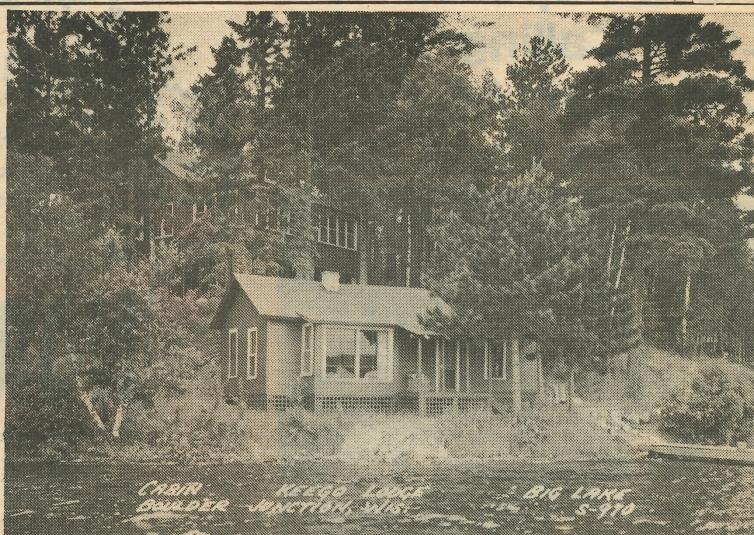
As for the grand old boathouse, "B" remembers hearing the story about how that, along with the old launch that used to pick up the guests from the far end of the lake, exploded into flames. The caretaker in those days was a cigar smoker, and there had been some oil spilled out from the launch into the water in the boathouse. When he discarded his stub into the lake, everything went up in an instant. Somehow the caretaker himself escaped burning to death.

When "B" and her husband moved up from Chicago to get away from the city and make their living running the resort, there were ten cabins and the lodge's capacity was 45-50 guests. There were two cottages complete with kitchens, one of which would be rented out for most of the season, and all other guests were on American Plan.

"B" did most of the cooking in that time, and her husband would do most of the outside work, but outside help was also necessary.

The Keego Lodge and the Manitowoc Club share a very similar past. Both were started as private clubs by a group of men from the city who were attracted to the Northwoods because of fishing and hunting opportunities in the area. They hired several of the local men, known as the guides, who built the communal lodge and eventually individual cabins for the men and their families. The men who started the Keego Lodge were apparently involved with the meat packing industry in Chicago. They came up the same way, by train to Manitowish, where a coach and buggy met them, to take them to the end of Big Lake where highway K is now. There, the old steam-powered launch would be waiting to take them to the Lodge.

A main difference between the two clubs is that the Keego Lodge didn't survive very long as a private club. After the founders sold out, presumably some time in the 1920's, the Lodge changed owners and functions on several occasions. The first buyers turned the lodge into a girls' summer camp, which continued successfully until the Depression put it out of business. Nobody seems to know the whereabouts of any of the old deeds, ledgers, pictures or any other documents from these earlier phases of the lodge's history.



From then on it had a succession of owners. "B" guesses about four or five owners bought and sold the place between the Depression and the end of World War Two. At that point a couple by the name of Ryberg found the Lodge and ran it successfully until 1955, when they sold to the Fehners. While "B" Fehners and her husband owned the resort, descendants of former owners often stopped in to see the lodge. "B" remembers one family who came to visit and asked her where she had put the slot machines. When their parents owned the lodge, during gambling days, they couldn't have met the expenses of running the place without the revenue from slot machines. They used to hide them in the back of some of the cabins.

As "B" acknowledges, each owner makes certain changes, trying to update without spoiling the character of the place. "Moose" Ryberg built two additional cabins in the Forties. "B" and her husband built their own permanent home as well as another guest cabin. Each cabin was named, and they were changed from time to time. "B" explains that one of the cabins was named "Welcome Cabin," and they changed that in a hurry because people kept bothering the guests in that cabin.

Another link between Keego Lodge and the neighboring Manitowoc Club is that often family of Manitowoc Club members who had sold their shares in the club would come to stay at Keego Lodge. Big Lake had become very precious to them and they would come to stay near where their memories took place.

Ever since she sold the lodge in 1969, "B" has lived in her own house behind the point where the lodge once stood. "B" and her family moved several times during their married years, calling each place home. Big Lake has been her home for many years now, and yet she feels like a newcomer compared to some of the other residents. She has always felt welcomed on the Lake, and is fondly referred to as Grandma "B" by her friends and neighbors. Now she is one of many who were somehow tied to Keego Lodge, and know little of its early history but for the stories that they have heard over the years.

