

Murder on Big Lake

By Kay Krans 2023

This is a story that wants to be told, a story that has been told in the past, and a story told by many voices. This is a compilation of various sources of the memories of that story. Some of the information is from first hand accounts, some is from newspaper accounts and other information came from several accounts that have passed through people and generations. The story takes place in Northern Wisconsin's Vilas County on the beautiful and bountiful Big Lake.

In 1919, Mr. Otto Blaha was on jury duty in Manitowoc and his health wasn't too good. One night while in Manitowoc, he was reading the local paper and came across an ad for the job of caretaker. The Manitowoc Club wanted a couple to be caretakers on Big Lake in Vilas County. Otto Blaha knew a lot about that part of northern Wisconsin because he hunted up there with his father many times. According to his wife he got the job even though there were 30 applicants. She relayed that they spent a nice first year living on Big Lake. They became friends with the Heidemans, the Bovees, and the Theiraults. These three couples lived on Rest Lake. The Leones were friends as well and they lived on Papoose Lake. They all loved the Blaha child because none of the rest of the couples had children. The Heidemans were caretakers for the Keego Lodge for Mrs. Badger. The Bovees were caretakers for the Keith's

who had an island and a farm on the shore of Big Lake. The Manitowoc Club had from 15 to 20 people to take care of for the whole summer. Otto Blaha had to help his wife with the laundry because there was so much. He usually helped with the hanging out of clothes. Mrs. Blaha had to do all the laundry on a washboard and that was work. Otto Blaha waited on table and Mrs. Blaha did all the cooking. When September came most of the people went home. The men would come back in the fall to hunt and the Blahas had to take care of the hunter's needs. Wood had to be cut and stacked for the winter and the next summer season and the 8 cottages had to be cleaned and things had to be put away for the winter. After the close up, Blahas had a little time to socialize with the neighbors on Big Lake, Rest Lake, and Papoose Lake. The couples always went with Heidemans with their old horse. Dolly was the horse's name and she pulled the toboggan. That was the only way the Blahas could travel after the lakes froze over. The men would play cards and the women would crochet. The couples enjoyed the lifestyle, it was a little lonesome because it was hard to travel back to Manitowoc and visit family and there were very few people around. Mrs. Blaha related that her husband was suited to the country and felt better physically and emotionally. She felt they were very happy living in the northwoods of Wisconsin. The first winter the Blahas lived on Big Lake, a family named Myers lived in Powers cottage while the Powers were away for the winter. The Meyers had a young son

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who had tuberculosis. He slept every night in a shelter outside and he got much better.

After the Blahas second year on Big Lake they were able to go to Manitowoc to visit family. Mrs. Blaha still referred to Manitowoc as home. She was so very happy about going home for a while. A man by the name of John Iverson was to take care of things at the Manitowoc Club while they went home for a visit. He was about 50 and lived on Rest Lake. John Iverson would walk across Big Lake and on to Boulder Junction twice a week to get the mail and he would bring back mail for Big Lake. During this winter, a man by the name of Jack Donohue came to live with the Powers. This man made moonshine for Powers who would sell the moonshine in Boulder Junction and other places and “make pretty good money.”

Jack Powers and his wife lived on the north side of Big Lake and rented three cottages in the summer and Jack Powers guided tourists. Mr. Powers was a fishing guide and in the winter Jack Powers and his wife sold moonshine. They never associated with anyone and the Blahas boss at Manitowoc club said not to have anything to do with them, Jack Powers was a very good looking man and his wife was a Swedish blond originally from around Sturgeon Bay. One morning in January, toward the end of the week, John Iverson was on his way to Boulder Junction to pick up the mail. He brought Powers mail back with him. He went to the

Powers place to deliver mail and return a newspaper and came in the cabin. There stood Donohue with a gun in his hand. Donohue said, "Empty out your pockets, I want your money." All John Iverson had on his person was 35 cents. "You'll have to stay here with me," Powers said. He told John Iverson his story. "I killed Jack Powers with a hammer while he was sleeping." Jack Powers was dead. John Iverson said that Otto Blaha and his wife were coming home the next day and they would miss him because he was supposed to be looking after the Manitowoc Club. Donohue started drinking the moonshine and made Iverson drink as well. He told Iverson that he and Powers were not getting along very well and he wanted his money so he could leave. After they drank a while Iverson talked Donohue into letting him go. He told Donohue that if he had killed Powers in self-defense no harm would come to him and that he would not tell anyone about the situation if he let him go. When the Blahas got back from Two Rivers, Iverson was in a real hurry to get back home to Rest Lake. He didn't tell them what had happened at Powers. The next day, Iverson said that Donohue told him that he killed Jack Powers because Powers wouldn't pay him for making the moonshine. Powers told him he would pay him in the summer when he was guiding.

The day after they had gotten home was Sunday and the Heidemans called and asked the Blahas to come down for a chicken dinner. The Bovess were to come and pick them up with his horse and toboggan. The Bovees must

have found out about the killing through the party line. John Iverson must have told someone on Rest Lake what happened at Big Lake. Mrs. Bovees overheard them talking on the party line. When they passed Powers they saw a stick with a piece of paper stuck on it. Someone in the party picked up the note. When the group arrived, Gus Heideman invited them to spend the night with them. They read the note and now realized that what they were hearing on the party line was true. They now felt sure that something did happen at Powers. Mrs. Powers had gone to the outdoor toilet and put the stick and note by the path to the lake. The note said, "Jack Donuhue killed my husband with a hammer. Don't come near because he will shoot to kill." Mrs. Heideman was not in the room when the note was read and no one wanted her to know about the situation because she was so very nervous. She had a wonderful dinner prepared but none of them could eat very well. John Iverson had spread the news around and on Monday, the sheriff of Vilas County came to Big Lake. The sheriff got a group of men together and went out to Big Lake to see what he could do. The Powers had a horse they kept in a shed across the lake on McBains Point. McBains point was called Powers Point then. Mrs. Powers told Donohue she would go and feed the horse. He planned to live with Mrs. Powers all winter and then in the spring, they would get rid of the body.

Mrs. Powers talked Donohue into letting her go to feed the horse by herself and she got away. The group at

Heidemans saw someone going across the lake with a cape like coat. The sheriff was set up at the point and the sheriff caught her. She told them to be very quiet. The Sheriff took Mrs. Powers to Bovees. Donohue was still in the shack. Gus Heideman told his wife about the situation and she was in a panic. Gus needed help. Otto Blaha went out to feed the chickens at Keego Lodge and while he was crossing the lake, Donahue shot seven times at him. When he got to Keego, where we all still were, he was real sick but not hurt. We called for help but nobody came. Finally Gus came by and spent the night. We didn't sleep well at night at all. We saw a man on the lake in the night, but it was one of the Devine's coming back from checking their traps. The next morning the sheriff and the posse came and called for Donohue to surrender and when he didn't they opened fire. Some of the men went around through the Manitowoc Club property and surrounded the cabin. When the shooting stopped they went in the cabin and found Donohue in the cellar with a bullet in his head. There was a note stuck by a knife to a ham on the table that said, "I killed Jack Powers and I am glad I did it." Jack Donahue signed the note. They took Powers body to Sturgeon Bay with Mrs. Powers. They rolled Donohue in a blanket and buried him somewhere in the woods around Big Lake.

Mrs. Blaha talked about how scary this all was and the story still upset her just by retelling of the story. She said the story still really roiled her up. It was sure an

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awful thing to go through. There were so few people living on the lake and so much could have happened to them. She felt they were just lucky nothing more happened to them or their neighbors. She also never walked near the Powers place after the murder because it was such a spooky place. They say that Donohue was not such a bad man but Powers made it really hot for him. Some said that if Donohue hadn't have killed Powers, Powers would have killed him.