

## **Robert Loveless: The Northwoods Jack of All Trades**

### **By Kay Krans**

Robert Loveless grew up Balsam Lake, WI, northwest of Eau Claire. By 1891, he had left home and began working as a guide at Mann's Camp on Trout Lake. He supplemented his income by trapping, and he sold fish to several logging camps in the area.

He would meet his future wife at an island resort on Trout Lake, and she would become his partner in raising a family and running his many businesses.

Also at Mann's Camp, Loveless first met Richard Southgate, owner of the Congress Hotel in Chicago. Southgate and his good friend Marvin Hughitt, vice president of the Chicago Northwestern Railroad, were customers at Mann's Camp. His relationship with Southgate would have a strong influence on Loveless.

In 1893, Loveless went to work as caretaker for Southgate who owned a large tract of land in what was then Lac du Flambeau around Little Trout and Alder lakes. Southgate hired a Canadian carpenter, and Loveless assisted him in building the Southgate main house as well as other cabins on the Southgate Estate. The main house was described as being furnished with items that Southgate collected from around the world.

Loveless' daughter Dolly (Tirpe) remembered years later that there was a phone line brought in so that Southgate and guests could conduct business from the northern retreat. The train delivered live lobsters and Champagne for the lavish parties held for the guests.

Loveless also helped manage the building of several canals, using Native American and railroad labor, from a series of Lac du Flambeau lakes through Little Trout Lake and on to Alder Lake.

He formed a close friendship with Southgate as well as a working relationship. Loveless and his wife were invited to spend their honeymoon at the Congress Hotel in Chicago. When Southgate grew ill in California, he called on Loveless to come via a private train car to California to help him through his illness. Loveless stayed with him for quite a while before returning to family and responsibilities on Alder Lake.

These experiences served as his education and helped define him as a man who could take the wild land around Alder Lake and shape it into his world. He had the personality for entertaining and had learned a lot about elegance and hospitality through his connections to Southgate.

Between 1908 and 1910, he homesteaded, and through the years, he bought more land as it came available along the shores of Alder Lake and bordering Highway 10 (later Highway 51). He amassed 250 acres of land, and on that land he built his businesses and home using the wood gathered and milled at his sawmill.

He was an entrepreneur and jack-of-all-trades. Over the years, he earned his way as a guide, caretaker, builder, logger, sawmill owner, resort owner, saloon owner, gas station owner, market fisherman, tightrope walker, inventor, and owner of one of the finest dance pavilions in northern Wisconsin.

By 1889, trains brought tourists to Woodruff and by 1903 to Boulder Junction, the closet train stops to the Loveless property. By the 1920s, tourists were coming north via automobile as well. The journey was long, and the roads were rutted, but fishing and beauty lured the city folk to the lake country of Northern Wisconsin and to Loveless' Virgin Forest Park.

After the grim period of World War I, The Jazz Age of the 1920s became a time when people wanted to forget the horrors of war and sacrifice, and enjoy life. Loveless provided a great venue for enjoying nature as well as "cutting up the rug." He was proud of his virgin pine studded land and made sure that the big pines remained.

He and his wife Hulda built a complex, including a saw mill, mill pond, two houses, six tourist cabins, a dance hall, picnic grounds and a tent camping area. The resort had a generator that supplied electricity for the operation. He named his resort "Virgin Forest Park" and made the resort ready for his customers to relax in the fresh northern air and to have fun on Alder Lake.

Live music and new dances became the rage. But, there was also a counter movement to protect people from the "evils of alcohol." The Volstead Act became law in 1919, and the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment brought on Prohibition. This caused many resort owners to look to illegal alcohol to serve their patrons.

By 1923, Loveless, with the help of Palmer Hanson, had constructed one of the best dance pavilions in Northern Wisconsin. It was called Park Hall, or Virgin Forest Pavilion, and included a long boardwalk and small bridge to guide customers to the dance hall. The pavilion was a 116' x 52' building that could hold as many as 500 people. The dance floor measured 40' x 80', which was room for plenty of couples to perform dances like the Charleston, the Lindy Hop (Jitterbug), the Shimmy and the Fox Trot.

There was a \$1.10 admission to the pavilion with 10 cents going to the government, according to Loveless. If you wanted to impress your girlfriend, you bought tickets for the dance floor. These tickets were known as the "Jitney" (slang for a bus ticket), and you had to pay an extra 10 cents per ticket for "Jitney Dancing." The more Jitney Dance tickets you had, the more impressive you were to the girls because those tickets signaled you had cash and were a good dancer.

There was a stage for live bands, with an 11-man orchestra player piano for times when no band was available. Bands and orchestras with up to 15 members were hired to play at the pavilion.

Dolly Loveless Tirpe believed that the first band that played there came from New York, but most of the bands came from Chicago, Milwaukee and Minneapolis. Another Loveless relative, Bob Kassein, told stories years later of Wayne King and His Orchestra, performing in 1923. King became very famous in the 1930s and recorded famous songs like *The Waltz You Saved For Me*.

Loveless booked African American orchestras as well as all-women orchestras like the Riley's Sunkist Queens. (Kassein remembered the all-women bands, and as a young boy, he thought of them as all being very beautiful.) Native American musicians and Pow Wow dance groups were also booked, and these were very popular shows.

Loveless advertised many different types of dances that kept customers coming back for fun evenings. Carnival dances were held on Halloween Weekends. In 1927, a dance hall competitor from Rhinelander mentioned Virgin Forest Park in his advertisement of bands coming to his venue: "Twentieth Century Entertainers-8 piece band right from Minnesota....coming to me direct from Echo Lake Gardens and Virgin

Forest park two of the largest dance pavilions in northern Wisconsin drawing at these places 300-700 people.”

Joining customers that were summer homeowners and resort tourists, people drove from the U.P of Michigan and the surrounding counties for the dances. According to relative Jeff Trapp, Loveless said many of his customers traveled long distances and set up tents at the camp grounds before attending the dance. They spent the night at camp and returned to their home the next day. There were rowboats available for rent so that couples could take romantic paddles under a summer starlit sky on Alder Lake while the music echoed across the water. Guests could visit several dance halls while in the area, like the ones at Trout Lake and Plum Lake.

The walls of the pavilion were made of logs and over 30 mounts adorned the walls, including various flags. Front and center was a full mount of a Bald Eagle (very illegal today!). All specimens were harvested by Loveless.

In addition to being open to the public, the pavilion could be rented for big parties and weddings. The dance hall had an adjoining kitchen and lunch counter where a sandwich, pickle, cake and coffee were available for 25 cents. Loveless' daughters Ella and Dolly helped their mother with making sandwiches and serving as hat check girls. Ella remembered seeing many a flask get slipped into the pocket of a gentleman after checking his overcoat.

Loveless sold moonshine and had a phone available so he could be tipped off if “revenue men” were on their way for a raid. No one knows who tipped him off but he would announce to the crowd, “Ok, we are passing around cups, and you all have to hurry and drink your ‘tea’.”

During prohibition, Loveless had a 1928 Buick that he had modified for carrying bootleg bottles of whiskey. The inside door panels could be removed to store whiskey he bought near Hurley, WI. Although Prohibition ended in 1933, apparently bootleg liquor was still in use. The only source found that tied Loveless to liquor violations was from 1934 when he was indicted and found guilty of possessing liquor that did not have legal tax stamps on the bottles.

In addition to drink, food, music and dancing, the pavilion was a place for Loveless to showcase his talent and love of entertaining. He would dress in

elaborate costumes, and one time he was nearly shot when he entered the hall in a bear costume that apparently was very realistic. Someone in the hall yelled, “Don’t shoot! That bear is Loveless.” He kept two real bears that he raised as cubs named Billy and Lucy for the public to feed peanuts they could purchase at the park. His showcase routine featured him as a tightrope walker, making his way across the top of his dance floor.

By 1926, there was a for sale ad in The Chicago Tribune for The Virgin Forest Park. It did not sell and was kept by the family until the early 1940s. It is not evident why it was for sale but his daughter Leona had passed away in 1925 and that increased the workload for Ella, Dolly and Hulda.

In 1928, the Loveless house burned to the ground, and he began to look to his family’s future closer to Highway 10 (51 today). He built a store, with family living quarters in the back, where he sold candy and snacks.

The Great Depression hit in 1929, and the luxury of having cash to spend on travel and dancing began to fade into the reality of hard times. During this period, Loveless kept looking to the future and built some of the first travel auto cabins on the highway, and by 1931 he had built a larger building for a saloon and gas service. That building still stands and is known today as The Howling Dog.

The laughter and good times of the 1920s came to an end. The 1920s boom of tourism and dancing gradually led to the hard-scrabbled life of the 1930s until the next tourism boom of post-World War II prosperity. Heywood Broun (American Journalist who often wrote about social issues) said, “The Jazz Age was wicked and monstrous and silly. Unfortunately, I had a good time.”

Loveless rented the dance pavilion to others who wanted to make a go of it. By the end of the 1930s, the pavilion fell silent, and in January of 1940, the roof of the dance pavilion collapsed under the weight of heavy snow that ruined the building. Ella Loveless Kassein and her husband Henry took the building apart board by board to build a horse barn on their land near Virgin Forest Park.

Robert Loveless died in 1942 at the age of 72, and his wife Hulda gradually sold off the property until she passed away in 1949.

The Loveless family was a true example of people who used their energy and work ethic, creativity and adaptability, and the resources available to them to build a great life in a wild land.