

Commerce in the 1920s

By JoAnn Miller

Editor's Note: Finding information on local business in the 1920s is challenging. However, thanks to the archives of The Ironwood Daily Globe, The Iron County Miner, The Rhinelander Daily News and Gogebic Range Directory, it has been possible to develop a fairly good idea of area commerce.

The Manitowish “waters” area gained recognition during the 1920s thanks to tourism growth. Around 20 resorts were drawing people from the larger cities to the south and from Ironwood and Hurley to the north. Resort accommodation choices included tented campsites, lodge rooms, and cabins with or without kitchen facilities.

The 1920s resorts included (but were not limited to) Voss' Birchwood Lodge, Koerner's Spider Lake Resort, Deer Park Lodge, LaFave's Island Lake Resort, Lange's Resort, Mitchell's Resort, The Win-Mar, Schroeder's Resthaven, Virgin Forest Park, Rest Lake Resort, Fern Lodge, Sylvan Resort, Quo Vadis Club, Hoosier Club, Ilg Camp, Red Feather Camp, Camp Swastika, Kamp Khaki and Northern Lights Resort.

The local population was not large enough to accommodate staffing needs so resorts recruited seasonal workers by placing ads in Chicago, Ironwood and Hurley newspapers for cooks, yard work, housekeeping and general staff. Room and board were often included for the staff.

During this decade, an increasing number of Ironwood and Hurley residents were building summer cottages on the lakes, also driving demand for local services.

An unofficial listing of Spider Lake residents in 1928 noted the following occupations:

Guides: 11

Ice Cutters: 4 (all 4 were guides during the summer)

Caretakers: 4

Laborers: 2

Carpenters: 2

Painter: 1

Gardner: 1

Mechanics: 2

Lunchroom proprietors: 4

Farmer: 1

Realtors: 2

Dam Tender: 1

A true grocery store did not exist during this decade, but several resorts included retail facilities with basic supplies available to both housekeeping cottage guests and local residents. "Motoring" to Ironwood and Hurley for food, clothing and other purchases were day-long excursions and often a social event shared by friends.

Resort restaurants were open to the public. Medical facilities were available in Ironwood, Hurley and Rhinelander.

In 1928, Alvin Koerner was granted the rights to construct, maintain and operate telephone lines from Mercer to the village of Manitowish, eventually bringing the service to Spider Lake.

The Lake Superior District Power Co. extended electrical lines to the Manitowish lakes region in June 1929. This provided residents with electrical power and replaced the lighting plants utilized by many resorts.

The end of the decade saw major development that launched Spider Lake into greater population growth and increased commerce during the 1930s. A report in December 1928 focused on three large building projects that opened for business in spring 1929:

- The Northern Lights Hotel owned by Mr. Oestreich was constructed on Rest Lake. It had a dining room serving 60-70 people and 10 bedrooms complete with a lavatory with hot and cold running water. In addition, the resort included eight cabins.
- The Tower Tea Room, a new two-story building with a tower built above the roof containing a light, built by Mr. and Mrs. A. Zermuehlen on land purchased from Frank Laundries. One room had a \$2,000 soda fountain, and they also served lunch.
- Just south of the dam, a bakery and lunch room was built by Walter Schuster of Milwaukee.