

Easy Going - Wisconsin's Northwoods

by Michael J. Dunn, III

Early Hospitality

Hospitality is one of the most respected of northern Wisconsin traditions, from the time when lumber camp cooks delighted in sharing their famous cookies and doughnuts with children, from villages like Winegar, to today when a tourist can slip into bed by the glow of a fireplace right in his carpeted bedroom.

The many faces of modern hospitality are painted in the rest of this volume, but let us look briefly at early hospitality in the northwoods.

Trading posts and even saloons provided some of the first hospitality, before formal resorts had developed to accommodate guests. Early visitors were often transients moving about in connection with their work, and they expected little more than a bed in the rustic log loft or a jury-rigged sleeping room in the attic. Hi Polar, trader on Virgin Lake, for instance, offered sleeping space to passersby on what would eventually become the Military Road, beginning to do so in the 1850s. An example of the saloon-type inn was the one operated where the dam and boat landing at Manitowish Waters attracted transients; Peter Vance (a "squaw man") operated it, as did one of the McKinney brothers.

In small towns, little pitcher-and-bowl hotels developed near railroad stations. Almost, invariably they had false fronts on one end of their gabled roofs, and transoms and wide openings above and below the doors to allow heat from big woodstoves in the hall to circulate into the sleeping rooms.

Hunting and fishing clubs were popular in early days. Many were membership clubs, but some were cooperative clubs with individual private residences on the grounds, like the Manitowoc Club near Boulder Junction. Famous old ones, like the Twin Lakes Hunting and Fishing Club, have vanished, but others have become more diversified, like Big Sand Lake Club or Dairymen's Country Club, near Phelps and Boulder Junction, respectively.

Motels have been the newest addition, growing out of just a handful of tourist cabin courts of pre-World War II years. Housekeeping cottages really appeared only in the early 1920's, and even into the 1940's all but the most sophisticated were still plain log cabins or frame cottages whose exposed rafters and wall studs showed the wood of the outer siding. Kerosene lamps and privies were not uncommon even in the forties, nor were woodstoves or smelly oil stoves.

It was lodge-type resorts, however, that played the most colorful and interesting role in developing northern hospitality, for even the pioneer summer-home owners usually got their northwoods initiation at such resorts.

It is surprising how much development took place even before 1900. The resort of the Thomas family on Lac Vieux Desert was probably the first lake resort in these northwoods, about 1882. John Mann began his resort (now Cardinal's) on Trout Lake in 1888, and before the Goodalls took it over as a resort in 1891, the Twin Lakes club had developed remarkably.

The 1890s saw a flurry of resorts like Benedict Gauthier's at Flambeau (1891); Sayner's Camp at what would become Sayner after the railroad arrived in 1894 (resort opened in 1892); Coon's on Trout Lake and Buck's at Divide, later Winchester (both in 1894 or soon after). Bents built their camp early enough (1896) to be able to name their own lake, I have heard, and the year 1897 saw Oxley's Camp McKinley, near Boulder Junction and named for the president then in office, and LaFave's Resort at Manitowish Waters. The Everett Resort, owned earlier by Fred Morey, opened at Eagle River about 1898.

The actual turn of the century saw new resorts spreading hospitality to High Lake between Boulder and Land O' Lakes (then State Line), and to the future Phelps area (Hazen's, still active!) and to Star Lake. By then, too, Oneida County was seeing its share of lodges like the Northern at Minocqua and the even older Sanders House at Lake Tomahawk.

The standard resort format in early years was a lodge with cottages. The lodge served everyone with dining and socializing and some of the guests with sleeping rooms. Clap boards or even rough planks were hard to come by, especially in sites away from the railhead, so early resorts were mostly built of logs. Hewn square ones were the material for the Thomas resort's first lodge, which actually was the family home built in 1860. Bent's Camp used large horizontal logs with the bark still on for its first structures (one is still in use). The lodge at Orrin Sayner's was built of huge vertical logs in upright post fashion with only gable ends of boards and battens. The lodge at Coon's on Trout Lake, now in its ninth decade, is a rich, warm example of log lodge construction at its grandest.

Islands were sometimes popular as resort sites, partly because of the romance associated with them, partly out of the importance of fishing among early vacation interests, and partly as natural sites in regions where no resorts had early road access. Such an area was the Manitowish chain of lakes, all of whose visitors transferred from buckboards to launches at Rest Lake dam in order to reach resorts situated around the lakes. One of its island resorts was LaFave's. Island resorts had to expand upward, not outward, and LaFave's had a three-story lodge, with guest rooms on the second floor, guides' quarters on the third, and a ring of tiny cottages hugging the banks. Pig Island nearby served as its tiny farm and dumping ground.

At LaFave's as elsewhere, elegant gas-powered launches provided transport, but fishing was done from double-pointed clinker-built rowboats with legless captain's chairs affixed to the seats for the fishermen's comfort. Some resorts had huge fleets; the Thomas resort had 35 rowboats or birchbark canoes, not a surprising number in view of the resort's 21 cottages.

Indispensable to early sportsmen was the guide, for he not only pointed out choice fishing spots and fixed the shore lunch but also, with his strong arms, functioned all day as the predecessor of the outboard motor.

The style of early resorting was pretty uniform. It was room and board on the American plan. As Edmund Espeseth, himself a resort host, pointed out in a 1953 history of Vilas County hospitality, early guests "were in fact additions to the family home" ----a home which, like its more elaborate lodge successors, was likely to be decorated with trophy fish and game. (What a sight the 45 deer heads must have been that graced the old Gris wold Resort near Three Lakes and Eagle River!)

The lodge fireplace would be the focus of evening socializing and yarn spinning till its flames had turned to embers. The acme of the resort fireplace must have been the double fireplace in the 110-foot lodge of the De Haas Red Oaks Resort at St. Germain; it used four-foot logs!

Guests were usually prosperous and stays of a month, six weeks, even a full summer were the rule rather than the exception.

Supplies were a problem for early hosts, because of not only remoteness but also limitations in transport and refrigeration. (State Line, for example, received meat once a week, when the Friday train brought the meat car. The lumber company store in Phelps prided itself on its two-carload capacity coolers.) One answer was a farm on the resort, with garden, chickens, dairy cows (ten cows in the herd of Maple Grove Resort on Lac Vieux Desert). Ice for food preservation was cut on the lake in front (something still done at Woodruff). Though it is hard to envision now, even into the 1920s over forty resorts in the two counties had farms or small gardens and a cow or two.

Lodges grew ever larger and more elegant. One at Deer Park Lodge (since replaced) was 140 by 40 feet in extent, three stories in height. Sayner's was 126 by 40, Gauthier's at Flambeau 100 feet long.

In the 1920s, because more guests were arriving by car, resorts stressed garages among their features. The irony in being so accommodating was that the automobile's continued rise in popularity freed vacationists from the restrictions of vacationing only at lodges and from staying in one place for long periods. The housekeeping resort era would capitalize on the automobile and would build anew on the beginnings that the lodges had provided. The summer-home boom would build upon both of these in a third wave.

The housekeeping guest or the individual summer-home owner, though, never knew quite the drama that the lodge guest knew. For it was lodge guests who enjoyed traditions like the Sunday outdoor buffet at the St. Clair resort on Black Oak Lake at State Line. When the guests had finished eating, they would toss the wooden plates upon which they had just eaten into the bonfire to make it blaze the brighter. And at Musky Inn in St. Germain, when guests were ready to take their leave, the white-hatted chef who owned the resort would stand in the doorway, put his great French horn to his lips, and send an elegant farewell salute echoing across the lake and into the woods.

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