

Easy Going - Wisconsin's Northwoods

by Michael J. Dunn, III

Winchester & Presque Isle

Winchester and Presque Isle share many similarities, especially those of history and landscape.

Both communities began as sawmill towns, and the companies that built them shared a number of common officers or owners. Both bore the names of mill figures (Walter Winchester and William Winegar till his namesake town changed its name in the 1950s to Presque Isle). They were both part of the same civil town-Presque Isle-till Winchester town was separated in 1921.

A great end moraine covers much of their area, except for a gentle, more level area that spills south from Harris Lake to Birch and Presque Isle lakes (where farming flourished to a remarkable degree and even today is commemorated by abandoned clearings). The moraine gave the area magnificent uplands that were a treasury of great hardwood trees that went unlogged in the flush of pine cutting and river driving. Railroads, however, made their exploitation possible, and in 1905 a branch line was pushed past Winchester and on to Presque Isle, then known (by the first of its three names) as Fosterville.

The Turtle Lake Lumber Company built a small mill where the railroad touched the lake, and a small cluster of tar paper houses sprouted around it. This mill cut the material to build a fine big mill down the lake a bit and then turned to cutting shingles for 20 years. Little Tar Town remained, but on a more pleasant hilltop overlooking the lake the company built a complete town of fifty-odd houses-precisely spaced in orderly rows behind boardwalks and white fencing-two inns, two community buildings, and a big store; this was **Winchester**.

From a little roundhouse behind the mill (where Car-Lee Campsite stands today) a network of private railway tracks began to range out in all directions, even up into Michigan, and little "sidewinder" Shay locomotives brought in log trains every day from the loggers in the woods. In winter teams and sleighs delivered logs from swamps impregnable except when frozen, or tracts too small or remote to justify extension of tracks to them.

Rather abruptly, in early 1926, the company decided that it had done all the cutting that it cared to do, shut down the mill, shipped out its valuable machinery to a competitor at Hiles, Wisconsin, and sold the town and its remaining woodlands.

Fosterville got its mill and its village at the same time as Winchester, 1905-6. The operator there was Vilas County Lumber Company and when the firm was on its knees a few years later, it was William Winegar who put it back on its feet and gave the town his name. This mill company logged with its own private log trains too, and even today abandoned rights-of-way can be traced around Presque Isle Lake, east as far as Lynx Lake, and north into Michigan.

The Winegar mill much longer than Winchester's; for a new set of owners it sawed way into the 1930's, and the mill village had a less harsh transition to survival without the mill. Today's village, smaller than the 80 houses of its peak, reflects the newness of its 1956 name with the newness of most of the homes along its little net of streets.

The boom years brought a lot of colorful people into the moraine hills. Not surprisingly, many were Kentuckians to whom these hills were like the hills of home. Some Kentucks brought an unusual skill with them: moonshining. Many a still flourished in the hills, and growing grain for them accounted for more than a few of those farm fields mentioned above. One moonshine operation was interrupted in 1926 by a shootout that eventually cost two lives. That period saw Ku Klux Klan rumblings in these same hills.

Dunn III, Michael J. Easy Going – Wisconsin's Northwoods. Madison, WI: Tamarack Press, 1978.

The resort business in this vicinity had preceded even the timber cruisers. In 1895 George Washington Buck built his famous Divide Resort at the wasp-waisted narrows of Turtle Lake, so remote that the only way the first fishermen-guests could reach it was in a canoe towed up the Turtle River by men trudging along the bank all the way up from the train station at Mercer. The resort grew to a huge complex complete with its own pioneer electric plant and bowling alley, but withered and died in the 1930's. No comparable lodge ever followed it. **Presque Isle** resorting had begun about 1896 with a fishing camp similar to the early Buck camp; one sporting magazine of the period mentions a camp, just getting to which required a train trip, a stage ride, a boat trip, a mile and a quarter hike, another boat trip, and a canoe trip with two portages!

Lodges and housekeeping colonies followed a generation or so later, on Presque Isle Lake, notably, but the resort business never grew on the scale that it attained in southern parts of the county. Summer homes popped up here and there even before 1900, several by World War I. One of the lakes that was marked by early homes ----- impressive for their time ----- was Crab Lake, especially on its lovely islands.

Presque Isle bills itself as the last wilderness, but it is seeing a significant growth of activity, symbolized by the handsome summer homes lately built around its lakes and by new interest in winter hospitality and sports.

SIGHTSEEING AND TOURING

WINCHESTER AREA

Winchester village, AREA west shore of South Turtle Lake off old Highway O. Offers hints of what a mill village was like; townsite was sold a couple times before division as individual homes and lots, and homes were sold for materials in that time. Double or triple the number of uniform homes in your mind, for an accurate picture, and add a long narrow boarding house and inn on the northeast hillside and a big store below the hill. The quiet old barn in the town site was the lumber company's veterinary barn. An abstraction of standard home design can be drawn from common details and shapes among existing, remodeled homes.

Highway W between Highway J and Highway O has early and bright fall colors.

Papoose Lake Road has rugged landscape of small kettles and ridges; an entire little logging community, Buswell, with a large mill complex and rail network, once stood on Papoose Lake; it died after the mill burned in 1910.

Lake Adelaide area, off old Highway O north; rugged landscape, pretty lake, site of opening scenes of film *Adventures of a Young Man*, based on early Ernest Hemingway short stories and still seen now and then on late-night television. Unmarked road, off north part of loop around lake, leads to Trostel Fire Tower, a ladder-type tower not for the faint of heart.

PRESQUE ISLE AREA

Walleye Rearing Ponds of the DNR, in town; interpretive sign along road above them; 1949 renovation of early millpond area. Newly hatched walleye grow into finger lings in a summer here. In laborious five-man seinings visible several mornings a week in August DNR employees net the fingerlings for planting in area lakes.

Shanty Boy Hill ----- if you can find it! Heavily overgrown, slight knob on ridge overlooking Highway B a few hundred feet north of village hall, marked by an apple tree and wildflowers in season, this was the potter's field for old loggers from 1905 to 1926; only a few stones stand or lie there, one ironically reading, "Gone but not forgotten."

Highway B is extremely pretty all the way to Land O' Lakes. It offers two nice wayside picnic spots and views of rugged southern ridges, and passes many lakes and bogs on both sides. (See Land O'Lakes too.)

Crab Lake Road south from Beast. Lakes, deep woods, scenic homes; area near Crab Lake was logged for the first time only in 1942-43; the millpond still hides near Town Dock Road, artery to a good access to handsome Crab Lake.

South Crab Lake Road, off Crab Lake Road near its south end, supplies, I think, the area's boldest ridge and kettle scenery, heavily shaded; follow 49ers Road to its end and a little monument to one Joseph Anicich, and the brief side run down Diamond Point Road.

Lynx Lake Road, south from B, skirts north fringe of heavy ridge area.

RECREATION

CANOEING

Horsehead to Crab lakes, including two intermediate lakes amid the finest of rugged northwoods scenery; four miles, landing to landing, but roam a bit en route!

CANOE TRIP SERVICE AND RENTAL

Armour Lake Resort, Crab Lake Road, Presque Isle. Outfitting; pick-up service.

FISHING

Moraine Springs Trout Farm, Palmer Road north from old Highway W. Fee fishing for trout in pretty setting below the glacial moraine; 686-2461 for hours.

PARKS, BEACH, RECREATION AREA

Presque Isle Lake County Park, south from Highway W. Public beach.

Winchester Fishing Pier, off Highway W between two taverns in business district. Picnic tables, fishing pier, and (during my visit) aggressive muskies.

Winchester Town Park, old O. Pretty site, tennis courts, play field, shelter.

SHOOTING

Black Powder and Turkey Sticks, scored by Winchester Arms, check locally.

SKIING / CROSBY COUNTRY

Crosby Country Ski Area, Highway W south near Highway J, 16 miles (novice to expert) in wooded moraine area opened 1977, with later extension possible. Joint effort of civic agencies and landowner. Consolidated Papers, Inc.

SNOWMOBILING

The northwestern portion of Vilas County is closest to the snow belt that makes possible the ski hills in the Gogebic Range. Thus snowmobiling may linger later in this area or begin earlier than elsewhere in the county. Trails are groomed by individuals, businesses, or resorts, and by the Presque Isle Sno-Bunnies Club.

SHOPPING AND BROWSING

Artisan Industries, downtown Presque Isle. Designers/manufacturers of quality custom furniture. Tables figure importantly in their line; the firm works only in northern hardwoods. Showroom closed Sunday.

Steincraft, 4.5 miles east on Highway B, Monday-Friday in summer, by chance rest of year. In a workshop that has long been a tourist mecca, Cecil Stein fabricates or lathe-turns candlesticks and other wood items for home or gifting, plus a few pixyish novelties.

The Wooden End, in town. An appealing little workroom and shop where a Stein protege makes turned-wood lamps and similar items.

DINING

Skyview Supper Club, Highway W, two miles west of Presque Isle; closed Tuesday, all year, 686-2928. Carpeted dining rooms, small salad bar; family operated; very clean. Very good food and treatment of guests put the Skyview on my small list of personal favorites. Especially good fish fry. Cocktails.

Zastrow's Lynx Lake Lodge, four miles east of Presque Isle on Highway B; nightly, all year, closed Wednesday, September-May, 686-2249. Small, low, rustic dining room; full menu, summer smorgasbord, fish buffet. Cocktails.

During 1977 Winchester saw many changes in its dining places. The Bear burned, but its owner pledged the return of his "world record chicken." Two other dining places changed hands in mid season, and since its change, Turtle Lake Lodge showed real promise, with good and reasonably priced meals, including steaks; Highway W, business area; evenings, all year, 686-2343.

The Retreat Bar, Highway P about two miles south of W; all year. A neighbor hood tavern that I like for its companionable owners and clientele, its sandwiches or Tombstone pizza, and its stressing Leinenkugel's beer. Raccoons often feed outside the picture window.

LODGING

The Bear, Winchester business district. Dormitory or private room accommodations (central toilets, showers) for Art LaHa's Bow Hunters Camp in fall and for skiers in winter. Colorful north country atmosphere (new in 1977). Bar, dining.

Brown's Point Resort, Presque Isle, east side Presque Isle Lake off P, all year. House-keeping, seven paneled cottages, mostly carpeted, on a scenic point with sandy cul-de-sac beach in the foreground; very nice lake; hospitable young hosts.

Shoreline Resort, Highway P near W (Route 1, Manitowish Waters), mid May-mid October. Housekeeping, four charmingly remodeled little cottages with carpet, paneling, little decks facing the lake, sand beach, nice lake. Pleasant owners. Bar.

Simon's Sunrise, Highway P, near Pat Presque Isle Lake (Route 1, Manitowish Waters), seasonal. Housekeeping, fine physical plant of lawns, uniform cottages (six) side by side, well equipped and appointed, scenic view, dining area.

Sportsman's Resort, Highway P south Winchester, all year, 686-2232. Six motel units, kitchenettes in each, scenic lake, beach.

Zastrow's Lynx Lake Lodge, four miles east of Presque Isle on B. American plan all year or housekeeping September-June, 10 comfortable cottages or two duplexes; sand beach. Winter sports. Dedicated and energetic owner, never stop upgrading. Bar.

Car-Lee Campsite, west shore of Turtle Lake Winchester townsite (Post Office Box 20), May-October. 20 units.

The Pondorosa, Presque Isle, on W, May-December. 24 units.

EVENTS

Independence Day, Winchester.

Walleye Fry, Presque Isle, a Friday in July. Features the walleye capital's specialty. Since 1965.

Firemen's Picnic, Presque Isle, a Sunday in early August. Contests, water fights between fire departments, refreshments.

Colorama, both towns, with different dinners or festivities.

Ice Fishing Jamboree, January, Winchester fishing pier; also Presque Isle.

INFORMATION

Write Winchester Township - Chamber of Commerce, Winchester 54567 or Presque Isle Information Center, Presque Isle 54557.

Public library, in town, Presque Isle town hall. Hours posted.