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# BRIEF HISTORY OF SAYNER AND STAR LAKE

As presented by Mrs. Mabel DeWitt before the Vilas County Historical Society at Sayner, January 5, 1955

In the early summer of 1889 Orris Wesley Sayner, who had been operating his father's farm near Eau Claire for the past six years, and wanting something different to do, answered an ad in a Chicago paper asking for a guide to accompany a wealthy Chicago couple, Mr. and Mrs. Chas. H. Tatum, in exploring the wilds of Northern Wisconsin in view of finding a good location for a summer home. He was accepted so left by train to Wausau, where he met the Tatums. At that time, Wausau was the land office for all the sales of land North.

After getting the necessary information, maps and location of land for sale, Mr. and Mrs. Tatum, accompanied by Mr. Sayner, left by train for Tomahawk. There buying a canoe and light camping equipment, they paddled up the river into many lakes and waters--Manitowish, Spider, Ballard, Star Lake, Plum and Big St. Germain Lake. Then through the thoroughfare into a small lake now known as Lake Content. As soon as Mrs. Tatum had a good view of the lake the beautiful surroundings, she called out, "This is the place. Here we shall be content". In a short time the building was underway. Help was obtained from Eagle River. Logs were taken from the land, cut and hewn for two houses--the summer home and the caretaker's cabin. The remaining necessary building materials were brought in by tote team for Eagle River.

The only person living within miles of this place was a part-Indian trapper, Joe Blair, shacking on the shore of Big St. Germain Lake. He helped with the work around the Tatum Place, also guiding them hunting and fishing.

In April, 1890, O. W. Sayner moved his family to Lake Content. Here he was to caretaker, builder, and handyman. His family consisted to his wife, Cora, two sons (Wesley, six years old and Silas who was four) and a daughter, Mable (the author) who was four months old. A short time later his brother, Frank Sayner, came from Eau Claire to assist with the building and work around the place.

In August, 1890, another son, Richard, was born to the O. W. Sayers, the first white child born between Eagle River and Minocqua.

Mr. Sayner, having the summer resort plan in his mind, took out a homestead on Plum Lake, later buying it in, cleared the forest for putting up a tent, which took him one week. The only tools he had were a double bitted ax, a square, and a one man saw. In the spring of 1892, the Sayers moved to Plum Lake, living in the tent, expecting to have a house up before winter set in. But with the difficulties and hardships to be met, this was not accomplished. So they lived in the tent all winter, the first white settlers in the vicinity. The Indians were very friendly and helpful, showing Mr. Sayner how to tan the deer hides, and to make mittens and moccasins for the family. Otherwise, the children would go barefoot, as there was no money to buy shoes, besides Mr. Sayner had to walk the way to Eagle River and carry provisions, and necessities home on his back, a distance then of thirty miles--as the Indian trails

wound in and out through the forest. He could make the round trip in fifteen to eighteen hours, if all went well. But there were times when the wolves smelling the food, followed too close behind for comfort. Then Mr. Sayner would gather birch bark and start a fire. This kept the wolves back, and gave him time to get wood, which was available near the trail. At times he had to keep fire for several hours, or until it became daylight, when the wolves left for the deep forest.

In the spring of 1893 the main lodge was well underway so Mr. Sayner knew he would be able to keep fishermen for the summer. He managed to pick up a few second hand tents. His brother Frank had built some boats. He was very fortunate in getting possession of two large dogs, which he trained for harness. The first guests were eager fishermen, prepared for the hardships of travel, and rugged living conditions. To hear Mr. Sayner tell of how he brought in his first guests by primitive dog team from Eagle River was well worth listening to.

This was the third summer resort in the North. The first was the L. Thomas at Lac Vieux Desert; the second, Seth Conover on Big Twin Lake.

Mrs. Sayner lived here two years before seeing a white woman. She was thankful for the Indian company. She made friends with the animals and birds. She always declared that the fish knew her walk, and voice, when she went out on the long dock to feed them. She would get down near the water, call, and talk to them. And it was surprising how they came to the surface, played and jumped around.

In the fall of 1893 Mr. Herb Warner walked down from Michigan exploring the country and looking for a good place to trap for the winter. He got to Joe Blair's shack on Big St. Germain Lake, stayed there that winter, and the next summer guided at the Sayner resort, guiding there each season, until fall of 1898, then marrying the cook at the resort. They started a summer resort of their own, "The Forest Home Resort" on the opposite side of Plum Lake. This was a homestead also.

Mr. Warner became the first town assessor, held other town offices through the years, rendering much service to the developing of the community, in later years was elected county surveyor, which office he held for some time.

In December 1894 the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad Company had completed a line from Minocqua to Star Lake. William Salsich and Co. of McKenna, Wisconsin, put in a large saw mill and lumber camps at Star Lake.

In 1895 Star Lake was quite a town: A large saw mill, 84 to 90 company houses, a boarding house, ware houses, general store, butcher shop, three room school with three teachers employed, resident physician with a nice office, large hotel and summer resort, "The Hotel Waldeheim".

This was the start of the lumbering industry of the Star Lake and Plum Lake area.

The Sayner children started school at Star Lake in September 1895,

going by boat until the lake started to freeze over; then walked up the railroad track mornings and back at night until the ice was safe to cross over with dog team. They had the dogs trained to return home after taking the children in the morning. Then when it was time in late afternoon to get the children, Mr. Sayner would take the dogs on the lake to get them started. The dogs never failed being there when school let out. They had a shelter to get under at the school, if they were ahead of time.

Many homesteaders were coming into the territory. One in particular, was "Gene Sheppard", a lumber cruiser and surveyor, having a homestead on Ballard Lake, then building the famous summer resort, "The Ferncroft Inn", the one time home of the renowned "Hodag", the man devouring animal supposedly roaming the forest of northern Wisconsin. The invitation of this animal by Mr. Sheppard was so cleverly done that for many years people were fooled and actually believed this "Hodag", the man devouring animal, lived. It was kept at the resort during the summer season, then moved to Rhinelander for the winter, where Mr. Sheppard had a home. It finally perished in a fire at the resort in the early nineteen hundreds.

"The magic perfumed moss", growing near this resort was another attraction for the tourists in the early days. Whenever it rained during the night and the sun shone bright the next morning, Gene Sheppard, would get up long before his guests were awake, sprinkle the moss growing on the trees, with perfume. Then right after breakfast he would guide the guests out to gather the moss. Many sent out pieces of this moss by parcel post to all parts of the country. Articles appeared in newspapers; very few ever found out that they were parties to provicial joking.

In 1897 O. W. Sayner became acting postmaster. The depot was built and the railroad company put up the station sign "Sayner" naming it after the first white settler. Mr. Sayner became permanent postmaster in 1898, which office he held for twenty five years.

The first school was held in one of the Sayner Resort cottages in the fall of 1898 with six pupils enrolled, four of them from the Sayner family. The schools first teacher was Jessie Hoffman, from Arbor Vitae many Friday nights after school she walked down the railroad track a distance of thirteen miles, in order to get home over the week ends. She would get a ride back on the logging train early Monday mornings.

The first school house was built and occupied in fall of 1899. The county superintendent was Alex Higgins at the time. He visited the Star Lake and Sayner school during the winter, coming from Eagle River on snow shoes. Grant Cook became school superintendent later and also made the trip on snow shoes. The roads were not kept open as of today.

In early part of 1898 the Mike Froelich family took out a homestead on Lost Lake, making their headquarters at Minocqua the first year. Then after the school was built in Sayner in the fall of 1899 the Froelich children attended school here, walking out each morning and back at night. The weather did not interfere in those early days. The children were more about concerned about a full attendance report card than 35 or 40 below zero weather.

These things were not considered hardships in those days. It was all in the stride of every day living.

Mrs. Froelich was always ready to serve the community and surrounding territory in any emergency, brought many new born babies into the world with out the assistance of doctors and long before undertakers came into this territory she gave service to the dead.

Getting a doctor, or getting to a doctor was a difficult task in the old days. Sick folks were hauled out on toboggans, some taken on hand cars; some starting out with team of horses with no roads plowed, taking extra time and men along for shoveling the way through usually to Minocqua, where there was a Sisters hospital during the early logging days.

If a man developed a bad tooth ache in the night he would start out walking down the railroad track to Minocqua so as to get the tooth pulled as soon as possible.

Like all communities we have had our joys and blessings, our sorrow and trouble. But often I think back to the many pleasures we had long before the day of automobiles, the long moonlight hayride parties, bob sled and tobogan slides, taffy pulls, basket socials, spelling bees, and the different "Bees" in helping out the neighbors.

I really believe that the young folks of today are missing much that we used to have in the "Good Old Days".

Mrs. Mable Sayner DeWitt