

EL DORADO ISLAND

By Gene Wicklund

Frank Rohr was in a quintessential quandary that summer of 1937 - how to get enough cash for nails, windows and other necessities to start building cabins on the present site of Dancing Waters for a dream: Rohr's Resort.

His wife Vi, the former Violet LaVoie of Pine River, thought it might be a good idea to sell their island home. After all, they had lived in Frank's "Trapper's Cabin" since their marriage in 1925. Their three daughters, Mary, Theresa and Francie were anxious to move, too. They had been born on the island and were tired of negotiating Frank's foot-bridge which spanned the channel to what is now Hand Lake Public Access. (The bridge, incidentally, sunk in the soft bottom and snagged many a daredevil over the years.)

Frank had exercised Squatter's Rights in about 1921 and moved onto the island and built his log cabin nestled into the bank directly across from the Public Access. Frank's Pine River relatives were all pleased that he was settled in his Bit of Wilderness where he was, as he used to say, "Happy as a pig in mud."

But now he would be happier, fulfilling his dream to build his own resort. He was driving to town to sell the island, he told my Dad on the road. (Dad was Cass County Superintendent of Schools and had to "scare up" enough votes to win this elective position and had been visiting schools in the area.)

In this very unique piece of property, Dad was interested. Frank agreed to sell the 2.2 acre island to my father, Joseph Waldemar Wicklund, formerly of Pine River with Joann, 10, myself, 6, and our mother Eldora Wicklund (nee Robideau of Pine River). What dad secured from Frank that early summer day, July 8th of 1937, were Frank's Squatter's Rights, which is in the nature of a right at common law. A Quitclaim deed was drawn up which transferred Frank's interests in the island to my Dad.

Dad applied to the United States Land Office in Washington, D.C. (most islands were federally owned at that time) after having the island surveyed. Dad was given a five-year lease to 1944. He reapplied in 1944 and the decision by the U.S. Land Office was made to sell. According to Dad in 1989 (he died in May, 1990) the Official Deed was issued in 1951. A cabin was built in 1948 on the east bank with an addition made in 1958. (Frank's original log cabin had deteriorated during World War II and was torn down.)

Our cabin, directly across from the Public Access, was built in 1959. In 1970 Dad and Mom deeded the property to my sisters and me.

Since I worked in the Minneapolis Public Schools, we were able to spend full summers on the island from 1959 to 1970. We spend time on "El Dorado" (named after my mother, Eldora) whenever possible. It's really tranquil living on Hand Lake. We're hoping to do more of it in the future.

My sister Joann and her husband, Bernard, owns a cottage on 100 feet of mainland directly across from the north end of the island. Their children are frequent residents of their property. My sister Elizabeth is beginning to spend more and more time in the original cabin with her children. Our children are getting into the "island spirit" and are also beginning to get up to the lake more often.

Frank Rohr, now deceased, the son of old Bill Rohr, a Pine River blacksmith, did indeed fulfill his dream. He built three beautiful log cabins on the Dancing Waters site and named them Bluebird, Canary, and Robin (or Red Bird) with accompanying color schemes. Frank and Vi, and son Billy, ran the resort rather successfully until the mid-fifties.

But originally, Frank, still in his teens, went trapping and spent twelve very happy (but I'm sure, very hard) years in his own little world, The Island. He and Vi had a cow and a garden on the upper part of the island, Frank also did his share of moonshining during Prohibition. He called it his "cash crop."

My Dad's nickname was "Baldy." I can still remember going over to Rohr's Resort with Dad to borrow one of Frank's many_ tools. Dad would ask for the loan of his tool and invariably Frank, giving consent in his own special way, would reply, "Hell ya, Baldy!"