

Webster Brown's family celebrates cottage's centennial

By Meredyth Albright

Editor

One hundred years ago while Webster Brown and his brothers, Anderson and Edward, were building Rhinelander Paper Company, he was also building a foundation for his family.

That turned out to be Wa-be-ka-nish, the family cabin on First Lake on the Moen's chain.

Now six generations later, more than 50 descendants of Webster Brown reunited at Wa-be-ka-nish to celebrate its 100th anniversary.

Webster, Rhinelander's first mayor, and his brothers became familiar with the Moens Chain as they were logging in the area. Family lore has it that while Webster and his wife, Juliet, were searching for the perfect site, their daughter, Edna caught a musky from the gently, sloping, sandy beach. That clinched the decision-making process.

In 1903 Webster's sons, Ralph and Allan, constructed the cabin which was intended to be for gatherings and house parties for Webster, Juliet and their children Ralph, Edna, Dorothy, Richard and Allan.

The cabin was constructed with sleeping quarters for men and women and separate ends of the structure. In between were the kitchen, dining room and living room. All rooms opened onto the large porch, which has served as a meeting and relaxing point for six generations.

Once the cabin was completed, it was time to name it. Legend has it that Wa-be-ka-nish, is the name of an American Indian with whom Webster was familiar when the family lived in Oneida County, New York.

This weekend's reunion finds family members sharing stories, photographs and memories of their ancestors and building relationships with their relatives.

Webster's daughter, Edna inherited the cabin, which continues to popular vacation spot for her descendants as well as those of her siblings.

Not everyone comes every year, nor do all of them come at the same time, but every one seems to manage to touch base every three or four years.

"This has been a gathering place for cousins to meet," said Sarah Nigh, the daughter of Webster's grandson,, Edward, who died a year ago. Nigh has been coming to the cabin every summer since childhood and now spends a month here each year reconnecting with her heritage.

Four generations of Webster Brown's descendants, ranging in age from 87 to three years-old are represented at this weekend's reunion. They traveled from Montana, Idaho, Washington, Nevada, Massachusetts, Georgia, Florida, Minnesota, Arizona, New Mexico, Maine, New York, Ohio, Kansas and Wisconsin.

Activities haven't changed much over the years, swimming, fishing, boating and talking are still the favorite activities. Then there are the trips to Mosquito Island on Fifth Lake. Just about every family member has a special memory of one of those trips. Those memories range from getting fishing lures caught in a hand, camping under canoes, towing canoes full of youngsters back by boat during a rain storm.

The family of Webster Brown has spread far from its Rhinelander roots, yet Wa-be-ka-nish keeps bringing the family home.