



MANITOWISH WATERS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

November 2021

Wild Rice: Historically Significant ...and Tastes Good, Too!

By Jim Bokern



A painting by Frances Badger of wild rice harvesting. Read about Frances, the influence of the Northwoods on her painting, and our newest additions to the Koller Library on page 3.

For thousands of years, wild rice has been critical to the Northwoods' Indigenous People communities. The quest for **Manoomin** (wild rice) motivated the 500 years of the Anishinaabe/Ojibwa migration from the northeast coast along the Atlantic to the region around Lake Superior. Wild rice harvest and stewardship of wild rice resources remain natural and cultural resource priorities for the Ojibwa.

Previously, historians argued the Ojibwa moved from Lake Superior into Wisconsin's lake region to expand their fur trade commerce. Modern and Ojibwa

historians strongly suggest expanding wild rice access was the primary motivation for the Ojibwa to battle the Fox and Dakota Sioux for control of the lake region surrounding Manitowish Waters.

Simply put for the Ojibwa, wild rice was the most reliable and prolific storable food for winter. By the 1880s, river drive logging and dams destroyed many traditional rice beds. Surviving wild rice beds, like those above Big Lake, became precious resources for late 19th and early 20th century Ojibwa.

Today, wild rice (actually a grass) has expanded its range since the turn of the 20th century,

though rice harvests and wild rice fields continue to struggle to reach their historic production. Next time you enjoy a dish with wild rice examine it to see if you are consuming dark and hard commercial wild rice or the rice from the Northwoods' lakes and streams. Our native wild rice cooks quickly, is softer, and appears less dark in color.

We celebrate the historical significance of wild rice to our area with this edition of our newsletter. And might we suggest a wild rice stuffing for your Thanksgiving bird?

The Manitowish Waters Historical Society will hold its annual meeting and elect officers for 2022 at 4 p.m., Wednesday, December 15, 2021 at the Community Center.

All members of the MWHS are invited to attend and participate.

A Word From Our President



Jim Bokern

2021 has proven to be a banner year for the Northwoods and the Manitowish Waters Historical Society (MWHS). Coming off of COVID restrictions and enjoying a warm summer, folks loved all the fantastic choices surrounding the Manitowish chain. That spirit of engagement

and enthusiasm spilled over to MWHS activities!

We started early in 2021 with new online engagement through three historic presentations via Zoom and historic videos on YouTube. Throughout the summer, we conducted a record 43 public pontoon tours, helping our members and friends celebrate MW history. Currently, the MWHS is planning to conduct 55 pontoon tours in 2022. All of the 2021 MWHS accomplishments are too many to enumerate here, but check them out [here](#).

2021 marked a shift in MWHS financing and documenting of MW history. In April, we set an ambitious

goal of raising \$50,000 to hire tech savvy interns to digitally document, share and preserve our history over the next few years. During the first six years of MWHS operations, we came to witness a gap in volunteer digital skills to build our 21st century historical society. I am pleased to report that we have exceeded our fundraising goal with over 150 generous donations from our friends, totaling more than \$53,000. I am looking forward to share more in our initial fundraising annual report in May of 2022, but for now, a heartfelt thank you to all!

I am also pleased to report numerous ongoing partnerships with the North Lakeland Discovery Center, Camp Jom, Koller Library, the DNR, the MW Chamber of Commerce and several businesses, leading to new and exciting historic destinations. New interpretive trails, a forest history museum, historic videos, cultural displays, and guided tours along our many trails are all being explored.

We wish you all a great holiday season and wonderful New Year.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jim Bokern', written over a light yellow rectangular background.

MWHS needs your help!

Wanted for Digital Archiving

Photographs of:

- Joe the mynah bird from Rudy's Rest Haven (currently Parkside being renovated into Allswell)
- Voss' Marina (currently Greer's Pier)
- Bear pictures from the MW Dumps (currently the MW transfer station and other sites)
- Poor Henry's or early Northern Lights bar (currently Aurora Borealis)
- Anything depicting your family's history!

Your generosity has helped us in the past to document and pass along these treasured memories from MW history. Please keep an eye out for old photo collections that might contain these gems. We would like to scan any of your high quality images to share and return the originals to you. Thank you!

MWHS Board of Directors

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Any questions or comments on our newsletter can be directed to Jean Bettenhausen at jmcbett@gmail.com or Frank DiLeonardi at fdileonardi@icloud.com.

Portraits of Beauty: Ojibwa Wild Rice Harvesting

By Kay Krans

Frances Badger, a prominent Chicago artist and muralist during FDR's Work Progress Administration (WPA) program in the 1930s, spent her summers in the Northwoods. Her art was influenced by the beauty of the area and Ojibwa wild rice harvesting.

Her interest in painting started very early in her life. At the age of 7, her parents enrolled her in art classes through the Art Institute of Chicago. After secondary school, she attended and graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago where she later taught as well.

Her life in the Northwoods began even earlier. In 1908, at the age of four, Frances and her family first arrived in a beautiful area of old growth timber and cabins which was their new estate on Big Lake in Vilas County, Wisconsin. The virgin timber had been left surrounding their property, but the rest of the area was already clear cut.

There were no roads leading to this summer retreat, and so the family boarded a train in Chicago and rode it to Manitowish, which Frances stated was no larger than a "whistle stop" on the main line of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. They left Chicago at 5 p.m. and made stops in Milwaukee and Wausau. Her mother always had sandwiches along for everyone.

The family would reach Manitowish early in the morning and have breakfast at Lee Doriot's before journeying to Big Lake. Doriot's were their caretakers at Big Lake as well. After breakfast, the next part of the trip was by horse and buggy to the Dam (Rest Lake) where they were greeted by the Plunkett family. Next, they loaded onto a launch that carried the family and supplies through Rest, Stone, Mud (Fawn) and Clear lakes. Then the group had to portage two miles and then climb aboard row boats for a two-mile ride to their estate, named "The Tamaracks."

If the supplies did not arrive with the family, fish had to be caught for dinner. Her mother soon decided to change the name of the estate to "Keego," the Ojibwa word meaning "fish," and Big Lake was a place to catch lots of fish.

Frances described the property as a group of 12 log cabins each with specific purpose. For example, cabin two became first her playhouse and then her art studio. There were sleeping cabins, a living room cabin, and a dining cabin as well as others. According to Frances, most of the cabins were peeled log in the English cabin style, and several made in the French



style. English style, by her definition, were cabins built with the logs horizontal, and French style meant log cabins built in the vertical style.

When the family acquired the estate, the cabins and pavilion that was built over the water were filled with the previous owner's artifacts from around the world. Her parents added their own touch with items like a wonderful chair from Holland that fit well into the pavilion. The family entertained guests and enjoyed the peace of the Northwoods.

The one necessity for Mr. Badger was a phone to connect him to his business in Chicago. Frances' grandfather had been a banker and corresponded with Abraham Lincoln on how to best bring the financial worlds of the North and the South back together after the Civil War. Her father was a lumber merchant. That phone was likely one of the first phones in the region.

As Frances grew older, her parents decided to run Keego as a girl's camp during the summer. When the A. S. Badger Girls Camp ended in the summer of 1920, three Pullman cars awaited in Lac du Flambeau for the young passengers for their ride home to Chicago. That summer 50 girls lived at Keego from the end of June until early September.

Keego bordered Big Lake and Rice Creek. Across the creek, Ojibwa people had camps for gathering and processing wild rice. From a young age, Frances would have interacted and observed Ojibwa people making baskets, gathering rice, processing rice, and selling berries.

All were welcome at Keego. Frances told a friend the story of an Ojibwa man coming to the Badgers and borrowing their birchbark canoe for ricing.

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One morning, she looked at the shore, and there was their boat, back in its place. She went to look at it, and there in the canoe was 50 pounds of rice, finished and ready for the family to enjoy for the year.

After Frances graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago, she became a well-known Chicago artist. Many *Chicago Tribune* articles mention her in art shows, and critics expressed their approval of her work. During the Great Depression, she went to work for Franklin D. Roosevelt's WPA Project. There she painted murals in the Chicago area.

Two of the paintings depict the Ojibwa Rice Camp along the shore of Rice Creek, near Keego. One is a scene of Ojibwa processing rice, and the other is of them gathering rice. These original watercolors are the property of the St. Charles, Illinois Library. They may have been prototypes for a mural. The library had giclee prints made at a Chicago printer for the Manitowish Waters Historical Society, and they are now hanging in the Koller Library.



Frances Badger and her father in 1910

Our gratitude goes out to the **St. Charles Library** for the special effort they made so these depictions of an important way of life for the Ojibwa can be viewed in the Northwoods. From the memory of a young woman who became an important Chicago artist, we can take a glimpse back to a time when birch-bark canoes and Ojibwa families quietly came through the Manitowish Waters Region and did the fall gathering of a food that is still so important to them culturally and spiritually.

Ojibwa History Lessons



Teaching Ojibwa history to young students today is an important endeavor for our neighbors in Lac du Flambeau and elsewhere. These lessons include the importance of the birchbark canoe and wild rice.

For a short video on these lessons, click [here](#).

Down on the Wild Rice Farm



By Barbara LaPorte Bartling

Most of us are familiar with the native wild rice that grows in our area's lakes and rivers, but did you know we had a commercial producer of wild rice in our neighborhood for 25 years?

LaRoe Farms, Inc., owned by **Cal LaPorte and Benji Roemer**, was one of only two Wisconsin producers that cultivated wild rice for sale on the commercial market. In 1971, LaRoe Farms purchased 600 acres of land north of Highway 51 at the Vilas/Iron county line. It took eight years to remove the tamarack and black spruce trees, dig ditches, and build dikes to prepare 200 acres for rice production. The first crop was planted and harvested in 1980.

Wild rice is an annual plant, but it self-seeds every year when the ripe seed kernels drop into the water bottom to germinate the following spring. In June, the rice "paddies" on the farm would be flooded so the plants could germinate and grow to the floating leaf stage. The water would then slowly be drawn down as the rice stalks grew and the seed kernels matured. The crop would be harvested mid to late August and sent to a processing facility in northern Minnesota.

Commercial farming of this native grain presented several



challenges beyond the normal concerns of weather and pests. Too many rice kernels re-seeded every spring due to the density of the crop. To solve this crowding issue, an airboat fitted with cutters would be driven through the plants at the floating leaf stage to thin it.

Driving heavy combine tractors on the swampy peat at harvest time, after the paddies had been flooded for several months, always resulted in equipment getting mired in mud. Occasionally, the peat was too wet and deep to even harvest the crop. A fire that started from a tractor spark in the peat soil caused issues for several years

(summer and winter) as the fire would burn underground and then suddenly ignite again.

The most significant threat, however, was when California entered this industry. They boasted a mild climate, fewer crop diseases and established white rice paddies that resulted in high-yielding wild rice crops, driving retail prices below the cost of production in the Midwest.

In 1995, having expanded to 400 acres of wild rice, Cal sold his interest in the farm to Benji. To balance the falling returns from the wild rice crop, LaRoe Farms began converting some of the paddies to cranberry beds. The final wild rice crop was harvested in 2005.



Recalling Wild Rice and Hollywood

*Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt from a journal penned by **Lottie Rintelman** in 1958 of her time on Clear Lake from 1941-1958. You can read the entire journal [here](#). The reference to "Mary and Tommie" is **Tom and Mary Haskins**. Mary was a daughter of **Dan Devine**, one of the early settlers of Manitowish Waters.*

"Wild Rice is a delicacy today, and well it might be when one begins to realize what tasks are involved in gathering and curing it. Wild rice has been know(n) to be the Indians friend, and we as adopted Americans have learned a great deal about food from the real natives—the Indians. For many years, the Indians have labored gathering rice, selling some and retaining some for their own use. Mary and Tommie (as his

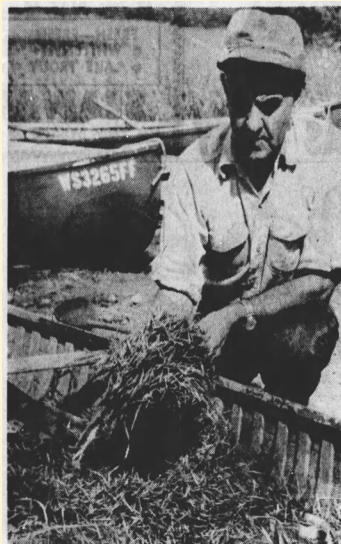
friends call him) have learned enough from their parents to follow the old methods of gathering and curing. In the late summer, they tie bunches together with a rope made from dried and cured bass wood strips. In tying it, they float their canoe close to the beds in the lake, separating it here and there into bunches so the rice can ripen and dry. In a week's time, dependant (sic) on the weather, they again go into the beds with their canoe—bend the stalks over the canoe and shake the kernels loose. It takes many hours and many days to gather a hundred pounds of rice. The rice then has to be shucked, this is done by shaking a small amount in a flat birch basket, loosening the shucks which fly away from the kernel. After this process is completed, it is left to dry and then comes the

roasting process. We have watched them and fully appreciate why the price of wild rice should be what it is today. It really takes patience. First a fire is built out in the open and when it comes to the charcoal stage a small quantity of rice is poured in a tub, placed over the fire and roasted. By means of a paddle, the rice is kept stirred while it roasts to a light brown color. Then it is wild rice as we buy it in the store. How easy to cook it—what a tedious job to get it that far!

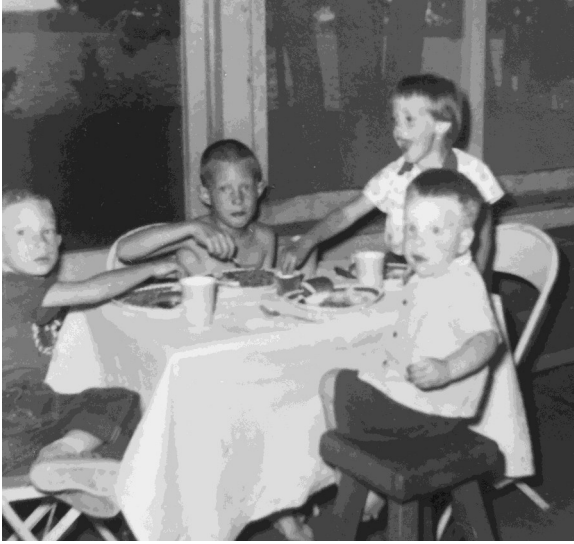
It might be interesting to note that scouters from a Hollywood Studio appreciated rice gathering and curing so much that a few years ago they shot films of Mary and Tom while in the process of gathering it in Big Lake."

Harvesting of Wild Rice a Vanishing Art

By 1964, the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* noted that the harvesting of wild rice was becoming a lost art. Read about a local take on harvesting wild rice [here](#).



The Schlender Family Cottage



Kids on the Porch

By Cathy LaForge Tonkin

Our family summer cottage is on Manitowish Lake. My mother's grandfather, Julius Albert Schlender, built it in 1906. He owned and operated a thriving merchant tailor business in Hurley, Wisconsin, when it was a boom town, and could well afford to join colleagues in the purchase of land on Manitowish Lake for summer vacation use.

Jules courted Libby O'Rourke for a year, became engaged, and eventually married in 1893. Jules had a large home built for them on 2nd Avenue in Hurley with a big front porch and a copula. They would raise their family and live the rest of their lives in this home. The Schlenders went on to have four children: Julius (known as Lyle), Allen, Esther and Francis, who died 19 days after his birth.

Julius got to know Louis Voight and Chris Christenson who ran the hardware store in Hurley. The three friends would spend quite a bit of time together socializing, fishing, hunting and vacationing in the Manitowish Lake area at Bucks, a local resort.

In 1904, Julius, Louis and Chris decided they wanted their own cottage on the lake so went in together and purchased one half of a quarter section of land on Manitowish Lake, containing 45.35 acres for \$453.50, or \$10 per acre. The property was later divided between the three friends.



The three fellows built a cottage on this land in 1905. Each of the three families had the cottage for one month that first summer. In 1906, Jules built a second cottage. It was a white frame building, to the west of what became Christenson's cottage, with three bedrooms, a kitchen, and a screen porch running along the length of the building facing the lake.



Back when getting to the cottage was such a long involved trip, the family would go down for the whole summer. Libby, her sister Sue, and the Schlender children, Lyle, Allen and Esther would go down in the beginning of June, and Jules would join them for a two-week vacation usually in July or August, depending how his business was doing.

In the early 1900s, the day-long trip to Manitowish was exhausting. The family had to take a train from Hurley to the township of Manitowish, then from there take a stage coach to the Manitowish Waters dam. The local resort owners would meet their guests at the dam, then take them by rowboat (then eventually motor boat) from the dam to their resorts. The Schlenders would get a ride with the Koerners to their place.

There was a tourist boom in the Northwoods from the 1890s to the late 1920s when many resorts and fishing camps sprang up around the many lakes in Vilas County. Also came the cafés, dance halls, bars,

and many businesses that catered to the vacationers. The Manitowish Waters area gained recognition during the 1920s. There were around 20 resorts that were drawing people from the larger cities to the south and from Ironwood and Hurley to the north.

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Esther was 16 when she came down with her first bout of tuberculosis. Her health continued to decline until her death on July 4, 1924 at the age of 23. Her brother Lyle also suffered from TB. He spent a summer recuperating at the family cottage. He eventually died of lung cancer when he was 60. (He never smoked.) Their brother Allen also had TB and suffered from it on and off his whole life. He died in 1933 at age 36.

Julius' son Lyle grew up going to their cottage, and it was there that he proposed to Teddy Ryan. They married on October 31, 1929, and spent their honeymoon in Manitowish. This was the first generation to honeymoon there as Lyle's daughter and granddaughter did the same.

Lyle and Teddy had two daughters who grew up going to the cottage. One of the daughters, Mary Beth, married John LaForge and raised her four kids going there, too. Her four grandkids did the same. When John's sister Maggie came to visit them at the cottage, she sometimes brought her friend Marie. One evening while they were setting the table for supper, Marie suggested that the kids have their own table on the porch so the adults could talk uninterrupted. This is where the phrase 'Kids on the Porch!' came from. "Kids on the Porch" is also the name of my book



on our family's history and is now available at Koller Library.

In the summer of 2006, the family had a big bash to celebrate the cottage's 100th birthday. We celebrated 100 years of warm summer nights, hot sunny days, songs, dances, parties, honeymoons, new babies, card games, boating, good neighbors, and laughs, laughs, and more laughs.

The Schlenders have been able to keep the cottage in the family through over 115 years of trials and tribulations, through two world wars, the depression of the '30s, and many lean years when it was tough to pay the taxes. It is a tribute to how much the cottage is loved that there was never a question of letting it go.

Editor's Note: Although the Schlender family story has nothing to do with wild rice, we wanted to continue featuring histories of local families in this issue. Please consider sharing your family story with the MWHS.

Mary Beth and John in vintage swim suits, 1947



Don't Forget to RENEW your 2022 dues! Membership & Donations

Those interested in joining the MWHS should complete the form below and send in your form with **\$20 to:**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society
P.O. Box 100
Manitowish Waters WI 54545

Those considering joining the Manitowish Waters Historical Society are encouraged to explore our web page, attend MWHS events and reach out to board members.

Student Memberships are available for \$2, renewing each May.

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P.O. Box 100
Manitowish Waters WI 54545

MW Historical Society is an approved 501c3 charitable organization, and contributions may be tax deductible. Please contact us for additional information.

Thank you for supporting the Manitowish Waters Historical Society.
Memberships renew each January.