

MANITOWISH WATERS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

June 2023

Islands in the Sun

Our wonderful chain of lakes is speckled with many islands that hold much history and many stories. We are featuring several of these islands of interest and intrigue in this issue of our newsletter. As we head into another summer of sun and fun, we invite you to learn a bit about our islands before that next boat trip around one or more of them.

The Big Island on Island Lake



Abe LaFave Circa 1920

By Kay Krans

Known as the Main Island, LaFave's Island or Hell's Half Acre, Gensburg Island, Greenwood Island, Simon's Island

The Island Lake Resort on LaFave's Island was homesteaded as early as 1888 by **Abe LaFave**, and by 1895, it was a well-known fishing resort.

LaFave, born in Canada, was the son of **Jean Baptiste Lefebvre** and **Magdelene Duval**. As a small boy, he worked in the cotton mills of New England and by 19 became a logger. Moving to Vilas County, he worked on Trout Lake as a fishing guide for **John**

Mann and worked the woods for the Chippewa Logging Co. He put together a fishing camp and started a guiding business.

An early description of the island was recorded by **Dr. O.W. Nixon** in the *Chicago Inter Ocean* newspaper. In 1896, Nixon and his party stayed "on a beautiful little island where LaFave has a clubhouse that can accommodate twenty fishermen and is arranged for both ladies and gentlemen. He has a good cook, comfortable beds, good guides, who know where the fish are, and excellent boats."

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Frank DiLeonardi

A Word From Our President

Hello Members and Friends.

I mentioned in our last newsletter that the MWHS board has been engaged in a strategic planning process so that we ensure we continue our mission, which you can see below.

Working with outside consultant and facilitator **Cathy Berch**, the board has landed on four key objectives for our near-term efforts:

- 1) Identify and increase the collection of history at risk: people and places
- 2) Populate the website based on the most compelling information
- 3) Increase engagement with our YouTube channel
- 4) Increase the number of volunteers and their involvement in committees

We have already completed several action steps toward achieving these objectives. We will keep you apprised on our progress.

By the time you read this, we will have just held a Volunteer Open House to share opportunities for you to participate more directly in achieving Objective 4 of our mission. If you weren't able to attend but want to learn more, drop me a note at fdileonardi@icloud.com, and we'll talk.

Spring and summer mean lots of things to celebrate in the Northwoods...family, friends, time on the water and in the woods, and so much more. It also

means a time to celebrate our history in a very direct way through our pontoon tours, hikes, drives and presentations. We hope to see you at one of our events, which you can check out at https://www.mwhistory.org/events/. To register for events, please do so with our partner, the North Lakeland Discovery Center: https://nldc.app.neoncrm.com/np/clients/nldc/publicaccess/eventList.jsp.

Finally, please join us for a special evening, 5-7 pm, Tuesday, June 6th at the NLDC as we honor this year's Leaders of Historic Preservation. **Michele** and **Tom Baer** have provided many items to our archives, including many of our MW Chamber of Commerce guides that supply so much of our historical insights. Also being honored is the staff of the Frank B. Koller Memorial Library: **Janelle Kohl, Sarah Krembs** and **Callie Bates.** It might be said that the MWHS started with the library.

Hope to see you this summer!

Regards,



MWHS Revised Mission Statement

To collect, preserve and share materials and information relating to the history of Manitowish Waters and the surrounding area so that we engage, educate and excite our members and community

MWHS Board of Directors

Frank DiLeonardi President - fdileonardi@icloud.com

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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.

The MW History is on the Tube!



Check out
MWHS YouTube Channel
for video presentations

We also have started Podcasts for your listening enjoyment Check them out!

Click or go to:

https://www.mwhistory.org/manitowishwaters-historical-society-pod-casts/

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The Big Island on Island Lake

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In 1897, LaFave began to build up his resort on the island. He married Sarah Noonan in 1898, and they built a main lodge and five cabins on the island. and later built a resort on the mainland. Sarah and Abe were hard workers and great work partners, and created a very successful business. worked hard on the island and had to depend on the older children to watch the young ones. There were several close

calls of losing little ones to drowning but all survived. Occasionally, the younger children were sent to live on the Plunkett farm during the busy summer months.

LaFave added a phone on the island with wires placed from island to island and then to the mainland. The telephone wires seemed to attract lightning, and Sarah had some close calls. One time, a celluloid comb was snapped from her head and flew 25 feet. Another time, a "blue ball of electricity about 10 inches in diameter was visible floating near the telephone."

The first family home on the island was called the "Big Cottage," a one-room log cabin 20' x 24'. It later became known as the "Front Cabin." Next, they built a larger cabin for the family on the north side of the island and finally their home in the center of the island. LaFave's Island Resort became a very popular fishing resort with repeat fishing parties and fishermen from near and far. "Abe LaFave probably knows more about catchina muskies than all the rest of us put together and says less" (Outers' Book -Recreation, August 1918, "The Queen of the Manitowish: The Fishing Ground of Island Lake," E.C. Potter).



His son, **John LaFave**, recorded many stories of growing up on Island Lake. He remembered that in the early days they didn't even use a water pump but simply drank, cooked and bathed in lake water. Guests drank spring water that was hauled by boat from a spring nearly a mile away. The island was a busy place with fishermen staying, guides coming and going, and a few people stopping for supplies.

When John LaFave was six vears old, two canoes of Oiibwe paddled their birchbark canoes up to the island. It was common for Ojibwe to stop as they sold blueberries to Sarah for some of her wonderful recipes. This time the canoes came in late August on a return trip from the wild rice fields on Big Lake. In one of the canoes, there was a coffin with a beautiful red blanket forming a seal under the lid with the body of a 15-year-old boy who had accidentally shot himself while hunting birds. John's older brothers knew the boy as they had attended Indian School at Odanah with him. After talking with Abe LaFave in Ojibwe about what had happened, the mourning party left to continue their trip to Lac du Flambeau through Spider, Manitowish and Alder lakes and then the Southgate canals.

As the 1930s arrived, Sarah passed away, and Abe decided to sell the island resort and concentrate on the mainland resort with the help of children and grandchildren. Enter Gensburg Island.

Louis Gensburg owned several businesses with his three brothers and was a real estate developer from Chicago, Illinois. Early in Gensburg's career, he made prizes for boxes of Cracker Jack. He and his brothers

owned Chicago Coin and Genco, manufacturers of coin machines, arcade machines, and pinball machines. Lou Gensburg also invented and patented parts that developed the spin cycle in washing machines. During WWII, the company produced artillery shell components. He and his brothers invested in real estate in Chicago and Las Vegas. Lou and his wife **Gert Gensburg** moved to Beverly Hills, California and summered in Manitowish Waters. In 1954-1955, Gensburg, his brothers, and the Marx Brothers (yes, Groucho) built the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas (known as the "Tall One" on the strip).

In 1935, Lou and Gert honey-mooned on the island, and it became their dream to make it their summer home, so they bought the island resort in 1937. Along with the now Gensburg Island, they bought almost all of the available acreage from Rice Creek to the Manitowish River (around three miles of shoreline). At first, they brought their chef and chauffeur with them from California but soon spent their summers without them. To read more about Island Lake go to

http://ppolinks.com/mwhistory/Main% 20Island%206.23%20Newsletter.pdf

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The Other Islands of Island Lake

By Kay Krans

The Ojibwe name for Island Lake is **Gaa-minisiwaang-zaaga'igan**, meaning "in, at, on the island in the lake." While most everyone thinks of the main island on Island Lake, there are several other islands on the lake, with one or two not shown on early maps. Some of these islands have had several names, depending on the decade or the owner. Eventually, the state of Wisconsin took ownership of many of the islands. Here's what we know about these other islands:

Scrubby Island or Cedar Island

At one time, this island had a dock on the eastern shore, probably there for campers or shore lunches.

Frank's Island, Wayne's Island

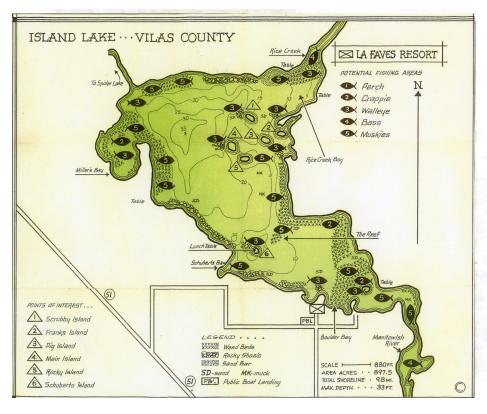
An Outer's magazine 1918 map of this island shows a private cottage.

The first known name for this island is named for **Frank LaFave**, a son of **Abe LaFave**. Maybe it was named for homesteading reasons. Later, the **Wayne family** purchased it along with their island home very nearby. Their home is a beautiful log cabin reached by a small bridge that can be crossed by car.

Pig Island

John LaFave said that his family raised two to four pigs every year, and they were kept on the island that became known as Pig Island. The purpose of island living for the pigs was to protect them from wolves and bears. They were kept in pens, and fed and watered everyday by the LaFave children.

One fall, Abe LaFave decided that there were not enough adults to help butcher, so they kept the pigs into early winter. Abe kept a big kettle resting on three legs on the island so that they could warm the drinking water for the pigs. Whoever went to the island with feed for the pigs had to warm the water before feeding. One day the pigs got out of their pen and went to the hole in the ice where the water was gathered. The pigs disappeared, and there was speculation that someone stole them. When the ice went out that spring, the LaFave family found the bodies of the pigs floating on Island Lake. There were other pig escape stories, but the pigs ended up drowning each time. When the inland resort was built, the pig-raising operation was moved there. Besides the pig pens, there was an icehouse on the island.



Rocky Island

This is a very small spit of an island that has been in many photographs of Island Lake. It is disappearing, but still is home to many animals as a resting and nesting place.

Schubert's Island, Boy's Island

Jim Hasselman and Harry Agerter from Indianapolis, Indiana camped all summer for many years circa 1920s on Schubert's Island, also called Boy's Island. They would spend the summer making many canoe trips from their island encampment, buying supplies from the LaFave family's island storehouse. One night during a thunderstorm, a three-foot in diameter pine tree landed within a few feet of their tent. It broke up their fireplace, ruined a pup tent, and scattered all their supplies. They borrowed Abe LaFave's cross cut saw and an axe, and took days to clean up the branches, and saw and chop the pine into firewood. They tried to make their story a funny one, but their lives would have been cut short if the tree had landed just a little closer to their tent. It was easier to laugh and joke as the years went by. That firewood lasted on the island for several camping years to come. Agerter continued to come to Island Lake throughout his life and became close friends with John and Sai LaFave.

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The Mysteries of Manito Island

By Kay Krans

Manito is an island of .23 acres and is surrounded by many tales as much as it is by water. The island was earlier known as **Pinnacle Island**, probably because of its high, hilly topography. Why it also was referred to as Ship Island at one point is unknown.

The earliest documentation about the island dates to 1897 with an article entitled "Fishermen Return" in The Appleton Crescent. The article discusses a tale told by a fishermen's guide about the island and a native warrior buried there. The guide used a negative translation of the Ojibwe word "Manitowish." More stories appeared in newspapers through time but mostly reflected negative and superstitious themes.

Conversely, current research and translations from Ojibwe language and culture experts define "Manitowish" as positive and lovely. Recently, the island received the official name Manito (it's Ojibwe for Spirit). Manitowish Lake in the Ojibwe language is **Manidoowiish-zaaga'igan**, which means Little Spirit (small animals) Lake. Another recent translation of Manitowish is that "**Manido** refers to the mystery of creation which is never evil but rather is always beautiful. By saying Manidoo wish, you refer to tiny spirits such as the fireflies in the evening, meant to lift your heart and bring you happiness."

One published story tells that every spring several



As seen from Koerner's Resort in 1938

Native-American women would come to the shore where the Blue Bayou is located with spring flowers, and they floated them out to the island to honor the spirits who dwelled on the island. There are other stories as well, and they change over time as different story tellers add more details or lose some.

All newspaper articles found by the MWHS are written from the perspective of non-indigenous people. More research is needed to connect these stories to Ojibwe knowledge and language translation. Many interpretations and varied versions are discussed on our Manito Island Pontoon Tour.

Keith Island, Big Lake

By Kay Krans

At one time, Big Lake was considered part of the Manitowish chain, and Keith Island was an important part of the lake. The earliest known owner of the island was **Calvin Doriot**, who homesteaded on Big Lake and whose family would play a greater role on the chain. After Doriot, **James Martin** from lower Michigan, who was a prominent cherry farmer, owned the island. **A.S. Badger** of Chicago owned the Keego Estate on Big Lake, and it is believed that he told **Carl Keith** about the island that Mr. Martin hoped to sell. Both Badger and Keith were from Kenilworth, Illinois.

In 1908, **Carl** and **Cornelia Keith** purchased the island for a summer home for their family. A wonderful furnished home was already in place and to this day is known as the "Big House." The family would ascend upon the island each summer very excited

about their three months stay. The island had care-takers through the years like **Jim and Louis Blaisdell**. The island was about nine acres which seemed like a wonderous place for their nine children to play, find adventure, and learn about nature, swim, fish and boat around their island for the whole summer.

In 1910, Carl and Cornelia bought 53 acres on the mainland shore to build their farm property. There were several people who ran the farm through the years, but the earliest were **Frank** and **Wilda Bovee**, while later caretakers were **John** and **Emma Collins**. The Keith children were expected to work at the farm and went daily by boat to gather eggs and vegetables for island meals.

Sunday dinner was an important event on the island. On Saturday mornings, some of the children would go to the farm and get two or three chickens, eggs, milk and vegetables.

To read more about this go to Keith Island here.

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The Islands of Rest Lake

By Jim Bokern

All three islands on Rest Lake were part of the original shoreline before construction of the Rest Lake Dam in 1888. Today, only two islands remain, Fox Island and **Judge Kersten's** Island. The infamous one-acre floating island on Rest Lake was removed in 2008, after about a century of bouncing around the lake.

Fox Island

Fox Island was originally a peninsula that connected to the **Camp Jorn** property and was likely the summer residence of Ojibwe chief **White Thunder**. In 1846, geologist **A. B. Gray** documented, "upon

this point are two large wigwams and several acres of ground cleared and cultivated, being the summer residence of 'White Thunder'..." Ojibwe continued to occupy Fox Island into the late 1800s.

In 1902, a new Rest Lake Dam holding back 12 or more feet of springtime water for log drives caused Fox Island to erode dramatically. A 1902 survey crew documented no modern buildings on the island and estimated the newly eroding Fox Island to be 20 acres. Today, Fox Island is just over nine acres.

In the early 1900s, **H. E. Fox**, a dentist from Ironwood, Michigan, purchased the island and other properties on Rest Lake. Fox visited Rest Lake often, owned an 18-foot gasoline launch, and constructed several structures along the western most point of the island

In 1926, Fox sold his island property to **Charles Nash**, famous automobile manufacturing giant. Nash spent \$150,000 to purchase Fox Island, a lumber camp, and thousands of acres of land. Nash developed Fox Island further, building a barbeque and picnic area where storied family cookouts were filmed for family movies. Nash himself cooked for his family on large permanent grills. Nash also purchased what today is Camp Jorn, creating a fantastic Northwoods family retreat with a private island.

In 1947, longtime MW summer vacationers Jack and Dorothy Dengel purchased the Nash estate, including Fox Island, and created Camp Thunderbolt. The Dengel family proudly operated Camp Thunderbolt until 1952 when it was sold to the Lake County (Illinois) Family YMCA. Over 70 years later, Camp Jorn operates independently as a YMCA camp and continues to deliver on its mission: Building character, confidence and community through enriching outdoor experiences. Fox Island is prized by the Camp Jorn community and remains a big part of their unique camp experience on Rest Lake. Fortunately,





Here today, gone tomorrow; the floating island in 1964

Camp Jorn intends to keep Fox Island undeveloped. **Judge Kersten Island**

Rest Lake's southernmost island was originally part of a long peninsula that separated the Manitowish River and Rest Lake. In 1862, original surveyor notes cited, "...a large amount of pine timber much of which is valuable and will very soon be taken to market by floating down the streams..." To facilitate booming logs by steamboat to the Rest Lake Dam and the railroad's **Riley Hoist**, loggers made a new eastern channel to shorten the log drive distance and avoid snags. Today, remnant river drive logs remain on the southern shore of the island.

Before 1917, Chicago Judge Kersten purchased the southernmost Rest Lake island and built an impressive summer residence, boat lagoon, and other buildings. Kersten also owned a narrow access point on the southern shore of Manitowish River.

Given the growing list of gangsters visiting Manitowish Waters and surrounding communities at the time, local historians continue to question the proximity of a long-time Chicago judge's summer residence to where Chicago mob leaders frequented. In the summer of 1925, Kersten was removed from the bench due to illness and declared insane by a judicial commission. Interestingly, current local excavator, **Chuck Kramer**, discovered an antique brass hydrometer for measuring alcohol content in beer or liquor while clearing some of the old buildings from the island. Also, a Manitowish River property owner directly across from the island shared the discovery of a mysterious large cement structure hidden beneath a crawl space of his historic home.

The Kersten family sold the island and the Manitowish River access property to **John** and **Virginia Langum** in 1955. The Langums also purchased Manitowish River property from the **Bart family**. They hoped

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Stone Lake and the Belter/Beaumont Island

By Jody Miller

Local history indicates that in 1904 the large island in Stone Lake was deeded to **Edward McQuire** by the U.S. government. However, details regarding the individual and the deed transaction are somewhat of a mystery.

Charles Doriot and his family purchased the property in 1908 to develop a tourist camp with a few log cabins and a large dining hall, naming it Cedar Lodge. A journey to reach the island required transport via train, stagecoach and boat, and then guests had to reverse the process to return home. In 1917, Cedar Lodge closed when the Doriots purchased another resort. Gus Koerner owned the island from 1920-1922, then sold it to the Hunger family. Hunger's Cedar Lodge welcomed guests until 1926.

The next chapter in the island's life begins in 1931 with **Beryl Maude Belter** visiting her sister at an area resort. Maude, as she preferred to be called, started searching for a summer home to buy, fell in love with the island, became the owner, and Belter's Landing was born.

Maude bought the island's first liquor license, converted the old dining hall to a bar serving alcohol and food, installed a piano, and opened in 1932. Improvements were made to the cabins, guests rented by the week, and many stayed for the summer. Resort guests were now transported to and from the island via the Rest Lake landing.

To attract locals to her bar, Maude devised a pickup system by installing a large bell on the shore across from the island. Patrons would ring the bell, wait for a boat to pick them up, and later in the evening they'd be returned to the opposite shore.

Belter's Bar became known as "the place to go for a good time" with plenty of music and dancing.

With Maude's passing in 1949, her eldest daughter **Vermitta (Mitzie) Beaumont** purchased the resort and renamed it Beaumont's Island.

Improvements to the resort included a gaspowered generator, electricity and a new motorboat to transport guests. Mitzie loved music, particularly honkytonk jazz, and regularly entertained her guests with piano and song. Her mother's traditions of providing a good time for all carried on until 1960 when Mitzie decided to retire. Her four children were each allowed to choose a part of the island for their families, but no trees were to be destroyed. The resort has remained closed, and the island is still owned and enjoyed by Maude's descendants.

More information about the Belter/Beaumont resort can be found at https://www.mwhistory.org/commerce/resorts/stone-lake/.



The Islands of Rest Lake (continued from page 6)

to renovate the island buildings to enhance their experiences Up North. Unfortunately, the buildings on the property were in terrible disrepair; police reports and other documents reveal repeated vandalism, leading to formal complaints from the town of Manitowish Waters. On one occasion, vandals using high-powered rifles shot the corner blocks that served as the main building's foundation. The house shifted radically, knocking the chimney over and into the center of the house. The Langums worked with several local contactors over their years of ownership to repair the buildings, but reconstruction challenges became too much. Initial island sales attempts in the mid-1990s proved challenging, and the Langums offered the island to the town of Manitowish Waters, the Wisconsin

Department of Natural Resources, and the Nature Conservancy. Property liability, as well as building demolition and property costs, deterred these groups from purchasing the island.

In 1997, **Rich and Sue Clack** purchased Judge Kersten's island from the Langums and had the old buildings removed. The Clack family collaborates with the Manitowish Waters Historical Society regarding the island property and continues to support ongoing historic research. The Clacks intend to preserve the island in its natural state.

Rest Lake Floating Island and MW Bog Islands

The Rest Lake floating island was both beloved and a source of controversy among the Manitowish Waters community. To read more <u>Rest Lake Islands</u>

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MW Historical Society 2023 Calendar

For more information go to: https:// www.mwhistory.org/events/

JUNE

Leaders of Historic Preservation 6/6, 5 to 7 pm Discovery Center

Dillinger Pontoon Tour Including Lunch at noon

6/9, 9:30 am to noon or 1:15 to 3:45 pm Little Bohemia Lodge

Mysteries of Stone, Fawn, & Clear Lakes by Pontoon

6/22, 9 to 11 am, 11:30 am to 1:30 pm or 2 to 4 pm Clear Lake Boat Landing

Mysteries of Alder & Wild Rice Lakes by Pontoon

6/27, 9 to 11 am, 11:30 am to 1:30 pm or 2 to 4 pm Discovery Center

MW Historic Hike and Pub Crawl

6/29 3 to 7 pm Koller Park

Rest Lake's Amazing History by Pontoon

6/30, 9 to 11 am, 11:30 am to 1:30 pm or 2 to 4 pm Discovery Center

JULY

Manitowish & Little Star by Pontoon

7/7, 9 to 11 am, 11:30 am to 1:30 pm or 2 to 4 pm Blue Bayou

Thank You to the YCC Driving Tour

7/10, 1 to 4 pm Discovery Center

Legends of Manito Island & Manitowish Lake by Pontoon

7/12, 5 to 7 pm, 7:30 to 9:30 pm Blue Bayou

Spider & Island Lake by Pontoon

7/14, 8:30 to 11 am, 11:30 am to 2 pm, or 2:30 to 5 pm Blue Bayou

Dillinger Pontoon Tour Including Lunch at noon

7/17, 9:30 am to noon or 1:15 to 3:45 pm Little Bohemia Lodge

Turtle Flambeau Flowage by Pontoon

7/19, 11 am to 4 pm Discovery Center

JULY

Sunset Tour of Turtle Flambeau Flowage by Pontoon

7/19, 5:30 to 9 pm Springstead Boat Landing

Turtle Flambeau Flowage by Pontoon

7/20, 11 am to 4 pm Discovery Center

AUGUST

Camp Mercer Interpretive Trail Hike

8/3, 1 to 4 pm River's Edge

Dillinger Pontoon Tour Including Lunch at noon

8/24, 9:30 am to noon 1:15 to 3:45 pm Little Bohemia Lodge

Big Lake Investigation by Pontoon

8/25, 9 am to noon, 1 to 4 pm Discovery Center

SEPTEMBER

Dillinger Pontoon Tour Including Lunch at noon

9/7, 9:30 am to noon or 1:15 to 3:45 pm Little Bohemia Lodge

Presentation on Frances Badger, Muralist 9/13, 1 to 2 pm MW Athletic Club

OCTOBER

Forest History Driving Tour

10/5, 11 am to 5 pm Discovery Center

Hike of Partridge Creek & Lake

10/7, 9 am to 4 pm Discovery Center

Time Traveler Trail: Trout Lake to Pallette Lake

10/27, 1 to 4:30 pm North Trout Lake Boat Landing

Don't Forget to RENEW your 2023 dues!

Membership & Donations

Email:

Donations

Donations can be sent to:

Manitowish Waters Historical Society
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.

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.

Name:		
Address:		
City:	State: :	Zip:
Phone:	Cell Phone:	