

Coon Lake

By Sara Given

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INTRODUCTION

“The best part of living in Coon Lake Beach is that our people are so able and willing to help one another. We do not have a Social Service Center, we can’t get tradesmen or repairmen to come out this far, we don’t have AAA or even AA. But we all know who’s a welder, electrician, a roofer, a mechanic and who will drive us to the doctor when we’re sick and who will watch the children while we are gone.” That was the description the editor of the first “Beachcomber” newsletter in 1989 gave about what life was like living on Coon Lake.¹

Over twenty years later Barb Boujon wrote for the Coon Lake Improvement Association (CLIA) newsletter in 2011 “Ever since we’ve moved in, I’ve been in awe of living on Coon Lake. It didn’t take long to realize the lake’s assets included not only the beauty and entertainment value it provides but, most importantly, the warmth and openness of all the wonderful neighbors we’ve met and the lake friends we have made. Whether its tows back home – too numerous to mention...or heavy items being moved from our vehicle into the house after my husband’s surgery, friends and neighbors were there.”² The lake that the first editor described has become more connected – you can get pizza delivered, and also cell service in the area. The connection to people and neighbors remains the same despite the twenty years between the recollections.

Love for Coon Lake runs through all aspects of its history.

MSP DAILY STAR/COON LAKE BEACH COMMUNITY

Coon Lake’s identity as a community lake was solidified by an oddity of advertising in 1925. *The Minneapolis Daily Star*, a newspaper that ran from 1924 until 1939, put Coon Lake on the map and made lake property accessible for working class families in Minneapolis.

The ad that ran in issues between Sept 3rd -29th said that for \$67.50 each, or just \$10.00 down and \$2.50 a month you could buy Coon Lake Beach property.³ Each lot was 20x100 feet – and came with a few caveats. You had to buy a minimum of two lots, but no more than five, and “to take advantage of this wonderful offer simply subscribe to *The Daily Star* for 6 months. Don’t delay another day – mail the coupon or phone Atlantic 6000 for full details.”⁴

Marleen Collen noted that her older sister could remember the day the advertisement came out in the *Minneapolis Daily Star*. “That weekend many vehicles came out so she and some of the other children wanted to come down and see what was happening,” their Grandfather said no and they had to stay away from the procession of cars checking out the

¹. Editorial, *The Beachcomber 1, no. 1* (Aug. 1989).

². Barb Boujon, “A Message from the President.” CLIA Newsletter 11, no. 2 (Fall 2011).

³. Coon Lake Beach compilation by Philip M. McDonald, file 3.4, Coon Lake Beach File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁴. Coon Lake Beach Ad reprint, *The Beachcomber*, 1 no. 1 (Aug. 1989).

lake. "To have that many cars coming at that time was amazing."⁵ The lake was a distance from the city, but with cars more accessible it became a drivable distance for more working class families.

People responded to the ad, buying tiny lots in Coon Lake Beach and erecting their own small cabins. The families sank a line for water built a roof over their heads and were set for a summer of lake fun.

A development on the other side of the lake by Kavalie Realty was available around the same time. For \$475.00, larger lots were sold and included the materials and plans to build a one-room cabin.⁶ Each community attracted buyers, but the Coon Lake Beach area wasn't just selling property, it was selling access to the idea of a beach resort community.

CJ SWANSON

Coon Lake Beach only became available for low monthly payments to *Daily Star* readers because of C.J. Swanson. Coon Lake and the Swanson's are inseparable. Who was CJ Swanson? Born in Sweden, CJ Swanson came to the United States in 1869⁷ and served as a Minnesota State Senator to District 45 for eight years- from 1907 to 1915. His district included the counties of Anoka, Isanti, Mille Lacs and Sherburn.⁸ After he died in 1943, the Anoka Union printed that the senator was "noted for his liberality in public matters and many undertakings have been greatly assisted by his generous contributions."⁹

Swanson's lasting contribution to Minnesota was in his main profession – he was President and owner of the Northwestern Fireproofing Works, which produced clay bricks for building. Established in 1875, the brickyard was located in Fridley near the border with Minneapolis, and made bricks with material from a clay hole next to the factory. The bricks were special ones made with a mixture of sawdust and clay. The sawdust burned off in the kiln, leaving each brick more porous and a better insulator for the buildings in which they were incorporated.¹⁰ You can still see these bricks in buildings around Anoka County and Minneapolis. The next time you are at the Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, look closely at its construction as it was built with Swanson's specially formulated bricks. The clay in the clay hole was depleted after the Great Depression and they stopped producing bricks. However, they had been so productive the company stayed open an additional ten years selling through their inventory.

⁵. Marleen Collen, interview by Darleen Bearl, March 20, 2014, Oral History Collection, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁶. Coon Lake Beach compilation by Philip M. McDonald, file 3.4, Coon Lake Beach File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁷. Information compiled on C.J. Swanson, 1993, file 5, Swanson File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁸. Member Record: Charles "C.J." Swanson. Minnesota Legislative Reference Library. <http://www.leg.state.mn.us/legdb/fulldetail.aspx?ID=15006> (accessed May 1, 2014).

⁹. Obituary, *Anoka Union*, January 5, 1944. CJ was elected as a Republican. These political contributions came from the numerous committees on which he served including: dairy products & live stock; hospitals for the insane; manufactures; roads and bridges; state soldiers home; and State Fair and agricultural studies. Minnesota Legislative Reference Library.

¹⁰. Jim Swanson, interview by Darleen Bearl, March 20, 2014, Oral History Collection, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

The works employed approximately fifty people, and Swanson sponsored a number of the workers to immigrate to Minnesota from Sweden to work in the brickyard. CJ Swanson sponsored Marleen Collen's grandfather to immigrate to the United States and guaranteed him a job upon his arrival in Minnesota.¹¹

Because of his position in the County, the Senator was given an honorary membership to the Anoka County Historical Society in 1934 - the year it was founded.¹²

CJ SWANSON AND COON LAKE

CJ enjoyed hunting and exploring the land in Minnesota. One story is that one day he came across Coon Lake with its beautiful stand of white pines on the south shore and he was hooked. Those trees drew him in. His grandson remembered how much he "loved those trees." CJ ended up owning a lot of the land around Coon Lake and built a hunting lodge to stay in. First the family made the commute by horse and buggy down Radisson Road to the lake. Later they transitioned to make the trip by car with bad tires over bad roads, but they didn't tire of going to the lake.

The Swanson's even gave or sold portions of the land around the lake to relatives or employees of their brickyard. The Collen family, who immigrated here and worked in the brickyard, was deeded 40 acres of the Swanson's land.

It's unclear the exact reason the Swanson family decided to sell, but the plan was to move the family to Lake Minnetonka and they sold their Coon Lake property.

The land went through a few hands between the Swanson's selling it and the newspapers promotion. On June 12, 1925 the Swanson's sold the Coon Lake Beach Area land to Mr. Ludwig B. Freudenthal, who acted as the next owner's agent. It was then transferred to Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Smadbeck for \$1.00, who in turn sold it to the promotions manager of the *Minneapolis Daily Star*, Mace Eustice Fisher on September 4, 1925 for \$1.00 "and other valuable considerations." What those considerations were is unknown. Clauses in the sale also make a few restrictions on what the land could be used for: "all toilet outhouses shall be suitably screened and equipped with septic or chemical tanks..." and "no part of said premises shall be used for any insane, inebriate or other asylum, or cemetery, or place of burial, or for any structure other than a dwelling. Plans and specifications for all buildings shall be submitted to the Minneapolis Star Subscription Dept."¹³

Even after the sale, the Swanson's couldn't stay away. They never did move to Lake Minnetonka, but instead purchased land back from the Collen's and built a house on Coon Lake again. Jim Swanson, CJ's great grandson, noted: "I know when I read the abstract on my property the family weaves in and out of there about eight times, it's just mind-boggling."

CLUBHOUSE

¹¹. Marleen Collen, interview by Darleen Bearl, March 20, 2014, Oral History Collection, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

¹². Listing of Historical Society Honorary Memberships, file 8, Swanson File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

¹³. Information on Coon Lake compiled by Elmer Peterson, 1997, Coon Lake Improvement Association Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

The Swanson's provided more than just land to the Coon Lake Beachers. Lot ownership in Coon Lake Beach came with a few other perks: it "entitles you to free membership in the New Clubhouse, exclusive use with other lot owners of beautiful lakeside park, and the beach for bathing, boating, and fishing..."¹⁴ The original Clubhouse was the Swanson's hunting lodge with a few additions built around it. The Clubhouse became a social center, hosting dances and other gatherings.¹⁵

The grand plan for the Clubhouse was more of a handshake deal rather than a solid legal one. It was intended for the grounds and lakeshore itself to be designated as a "park" but it never officially went through the process. The ownership of the Clubhouse building was also still in question. In the sale of the property, the Smadbecks transferred the entire area to Mr. Fisher, the promotions manager at *The Daily Star*, – except the site of the Coon Lake Beach Clubhouse. The Smadbeck's gave the land to the community, but with the restrictions to keep it clean and keep it open to the public or they had the right to take it back. This particular loophole was discovered and the Smadbeck's officially gave up any claim created by this addendum.

In the mid 1980's, even though the building was still a social gathering place, age and time had not been kind to it. Association members gathered together and decided they needed a new Clubhouse. Over 104 families volunteered to try to build a new structure. Through seemingly endless fundraisers, donations of money and time, and the strength of the community they raised \$42,000 and worked on a long term plan. "The 'young'uns' showed up strong for [concrete], walls, [and] shingling. The oldsters were behind the scenes pushing for more funds."¹⁶ The old Clubhouse metamorphosed into a new building with a new name: the Coon Lake Community and Senior Center with charitable organization status. Even though it had a new name, it kept up its original purpose: to be a place where people in the community could gather. Today the building hosts community events, such as the Coon Lake Improvement Society's annual meeting as well as bi-monthly Sunday morning pancake breakfasts, and Thursday morning coffee hours. It is a place where lake neighbors can gather together.

COON LAKE'S LOCATION

Those who do not live along its shores may be unsure of where to find Coon Lake. At over 1,200 acres, Coon Lake is the largest lake in Anoka County – but it is situated in the corner of multiple cities, which can make things complicated. Jim Swanson described what people at the lake recite: "We have a Forest Lake phone number, live in Columbus or East Bethel, [and] we have a Wyoming address and zip code." He went on to remember "...when we built our house in 1990 – I kept telling people our address is Wyoming, but we're not in Wyoming so don't go there...I can't tell you how many times people would call from Wyoming not able to find us."¹⁷

¹⁴. Coon Lake Beach compilation by Philip M. McDonald, file 3.4, Coon Lake Beach File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

¹⁵. "Tall Trees," *Anoka County Union*, file 1, Coon Lake Beach File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

¹⁶. *The Beachcomber* 10 (April 1998).

¹⁷. Jim Swanson, interview by Darleen Bearl, March 20, 2014, Oral History Collection, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

Coon Lake has always straddled town lines. After Anoka County was organized in 1857 there were eight townships: Anoka, Bethel, Centreville, Columbus, Oak Grove, Round Lake, St. Francis, and Watertown. Coon Lake touched three of them: Bethel, Columbus and Round Lake. Round Lake became Grow Township and in 1871 a portion of Grow incorporated as Ham Lake. Next, in 1957 the city of East Bethel was created – leaving Coon Lake still split into three but this time situated in the cities of East Bethel, Columbus, and Ham Lake.

Just as its location was convenient for the seasonal commuting Coon Lake Beachers in 1925, Coon Lake continued to be more of a seasonal community throughout the Twentieth Century. Arlan Mercil remembered, “The last day of school the kids would come home from school and we would shove them in the car and lock the house and come up here.” His wife Bev continued, “and we went back to town the night before school started so we could take a shower and get them off to school” the next day.¹⁸

Virg Paulson had a solution that could have saved the Mercil’s time. He purchased a cabin on Coon lake in 1966 and “We made the tiny cabin our ‘summer home;’ with Coon Lake being our bathtub.”¹⁹

Even if your family lived there year round as Marleen Collen’s family did, friends and relatives became your seasonal visitors. Marleen noted “My mother would NEVER know how many people she would have for Sunday dinner.” The lake, the area, and the good people were a reachable distance from Minneapolis or St. Paul. Why not go to the lake?

Slowly, the seasonal cabins are being changed to year round homes. Jim Swanson counted that there are only 13 seasonal houses remaining on East Front Road. Despite all the changes, Keith Mercil thinks “It’s amazing that it’s stayed virtually the same all these years.” The essence of living on Coon Lake remains the same.

NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE AREA

Anoka County does not have a lot of history with the Native American tribes, Dakota or Ojibwe, because neither lived in the area. The Land of Anoka County was an area to pass through, trade in, or gather natural resources before moving on. The two Native American nations in Minnesota at the time were: Dakota (Sioux) primarily in the South and the Ojibwe (Chippewa) farther North.

There are a few “Indian Mounds” scattered across the County, one of which is near Coon Lake, but it is difficult to say what any particular mound holds, or who constructed it. Mounds can be burial places and hold human remains, but they can also hold the remains of daily living. The State Archeologist investigates such areas, but doesn’t advertise their locations or any contents they might identify to deter people from disturbing the area or trying to excavate items from the mounds.

The places where Native Americans show up most prominently in the historical records of Anoka County are in the recollections and writings of white settlers – such as the Hart family.

¹⁸. Arlan and Bev Mercil, interviewed by Darleen Bearl, March 20, 2014, Oral History Collection, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

¹⁹. Virg Paulson, “President’s Bay,” *CLIA Newsletter* (Summer 1997), CLIA BOX, Anoka Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

JOSIAH HART

Josiah Hart was the first settler to put down permanent roots in the area that became Ham Lake when he and his family moved there in 1857. Originally an easterner, Josiah was born in 1807 in Rutland, Vermont. He married and the young family was living in New York when their son Frank was born in 1854. The family moved a few more times, but settled in Section 6 of Ham Lake in Anoka County, not far from Coon Lake where Josiah became a farmer and raised stock on their property "Butternut Farm."²⁰ Josiah Hart lived on that farm until his death in 1876 and currently resides in Forest Hill Cemetery.

When the Hart's made Ham Lake their home it was a part of Grow Township. But on February 21, 1871, the area detached and organized as Ham Lake and Josiah was elected as its first Justice of the Peace.

FRANK HART

Josiah's son, Frank Hart, also became a part of the Ham Lake community. He was a farmer and well-known auctioneer as well as Census Enumerator in 1880, 1890 and 1895 and the Clerk of the District Court between 1897 -1917. Later in his life Frank handwrote his autobiography titled: *Autobiography of a Common and Humble Citizen*. It is dedicated to his "wife and daughter with the hope that they may possibly derive a little pleasure."²¹ It is now in our collection at the Anoka Historical Society for more than just his wife and daughter to enjoy.

In it, Frank writes of his early childhood in Anoka County. While he was a young child when his family made a home in Ham Lake, he remembered the winters of 1858/1859 and wrote: "My father was busy getting timber and other material for a new house and was absent from home most of the time each day, leaving my mother and self alone. That means alone." There were no close neighbors in such a sparsely populated area, which made unexpected visitors more stressful.²² It wasn't uncommon for Frank to see Indians or for them to drop by the home. He wrote that "The Chipawa Indians [Ojibwe people]...were camped a few miles away and often came to beg salt and matches...In the summer they [would] beg green corn, water melons etc. But we had no knowledge of their ever having stolen anything from us."

COON LAKE CONNECTION TO U.S. DAKOTA WAR

Frank wrote in his autobiography specifically about Coon Lake's connection to the U.S. Dakota War in 1862. The massacre began in August 1862 after a particularly severe winter. It was the culmination of a number of factors including: starvation, mistrust, and corruption in the white officials charged with working with the Dakota. After six weeks of fighting, at least 600 white people had been killed which resulted in the largest mass execution in US history with the

²⁰. Margaret Livgard and Hope Moore, "Josiah and Laura Hart and Family," *Anoka County Minnesota: A Collection of Historical Sketches and Family Histories Compiled by Members and Friends of the Anoka County Historical Society* (Anoka: Anoka Historical Society, 1982), 212. The Hart farm was located in the area where Henry Stromgren's farm was in 1982 on Crosstown Blvd, west of Soderville.

²¹. Frank Hart, "Autobiography of a Common and Humble Citizen" [ca. 1930], file 1, Hart File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

²². N.H. Winchell et al., *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Company, 1881), 280. The closest census in 1880 puts population of Ham Lake Township at 235.

hanging of 38 Dakota men in Mankato on December 26, 1862.²³ This is just the barest summary about this chapter in our Minnesota history, and I encourage you to delve into it more with the many resources available in the Anoka County Library system.

While the battles in the war were to the southern and western parts of the state, the fear of Indian attacks extended throughout the state and Frank remembered how it affected residents in Anoka County.

Frank wrote that: "The winter before the outbreak about three hundred Sioux Indian camped all winter on the shores of Coon Lake. Naturally when the outbreak occurred, the citizens of the northeast part of the county had reason to be alarmed as they were of the opinion that the Indians had purposely camped there to [familiarize] themselves with the country and people. When reports came in of the slaughter of the white people to [the] West and southwest there seemed to be very good reason why the neighbors in our community should feel alarm."²⁴

Some families in the rural parts of the county moved to more densely settled places so they wouldn't feel so isolated, but Josiah refused to move his family. Instead, he and Frank traveled to St. Paul to meet their friend Jarad Benson, Speaker of the State House of Representatives. Benson reassured Josiah that there was no danger, and even if something did happen "he would put a man on horseback and have him at [the Hart's] home within three hours." Josiah and Frank returned home but needed to check things out for themselves.

The next day the two set out in a wagon, brought lunch and "drove...nearly all day out through the...marshes in the vicinity of Coon Lake." Frank recalled the day vividly in his autobiography. "I remember on the way out, a partridge lighted in a tree... and my father debated whether it would be advisable to discharge a gun within the possible hearing of Indians." With the news of massacre in the South, the Harts feared an Indian attack on their trip out to Coon Lake. Partridge did become part of the day's lunch, and father and son "visited the Old Camp grounds of the Indians on the so-called Randolff Point on Coon Lake...." The pair confirmed for themselves that there were no Indians in the area.

Frank reflected on Native American relations later in his life. "My personal opinion is that the whites were somewhat to blame for the unfriendliness. Unscrupulous white men would sell or give them liquor, cheat them and otherwise abuse them, and it is not to be wondered at that they finally retaliated. While those that we knew best would beg for matches, salt and other luxuries they were never accused of stealing or committing any criminal act."²⁵

EARLIEST MENTIONS OF COON LAKE

But people certainly were caught in criminal acts in the area. The earliest mentions of Coon Lake in newspapers dealt with people arrested for illegal fishing. *The Wilmar Tribune* May 5, 1896 reported: "John Grant, deputy game warden, arrested two Minneapolis men for illegal

²³. Minnesota Historical Society, "U.S.-Dakota War of 1862," Minnesota Historical Society, <http://www.usdakotawar.org/> (accessed May 5, 2014).

²⁴. Hart, *Autobiography*, file 1.

²⁵. Hart, *Autobiography*, file 1.

fishing at Coon Lake. Justice Hart of Anoka fined them \$100 and lodged them in the city jail.”²⁶ A few years later an alderman was “charged with offending the peace and dignity of the state of Minnesota by catching crappies in Coon Lake.” While the alderman admitted to fishing the lake, he “emphatically denied that he had broken the law.”²⁷

Coon Lake was a destination for fishing and hunting even at the turn of the century – it drew people from the city to its shores – whether they had nefarious fish intent or not. If they did not want to completely rough it with nature, the visitors could find a resort at which to stay – such as the Norquist Resort.

NORQUIST RESORT / GOV. JOHN LIND

The original owner of the Norquist Resort was Edward Norquist. Born in Smoland Sweden, Edward immigrated to the United States and purchased Norquist Farm in 1902. Located on the north side of Coon Lake the family farmed as well as opened it up as a resort. Mrs. Joyce A. Nelson, their granddaughter, wrote a small history of the family: “In the early 1900’s many people journeyed from the Twin Cities by horse and buggy to hunt and fish at the Norquist Resort.” In those days there were 18 wooden boats and for \$1.00 a day the Norquist sons, Fred and Carl, would row the guests around the lake on their fishing excursions.

Joyce Nelson noted: “The fishermen would stay overnight and the accommodations were quite meager. Some stayed in the farm house, others slept in the barn and grainery, but they still begged to stay any place, just so they could hunt and fish and get good food.” The food Mrs. Norquist prepared for the hunters and fishermen was delicious.²⁸

A frequent visitor to the family run resort was Governor John Lind – the 14th Governor of Minnesota. Lind only served one term as Governor, from 1899 to 1901,²⁹ but was also a lawyer and three term member of Congress. The Governor was noted for having only one hand. He lost the hand in a hunting accident as a teenager – from when he poked his gun in the mud and fired which exploded backwards taking his hand.³⁰ Despite the missing hand, he came to Coon Lake like others to hunt, fish and enjoy Mrs. Norquists’s wonderful meals. The Resort has transformed itself and is renamed the Norquist Campgrounds but remains a place where people can come and stay to enjoy Coon Lake.

Governor Lind was not the only politician to enjoy a stay on Coon Lake’s shores. A former Mayor and then Postmaster of Saint Paul, Robert A. Smith, was the original owner of the land the Norquist’s purchased for their farm.³¹ There are a number of newspaper blips

²⁶. Article reprint, *Wilmar Tribune*, May 5, 1896, file 5, Coon Lake Beach File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

²⁷. “A Mistake, Foell Says,” *Minneapolis Journal*, March 14, 1902, file 6, Coon Lake Beach File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

²⁸. Joyce A. Nelson, “Norquist Family,” *Anoka County History*, 169.

²⁹. Governor Lind ran for a second term but lost by .7% to Samuel VanSant.

³⁰. “Minnesota Governor Vacationed at Coon Lake” clippings, CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

³¹. “As Some People Hunt,” File 9, Coon Lake Beach File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN. Robert A. Smith served as Mayor of St. Paul from 1887-1892 and again from 1894-1896. He died February 12, 1913.

documenting his travels back and forth.³² *The Saint Paul Globe* reported on September 15, 1901: "Mayor Smith arrived home yesterday from a ten days' hunting trip at Coon Lake which, while profitless in respect to game, netted him an even \$1,000 the amount representing the sale of a piece of land owned by him at Randall's Point."³³ After he had sold the property and was no longer mayor, Smith kept returning. In 1902, he lamented that the hunting wasn't the same anymore. "I have seen the time when I got as much game in an hour at Coon Lake as we got all the time we were there this time. [But] We did some fishing and...passed the time very agreeably."³⁴

OLSON'S RESORT – AND OTHER RESORTS

There were more resorts than the Norquist's on the lake. Axel Olson and his family moved to Coon Lake in 1917 after trading their land on Lake Minnetonka for the piece on Coon Lake. The Olsons farmed on their new land and also founded Olson's Resort. Dock rentals cost 50 cents an hour, or visitors could rent a boat or motor for their lake adventures. In 1992 Axel's son Buford was running the operation, and at that time the resort operated a boat launch, two cabins, 25 rental boats and permanent trailer camping.³⁵ The resort closed in 2001 and lake neighbors noticed. The CLIA Newsletter reported: "This is the first year anyone can remember that Olson's Resort hasn't had his boats out to rent or the docks. He has sold all the boats and the docks just aren't there."³⁶

Other resorts that have operated on the lake include the Oak Ridge Resort, The Last Resort and The Comfort Resort – which people swear may, or may not, have had ladies that "offered comfort" to guests who stayed there. Confirmation of such practices is difficult to come by.

WIRE GRASS

Not everyone came to the area to hunt and fish. There was a particular grass that made a large impact. Wire grass – scientific name *Carex stricta* – is generally found in a wetland, bog, ditch or marshland.³⁷ The grass blades are bluish-green in color, flat and shiny with sharp edges. Until the early 1900's, farmers considered land where this grass grew worthless, calling it "razor grass" for its sharp edges which grazing animals refused to eat. While the grass was unsuitable for grazing and the land too wet to farm, the grass itself could be harvested and used in manufacturing.

The nature of the grass which liked wet boggy areas, presented a number of hurdles. Insects and mosquitoes loved it, but a horse could easily sink into the muck and get stuck. To

³². *History of the Police and Fire Departments of the Twin Cities: Their Origin in Early Village Days and Progress to 1900*, (Minneapolis: American Land and Title Register Association, 1899), Saint Paul Police Historical Society, http://www.spphs.com/history/1899/chapter_3.php (accessed May 5, 2014).

³³. "Mayor Smith is Home," *Saint Paul Globe*, September 15, 1901, file 10, Coon Lake Beach File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

³⁴. "Mayor Says Hunting is Not What it Was," *Saint Paul Globe*, September 13, 1902, file 12, Coon Lake Beach File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

³⁵. Chip Nelson, "Coon Lake People," *CLIA Newsletter* (Spring 1992), CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

³⁶. "Around the Lake," *CLIA Newsletter* (Fall 2001), CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

³⁷. Susan Segelstrom, *Amidst the Meadow Grass: Crex Carpet Company Grantsburg, Wisconsin* (2013), 23.

prevent this, the horse was fitted with a special pair of bog shoes to keep them from sinking – kind of like snowshoes for hooves. ACHS has a set of these in our collection.

There were three camps in Minnesota harvesting wire grass: Camp 1, Camp 2 and Camp 3. All three camps are gone, but there is still a Camp 3 Road near Coon Lake – an echo of the wiregrass harvesting camp which used to be there. In addition to the large camps, local farmers harvested the grass on their own lands to sell independently.³⁸

Harvest in the camps began in June and continued through late autumn, or until a hard frost made the grass too brittle to handle. The process involved a lot of manual labor. The grass was cut and laid in rows on the field to “cure” or dry properly. The “flopping crew,” also known as “rubber backs,” was in charge of turning the grass over so it could dry thoroughly. Often staffed by women, these were generally the lowest paid jobs in the camp.³⁹ Once dry, the grass was gathered, baled, and taken to Forest Lake where the workers loaded it on railroad cars for transport to the Crex Carpet Company’s warehouse in St. Paul.⁴⁰

CREX CARPET COMPANY

An article in *The Journal of Burnett County* in 1911 declared: “The Crex Carpet Company is said to be the wealthiest matting manufacturing corporation in the country.”⁴¹ The name of the company itself comes from the plant it harvested – Crex being a shortened version of its scientific name, *carex stricta*. Originally named The American Grass Twine Company, it was formed in Delaware in 1899 and transformed to The Crex Carpet Company in 1908. The company was a national one – a Delaware corporation, with headquarters in New York, manufacturing center in St. Paul and harvesting fields in Wisconsin and Minnesota.⁴² The company owned 8,300 acres of marshland here in Minnesota near Coon Lake.

The company used the grass harvested near Coon Lake to make wire grass carpets that were “sanitary and made to withstand ordinarily hard usage on any floor. Easily cleaned without beating, they lighten the burden of housekeeping while their low cost makes them particularly desirable.”⁴³ In addition to their line of rugs, Crex offered a vast collection of furniture – at one point there were over 400 items available to order.⁴⁴ The Crex Carpet Company eventually declined during the Great Depression. This decline was influenced by competition from Japanese carpet imports, draining land and changing fashions combined with the country’s economic depression.

Crex management filed for bankruptcy on February 11, 1935 with only \$24.90 in the bank⁴⁵ officially ending the wiregrass industry in the area. In that same year the US government was looking for work opportunities for the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

³⁸. “Dahlquist Family,” *Anoka County History*, 91. Mr. Dahlquist had a farm and harvested his own wire grass to sell directly to Crex.

³⁹. Segelstrom, *Crex*, 34.

⁴⁰. Raymond Bergerson, “Wire Grass Industry,” *Anoka County History*, 145. Each bale could weigh up to 250 lbs and workers were given a diagram depicting how to load bales to get maximum amount in the railroad car.

⁴¹. “Gigantic Burnett County Real Estate Deal,” *Journal of Burnett County*, July 21, 1911, in *Amidst the Meadow Grass: Crex Carpet Company Grantsburg Wisconsin*, by Susan Segelstrom, (2013), 20.

⁴². Segelstrom, *Crex*, 25.

⁴³. Advertisement, *House and Garden*, April 1920, in *Crex*, 45.

⁴⁴. Segelstrom, *Crex*, 47.

⁴⁵. Segelstrom, *Crex*, 53.

Created during the Great Depression, the WPA was a work relief program, employing people to build “bridges, roads, public buildings, public parks and railroads.”⁴⁶ One of the approved projects was a plan to turn the unused Crex lands into a game management farm. Officially opened in 1937, Crex became Carlos Avery Game Farm. Today it is a wildlife refuge and consists of 23,000 acres, most of which is open for hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities. With over 274 bird varieties, the Carlos Avery Wildlife Refuge can be a bird-watchers heaven.

COON LAKE SPORTSMAN’S CLUB

Coon Lake Sportsmen’s Club also contributed to the community and took it upon themselves to protect the nature in and around the lake. The exact dates the club was active are unclear, but it formed in the mid-40’s and from what we can tell disbanded in the late 70’s (if anyone has more concrete dates for this please let us know so we can update our records.) The Club was a part of a larger network of local and regional organizations in The Game Protective League.⁴⁷

The members made the protection and management of fish and wildlife around Coon Lake a part of their mission. They operated fish rearing ponds and stocked Coon, Ham and Netta Lakes with fish with the aid of the Conservation Department. In 1945 the club released 260,000 crappies, and 70,000 sunfish among the three lakes.⁴⁸ They also helped State crews remove unwanted fish. In 1948 16 tons of carp and 7.5 tons of bullheads were seined out of Coon Lake with labor supplied by Club members.⁴⁹

The club members took their mission to manage the fish population seriously. In the 1940s and 50’s the club members guarded the walleyes and northern pike during their spawning runs in the middle of the night. Lytton Taylor wrote in the newspaper: “Patrols numbering up to 25 members spent many a dark and lonely, and often wet and cold night, watching streams connecting with Coon and Linwood lakes...” for poachers. The vigil was successful as one night they “encountered seven men wearing rubber boots and carrying flashlights ...” along with bags and buckets. The members saw this nightly patrol as supplementing the state’s limited warden force and noted “that many others blame the department for omissions with which they could be helping.”⁵⁰ There was just too much territory to be covered, so the sportsmen stepped up to cover what they saw as their part instead of expecting others to take care of it for them.

While the club has since disbanded, their mission and attitude towards the lake and the land around it resonates with the goals of the CLIA and Coon Lake Improvement District today. A club member wrote: “If through our humble efforts, there will be a few more fish in our lakes,

⁴⁶. The American Experience, “The Works Progress Administration,” PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/dustbowl-wpa/> (accessed May 30, 2014).

⁴⁷. Newspaper clipping (circ.1945,) Pete Eckstrom Brown Notebook Collection, CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN. “The league total affiliated membership is unknown but probably equals the 62,000 claimed by the Southern association.”

⁴⁸. In order to transport the fingerlings the club owned 2 redwood tanks and oxygen equipment. *Anoka County History*, 253.

⁴⁹. Newspaper clipping (circ.1948,) Pete Eckstrom Brown Notebook Collection, CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁵⁰. “Coon Lake sportsmen Guard fish” by Lytton Taylor, (October 1945,) Pete Eckstrom Brown Notebook Collection, CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

a few more game birds in the fields and a few more evergreens for a coming generation to enjoy, we the members of Coon Lake Sportsmen's Club will be forever grateful."⁵¹

STEAM BOAT

There have been many talented people living on Coon Lake. Around 1946, Louie Robertson began construction on something amazing. Arlan Mercil and his grandfather heard the commotion next door to their cabin and investigated. They found Louie Robertson building a steam powered paddle wheel boat that would, upon completion, be 25-30 feet long. Working alone, he built the steam engine by repurposing items or making them from scratch. The 18" diameter flywheel alone took him a year to complete using a hand hacksaw and 1" steel plating.⁵²

After construction, Louie christened the boat *The Nonpareil*, a French word meaning the boat had no equal. Arlan Mercil described it as "a flat bottom, wood fired, 20 passenger, covered steam excursion boat."⁵³ On Sunday afternoons, Louie took the boat around Coon Lake, steam engine chugging and wood smoke trailing behind. For just ten cents could join Louie on *The Nonpareil*, chugging around the lake.

The steamboat had a short run on Coon Lake before moving on. People believe it made an appearance on Lake Minnetonka, and then headed to Montana – but no one knows for sure where it ended up. What is for sure is that Louie started a tradition on the lake of sharing his talents and creations with his neighbors.

TRAIN GUY – HARRY A.O. JOHNSON

Travel by water with Louie Robertson, or travel by land with Harry Johnson and his trains. Born in 1900, Harry grew up around engines. He started with engines by helping his father in the family's steam engine tractor repair shop as a teenager.⁵⁴

As an adult he made power his profession and trains and steam engines his passion. In 1932 Harry and his young family settled in Minneapolis, and Harry had time to create his first steam locomotive – a model of a Northern Pacific series engine, which took him three months to complete. In 1939, Harry rented a vacant lot next to a diner near the corner of Minnehaha Parkway and Hiawatha Ave. in Minneapolis. The diner was made of two old Railroad passenger cars – a perfect spot for Harry to begin. He lay 400-500 ft of five inch gauge track (five inches wide) and set up one of his engines to pull three passenger cars – then sold rides for 20 cents.

⁵¹. "Activities of the Coon Lake Sportsmens Club 1945-1978," *Anoka County History*, 253. The club prided itself as one of the few clubs "that [included] a large percentage of women in its membership."

⁵². Arlan Mercil, "Coon Lake Steamboat," *CLIA Newsletter*, 9 no 1 (Spring 2009) CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN. The Robertson property was located at the mouth of the bay that almost touches Viking Boulevard (Anoka County #22) near what is now known as Steamboat Bay.

⁵³. Arlan Mercil, "Coon Lake Steamboat" *CLIA Newsletter* 9 no 1 (Spring 2009), CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁵⁴. Don Johnson, interview by Darleen Bearl, March 12, 2014, Oral History Collection, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN. Harry Johnson also built a steamboat powered by a gas lean engine in 1962 named *The Bella Coon Lake*. The boiler on the boat was originally built for steam but the engine Harry made proved too heavy for the boat so was swapped for gas. As of May 2014 Harry Johnson still had *The Bella Coon Lake* in storage at his property on the lake.

His son Don remembers: “the guy that owned the diner thought it was a great thing because it brought business to him.” A miniature RR next to a RR diner was a perfect fit.

Harry didn’t always have schematics to work from. For his model of the William Cooks engine he went to measure it himself. He received permission and “they gave him a ladder” and he made his measurements by hand. Wanting to have more space, Harry purchased seven acres of property on Hiawatha Beach on the southwest shore of Coon Lake. The larger space meant he could build his dream railroad with bridges, tunnels, water towers and a depot.⁵⁵ People living on Coon Lake remember that the train whistle blew and people would gather at Harry’s place to get a ride on his trains. Harry built his final steam locomotive at the age of 92 and passed away when he was 101 in 2001. His son remembered “Harry always liked to keep busy and when he was not working on his railroad, he was in his shop building more steam engines.”

Harry Johnson’s trains ran at Coon Lake for over 60 years. People “rode it when they were kids, their kids rode it and now they brought their grandkids.” The last train ran in 2013, and the engines have been sold, but the memories of those summer rides continue.

BOAT PARADE

Back in the water, every Fourth of July Coon Lake is home to the annual Boat Parade. It’s unclear exactly what year can lay claim to being the inaugural year, but around 1989 Marge and Chip Nelson learned of a similar parade on another lake and decided to see if their neighbors on Coon Lake would be interested. A contest began among those first few for the best-decorated boat or pontoon and a tradition grew from there. From neighbors talking to neighbors, and people watching and wanting to join in, the Fourth of July event grew. While the CLIA promotes the event in their newsletters, no one officially sponsors it. Bev Mercil tried to describe it: “every year a boat parade...it just kind of happens.”⁵⁶

PIRATE SHIP

The boat parade attracted more than just patriotically bedecked boats. Mike Gaynor reported in the CLIA’s Fall 2004 newsletter: “You would think we would be safe way out here on Coon Lake because we are so far from anything...But NO – we aren’t safe. We go out for a boat ride to relax and are accosted by ...you’ll never believe it.. A PIRATE SHIP!” Resident of the lake, Dave Paul, followed in the craftsmen footsteps and built his own Pirate Ship to sail on the lake. Debuted at the 2004 Fourth of July boat parade, the ship dubbed *The Coon Raider*, is 30 ft high and 50 ft long. Dave said he was inspired by the movie – *The Pirates of the Caribbean* which came out in 2003.⁵⁷ That same year, he sold the craft to Robert McCluskey, with the promise that he was planning on building another craft that would be even larger at 40 ft high and 70 ft long. It was completed and now Coon Lake can boast two of their very own pirate ships.

⁵⁵. Don Johnson, “The History of Harry Johnson’s Trains,” (March 2014), 2, CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁵⁶. Bev Mercil, interviewed by Darlene Bearl, March 20, 2014, Oral History Collection, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN. While no one sponsors the event, the Anoka County Sheriff’s Department has been present in the past few years to make sure the large number of boaters and people around the lake remain safe.

⁵⁷. Mike Gaynor, “Ho Ho Ho and a Bottle of Run,” *CLIA Newsletter* (Fall 2004), CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

Perhaps what drew the pirate ships to the area was the gold hiding in Coon's depths. In the early 20th Century, the Crex Carpet Company paid their workers in gold. There is one story of a worker who, on his walk home, decided to wade across the Narrows. Of course, he didn't want to get his clothes wet so he undressed and held them folded neatly on top of his head. As he waded, the water got deeper than he anticipated. Eventually, saving himself became more important than saving either his pants or his dignity and his clothing. The pocket full of gold fell into the water and now resides at the bottom of the lake.⁵⁸

MAP NAMES

When Lake Association members were thinking about establishing one lake language, Coon Lakers honored some of their amazing craftsmen in the process. "Steamboat Bay" for Louie Robertson and "Choo Choo Bay" for Harry Johnson. Perhaps someday there will even be a Pirate Ship Cove.

TO BUILD A DAM

A structure that can be easily forgotten is Coon Lake's Dam. Living on its shores, the level of the lake becomes a part of the community. The level is documented by neighbors living on the lake and the CLIA Newsletter prints the history of lake level measurements each year.

The members of the Coon Lake Sportsmen's Club helped the construction of the crescent dam at the outlet on the east shore of the lake in the 1940's.⁵⁹ The dam was placed at the end of a crick that ran through Keith Mercil's father's property. Years later, CLIA members banded together to petition to raise the dam level, which would raise the level of the lake. After much work at the county and state level, a collar was added around the top of the dam which raised the level. Both in the past and today, Coon Lakers take it upon themselves to watch over the lake.

Lake level could never be as low as it was in the 1930's. Keith Mercil remembered stories about how people could drive cows across, or even walk across portions of the lake that have never since been walkable. Keith's mother planted trees on their property which ended up underwater once the water rose.

Around the same time mother Mercil planted her lake-bottom trees, Kavali Realty advertised lots for sale on Lake View Point. "This beautiful large tract has been divided into large lots...you will find excellent fishing and here you can swim to your hearts content."⁶⁰ They didn't know how right they were, after only three foundations were built, Kavali Realty had to abandon the project when it was obvious the buildings would be underwater. The foundations are still there, swallowed by the lake. The original advertisement did get one thing right, the lots probably have great fishing.

PRESERVING THE LAKE

⁵⁸. Beverly Mercil, "Bog Shoes," *CLIA Newsletter* (Fall 1998), CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁵⁹ Beverly Mercil, "Coon Lake History" *Coon Lake Improvement Association Booklet*, 2004, CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁶⁰. "January 2015," 2014 CLIA Calendar, Coon Lake Improvement Association Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

The lake is important to all who live around it. While the people gain from the lake's resources, the lake does not always benefit from people living so close to its shores. Different associations over the years have taken up the mantle of protecting the lake from human and invasive influences. The Coon Lake Improvement Association's first newsletter in September 1988 was already trying to mobilize a force to monitor the lake. "Be on the Look Out!! Please study the enclosed brochure on purple loosestrife and report any [sighting] on Coon Lake to Bob Johnson."⁶¹ Eurasian Water Milfoil, the big bad plant lake lovers dread, was first confirmed on the lake in 2003, but the preparation and education about the plant began in the Association's Newsletter's March 1990 edition.⁶² It contained articles about weed control methods, plant identification and the importance of being aware of the Lake's natural, or unnatural, vegetation. Association members were thinking, planning and educating thirteen years before the plant took hold.

The focus on lake health led to the installation of the lake's first aerator in 1988. The aerator oxygenated the water during the winter months preventing fish kills where large numbers of fish died due lack of oxygen.⁶³ The CLIA also hosts an annual Lake Clean Up day. The clean-up, held after the ice houses are off the lake, is organized to pick up any debris or trash left out on the ice. This helps prevent the trash from falling into the lake or washing up on the shores. The day is a simple event which makes a large impact to support a healthy lake.

The Coon Lake Community and Senior Center, the Coon Lake Improvement Association and the Coon Lake Improvement District, all take on the mantle for caring for the lake or its people – it's the way it's always been done.

CONCLUSION:

The history of the Coon Lake area is unique, and the efforts to preserve the lake and its history are evident throughout the letters, photographs, articles and newsletters saved and collected by people living there. Phillip McDonald, vice president of the Coon Lake Beach Property Owner's Association in 1977 wrote: "We note that 'Anoka County History' does not mention Coon Lake Area. Please help fill in the pages of history pertinent to our area. We have pride in our Coon Lake past and desire to supplement the 'History'..."⁶⁴

That history has been preserved and been given a place of importance in the community. Residents can be assured that the Anoka County Historical Society now has a wealth of information about Coon Lake - too much to fit into sixteen short pages. If you would like to look at the material first hand, or delve deeper into the stories and histories that were not included in this paper, the resources are available in the archives at the Anoka County Historical Society.

⁶¹. *CLIA News & Views* (September 1988), CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁶². Mike Bury, "The President's Perspective" *CLIA Newsletter* 3 no 4 (Fall 2003), CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN. In his article, Mike Bury noted: "Since our last newsletter, and much to our dismay, the dreaded rumor of Eurasian Water Milfoil is not a rumor after all."

⁶³. *CLIA News & Views* 2 (October 1988), CLIA Box, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

⁶⁴. Coon Lake Beach compilation by Philip M. McDonald, file 3.4, Coon Lake Beach File, Anoka County Historical Society, Anoka, MN.

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Have a wonderful summer on the shores of your favorite lake.

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