

News from Nan

NAN'S WRITINGS

NAN'S REMINISCENCES: THE COTTAGE

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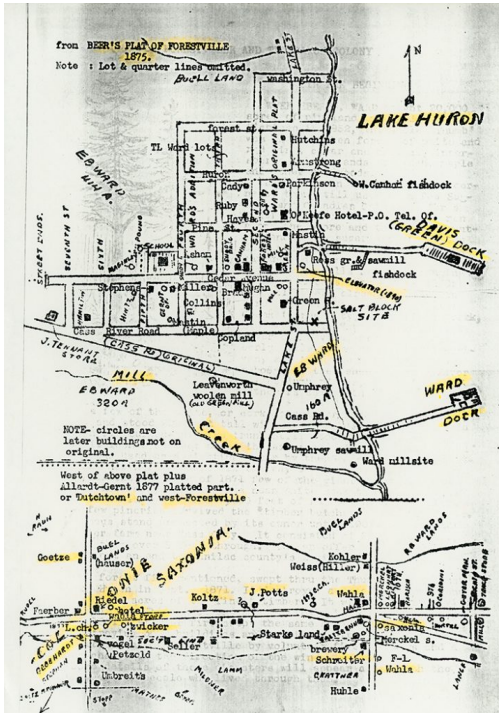
Original Riedel cottage in Forestville, Michigan
(about 1920)

This post is part of a series of reminiscences that Nan (born 1906) wrote about her childhood in Michigan. Most of the pieces were written sometime between 1990 and 1995.

Nan wrote this reminiscence in 1990. In it she describes the cottage property on Lake Huron in Forestville, Michigan, that her parents bought in about 1916. Nan was about 10 years old at the time, and she and her younger brother, Paul (who was about 5), spent many happy summer hours, often completely unsupervised by any adults, roaming the property and taking one of the rowboats out on the lake on their own.

Many other family members have also considered "the cottage" a special place: many of my [Anna's] cousins also spent the entire summer there (although their mothers were always with them, and their fathers typically came

down on the weekends after the workweek was over). My parents let me stay in this wonderland occasionally, although it never seemed like enough time to me! I had the same complaint as my mother (see below): I had to leave "just when it was getting nice"!



Map of Forestville, Michigan, when it was still a small farming and lumbering community (19th century)



Port of Forestville and Lake Huron (courtesy of Jean Westman Kinder)

The worst thing about going to the lake was that you always had to go home "just when it was getting nice."

When I was a middle-aged child [about age 10] my parents bought nine acres on Lake Huron from Mr. Pfaehler, who had bought a farm and was selling it in cottage-sized lots. We still had to go home "just when it was getting nice," but for us children the stays were extended. This piece of property became our

Shrangri-La. For Mother, especially, it was a lot more work. But work was something neither of them shied away from.



The almost treeless creek on the cottage property



Standing on the hillside and looking across the creek to the original cottage and lake

This was an area they had both enjoyed in their own childhood and youth, and a good place to try to recreate the “forest primeval,” which they remembered so vividly and with such pleasure. [The original “forest primeval” had burned over twice in the 19th century.] So almost at once, they bought trees from the state and planted them as an infant reforestation area near the entrance to the cottage. They carried the water, which the little trees drank thirstily, from the lake — pailful by heavy pailful.

The only trees on the place in the beginning were a willow or two near the boathouse. So all the trees that now provide shade were planted in our time. Sal [Nan's older sister] and I were both plant and tree lovers, and we put some in. At the top of the hill there is now quite a dense growth, I am told. For that Sal and I and the birds can claim a share of the credit. And the wildflowers were moved in almost singly. Sal brought trilliums, remembering those that used to bloom in Summers' Woods. With great consternation she used to remember that she had picked them, which she now knew should not be done. Conservation had not yet begun, and we did not know then that all wildflowers were not for picking. She established a small bed of bloodroot, and I may have helped with that, remembering the magnificent stands of it that were found around Lake Odessa [where Nan taught high school in 1926-27]. I think I brought the

Mayapple, which is now quite well established north of the garage. Mother planted violets and forget-me-nots, which bloom every year. We all tried to bring new varieties when we found them.



Anna Schreiter Riedel (Nan's mother) and her flock of chickens by the "turkey coop," which ultimately became my family's cabin

Usually we asked permission, as a matter of simple good manners. I remember Mother asking Mr. Goetze if she might have a piece of a shrub, and his laughing about her wanting "brush." I remember the stems glowed red as spring came and the sap rose. I learned that one can be too careful about not removing from original sites. Near Port Huron there was a field of a fall flower that I wanted, but I couldn't establish the owner and didn't want to denude Nature. So I left them and didn't take even a spear. All at once, someone plowed up the field and destroyed all the wildflowers! Sal and one of her naturalist friends once moved an entire stand of that sort to a place away from developers. So the rule for conserving can be: "Don't take it!" or "Take it!" but know what you are doing.

The cottage was a very simple affair, built to start with little more than shelter from the weather. Dad was selling lumber, among other things. (The elevator in Minden was for buying grain, but they also sold coal, flour, feeds, and then lumber and creamery products.) Alex Stephens used to be the area carpenter, and I suppose he built the cottage. The lumber was light, and the knots sometimes fell out, giving the little critters shelter, too, under our roof. Swallows built their nests where we could watch the whole process as we lay in bed in the morning. Bees and hornets came in, too. Our cat caught and ate hornets until one day a "Yeow!" told us a hornet had stung her. We thought she would stop eating them, but she didn't. Apparently she didn't generalize from one hot specimen.

Our beds were straw ticks laid on sawhorses, emptied and freshly filled once a year. Mother also filled some pillows with the softer chicken feathers.



Large family gathering at the cottage (about 1930). Nan is third from right and her father, Louis Riedel, is fourth from right.

Food was prepared almost entirely at home in Minden [Minden City, which is about 10 miles to the west] and brought to us for eating. Every morning Mother and Dad went home to work hard all day, leaving us to get acquainted with the pleasures of the earth. We could play on the beach or in the creek, and we even had a rowboat we could take out if the weather was suitable and we kept within our established space limits. The "Big Hole" that the creek had formed below the bridge was off-limits: a couple of cows had drowned there and even a local boy. We learned the rudiments of Great Lakes weather: not to be caught on the lake if a wind sprang up. We almost were, once, and we had to abandon ship and walk to shore and then home. The boat was found later. We didn't need any further warnings about what wind and the lake could do.

[Anna's comments: Certainly a different child-raising philosophy than either my mother's or mine — imagine leaving a 10-year-old and 5-year-old alone all day by the lake!]



Women posing on the beach. The pump in the pump house in the background furnished the water to the property. Nan is on the right.



Nan's brother Paul and his wife, Dorothy, and dog at the cottage. The trees, which were planted so carefully by hand, have grown!

There were berries for picking, and once we caught a nice little catfish. As a pet in a pail it was a success; we hadn't the heart to kill it.

The stove was a "laundry stove," with limited space on top and a small oven. Eventually I learned a few things about cooking on a wood-burning stove, but those are not for amateurs. We also had an oil-burning stove, for hot weather, and that, too, takes some skill. Mother built a brick stove outdoors. As a Rule of Thumb, I think one might say that the less sophisticated one's equipment, the more skill is required to get an acceptable product.



Women and one my cousins in front of the original cottage. Nan is in the middle.

The best food came out of the car ready to eat when our parents arrived in the evening. If we had neighbor children with us, as we usually had, sometimes their parents came, too – or at least some food sent

from their kitchen. We furnished good appetites.

One of the first accidents I recall was when Paul was not much more than a toddler, and of course I was supposed to be looking after him. We went up the shore to Mastin's Fish Docks, where the fishing boats were pulled up snug. That made the thick ropes that held them taut as a tightrope, and very attractive as a play-place. I may have held his hand as he walked over it — I don't remember that. But suddenly he lost his footing and fell, and his stomach hit the hard rope and then he fell to the hard sand below, gasping for breath. I was scared out of my wits and frantic that I had let him come to harm in my care. I don't remember that he had bad after-effects, but I never got over the horror of it and probably never will!



Kids posing in their fancy swimwear

We used to enjoy the birds: gulls, of course, and sandpipers (which Louie called “teeter-ass snipes”); the kingfisher, bustling up and down the creek like a noisy freight train; the swallows, barn and cliff; the martins; and all the long-legged wading birds that enjoyed the creek openings and the low, damp places.

Once in later years I stayed there all by myself one day to enjoy the birds and the solitude. Dad had built a bridge across the creek, and the birds used it as an observation post. My observation was that the punkerlunk (bittern) was coming there daily about noon to enjoy a little nap. I decided to see if I could observe him close-up. I got down on hands and knees, and he flew in, on schedule, and settled down for a rest. Soon his eyes closed, but intermittently he would start, look quickly and carefully all around, and then relax again. So, matching his pattern, I moved in carefully when he was relaxed and froze when he went on guard. Soon I was almost directly under his long, sharp beak, and beginning to wonder if I had been smart to get that close to it. But he was beautiful, and I surely would never have a better chance to

study such a lovely thing alive. All at once, he was also aware of me! He started, stared open-eyed at me, and said, "Awk!" With that, he drew up his long, beautiful wings, and swooped away!

The herons came there, too, but I never was so close to any other big bird.

Not far from that spot, one warm day in early spring, I had a nightmare come true. I was in no danger, actually; it was just that snakes scare me, and although I have tried to like them and my mind accepts them as part of Nature's world, my instinct is to keep as far from them as possible.

On this balmy, sunny spring day, I had been wandering between the hills. Coltsfoot was out. I just stood, enjoying the sun and air. Suddenly, I was aware of the ground at my feet, covered with snakes, all doing what I was: enjoying the warmth of the spring sun. I don't think I had the breath to scream. I stood transfixed until I was able, at last, to move carefully out, away from them. They were probably just garter snakes out from winter holes.

Poor things! I wonder if Punkerlunk was that afraid of *me*?

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