

# The Lake Area Preserver



White Bear Lake Area Historical Society

Spring 2008

## 1915 IMMIGRANT'S MEMORIES OF WHITE BEAR LAKE

by John W. Johnson

**I**rma Jonsson was ten years old when she arrived in White Bear Lake in 1915. Irma is my father's cousin, and at 102 years old, she is the last relative of that generation. Recently, in the community room at the Ramsey Nursing Home, she and I had coffee, sardines and crackers while she shared her childhood memories of White Bear Lake. Except for poor eyesight, Irma is in very good health, has excellent memory and enjoys visits by friends and relatives.

In 1914, Irma's family was living in Antwerp, Belgium. Her father, Carl Jonsson, was born in Sweden and Irma's mother, Isidora, was born in Norway. Carl was an engineer on a steamship freighter, the S.S. Wryhandel of Antwerp.

When World War One started, in August of 1914, a German blockade forced Carl's ship to stay in port in Finland. Carl's last letter was dated Sept. 14th. Sometime later, the ship was able to leave Finland and steamed toward Belgium. The ship was in the North Sea cruising past Holland when it hit a mine and sank, killing everyone aboard. Meanwhile, the German army was bombarding the Forts around Antwerp. On October 7th., the city of Antwerp was evacuated under heavy artillery bombardment. A large number of refugees, including Irma's family, fled to the neutral Netherlands. More than 100,000 refugees stayed there throughout the war.



IRMA - 1952

Isidora's brother, John O. Johnson, of the Johnson Boat Works, made arrangements to



JOHN O. JOHNSON - CIRCA 1930

bring Isidora and her four children to America. During the summer of 1915, Dora and her children left Rotterdam and sailed towards

America. The German Navy had maintained a safe passage shipping lane for neutral Holland that went north from Holland and then around the British island. However, during the voyage, the ship was stopped by a German warship

Continued on page 2

and searched by German seamen. Irma, nine years old at the time, remembers that their ship was held there for a long time before it was allowed to proceed. The ship, S.S. Rotterdam arrived in New York on July 11, 1915. When they got to Ellis Island there was another delay. The U. S. government required that a sizable financial commitment be made by sponsors for all refugees. The family spent a month at Ellis Island while John O. Johnson tried to arrange for the money. Finally, he went to see his friend L. P. Ordway who agreed to sponsor the family. When they arrived in White Bear, Mr. Ordway outfitted all of them with new shoes and clothing.

The family moved into a house just across the railroad tracks from the boat works. This house, on the corner of Lincoln and Hinckley, was where John O. Johnson lived before he built the boat works. Neighbors helped out by donating used clothing, kitchen utensils and so forth. During the trip to America, the family had practiced speaking English. By the time they got to White Bear, Irma and her younger brother, Oskar, were very good with the language. At that time, Carl Jr. was 13, Harry 12, Irma 10 and Oskar 8 years old. Carl and Harry attended school for a year or two and then went to work to help support the family. Irma and Oskar stayed in school. Their mother Dora was an excellent dress-maker and went to work for a Mrs. Krum.

White Bear had a movie theater in the old auditorium building. On Saturday, Irma could go to the show for five cents and stay there all afternoon watching the movie over and over. On summer evenings, Uncle John would sometimes take the family out on the lake for a sailboat or motorboat ride. A couple of miles west of the boat works was the Doerer farm on Otter Lake road. This was the home of the parents of uncle John's wife Annie. The Doerers had a couple of horses and cows along with chickens and turkeys. They also had a couple of noisy peacocks! "Always good food there, especially the pies!" There was the time Oskar got into the melon patch, ate too many and got sick.

Irma and her family lived on the north side of Hinckley, while Gus Amundson and his family lived on the south side. Mrs. Amundson had a cow in the back yard which was milked by the two youngest boys, Christian and Edwin. Many families had a few chickens in their yard. Irma's mother had a hand operated washing machine on the back porch. The key for the house was hidden under the washing machine. Oskar and Irma started grade school at Webster where Irma remembered all the children were required to practice fire drills. This involved sliding down the metal circular chute on the outside of the building. Later, Irma and Oskar attended Washington School. Oskar did not like school and often left to play hooky. When Oskar ran away from school, the principal, Miss Redding, would get angry and take Irma out of class to go look for Oskar. She could never find him.

It was a long walk to school in the morning. At that time, the trains still stopped at the Lake Shore Station just north of the boat works. The kids would gather there in the morning to get a ride on the train. They got a free ride up to the 4th. street station. In the winter, the kids got rides from people in horse drawn sleighs. Often they would stand on the sleigh's runners while holding on to the outside. Walking home at night, Irma was afraid while walking past the cemetery so she walked fast and in the center of the road.

Irma and Oskar spent a lot of time with the Miller kids. Matt Miller and his wife Anna had ten children, one boy and nine girls! At one time Matt worked at the boat works. Irma played with Frances and Louise. In the summer, Mrs. Miller would keep an eye on Irma and Oskar. She said, "With all my kids, watching a couple more was no problem." However, when Frances fell off the boat work's dock John O. Johnson ran down there to pull her out. Usually they all swam at a small beach just north of the boat works in front of the Millers.

A couple of years after Irma arrived in White Bear, a train derailed in front of her house. A car load of pickled pigs feet had spilled out all over the ground. Irma and Louise Miller ran home for dish pans which they filled and took home. When Irma's mother came home, she told Irma to dump the pickled pigs feet back on the tracks! Irma's mother, Dora,

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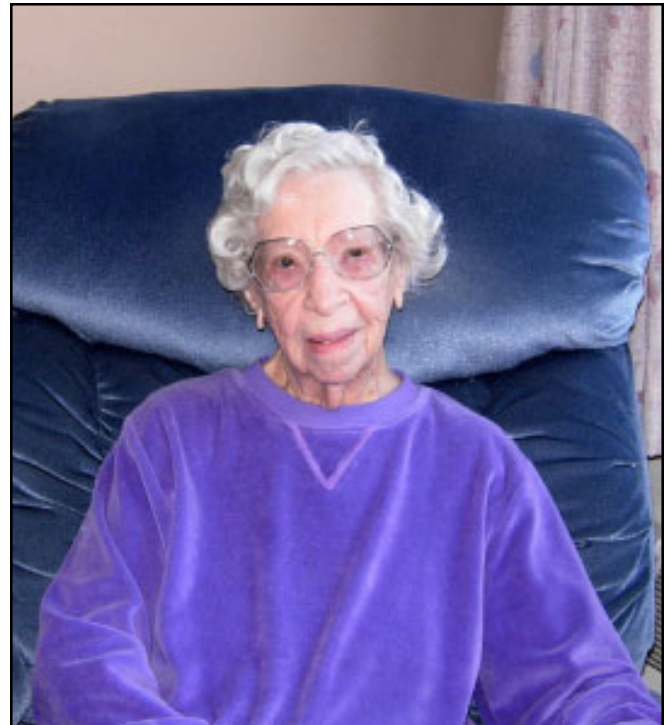
was a good cook, but was away during the day working as a dress maker. At Christmas time, Dora made lefse and jule kaga, and would buy some lutefisk to be served with melted butter and lemon juice. Irma liked to visit the Millers where Mrs. Miller made bread three times a week. Irma and Louise enjoyed eating fresh bread with butter and Karo syrup.

In 1915, there was no highway between the boat works and the railroad tracks. There was a street called Milner Avenue. The railroad tracks were on high ground with a low area along side between it and Milner Avenue. When snow covered the ground, the kids would use this as a sliding hill. Irma remembers using her mother's large dishpan as a sled there. Sometime later, her uncle John made a wooden toboggan for them. The Millers kept an ice skating rink shoveled on the lake. Irma had an old pair of double runners at first, but did much better when she got regular skates. Her cousin, Milton, gave Irma some exciting rides on his iceboat. "We went really fast, and it was so cold!"

Irma's younger brother, Oskar, as a teenager was restless and getting into mischief. At age sixteen, he went to the recruiting office to join the Navy. When asked his age, Oskar said, "Oh I'm about seventeen." The officer looked at Oskar and said, "I didn't hear that. Why don't you go out and come back when you are eighteen." So Oskar went outside, and immediately came back inside. "Well young man, how old are you?" Oskar said, "About eighteen." So, he was accepted, but there was a concern about meeting the weight requirement as he was very skinny. Before the physical exam, he went home and stuffed himself with bananas. He managed to pass the physical exam.

Lake Avenue ran north between the boat works and the lake. Milner Avenue was on the other side of the boat works next to the tracks and connected to Lake Avenue where the V F. W. is now. Milner Ave. is now Highway 61. In the triangle north of the boat works there were a couple of homes including the Miller family as well as a couple of businesses - Walek's Refreshment Store and Harry Darling's Auto Repairs. Next to the railroad tracks, there were many houses along Lincoln Ave., but behind those houses the land was mostly unoccupied and it was a great place for kids to play. Each winter, in the area called Ramaley Park, there was a large skating rink. Irma remembers seeing the Goheen brothers skating there. "Those boys could sure skate!" The Goheen family lived a few blocks north. Frank Goheen had played hockey for White Bear High and then for the St. Paul Athletic Club, which was the U. S. Amateur Championship team, in 1915-16 and 1916-17. After serving in World War One, Frank was part of the 1920 U. S. hockey team that won a silver medal at the Olympics in Antwerp Belgium.

When Irma was fifteen, one of the Miller girls, Marie, who was a telephone operator, helped her get a job as an operator at the White Bear Telephone company. Operators would respond to a light on the board and ask for a two digit number or the name the caller wanted and then plug into the connection. This was the beginning of Irma's career working for the telephone company. During World War II, Oskar got married and his young wife was in California while he was overseas. Irma arranged to get a transfer to Bell Telephone in California so she and her mother could be closer to Oskar's wife. Irma moved to Long Beach in 1944, and lived there for forty-five years. Later she returned to St. Paul.



IRMA – JANUARY 2008

## Your Society in Action



REPRESENTATIVE CAROL MCFARLANE, TOWN BOARD MEMBER BILL MAMPLE, TOWN BOARD CHAIR BOB WEISENBURGER, WHITE BEAR LAKE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SARA MARKOE HANSON, TOWN BOARD MEMBER DICK SAND AND SENATOR SANDY RUMMEL AT THE SESQUICENTENNIAL FLAG PRESENTATION.

The White Bear Lake Area Historical Society and White Bear Township were presented a Minnesota Sesquicentennial Flag from Senator Sandy Rummel and Representative Carol McFarlane at a Town Board meeting on December 17<sup>th</sup>. The flag was presented to recipients of grant funds through the Sesquicentennial Grant Program. The WBLAHS request for funds to create a video record of the story of Benson Airport to be presented during an event that celebrates the Airport's role in the history of White Bear Township was funded in the first round of the grant program.

## WBLAHS 2007 Board of Directors

**Peter Reis**, President                      **Holly Geck**, Past President  
**Jenni Corbett**, Secretary              **Jo Emerson**, Treasurer  
**Mike Campbell**, Fillebrown House, Out-house  
**Christy Gutt**, Education Liaison  
**Keith Hisdahl**, Community Liaison  
**Kathy Hoelscher**, Planned Giving & Development  
**Jan Holtz**, At-Large  
**Lin Lindbeck**, Fillebrown House, Out-house  
**Tom Rice**, At-Large  
**Meg Todd**, Membership & Promotion  
Vacant, Fillebrown House, In-house

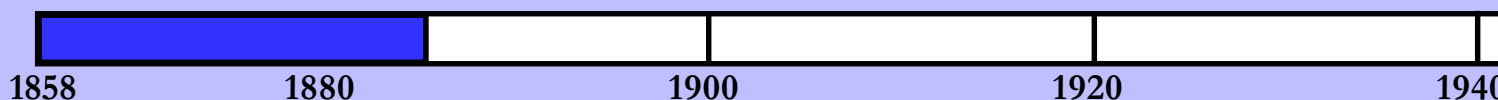
The WBLAHS is currently seeking board members for the following positions:

Fillebrown House – In-House Programs

For more information on becoming a board member please contact Peter Reis at 651-426-1268 or Sara Hanson at 651-407-5327.

## Recent Additions to the WBLAHS Resource Library

The Historical Society recently acquired 29 new reels of microfilm showcasing area newspapers including the 2000-2005 issues of the *White Bear Press*. With this recent phase of our on-going microfilm project the WBLAHS has acquired all of the local newspapers available—totaling more than 150 reels to date. This addition to the microfilm collection was possible through a Minnesota State Grants-In-Aid Grant.



SESQUICENTENNIAL MEMBERSHIP CAMPAIGN TIMELINE-EACH MEMBER WHO JOINS



## Thoughts from the President

**Thank you! Thank you!**

This is a note to update our Membership regarding the 2007 Special Appeal for repairs and assessments.

Our 2007 Special Appeal requested cash donations specifically for repair to the Fillebrown House porches (final bill from White Bear Carpentry \$3,554.00); and the Special Assessments for the Lake Avenue Improvement Project (\$6,330.00).

Total received from our Membership for this Special Appeal was \$6,735.00. We were able to cover the Special Assessments and a portion of the repairs for the front and side porches of the Fillebrown House.

Thank you for your generosity and commitment to preserving our heritage.

Holly Geck, Past President

## Mission Statement of the White Bear Lake Area Historical Society

The White Bear Lake Area Historical Society connects the community to its past, fostering an understanding and appreciation for our history.

We fulfill our mission by....

- Gathering and maintaining historical information and artifacts.  
*We are safe keepers of our heritage.*
- Educating the community about our history.  
*We are the community storytellers.*
- Encouraging personal and community responsibility for preserving our physical links to the past.  
*We are advocates for historical preservation.*

### Proudly Serving

The White Bear Lake Area Historical Society is proud to serve the following communities:

- Birchwood
- Dellwood
- Mahtomedi
- White Bear Lake
- White Bear Township



If you have a story, pictures, or any information that you would like to share, please contact Sara at 651-407-5327

## Hometown Business – Lakeshore Players

For more than fifty years Lakeshore Players has been entertaining thousands of people through their many performances. In 1971 Lakeshore Players purchased the former church building they still occupy today. At various times the building served several Lutheran congregations and most recently First Baptist Church.

To learn more about Lakeshore Players and to see details about their current season visit [www.lakeshoreplayers.com](http://www.lakeshoreplayers.com).



1960

1980

2000

2008

OR RENEWS AT THE \$150 LEVEL OR HIGHER MOVES THE TIMELINE AHEAD ANOTHER YEAR.

## A Special Thank You to Our Hometown Business Members



Commercial Printing  
Hisdahl, Inc.

Hoffman Corner Heating & Air  
Conditioning  
Judy King Estate Sales  
Knutsen Auto

Mélange  
Mortgage Works  
Mueller Lake Mortuary  
Sunbear Spa & Tan  
Ursula's Wine Bar & Café  
White Bear Country Inn/Rudy's  
Red Eye Grill  
White Bear Eye Clinic

### Organizations:

Lakeshore Players  
White Bear Lake Lion's Club

For information on how your  
business can be a WBLAHS Home-  
town Business Member please  
contact Sara at 651-407-5327



Over the next several months there will be significant changes and upgrades including a new name for the White Bear Lake Area Historical Society's website at [www.whitebearhistory.org](http://www.whitebearhistory.org). All of these improvements take a great deal of effort behind the scenes. Many hours have been contributed by **Stephanie Askin** from web design to database management and everything in between. Without her patience, persistence and expertise we would be in tough shape. Thank you, **Stephanie** for all that you do!

We would not be able to provide many of our programs and events without our numerous volunteers who make things happen. Whether it is giving tours at the House, sorting papers at the Resource Library or answering questions for visitors, we rely heavily on the help of our volunteers. Thank you to all of you—new and continuing! For more information on what you may be able to do to help please contact Sara at 651-407-5327.



### From the Director's Desk...

**W**e've kicked off another exciting year at the WBLAHS and things are starting to roll. Throughout 2008 we will be working with White Bear Township to highlight the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its formation. The Town of White Bear was formed on the same day Minnesota became a State—May 11, 1858 so there will be statewide things happening this year as well.

The WBLAHS plays an important role in these local celebrations but it is much more than party planning! To learn more about the upcoming events and activities please see the Calendar of Events in this issue of *The Lake Area Preserver* or visit us at [www.wblareahistoricalsociety.org](http://www.wblareahistoricalsociety.org).

The anniversaries in recent years of several of the communities that we serve have created wonderful opportunities for the WBLAHS to get the word out about our efforts to collect and preserve the stories, images and artifacts of our collective past. Did you know that our photograph collection has grown from approximately 100 images in 2001 to more than 3,500 today?! That increase is in large part due to the awareness created through the celebrations of our milestones-White Bear Lake's 125<sup>th</sup> and Mahtomedi's 75<sup>th</sup> in 2006, Dellwood's 90<sup>th</sup> in 2007 and White Bear Township's 150<sup>th</sup> this year.

We hope to see you celebrating with us throughout 2008!

-Sara

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# Calendar of Events

For more details on these events and more visit [www.whitebearhistory.org](http://www.whitebearhistory.org) or call 651-407-5327

*Saturday, April 26<sup>th</sup>* Red, WhiteBear & Blue – WBLAHS Spring Event!

*Thursday, May 1<sup>st</sup>* Lake Avenue Stroll-Walking Tour\* 3-5pm

*Sunday, May 11<sup>th</sup>* White Bear Township Sesquicentennial Celebration  
At Polar Lakes Park 1-5pm

*Sunday, May 25<sup>th</sup> &  
Monday, May 26<sup>th</sup>* 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Civil War Encampment Polar Lakes Park  
(Memorial Day weekend) Sunday 5-9pm & Monday 9am-noon

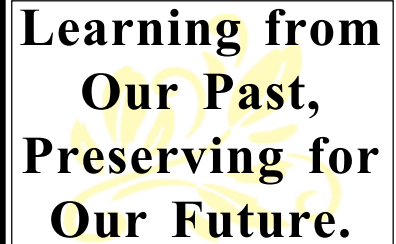
*Thursday, June 19<sup>th</sup>* *Marketfest Kick-off*

*Friday, June 20<sup>th</sup>* Manitou Days Parade

*Saturday, June 21<sup>st</sup>* All-School Reunion Celebrating 150 Years of White Bear Schools at the District  
Education Center & Central Middle School 11am-4pm  
Featuring Bus Tours of area schools, self-guided tours of the original High School,  
Dedication of the Memorial Bell at the newly renovated auditorium, displays of graduation  
photos, a vintage car show and much more!

*Saturday, June 28<sup>th</sup>* Around the Lake Bus Tour\* 10am-noon

\*Registration Required through Community Services & Recreation. Fees apply and space is limited. See program  
booklet for information or contact the White Bear Lake Community Services and Recreation Department at  
651-407-7501.



**Learning from  
Our Past,  
Preserving for  
Our Future.**

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## Watch the mail for your invite to the WBLAHS Spring Event!

**M**ark your calendars for April 26<sup>th</sup> 2008.

This year's *Red, WhiteBear and Blue* event features auction items only the Historical Society can provide including a fly-over of the White Bear area with long-time resident, former White Bear Lake City Council Member and pilot, Darryl LeMire, a motorcycle ride with the infamous Wild Hogs of White Bear, and a Day at the Capitol with Representative Carol McFarlane. You won't want to miss it!

**What:** Red, WhiteBear and Blue

**When:** April 26<sup>th</sup> 2008 6:00pm to 11:00pm

**Where:** White Bear Country Inn

**Why:** To have a great time and support a worthy cause

**How:** Tickets are \$45/person. Call 651-407-5327 for reservations

Have an item you would like to donate to the auction? Contact Betsy at [betsy@whitebearhistory.org](mailto:betsy@whitebearhistory.org) or 651-407-5327.

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Memories of an Early Resident  
And much more!



TO SHARE YOUR  
MEMORIES IN  
FUTURE ISSUES,  
CONTACT:

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