

Back in the day

All that remains

Story and photos by Len Harris

A couple years back while trout fishing I stumbled on an old abandoned homestead way back in the boonies in rural Crawford County. I typically fished this stretch in September when the leaves were still on the trees. This particular outing was in early March. The trees were barren and snow was still everywhere. The world looks much different in early March.

The trout stream I fish had a large pool with flat rocks at the top of the pool. I thought the flat rocks looked almost man-made, like a platform. The stream was shallow and fast-flowing down to the flat rocks where it then widened and deepened.

My first thought was the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources had done some work there, but after a little examination of the surrounding area, this was the only structure and it looked out of place.

I did some more exploring and saw a structure about 80 yards from the stream. I had fished this stretch numerous times before, but the foliage had hidden the structure from me in the past.

As I walked up to the monolithic structure, it looked very out of place. There were no roads nearby. I tried to guess how old it was; about 50 yards away was another structure. I wasn't sure what it was at first but after examining it and the surrounding area, I decided it was a smokehouse. I had stumbled on an old abandoned homestead. I had fished this area numerous times in the past and not seen it because of the leaves.

The flat rocks on the stream and the large pool below them were for bathing and washing clothes. This place was remote and had some rock bluffs that cradled the home and its occupants. The discovery piqued my curiosity and I needed to know the history behind these seemingly ancient ruins.

Back home, I looked at a plat map, found the closest landowners and paid them a visit. They were the caretakers of the place for the family who owned it and who camped and deer-hunted on the



A century ago, a family of five from Chicago built a homestead on the banks of a remote Crawford County trout stream. The current owners hunt the land and use the old fireplace to gather and share hunting stories from years past.

property. The caretakers knew some of the history of the place. Later that year, my wife and I visited the site when the owners were there deer hunting.

The owners had a fire in the old open hearth and were telling deer-hunting tales from years past. The history of the old homestead was here, there and everywhere. Each person around the fire added a tidbit to the story. Some of the reporting, I suspect, was romanticized and embellished through the years.

We learned that the homestead was built in 1917 by a family who moved up to rural Wisconsin from Chicago. There were five grown children in the family, besides mother and father. All of the family members helped build the hearth and smokehouse with rocks and bricks they brought on wagons.

The family built on the site because the limestone bluffs made an excellent wind break. They liked the stream nearby, but were careful not to build too close to it due to spring floods. The stream supplied clean water for drinking and brook trout they smoked in their smokehouse. A smokehouse was a necessity back in those days. There was no electricity and if they wanted to make it through the winter they needed to cure their fish and venison to keep through the Wisconsin winter.

As my wife and I sat at this open-hearth meeting, I remember her saying she could almost smell the hearty meals being cooked in a big black cast iron pot on the fire from years ago. She

admired the stonework and visualized the entire family making the structure almost 100 years ago.

Almost simultaneously we both asked the same question: "What happened to the family who built these structures?"

We were told that in late September 1918 a cold snap had hit the area. The father worried that winter was coming early and he didn't have enough smoked meat for winter. He needed to go hunting to stock up.

The father was gone for five days hunting. He camped and hunted and was bringing back the meat he had harvested during his outing. He walked into the log cabin to find all five of his children and wife bedridden. They had caught the Spanish Flu. The illness was fatal and the entire family died; the father was the only survivor. He abandoned the homestead in October 1918, went west and was never heard from again.

The Spanish Flu killed about 8,500 people in Wisconsin that year. Because of the deaths due to the flu, the homestead was considered toxic by the locals and sat empty for almost five years. Eventually it was used for many purposes through the years, even as a speak-easy during Prohibition. As time went by, the cabin decayed and fell in ruins. The stonework and the tale of the family from Chicago are all that remain.

Len Harris is an avid trout angler and photographer and writes from his home in Richland Center.

Back in those days a smokehouse was a necessity to cure fish and venison to keep through the winter.