

~~~~~ BIRTH OF A RESORT ~~~~~

# The Chase Hotel

*and the Rise of Lakeside Tourism*

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## WALKER NEWSPAPER

pronounced it “One of the Grandest Events in the History of Northern Minnesota.” On June 8, 1922, nearly 400 guests came from all over the state, arriving by train, car, and even seaplane to attend the grand opening and official dedication ceremonies of the New Chase Hotel on the shores of Leech Lake. The hotel was touted as the future of Walker, as large and modern as the vision of its builders and proprietors, longtime Walker residents Bert and Louisa Chase. Local newspapers embraced it with all the fervor of small-town boosterism, praising the New Chase as “one of the finest and most up to date hotel buildings in the Ten Thousand Lakes district of Minnesota” and observing, “There is no chance but what it will be one of the most popular summer hotels in the State.”<sup>1</sup>

Attempting to describe this new civic gem, the *Cass County Pioneer* observed, “It is difficult to adequately draw a word picture of this palatial building and it would be still more difficult to describe the beauty of the interior. It must be seen to be appreciated.”<sup>2</sup> The *Walker Pilot* was a bit more architecturally savvy: “The great white building is situated right on the lake shore and is an imposing structure being of frame construction and finished with an exterior finish of white Kellastone.”<sup>3</sup> It had been built perpendicular to the shoreline to afford every room a lake view. Each of the New Chase’s 64 rooms featured hot and cold running water and private bathrooms with tub and toilet, certainly a luxury for travelers to

northern Minnesota in 1922. Nearby, the Chase family’s Isabel Lodge (built in 1915) offered an additional 22 guest rooms and a large ballroom for dancing and other events. Like an error-filled game of “telephone,” area newspapers variously reported construction costs of \$100,000 and \$175,000.<sup>4</sup> These details aside, it was certainly a place the likes of which Walkerites had never seen. The Chases, who had for 20 years owned and run the more modest Hotel Chase in downtown Walker, had really outdone themselves this time.

“Complete in furnishings and equipment, every room a glow of light, beautifully decorated with potted plants, ferns and other embellishments, and thronged with guests, the setting was complete last Thursday evening for the dedication of the New Chase,” reported the *Walker Pilot*.<sup>5</sup> The unofficial start of the day’s events came in the late afternoon when that weekend’s most famous guest, H. W. Fawcett, landed his seaplane on Leech Lake and motored over to the Walker city dock. Fawcett, the Minneapolis-based publisher of the well-known humor magazine *Captain Billy’s Whiz-Bang*, also owned Breezy Point resort north of Brainerd. His presence—and signature on the June 8 registry as the seventh guest at the New Chase—served for civic boosters as yet another piece of much sought-after evidence that Walker had arrived.<sup>6</sup>

The five-course banquet began at 8 p.m. in the ballroom of the Isabel Lodge, where dinner seating for 159 people had to be repeated three times before all guests had

been served. Dancing, music, and obligatory speechmaking made up the evening’s program. The Dot Van orchestra came over from Bemidji, beefed up with a few additional players from Minneapolis.<sup>7</sup>

State representative and local attorney Daniel L. DeLury set the rhetorical tone for the evening with his speech. Known since the old days as “Crying Dan DeLury,” a reference to the pathos-laden strategies he liked to use when defending clients in court, he both praised the Chases and challenged local citizens to do their part. The *Walker Pilot* summarized his remarks:

Mr. DeLury gave an address that proved much more than a eulogy to Mr. and Mrs. Chase. He introduced his remarks by paying them the just tribute that was theirs. As a fellow townsman he was fully aware of the trials that had to be overcome and obstructions surmounted in order for the proprietors to achieve this, their greatest desire. But now that we have seen their ambitions crowned with success it behooves each of us to emulate, according to our ability, something that will also be for the betterment of the town.

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*The luxurious New Chase Hotel on Leech Lake, about 1923, touted as “one of the most popular summer hotels in the State.”*

**AS SHE OVERSAW FINAL** preparations for the evening's events and laid out the fashionable black dress and beaded head wrap that she would wear for the evening's festivities, Louisa Chase must have felt anything but celebratory. What should have been a night of triumph for the family—Bert, Louisa and their four adult children, Isabel, Edna, Loren, and Natica—could only have been bittersweet. Loren was dead. Losing a months-long struggle with pneumonia just one week earlier, 21-year old Loren was the one for whom this giant venture had been undertaken and to whom it would have been given upon his parents' retirement. While the newspapers did not report that the Chases were heartbroken and grieving on the night of the opening, stories on Loren's death the week before had noted the tragic irony: "He was very much interested in the New Chase which his father had planned and builded [*sic*] expressly for him. His death is a terrible blow to the parents as he was their only son and they would never have gone into the new hotel proposition had it not been expressly for his financial good and pleasure."<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Lewis Woodruff (Bert) and Louisa Chase were 61 and 59 years old in 1922, hardly the moment in life to undertake such a bold economic venture. By 1922 they had been in the hotel business for 21 years. They had raised four children and were grandparents four times over. They were responsible for the livelihood of dozens of employees, and they were up to their ears in debt. Now they had to figure out a way to make the New Chase work, without Loren. During the laudatory orations of the evening, the Chase family must have been in quite another place,



*Lewis and Louisa Chase, known as Bert and Lottie, in the 1920s*

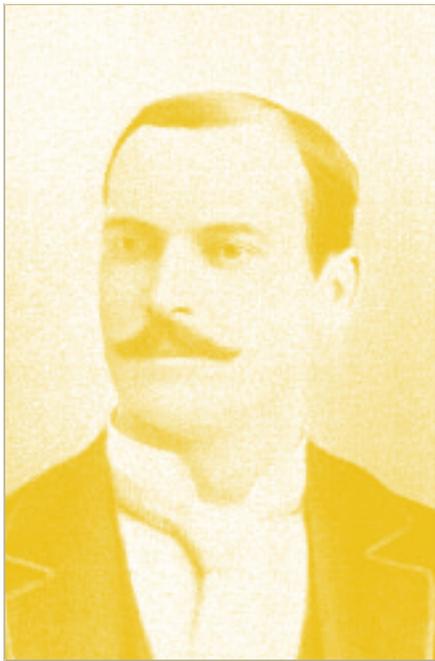
more consumed with anxiety and grief than flushed with civic pride.

Our interest in the Chases and their contributions to the early tourist industry in northern Minnesota is both historical and personal. The rise of the resort industry is an important story for both the region and the state; at the same time, this is also a family history. The grandson of Bert and Louisa Chase, co-author John R. "Jack" Finnegan Sr. spent his childhood summers in the late 1930s and early 1940s working and playing at the hotel his grandparents had built and his parents managed. The story told here combines archival research with personal recollections to communicate the role the Chases played in the rise of Minnesota lakeside tourism.

**BERT CHASE WAS SMALL** in stature but he had big ambitions. His wife, Louisa, a woman of strong character, was determined that Bert's ambitions would be realized. Together they were a formidable force. Bert

Chase met Louisa Hansen (he would later call her Lottie) shortly after he moved to Wisconsin from New York. They were married in Kilbourne City (now Wisconsin Dells) on January 2, 1887. To commemorate the occasion, they went to a local studio and sat for formal portrait photographs. These show the young newlyweds as rising members of the middle class, wearing well-made attire and the calm, serious expressions required for so auspicious an occasion. In the photographs the Chases appear to be good citizens well positioned in their local community. Maybe they were. But these portraits do not exactly tell the truth. In a practice quite common in the late-nineteenth century, photographs of their heads were superimposed on an artist's rendering of other, better-dressed bodies. As a result, the portraits show the Chases not as they actually were, but as they wanted us to see them. The newlyweds, we might say, adopted a "fake it till you make it" approach, using modern technology to accomplish visually what they would only be able to accomplish literally many years later. While the portraits are fakes in one sense, they are actually quite truthful in another, for they illustrate that from the very beginning of their life together Bert and Lottie Chase were always on the lookout for a way to get ahead.

They got ahead in earnest in 1898 when they arrived in the new town of Walker, some 66 miles north of their home of Brainerd, where Bert had co-owned a saloon. Incorporated in 1896, Walker owed its very existence to the state's burgeoning white pine industry and the logging camps and mills it spawned. According to historian Agnes Larson, who chronicled the rise and fall of the state's lumber



*Bert and Lottie Chase's wedding portraits, 1887, showing them as the prosperous citizens they hoped to become*

industry, in 1839 there was only one lumber mill in Minnesota; by 1870, that number had risen to more than 200. In the 1860s an entrepreneur from Ohio named T. B. Walker recognized the value of Minnesota's virgin forests; his Red River Lumber Company began several logging operations that reached "into the large and useful body of white pine" plentiful in areas north and west of what would become the town of Walker.<sup>9</sup>

The lumber industry was about more than trees, lumberjacks, and mills, however. As historian Theodore Blegen notes, "Lumber played important roles in the economic development of Minnesota. It was influential, through its capital, in financing the flour industry, in giving impetus to railroad building, in spurring employment, and in forwarding manufactures."<sup>10</sup> The development of Walker aptly illustrates Blegen's point.

Despite being named after T. B. Walker, the town actually owes its

earliest history to the boosterish efforts of Patrick H. McGarry. Described by a Brainerd newspaper as a "suave, polished gentleman," he was an entrepreneur and land speculator. Walker historian Duane Lund calls McGarry the "true founder and developer of the city." The man who would become Walker's first mayor (and later a member of both the Minnesota House and Senate), McGarry reportedly named the town after Walker in order to entice the famous businessman to build his lumber mill there. But McGarry did not anticipate the influence of Walker's wife, Harriet, a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, who refused to allow her husband to build in Walker unless its townsfolk closed the 13 saloons and the houses of ill repute. They didn't, so Walker set up his mill in the nearby community named after his partner, Healey C. Akeley. That town reportedly grew to some 4,000 inhabitants after the mill began operations.<sup>11</sup>

Walker circa 1896 was a rough-and-tumble town on the rise. There were two hotels, the Spencer and the Spaulding, which catered mainly to lumbermen and railroad workers. Only a few wooden sidewalks lined the town's dirt streets. The Brainerd and Northern Minnesota railroad (B&NM) had just laid some 59 miles of track from Brainerd to Walker and built a roundhouse and depot in town. (Walker was the end of the line until 1899 when the line was extended to Bemidji, about 40 miles north.) Much of the early B&NM business was hauling logs and lumber from Leech Lake to the mills downriver, replacing T. B. Walker's earlier practice of floating logs to the Leech River and then down the Mississippi to the mills. In keeping with Mrs. Walker's fears, a host of saloons served the area's lumberjacks and visitors, as did the brothels on the outskirts of town. Historian Blegen observes that, perhaps especially because "no liquor was permitted in the camps," the men who "after a season



*Entrepreneur Patrick H. McGarry, about 1890*

in the woods, got their pay and wandered into towns . . . spent their cash in a hurry.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite the obvious drawbacks in bringing their young family into such an environment, the Chases were likely attracted by the opportunities that the frontier of northern Minnesota offered. McGarry had circulated ads throughout the state with enthusiastic claims of great fishing and a healthful climate: “From the beginning, McGarry saw opportunities for tourism,” local historian Lund

neither hotel in town could handle crowds of people looking for fun and relaxation. These kinds of visitors sought first-class accommodations, good food, and entertainment. McGarry was prepared to provide those things. He began modestly with 12 tents set up on First Point, the nearest peninsula jutting into Walker Bay. Just northwest of Walker, his “White Tent City” became the focal point for tourists that summer. Later McGarry built cabins, a three-story lodge, and a dining hall on the grounds.<sup>14</sup>

## The coming of railroads made it much easier and more comfortable for tourists to visit the Walker area.

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relates. “While others were focused on logging, he recognized the scenic beauty, the excellent fishing and duck and big game hunting as future tourist attractions. He believed the railroad that carried logs and lumber south could bring tourists north.” Arriving in Walker in 1896, McGarry immediately bought up 20 building sites. He advertised that the town was a railroad center, “a pleasure grounds and an Indian trade area” that would soon have a wagon road to Bemidji.<sup>13</sup> From McGarry’s point of view, Walker had a lot going for it: besides the railroad line and the nearby Indian Agency, it overlooked a major bay of Leech Lake.

Indeed, the B&NM in 1895 and, by 1897, the Park Rapids and Leech Lake railroad spur (leased to the Great Northern in 1900) began hauling tourists and businessmen. The coming of railroads made it much easier and more comfortable for tourists to visit the Walker area. Yet

But it was the Pameda Hotel that McGarry saw as the major player in the tourist game. Within the year, he started work on his hotel, which hosted its gala opening in September 1897. The occasion featured a dinner dance for 300 people, including notables from Brainerd and the Twin Cities. As part of the festivities, guests were ferried on the steamer *Flora* from Walker across the bay for a visit to the Onigum Indian Agency.<sup>15</sup>

The four-story, 50-room, brick-and-frame building still lacked one important thing: a saloon. Bert Chase and a partner, Dee Holden, then the proprietors of The Bodega saloon in Brainerd, were eager to correct that situation. After seeing McGarry’s promotional ads about the opportunities in Walker, they closed their establishment and arrived in Walker in February 1898 with all of their fixtures and equipment. Louisa and the couple’s first children, Isabel

and Edna, arrived a few months later in May, spending their first chilly days in Walker in a tent.

The hotel quickly filled with land speculators, lumberjacks, politicians and, that fall, with soldiers of the U.S. Third Infantry Regiment. They had been sent to Walker to arrest Bugonaygeshig (Hole-in-the-Day), a 62-year-old Ojibwe man, for failure to appear in court in Duluth to testify against a friend charged with assault. Lottie Chase joined other Walker women to serve breakfast to the 80 soldiers before they left by boat for Bear Island, near the eastern shore of Leech Lake, to apprehend the wanted man. A skirmish there lasted a day, leaving seven soldiers dead and 11 wounded. Indian losses, if any, were never verified. Lottie Chase recalled later that she made coffee for the troops in two large washtubs on her wood-burning stove: “They had an early breakfast, about three o’clock in the morning when Poppa and I got up.”<sup>16</sup>

Bert Chase spent much of his time bartending, buying up property when he could, and becoming active in community affairs. There were persistent rumors that Bert got most of his land at the poker table, although the records show that he acquired a number of local parcels through paying off delinquent taxes. Author Maude Bragg Orton claimed that he won the Pameda from McGarry at poker, but the village newspapers reported that he purchased the hotel in September 1901.<sup>17</sup> What is true is that Bert did like to gamble. Family members recalled that he always carried large sums of money with him; he said he didn’t trust his bartenders, believing that they skimmed off some of his profits. Within two months of its purchase,

the Pameda was renamed the Hotel Chase, and the following spring the interior was repainted. The transformation of the hotel and Walker from a tough lumber town to a tourist center had begun.

**SETTLING INTO HIS ROLE** as a hotel proprietor, Bert stepped up his community activity by joining the town's beautification committee, which sought to improve streets, the lakeshore, and private grounds. With Lottie's help, he planted trees and flowers around the hotel and at the cottage that he owned a block up the hill. He also planted a large garden

in a nearby lot and raised vegetables for use in the hotel dining room. His interest in gardening led him to buy 160 acres west of town in 1902 and then another section a year later, for which he paid \$771 plus \$1,000 for livestock and farming equipment. Bert named his spread Eden Valley farm. It produced oats, hay, summer squash, carrots, and potatoes and the cows, hogs, and chickens that ultimately found their way onto the plates of hotel guests. When the Walker State Bank was formed in 1902, Bert was one of seven on its board of directors. He also became a trustee of the town a year later. That job involved important civic duties

such as fighting to keep wandering cows off the streets.<sup>18</sup>

The Chases were determined to become financially successful and a major influence in the developing community. But hotel ownership, Bert Chase was finding out, demanded constant vigilance. In 1903 he remodeled the building. A new floor was laid in the main lobby, replacing boards wounded by years of traffic under the hob-nailed boots of lumberjacks. A new metal ceiling went into the dining room. Mahogany-finished leather lounging seats and new tables were installed in the barroom, where a billiard table had also been added. The remaining scarred floors were replaced beginning in 1904 and the office and main

*In town, the four-story Hotel Chase, about 1905, when it was advertised as "the best equipped hotel in this section of the country" (Walker Pilot, May 5).*



dining room redecorated the following year. Over the next four years, a player piano was added to the bar-room, a café joined the dining facilities, and the dining room got new chandeliers and plate-glass doors.<sup>19</sup>

Outside, the Chases had a new fence installed, seeded a flower garden on the east side of the building, and planted trees around the property. In 1904 J. T. Love, an African American chef, was hired from Chicago. Chef Love worked for the Chases nearly every summer until 1928, establishing the hotel's reputation for fine dining. By 1905 the Chase was advertised as a \$2-a-day hotel featuring steam heat, electric lights, baths, and a bar.<sup>20</sup> It became a local center for meetings, parties, weddings, and banquets. The railroads brought more and more tourists every summer.

Just two years after Bert Chase bought the hotel, he began attracting conventions. For example, Northwest Editors, a group representing Minnesota newspapers, met at the Chase in June 1903. A few years later the *Walker Pilot*, reporting on a banquet for state officials, gushed, "A gathering of this kind not only adds a few stars to the crown Mr. Chase wears as the King Host of the North Country, but gives prominent visitors—of which this village is frequently blessed—a keen edged conception of the unstinted hospitality of Walker people in general."<sup>21</sup> The summers were filled with dances and parties at the hotel, and during the slow-tourist winters there were bridge parties, mah-jong tournaments, and other social gatherings.

Although Walker was flourishing and the Chases were members of its social elite, Lottie Chase was not entirely satisfied with the local



*The Chase family, 1900 (from left): Six-year-old Edna and eight-year-old Isabel with their aunt Etta Thompson (Lottie's sister) and parents Lottie and Bert*

school system. She did not want her children educated in what was, in many ways, still a frontier town; consequently, she sent her two eldest daughters off to the Sacred Heart Academy in Duluth (now the College of St. Scholastica). Loren, born in 1900, attended St. Thomas Academy in St. Paul.

Indeed, life in Walker could be exciting and even deadly. The Chases found that out firsthand in 1910. Howard Sexton had been in Walker for two months when his surveying job with a government crew ended early in 1910. He took a job as day clerk at the Chase and occasionally assisted at the bar. One morning while Sexton was working behind the bar, a local man, Walt McDonald, came in and asked for a beer. Sexton hesitated. McDonald demanded service. An argument ensued. McDonald threatened Sexton, and the bartender called him a "bluffer."

McDonald stormed out, cursing. He went to his house, where he got a .44 caliber pistol, and returned to the hotel. He again asked Sexton for a beer. When Sexton reached to get it, McDonald shot him once in the hand and three times in the chest. McDonald returned to his house, barricaded the place, and refused to surrender when the sheriff came to arrest him. The next day, McDonald was found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.<sup>22</sup>

Just a few months after this incident, getting liquor in Walker became more difficult. The United States government had declared that every town in Indian Territory—and that included Walker—must close its saloons. Townsfolk were thus introduced to the marvelously nicknamed William E. "Pussyfoot" Johnson, a special agent of the Interior Department sent to enforce the no-booze ban. By December 1910, the two

saloons—one in the Chase and the other the College Inn—were closed and their liquor carted to St. Paul.<sup>23</sup>

Loss of the saloon business did not deter the Chases, who continued to make improvements designed to attract tourists. A gasoline engine and generator improved hotel lighting and powered the new washing machines, dishwashers, and laundry mangles. By the spring of 1915, with business continuing strong, Bert and Louisa began construction of their second hotel, a two-story frame building on the shore of Leech Lake near Lake May Creek.<sup>24</sup> Named the Isabel Lodge in honor of their eldest daughter, it was designed for summer-only use. Amenities included 22 rooms with modern facilities, a lobby and office, a large ballroom, and a second-floor glassed-in porch facing the lake. It not only accommodated 50 guests but was also the site of

weekly public dances in the summer.

By World War I, the lumber-jacks had largely disappeared, and the white pine industry had been in steady decline for more than a decade, primarily due to clear-cutting practices that had eliminated most of the old-growth pine. According to Blegen, “The lumber product of Minnesota slumped by 1914 to about half its volume in 1905, and it dropped to about a fifth just after World War I. Mill after mill terminated its processing of white pine.”<sup>25</sup> Such an economic transition made it even more important for Walker to build its tourist industry.

In 1919 the Chases renewed plans to build a much larger hotel immediately east of the Isabel Lodge, a project they had postponed during the war. The main building would be 36 feet wide and 164 feet long, with a 44-foot extension for a dining room

and upper porch overlooking Walker Bay. The new hotel would be four stories high with 64 guest rooms, two dining rooms, a modern kitchen with a walk-in refrigeration system, and a large laundry area. Hallways would run down its center so that all rooms provided a lake view. It took three years to complete the structure. When it opened, the Chases faced a massive undertaking: with the unexpected death of son Loren, the family would have to operate its new facility and continue to run the old Hotel Chase on Main Street as well.<sup>26</sup>

**AS THE TOWN OF WALKER** prepared for the opening of the New Chase Hotel, Bert was praised in local newspapers as “one of the leading hotel men in the state.” Following up on the laudatory rhetoric of opening night, the *Walker Pilot* said, “Business people like the Chases are the elements that make towns.” The *Duluth News Tribune* concurred, observing that the hotel was “a distinctive mark of Walker’s advance as a tourist center. . . . The hotel is of proportions that would reflect credit and distinction on any summer city larger by thousands than Walker.”<sup>27</sup>

*Constructing the New Chase, about 1922; the Isabel Lodge stands at right.*



With the passing of Loren, the Chases turned to oldest daughter Isabel's husband, William F. (Bill) Finnegan, who became the new manager and joined their efforts to improve the hotel and Walker as a tourist center. A former traveling salesman for Armour and Company, Finnegan had ideas about how better to cater to both tourists and visiting businesspeople. Yet despite the brand-new facilities, it wasn't easy. In fact, the new hotel immediately faced major sewer problems; it took all that summer and \$4,000 in additional funds to correct them. No one involved in the planning had any experience in handling disposal problems associated with a hotel as large as the New Chase, with so many bathrooms and laundry needs. On the more positive side, the hotel management enthusiastically supported efforts of town pioneer Mc-

*Regular guest and fisherman L. D. H. Russell of Kansas City, whose guide displays a largemouth bass*

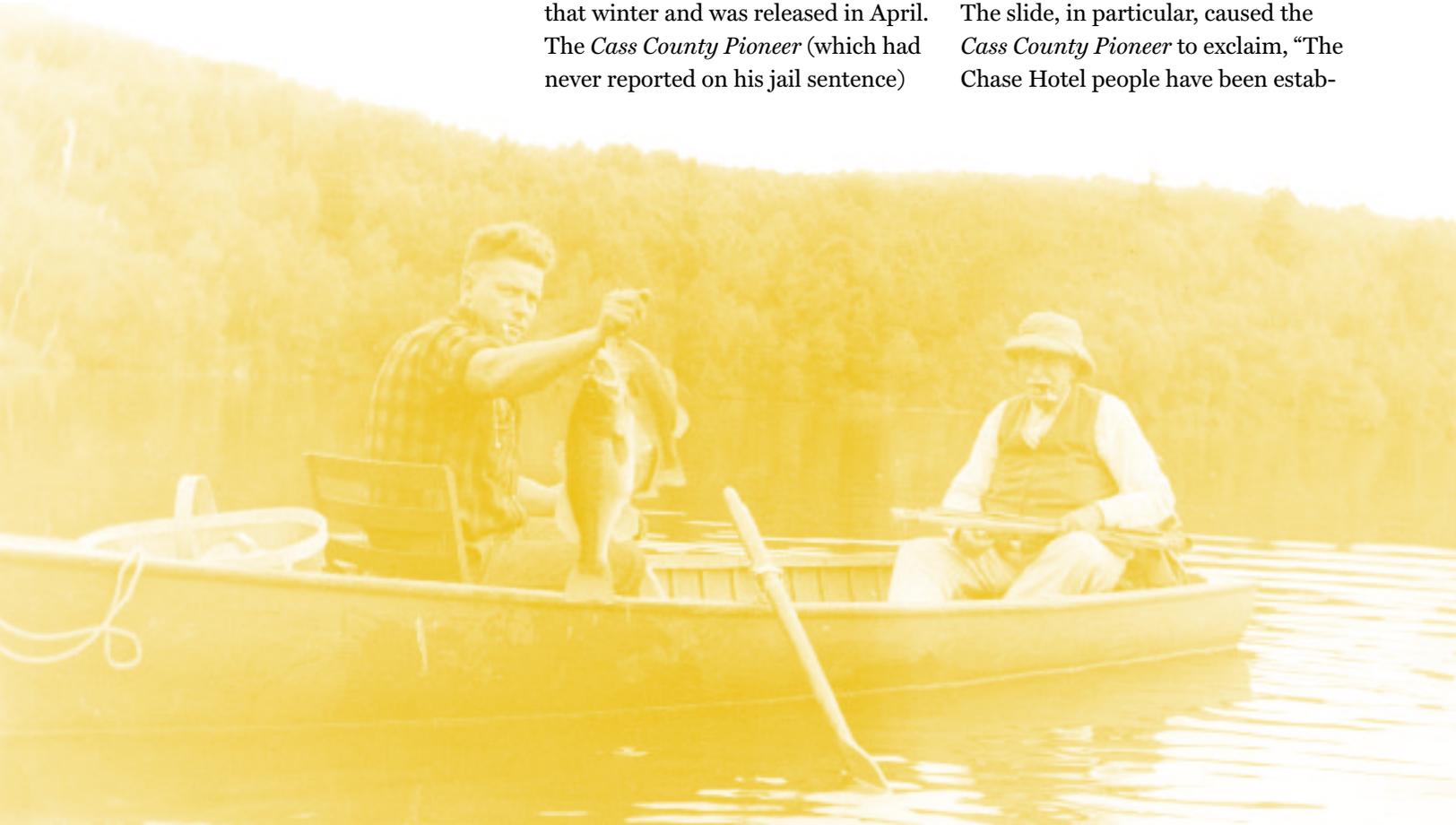
Garry, along with John Andrus and local banker I. P. Steade, to build a golf course near Walker. (The Tianna Country Club still exists today.) Bert offered a team of horses to help prepare the land and contributed funds, as well.<sup>28</sup> He also expanded his farm that provided the hotel with produce and meat for many summers.

During these years, Bert, like many others in the industry, had problems with Prohibition laws. Raids by federal agents in March 1923 turned up a bottle "with a little moon in it" in a hotel guest's pocket, the *Cass County Pioneer* reported. Bert was charged with sale and possession of liquor. In May the feds again raided the old Hotel Chase on Main Street, and one agent claimed he had bought a drink. A search uncovered several fruit jars containing a small amount of liquor; the hotel proprietor again was charged. This time, Bert was sentenced to five months and 25 days in jail and had to pay a \$400 fine. He served his time in the Washington County jail in Stillwater that winter and was released in April. The *Cass County Pioneer* (which had never reported on his jail sentence)

told readers that Bert had recently returned to Walker "after spending the winter near the Twin Cities."<sup>29</sup>

If Prohibition put limits on the social life of the period, the rise of a new mass medium, radio, expanded it. In the mid-twenties when radio became popular, the New Chase held weekly concerts on Saturday nights. A \$400 radio set (about \$4,850 in 2009) complete with loudspeaker was added to the lobby, and guests could dine, dance, and play cards to the music.

The hotel grounds, too, were constantly improved under Lottie's direction. A horseshoe-shaped driveway was constructed around the hotel, and stone pillars topped with lights were added. A nearby marsh was drained and landscaped. A clay tennis court was installed west of the Isabel Lodge, and a 110-foot water slide with a 30-foot tower was built in front of the lodge in 1925. Hardwood toboggans running on metal wheels in a slotted track launched squealing swimmers 40 feet into Leech Lake. The slide, in particular, caused the *Cass County Pioneer* to exclaim, "The Chase Hotel people have been estab-



lishing good things for Walker. . . . Each time it seems they have reached the limit but they come back with something better every time. The New Chase with its parks, annex, the well-kept grounds and the glorious lake view, have already become nationally famous.” That same year, the Chase Corporation was established with a \$70,000 stock issue.<sup>30</sup>

## During the depression years the entire Finnegan family worked at the Chase in the summer months.

By now the Chase was attracting people from all over the country, especially from midwestern and plains states such as Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. Many guests were avid fishermen. One, H. C. Jewett from Aberdeen, South Dakota, not only brought large fishing parties to Walker but one year arrived with a 40-foot fishing launch, which the Chases purchased in 1928.<sup>31</sup> For the next 12 years, the launch took daily fishing parties out, towing as many as a half-dozen 18-foot rowboats to the fishing grounds in the big lake. Guides and the launch skipper cooked shore lunches for the guests.

**THE ARRIVAL** of the Great Depression in 1929 slowed expansion of the tourist industry. Fishermen were a substantial client base, but during the late 1920s more resorts had opened on the shores of Leech Lake, and by the early 1930s guest numbers were declining and the length of reservations decreasing from months to weekends. Families, too, trimmed their stays to a single week.

To compensate for these losses, the Chase management began buying more state and regional advertising, adopting the slogan, “The Only Resort Hotel on Leech Lake.” Business owners in Walker teamed up to find solutions to these problems in the tourist industry. In 1934 the Leech Lake Resort Owners association was formed, later merging with the

Walker Business Owners Club into the Leech Lake Playground Association. Chase manager Bill Finnegan was named secretary.<sup>32</sup>

As the depression deepened, hotel management focused on attracting conventions and annual meetings that would bring in 75 to 100 visitors for two or three days. By 1935 Bert Chase confessed to the *Walker Pilot* on the occasion of his seventy-fourth birthday that “The past few years have been slow in comparison to my first years in the resort business.” Even so, there were bright spots: the opening of Danworthy Girls Camp south of Walker brought parents and grandparents to the hotel during the summer camping season, among them Dr. William J. Mayo, one of the founders of the Mayo Clinic. In addition, a winter-sports area was developed at Shingobee Hills in 1938, and by 1941 the Great Northern railroad sponsored a regular ski train from the Twin Cities.<sup>33</sup>

During the depression years the entire Finnegan family worked at the Chase in the summer months. Isabel Finnegan ran the dining room.

Daughter Katherine typed the daily menus. Son Bill Jr. often worked the front desk. Youngest child John, known as Jack (this article’s co-author), was a part-time janitor, bellhop, and occasional fishing guide. Lottie oversaw the laundry and landscape work. Bert became more physically limited in the 1930s, as he was ill with cancer.

Growing up in the hotel business, Jack was introduced as a child to some pretty interesting characters. Three who visited Walker regularly for 20 years were L. D. H. Russell of Kansas City, Missouri, F. E. Hoover of Oak Park, Illinois, and Judge J. H. Keith of Coffeyville, Kansas. All were fishermen who spent much of their time looking for largemouth bass. Their daily itineraries were known to most of the hotel guests, since two were very hard of hearing (Judge Keith used an ear trumpet) and



Sometime bellhop Jack Finnegan (left), inside the New Chase with Johnny Roventini, celebrity bellhop in the “Call for Philip Morris” ads, 1939

they met at 5 A.M. outside the lobby, loudly discussing their plans.

Some guests had less wholesome pursuits. One, a lawyer from Missouri who worked for the Tom Pendergast machine in Kansas City, spent some of his vacation time practicing his marksmanship. He hired several local boys to throw tin cans into the lake in front of the Isabel Lodge; he then fired at the air-borne missiles with a .45 caliber pistol he carried in a holster. (He rarely missed.) This man's mother had different interests. She liked to play the slot machines in the hotel lobby. When she won, she took the coins back to her rooms and washed them in rubbing alcohol. She obviously felt that money was indeed "filthy lucre." Doing bellhop duties, Jack once discovered \$5, \$10, and \$20 bills drying on a clothesline hung over the suite's bathtub.

Slots had been banned in 1929, but during the 1930s they were back in hotels, bars, and stores because law enforcement was lax. The Cass County sheriff publicly urged businesses to "get rid of slots,"<sup>34</sup> but he would conduct a raid only if he received a complaint from the public. Even then, he would tip the owner that he was coming to investigate. When hotel manager Bill Finnegan learned of the sheriff's upcoming visit, the slots, housed in a sturdy metal cabinet, would be wheeled from the lobby into a vacant and out-of-the-way bedroom. Despite their illegality, the machines were useful: Finnegan once said that they paid the hotel's heat and light bills for the winter months.

**IN 1931 THE OLD HOTEL CHASE** on Main Street was sold back to P. H. McGarry, who remodeled it and



*Jack and Isabel Chase Finnegan in front of the family business, 1940s*

named it the Patrick Henry; it was torn down in 1952.<sup>35</sup> In 1938 Bert Chase lost his seven-year battle with throat cancer at the age of 76. The Chase Corporation, which included Lottie Chase, Isabel Finnegan, and Bill Finnegan Sr., continued to run the hotel through the World War II years. Bill Finnegan Sr. died suddenly while duck hunting in 1944; he was only 56. At the time, sons Bill Jr. and Jack were both serving overseas (daughter Katherine had died in 1936). After the war, neither opted to remain in the resort-hotel business. Bill developed a career as a lawyer in the Navy Department and lived for many years near San Francisco, while Jack became a St. Paul newspaper executive.

**THROUGH THEIR HOTELS,** innovative programming and upgrading, and civic work, the Chase-Finnegan family contributed significantly to the growth and development of both the town of Walker and the tourist industry in Minnesota for nearly 50 years. Their relationship with the New Chase Hotel ended officially in 1946 when the property was sold

to the Cruse family. Lottie lived for many years after the sale, dying in 1961 at the age of 98. Isabel died 20 years later. Lottie, Bert, and their children Loren and Edna (who lived most of her life in California) are buried in the Chase family plot in Evergreen Cemetery in Walker. Bill Finnegan Sr., Isabel Finnegan, and their daughter Katherine are buried nearby in the Finnegan family plot.

The hotel—renamed the Chase on the Lake and later listed on the National Register of Historic Places—changed hands many times before an extensive kitchen fire in 1997 closed the original building for good. It was razed in the summer of 2007 to make way for a luxury resort hotel, which retained the Chase name and aesthetic. While only a pair of leaded glass doors was saved from the original building, the new hotel mimics the 1920s style of its predecessor and features 70 hotel units, a bar and restaurant, indoor spa and beauty salon, and a sauna and swimming pool. There also are 46 condo units.<sup>36</sup> In June 2008 the newest Chase on the Lake opened for business, 86 years to the month from the date the New Chase Hotel opened its doors. □

## Notes

The authors wish to acknowledge the important contributions of Norma C. Finnegan, whose initial newspaper research forms the basis of this article.

1. *Cass County Pioneer*, Apr. 7, 1922, p. 1, June 9, 1922, p. 1.
2. *Cass County Pioneer*, June 9, 1922, p. 1.
3. *Walker Pilot*, June 15, 1922, p. 1. Kellastone is stucco embedded with stone.
4. *Cass County Pioneer*, Apr. 7, 1922, p. 1; *Duluth News Tribune*, June 25, 1922, auto/sports sec., p. 1.
5. *Walker Pilot*, June 15, 1922, p. 1.
6. New Chase Hotel register, June 8, 1922, copy in authors' possession.
7. Here and below, *Walker Pilot*, June 15, 1922, p. 1.
8. *Walker Pilot*, June 1, 1922, p. 1.
9. Agnes M. Larson, *History of the White Pine Industry in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1949), 147, 156 (quote). See also Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 326.
10. Blegen, *Minnesota*, 319.
11. *Brainerd Weekly Journal*, July 8, 1897, p. 1; Duane R. Lund, *Leech Lake: Yesterday and Today* (Cambridge, MN: Adventure Publications, 1998), 98; W. F. Toensing, comp., *Minnesota Congressmen, Legislators, and Other Elected State Officials* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1971), 75; O. F. Ringle, *Bodega* (Walker: Steingarten Publishing, 1993), 45–47.
12. *Brainerd Weekly Journal*, Apr. 23, 1896, p. 1; *Cass County Pioneer*, May 16, 1896, p. 1; Maude Bragg Orton, *Birth of a Village: History of Walker, Minnesota*,

1895–1905 (self-published, 1981), n. p.; Ringle, *Bodega*, 23; Blegen, *Minnesota*, 332.

13. Lund, *Leech Lake*, 106; *Cass County Pioneer*, May 9, 1896, n. p.

14. Frank A. King, *Minnesota Logging Railroads* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 51–53, 137; *Cass County Pioneer*, May 16, 1896, n. p.; Lund, *Leech Lake*, 106.

15. *Cass County Pioneer*, Sept. 16, 1897, p. 1; *Brainerd Weekly Journal*, Sept. 30, 1897, p. 1.

16. *Cass County Pioneer*, Oct. 6, 1898, p. 1; Louisa Chase, taped interview by her grandson, William F. Finnegan Jr., Santa Cruz, CA, July 1955, copy in authors' possession. At the time of the interview, Louisa Chase was 93 years old.

For a detailed account of the battle, see William E. Matsen, "The Battle of Sugar Point: A Re-Examination," *Minnesota History* 50 (Fall 1987): 269–75. There are conflicting reports on the number of dead and wounded soldiers but all reports agree that no bodies of Ojibwe were found.

17. *Cass County Pioneer*, Sept. 20, 1901, p. 8; Orton, *Birth of a Village*, "People" chapter.

18. Mortgage deed, Cleora L. Fair to L. H. and L. W. Chase, Dec. 9, 1903, Cass Co. Register of Deeds office, Walker; *Cass County Pioneer*, Mar. 20, 1903, p. 1; *Walker Pilot*, Apr. 24, 1903, p. 1.

19. *Cass County Pioneer*, Dec. 4, 1903, p. 8; *Walker Pilot*, Dec. 4, 1903, p. 6.

20. *Walker Pilot*, May 5, 1905, p. 5.

21. *Walker Pilot*, June 19, 1903, p. 1, Dec. 20, 1907, p. 8.

22. *Cass County Pioneer*, Feb. 4, 1910, p. 1.

23. *Walker Pilot*, Dec. 9, 1910, p. 1.

24. *Walker Pilot*, May 21, 1915, p. 1.

25. Blegen, *Minnesota*, 329.

26. *Cass County Pioneer*, Nov. 15, 1929, p. 1.

27. *Walker Pilot*, Sept. 29, 1921, p. 1, June 1, 1922, p. 1; *Duluth News Tribune*, June 25, 1922, auto/sports sec., p. 1.

28. *Walker Pilot*, Dec. 28, 1922, p. 2. On the Tianna Country Club, see Lund, *Leech Lake*, 98, 109.

29. *Cass County Pioneer*, Mar. 30, 1923, p. 1, Apr. 17, 1924, p. 8; *Walker Pilot*, May 10, 1923, p. 1.

30. *Cass County Pioneer*, May 15, 1925, p. 8, June 26, 1925, p. 1; *Walker Pilot*, Oct. 1, 1925, p. 1.

31. *Cass County Pioneer*, Sept. 7, 1928, p. 1.

32. New Chase Hotel letterhead in Finnegan family files; *Walker Pilot*, May 17, 1935, p. 1. Lund, *Leech Lake*, 109, observes that once roads were built to allow access to other areas of Leech Lake, additional resorts and cabins sprang up.

33. *Walker Pilot*, Sept. 6, 1935, p. 4, Aug. 2, 1935, p. 3; Lund, *Leech Lake*, 109.

34. *Walker Pilot*, July 31, 1936, p. 1.

35. On the demolition, see John R. Finnegan, "Noted Hotel Razed," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 18, 1952, p. 1, 6.

36. *Walker Pilot-Independent*, Aug. 1, 2007, p. 1.

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