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The Saga of Saga Hill¹

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DURING A RECENT REREADING of the letters of Pliny the Younger, I found that my interest was centered not in the eruption of Vesuvius or in the reign of Pliny's friend, the Emperor Trajan, but in Pliny's descriptions of his summer home, his Laurentine villa—its rooms and promenades, its porticoes and courtyards, its statues and fountains, its gardens planted with fig and mulberry, rosemary, box, and vine, its baths and swimming pool, its tennis court, its garden house insulated from all noises, its sources of supplies of food and milk, the fishing of soles and prawns, and the charm of visitors who came to spend a few days with this gentleman of ancient Rome.

Without being in any sense a specialist in Roman history, I have through the years enjoyed reading books about Rome as well as about Athens in the era of its glory; and in all my reading I have found nothing that conveys so vivid a sense of the life, thought, civilization, and people of Roman times as Pliny's letters setting forth, not so much the great debates of the Roman senate or the affairs of empire, as the thoughts and observations of a Roman in his summer home during the vacation period away from the capital.

The story of Lake Minnetonka in modern times may seem a long cry from ancient Rome, but I wonder if that story, told in

¹This essay grew out of an address on the same subject presented by Dean Blegen at the Minnetonka Country Club on September 13, 1947. The occasion was the luncheon session of the Minnesota Historical Society's twenty-first summer tour, which revolved about Lake Minnetonka and exploited its history (see *ante*, 28:390-392). Mr. Walter Belde of the society's museum staff drew the map published herewith. *Ed.*

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all its sweep, would not reveal many facets of the civilization of America that escape the historians who fasten their eyes upon the seemingly great events. For the really significant history is that grass roots history which reveals the everyday life of people, in their homes and at their retreats, in their work and in their play, in turbulence and in repose—their thought and life not only in statehouse and forum and market but also in cabin and villa, not to speak of apartment, prefabricated house, and trailer.

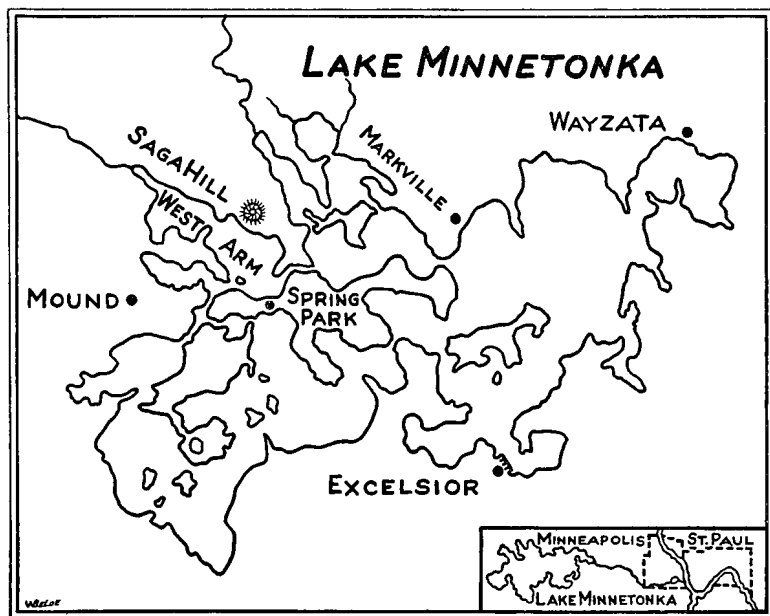
The history of this Minnesota lake near Minneapolis and all the reflections and manifestations of life that it has witnessed could be a contribution to our understanding of American civilization, in a book that would speak to us and to the future of the ways and days of the people, whose lives are the very substance of history, just as the letters of a Roman gentleman speak across a wide gulf of time to our own day.

There was a time when I thought of trying to write the "Book of Minnetonka," but upon reflection I find that it is very difficult for me to look at this lake with the objective eyes of the impartial historian. When I think of Minnetonka, my thought is not, I fear, that of a scholar. It is more akin to that suggested in a nostalgic line from Conrad Richter's *Sea of Grass* that speaks of "a small boy in a long nightgown and tousled hair white in the candlelight of a world that had vanished like last year's snows."

But with my Minnetonka background, I fully understood the sentiment in the graceful closing lines of Pliny's letter about his Laurentine villa. "Tell me, now," he wrote to a friend more than eighteen hundred years ago, "have I not good reason for living in, staying in, loving, such a retreat, which, if you feel no appetite for, you must be morbidly attached to town? And I only wish you would feel inclined to come down to it, that to so many charms with which my little villa abounds, it might have the very considerable addition of your company to recommend it."

The saga I have to recite is unpretentious, that of Saga Hill, a summer colony established on the north shore of West Arm, not far from Spring Park, in the 1880's. Although I cannot tell the story in full, I can give some glimpses of it, because my father,

one of the early members of the colony, has devoted a chapter to Saga Hill in his unpublished reminiscences, and because, starting in the summer of 1891, I spent my own summers at Saga Hill for many years. Let me add that I got out to Minnetonka about as soon as humanly possible. I was born that summer in Minneapolis



and started for the lake about two weeks later, according to reliable family tradition.

My own memories of Minnetonka and the recorded narrative of my father naturally differ a little. He does not, for example, mention the annual visits of the gypsies, with whom my brothers and I traded pickerel and dogfish for toys and trinkets—perhaps a sharp bargain on our part, for my mother in any case would not have cooked the dogfish. The scenes and events and sounds that stir my memory are, of course, those of a Minnetonka boyhood. My father does not touch on our hunt through the woods for ginseng, from which my brothers and sisters and I expected

to reap a fortune, gathering up the plants wherever we found them and transplanting them to a shaded area, confidently anticipating crops that would be shipped to China. There, we were told, people found healing qualities in the grotesque, man-shaped roots. We found and transplanted many ginseng plants, but the fortune, somehow, remained in far-off China.

Another memory is that of the annual excursion of the family on the glamorous "City of Saint Louis," an all-day affair that first involved a train trip to Wayzata, where we embarked upon the great steamer of the lake. On the "City of Saint Louis" we saw that captain of Minnetonka captains, J. R. Johnson, and I remember being touched with envy of my father, a mere teacher of Greek, who chatted with the captain as if he were the captain's equal. To me the captain was what my later reading disclosed the pilot to be in Mark Twain's stories of Mississippi steamboating. Remembered, also, are the hoarse whistle of the red-painted passenger steamer, "Florence Deering," and the sight of its bewiskered captain, Charles W. Deering, who now and then would allow me to make the rounds of the lake with him and who once, after taking a drink from a flask that he kept in a convenient spot, delivered himself of a bit of philosophic if grimly retrospective wisdom in the following line: "What I want is peace in family!"

To these, add the hunting of berries in wild spots long since tamed; fishing expeditions to Harrison's Bay when that bay was full of large pickerel; tutelage in the art of fishing from a father who had a genuine Waltonian instinct for finding the favorite spots of the lurking pickerel; frequent visits to Spring Park when its grounds were thronged with picnic folk from the city; a boy's impressions of a train conductor, Mr. Woolnough, whose voice singing out "Orono" and "Minneapolis" still sounds in my memory; the glamor of the Minnetonka steamboats, such as the "Belle of Minnetonka," its day of glory already past, the "Victor," the "Ypsilanti," the "Puritan," and others; the mystery of the deep woods; the charm of ferns and flowers, including the moccasin and lotus; and the strange symphony of insects in the marshes. Add also the impact of the many odd personalities that had a way

of appearing at our summer home, including a witty and swift-spoken Dane who had fought in the Dano-Prussian War; experimentation with kinnekinick, of Indian fame, in a day when cigarette smoking had to be done, if at all, far from the vigilant eyes of one's parents; an extensive business with the Hotel Del Otero at Spring Park that sometimes netted as much as sixty cents for twelve dozen frogs caught in the marshes adjoining the lake; a three-mile nonstop run, with one of my brothers, for a doctor in a futile attempt to save the life of an infant who had fallen into the lake from a near-by dock; Fourth of July celebrations with skyrockets shooting up across the entire horizon, my father serving as master of ceremonies at our lake front; daily excursions to a traditional swimming hole, where a great tree, extending out over the water, furnished at once a diving board and branches in which to ruminate on the meaning of life; and games played on the family windmill and in a tree house, from which, remarkably, no one suffered a fall. Finally add the work which, from spring to autumn, my father assigned daily to his sons and which had to be done before the day's play and diversion could begin. This became a game of wits between two generations, my father on the one side and his four sons on the other. We thought we had triumphed cleverly when at last we persuaded him, instead of having us work until eleven o'clock each morning, to give us a particular job for the day. He wracked his brains to think up jobs for us; and with this concession, we nearly broke up the summer home by getting up at five or six in the morning to complete the entire task by breakfast time and have the normal day open for really important enterprises, such as fishing and swimming. But my father was not easy to outwit; he complimented us on our enterprise and energy, and increased the size of the jobs assigned to us.

Such experiences, gay and happy, probably are more or less typical of American boys' lives during Minnetonka summers at all parts of the lake—and indeed at thousands of other American lakes not lucky enough to bear the name "Minnetonka." If there was something a bit unusual about Saga Hill summer life, it probably is to be explained by the nature of the colony itself, the

interests of its adult members, and the circumstance that it formed a homogeneous and well-knit society.

My father, in his reminiscences, tells of the inception of the colony. In June, 1885, a group of professors, ministers, bankers, and professional men, many of them affiliated with the Trinity Lutheran Church in Minneapolis and deeply interested in the affairs of Augsburg College, where my father taught, formed what was called the Saga Hill Association. With a capital stock of ten thousand dollars, they purchased a considerable tract of land lying in the area nearly surrounded by West Arm, North Arm, and Forest Lake, divided the land into lots, and arranged for each member to have a sizable frontage on West Arm, with numerous lots reaching far back into the woods. My father bought five shares in this association early in 1886, and, as we later believed, unerringly picked the best lake-shore property on West Arm.

It may be of interest to mention some of the personalities in the Saga Hill Association. Its president was a banker, Reinert Sunde, and its secretary was M. Falk Gjertsen, an eloquent and popular Norwegian American preacher whose talents also included those of a novelist. Another member was Olaf Hoff, a brilliant pioneering engineer of Old World education and wide cultural interests. He is notable as a bridge builder who later won national fame for constructing, first, the Detroit River Tunnel—he was then vice-president of the Butler Brothers-Hoff Company—and later the tunnel under the Harlem River in New York. Yet another colony member was Sven Oftedal, then professor at Augsburg College and later its president, an orator and scholar feared for his biting wit and controversial skill and admired for his versatility, a master of many languages, particularly of Greek, ancient and modern, and one of the builders of the Minneapolis Public Library system. Our own immediate neighbors for a time in the earlier years, antedating my memory, were the Uelands of Minneapolis. Judge Andreas Ueland was a notable figure in the city, and Mrs. Ueland was a civic leader for whom today a graduate fellowship at the University of Minnesota is named. Some years later, as the colony expanded to the shores of Forest Lake, Georg Sverdrup,

the president of Augsburg and in my father's opinion the foremost theological thinker and scholar among the Norwegian Americans, joined the settlement, along with three Augsburg professors, H. N. Hendrickson, a classicist and musician, H. A. Urseth, a poet, and J. L. Nydahl, a gentle teacher and man of integrity, plus N. N. Rønning, the magazine editor, writer, and humorist. The measure of Sverdrup's scholarship may be taken by reading his biography by Professor Andreas Helland, an able theologian and professor who also became a member of the Saga Hill Colony.

My father succeeded in having his summer house built by 1887, and that was therefore his first summer at West Arm. It may be of passing interest to note that he built a two-story house, with a tower at one corner that served as a friendly sanctuary for bats, generous verandas, a summer kitchen some distance behind the house, a windmill, a shower house, and a vine-clad coffee house, and that he promptly embarked upon a planting program, beginning with cedar trees, some of which, in full glory, still stand on the Saga Hill shores. He planted apple trees in large numbers, grapes, raspberries, and extensive vegetable gardens, and my mother created a flower garden of the French pattern with graveled lanes. A near-by farmer delivered milk daily. Groceries were brought from Markville, now Crystal Bay, a long distance in that pre-automobile day, and the lake supplied fish, not indeed soles and prawns, but sunfish, crappies, black bass, and pickerel, the latter often running to ten pounds and beyond, and sometimes running beyond in another sense. For making that unusual delicacy known as a fish pudding, my mother, assisted by Annette, her expert Norwegian maid, scorned any pickerel that weighed under five or six pounds.

Meanwhile the Saga Hill Association had built, not far from our place, a clubhouse or, more correctly, a meetinghouse, very near the beach. There, on Sundays, regular services were held, with Sunday school for the children, of whom, in the various families, there were many indeed, my father's family contributing four boys and two girls to the younger society.

My father, in his reminiscences, devotes considerable attention to the affairs of the meetinghouse, which came to a sad end. In

the late 1880's and early 1890's the Norwegian Lutherans, after a period of theological warfare marked by everything but shooting, were engaged in an effort to unite four synods or church groups, and they did in fact create what was called the United Norwegian-Lutheran Church of America. Unhappily, however, this union got involved in great difficulty with respect to the control of Augsburg College and Seminary, and the upshot of it was that the friends of that institution created a synod of their own, the Lutheran Free Church. This church controversy resulted in the closing of the Saga Hill meetinghouse, since some of the members belonged to one group and some to another, and the fires of controversy were so hot that they scorched the summer church. So it was sold and was moved away, to the great regret of members of the younger generation who had made its roof and the adjoining trees the playground for certain running and leaping games that were distinctly outside the religious plans of the colony founders.

The Free Church people, however, bought the home of one of the members, by an arrangement worked out by my father and Mr. Gjertsen, and created from it a large summer house for the nurses in the Deaconess Hospital of Minneapolis. For many years thereafter every summer Sunday morning saw the colony, insofar as its church affiliations did not prove an obstacle, assemble for sermons and church singing on the wide verandas of the Deaconess Home. There my father and other Augsburg professors and many visiting dignitaries took turns in preaching sermons that were punctuated by the throaty whistle of Captain Deering's steamboat, with every youngster squirming in his seat to get a look at the passing vessel and perhaps, for a moment, to escape the impact of Lutheran theology.

This, in general, was the setting of the Minnetonka life that went on, summer after summer, in the 1890's and the 1900's, sometimes in the absence of my father. He devoted the summer of 1898 to a European trip, on which incidentally he took with him one of my brothers; and he often was away on speaking trips or engaged in committee activities that made it impossible for him to devote full time to the lake, whose life both he and my mother loved.

One of the most interesting, if to my hospitable mother sometimes too burdensome, aspects of Saga Hill life was the unending stream of visitors who came, often without warning, to stay a day or a few days or a few weeks, if not the entire summer. My own recollection of the summers at Minnetonka, before we sold our large West Arm place, is of visitors all summer long. My father writes much about some of these visitors, notably of President Sverdrup, who later, as I have said, built a cottage of his own only a short distance from our place. He describes Sverdrup as follows: "He was a pleasant person to have as a guest, neat and orderly in bearing, rich in knowledge and interesting in conversation, a man one could respect." He records the contrast and clash of personalities between Sverdrup and the famed missionary-scholar, Lars O. Skrefsrud. The latter, a fabulous linguist, orator, and hunter, seemed to us to be a kind of potentate, an imperious master of men who, for all we knew, was a veritable maharaja in distant India, from which he came—and indeed he was in fact something like that. Upon his first visit, a meeting was held for him in the Spring Park pavilion, where he spoke to a vast audience, and afterward my mother and father gave a great dinner for him, with many guests who, my father records, continued their lively conversation on into the afternoon.

On another occasion Skrefsrud interrupted a speaking tour to spend a vacation at our home and made a tremendous impression upon the younger generation. He was an intense fisherman who, if he went out for sunfish and crappies, refused to come in until he had caught, in that pre-fishing-license era, precisely one hundred, and when he returned, he insisted upon counting them in state, with my mother as a spectator and as large an audience as possible. Needless to say, he never cleaned the fish he caught. That job was turned over to the boys of the family, and after it was completed my mother sent us on the rounds of the neighbors, with parcels of cleaned fish as gifts. If we felt some slight resentment about the necessity of his catching and our cleaning a hundred fish, we were careful not to offend him by voicing it. Not long ago in a biography of Skrefsrud published in Norway, I found a picture of him and

my father fishing at Lake Minnetonka in 1894, with a Viking boat in the background.

One evening the explosive missionary and President Sverdrup engaged in a profound and spirited discussion of the nature of immortality, with my father as a listener. The debate went far into the night and finally had to close with Skrefsrud on the losing end. As my father and Skrefsrud were walking home, the latter suddenly stopped and burst forth with the words, "Oh, fool that I was! I forgot my best argument!" He wanted to return immediately to resume the fight about immortality, but my father gently but firmly suggested that the argument was over and that no good purpose would be served by continuing it.

I have been interested to find that my father, in his recollections, devotes some attention to his plan of having his sons do regular work during the mornings of the vacation days. He writes that after he had assigned the daily job, the boys rushed at it as if their very lives were at stake, and he believes that if they later demonstrated a will to work, the Minnetonka experience possibly had had some influence in developing such an attitude.

It is curious how, as you review this kind of story, one episode and one personality after another crops up, and yet you miss many and realize that the full picture is eluding you. Where, for example, in the picture thus far is our neighbor, an accomplished pianist and teacher, a brilliant interpreter of Grieg, who one night had an encounter with a skunk and the next day buried in a special grave a brand new suit that had lost its usefulness? And his wife, who had such a passion for cleanliness that, to our round-eyed amazement, she daily swept her lawn with a broom, making one somehow think, though the thought did not come until many years later, of a lady named Mrs. Partington? Where in this chronicle is another neighbor, John Blichfeldt, pianist and singer, who used to enthrall us on summer evenings with duets played with a flutist named Oscar Owre? And where, in the story, is a girl named Borghild Dahl, nearly blind, for whom, when I played croquet with her, I had to mark the arches with white handkerchiefs? She has fought blindness all her life with singular courage

and only a few years ago published a remarkable and moving autobiography entitled *I Wanted to See*.

If I have intimated that the Minnetonka of the past has vanished like Villon's snows of yesteryear, I now amend the statement and say that if true at all, this is true only in a superficial sense. Change there has been, and great change. The Belles of Minnetonka and the Cities of Saint Louis no longer churn the waters. Cars and out-board motors, gas stations, buses, paved roads, and a hundred other new developments have changed the scene. People have built cabins in the backwoods where yesteryear we hunted ginseng and moccasin flowers. The lake has become, in a new sense, a suburb. But Minnetonka is still there, and I suspect that experiences not greatly different from those I have described are part of its onflowing summer life. Meanwhile the lake lives in the memories of many people, and their experiences, as remembered and recorded, will soon, it is to be hoped, be synthesized by a master hand. The "Book of Minnetonka" will have, I predict, an interest more than local and regional. If written with full justice to the richness of the story, it will reveal now and in some far time, centuries from now, the mores of American civilization in our age, just as the graceful letters that Pliny wrote from his Laurentine villa on the sea a hundred years after Christ reveal the mores of the people of the Roman Empire.



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