



Nearly 7 pound gift under the tree, a history book

COUNTY JOURNAL 12/20/07

By Dan Satran Jr. Editor

Here's an idea for something under that Christmas tree, perfect for the history buff. It's "Chequamegon Bay and Its Communities II (Washburn The City to Be, A Historical Memoir 1883-1947,") at 6.5 lbs., 670 pages, dictionary in size. Author Lars Larson said it was a labor of love, dedicated to his grandmother who was a Washburn resident. It took five years to write. He called it a "gift to the community."

Larson was raised by his grandmother, Martha Blexrud. On page 2 of the book there is this explanation: "With profound gratitude, I dedicate this work to my grandmother. Martha Blexrud, born Martha Jacobsdatter May 3, 1865, died Dec. 3, 1964, Washburn, Wis., 'Many women do noble things but you surpass them all (Proverbs 31:29).'"

Larson, who grew up in Washburn during the '20s and '30s, said he was allowed pretty much to run free. From an early age, he worked, shoveling snow, working at a dairy farm during high school, taking a part time job at Ungrodt's Hardware. Because of this, he developed what he called a sensitivity for

Washburn's history. Now a member of what is called the "emeritus faculty" for UW-Whitewater, Professor Larson said his hope was to write a book that would help explain the time line for Washburn. This was from its infancy, to being a boom town during its logging and shipping past, to its present state.

This is actually the second historical book by Larson on this area, the first also taking about five years. It is titled: "Chequamegon Bay and Its Communities I: Ashland, Bayfield, La Pointe, A Brief History 1859-1883." Both are

available at local libraries and through area historical societies. The latest is the most extensive effort on just one community.

Because these books are not money-makers for Larson (for example, selling the latest for \$40, his cost for it is actually \$65), it might be asked why has he gone to the trouble. His ready response is that it fits his occupation as a history scholar. Other answers are in the latest book.

First, a brief description of the book, not doing justice to all the work it took, not meant to be a formal review. The latest begins with a poem by Edward Heermans, "Washburn By the Bay," that includes this excerpt: "Our message to the world without prosperity and wealth have we to share; With welcome warm and true, for every stranger who knocks upon our gates."

An abbreviated table of contents not surprisingly includes a ready outline of what the book offers: Dream, City to Be, a Resource Frontier, Work Camp to Settlement, Community Emerges, Boomtown, Disestablishment, Prosperity, Bust, Maintenance Community, City That Is.

Longtime residents of Washburn may most cherish the extensive work that went into a series of biographies: Townsite Founders and Namesakes, Pioneers Before 1890, Three Pioneer Businessmen (telling the story of the Ungrodt's, the Olsons, the Andersons), Other Businessmen, Civic Officials and Politicians, Mill Owners, Ministers and Missionaries, Newspaper Men (such as Paul Robinson), Other Notable People, Not So Notable (special category for the "infamous" Anthony Clarence (A.C.) Probert who opened the Bank of Washburn in 1887 and in 1893 had "financial affairs that were struck by disaster"); and finally, Successful People from Washburn.

This is followed by what can aptly be called an eye-opener, roughly 15 pages depicting Images of the Past. These show everything from overhead views when Washburn was a boom town to

the view of the Washburn High School "Castle" when it was burning to the ground.

The book's forward includes a quote from William Cronch, an excerpt explaining the benefit of studying history: "To understand how and why we live as we do, we cannot avoid appealing to the past to explain how and why we got to be this way."

Larson writes in the forward: "When the early settlers came to Chequamegon Bay, they were awed, as the explorers and fur traders before them had been, by its great natural beauty. They praised its carpet of pine forests, the vast expanse of crystalline blue water and the necklace of green islands that encircled its entrance."

Laying out what could be called the groundwork for his book, Larson continues, telling of these early observers: "But in fact they had two contradictory views of this natural beauty. While praising and extolling it, on the one hand, on the other they saw the material fabric of the beauty as an obstacle to progress that had to be overcome, in short, the wilderness had to be civilized."

Further in the foreword, Larson writes of the early settlers: "They shared a common dream: that Washburn would become and remain a large and prosperous community in which their hopes would be realized so that they and their children could live happily and economically secure lives."

Larson notes that the book's chronology begins with the founding of Washburn and ends with the burning of the high school, namesake for the Castle Guards. Statistics he cites are telling, a population of 741 two years after its founding, this increasing after 10 years to 5,178. Paraphrasing Larson, the boom ended when timber was depleted, when the shipping routes changed, when there was a diminished demand for the locally quarried brownstone. He explains that he uses the fire at the high school as an end point because the dream was fading, the school's burning symbolized its death.