Countryman-Shutt Cabin – Could It Be Haunted?
by Dr. James D. Henderson

Of all the vintage cabins and cottages on the shores of Pelican Lake, the Countryman-Shutt cottage may have one of the strangest stories to tell. It all dates back to a time when Frederick "Fred" Haeberle and his wife Maude purchased land along the southeast shore of Pelican Lake from Paul Marquis (aka Markee) that was part of Marquis' original 1900 homestead. Haeberle had previously purchased a piece of land to the north and adjacent to the Markee property in 1917. He and his wife Maude merged the two pieces of land together totaling a little over 36 acres and platted it in 1920 as Sunset Beach.

Fred Haeberle, a professor at Shadduck School, a private boy’s school in Faribault, Minnesota, was a naturalist and conceived the idea of developing a boys’ camp on Pelican Lake around 1915. He called it Shadduck Camp. Although the camp never achieved fruition, Haeberle built his cabin there and later retired to live out his remaining days on the shore of Pelican Lake.

Lot 20 in Sunset Beach, on the southeast shore, was purchased by Robert Jaeger and his wife Frances in 1922. Jaeger was born in Lobes, Germany in 1865 and married Frances Laskey in 1890. The couple immigrated to Minnesota in 1891 and by 1905 had settled in Brainerd. He worked for the Northern Pacific Railroad until about 1920 when he became the Evergreen Cemetery caretaker (sexton), a position he held for the next 20 years.

According to the Brainerd Dispatch, by 1924 Frances was giving parties at their cabin on Pelican Lake. As the sexton of the cemetery, Jaeger had access to pieces of broken and discarded tombstones. He salvaged many of these for use as building supports for his Pelican Lake cottage. Always a thrifty man and an early recycler, he used the wood from old railroad boxcars as wall siding and for constructing walkways around the cottage.

As the cemetery's custodian and gravedigger, Jaeger had some interesting stories to tell. Late April and early May, after the frost had gone out of the ground, was a busy time for him. It was time to bury the winter's dead. With frost six feet in the ground, no one was buried in the winter. Bodies were housed in an unheated vault in the cemetery and then buried in the spring. Prior to the land becoming a cemetery it was used as a Native-American burial ground and Jaeger would sometimes unearth these bodies when digging new graves. Such was the case in April 1926 when he found the body of a large woman with dark brown hair in an unmarked plot. It appeared she'd been in the ground for more than 30 years since the fragile wood coffin was not in a rough wood outer box, a practice that began in the 1890s.
In May 1932 the Jaegers nearly lost their Pelican Lake cottage when a brush fire started near their cottage destroying the garage, ice house and two boats. The loss came to several hundred dollars.

Robert & Maude Jaeger sold their lake cabin to Wallace "Wally" Countryman and his wife Mary on September 14, 1945 for $4,500. Wally's uncle Millard Countryman, also from Rockford, had come to Pelican Lake and built a cabin on Sunset Beach in 1927. In the early 1940s Wally had rented it and then in 1944 he and his family rented the Jaeger place. Years went by and ownership passed to their sons Sanford "San" and Tom in 1980 and then to San's daughter Debra and her husband Donald Shutt in 2016.

The cottage has been extensively remodeled over the years. Recently a bedroom suite of 3 rooms with air conditioning, updated kitchen cabinets, a front screen porch, window replacements and a new deck facing the lake have been added by Debra and Donald Shutt.

A central feature of the Countryman cottage was a large oak icebox with white porcelain walls and a zinc-lined box where a big block of ice was stored to keep its contents cool. The ice blocks, cut from the lake in the winter by local residents, came from an icehouse attached to the garage behind the cottage. The blocks were stored in sawdust to insulate them from the warm air in the summer. Since this structure had burned in 1932, it appears the Jaegers rebuilt it before the Countryman's bought the cottage in 1945.

Kids playing on the beach often heard a story that maybe the Countryman cabin was haunted. Since no one was ever there on Halloween, maybe it's true, they said. Adults said when they were children their parents told them that the cabin had tombstones under it and that it might be haunted. "Probably just an old wives' tale" said owners San and Tom Countryman when they owned the cottage. "It makes for a great story to scare the kids a little, but the part about the tombstones is true."

Recently, the rebuilt 1932 garage that had been attached to an icehouse, was demolished. A large sandstone monument was unearthed near the garage door where it had been used as a floor support. Brushing the sand and dirt away revealed the inscriptions seen here.

Childhood deaths were commonplace during the 1800s. The family of David Wilson Smiley lost two children. A daughter
Ceanoel (spelled Seanol in cemetery records and Celia in the 1880 census) died from tuberculosis at age eleven in 1889 and a son Ora died at age nineteen in 1895. Ora had been ice-skating on Rice Lake with friends when he fell through the ice and drowned.

David Smiley and his wife Emma were born in Ohio and married in 1868, just after the Civil War. During the war he served as a private in Company C, 12th Indiana Cavalry. During his two years of service, he fought in many battles with the Union Army. For a time the couple farmed in Pleasant, Indiana. By 1880 the family was living in Brainerd. David worked as a carpenter for White Bros. Hardware for many years. White Bros. supplied the hardware for Brainerd’s famous landmark concrete water tower built in 1910.

David is best known as the brother of Ernest Smiley for whom the city of Nisswa was originally named in 1898. When David died in December 1920, the ground was so frozen they had to wait for the spring thaw to bury him. Sometime after his death the children’s monuments were replaced, possibly when David’s headstone was placed on his grave.

Today David and Emma Smiley rest in peace along with two of their twelve children in Evergreen Cemetery. The original tombstone still sits next to the cottage on Pelican Lake, unburdened by the weight of a garage – history carved in stone. And the ghosts? Well, they still have never been seen.

Dr. James D. Henderson is a retired veterinarian and free-lance writer. He writes historical articles related to the Pelican Lake area. He also is the author of LOST IN THE WOODS–THE LEGACY OF CCC CAMP PELICAN, an historical account of the only Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Crow Wing County during the 1930s. Part of the above article appeared in the 13 September 2010 issue of the Echo Shopper. The writer thanks both San & Tom Countryman and Sandy Purdue for providing historical information about the Jaeger-Countryman-Shutt cabin. He can be contacted by email at james7122@gmail.com.