



Minnetonka cabin on the move

- By Jessie Houlihan
- Lakeshore Weekly News
- Oct 20, 2008

Next summer, far from the woods where it stood for 100 years, the logs from an early 1900s Minnetonka cabin will be reassembled outside the Hennepin History Museum in Minneapolis.

The cabin, a small one-room shelter, was obviously constructed by someone who had no log cabin building experience, according to Bob Glancy, a board member at the museum.

No, the significance of this structure lies not in the quality of its construction but in the rich history of the early Minnetonka area and of the couple who built it.

The story begins with a Canadian named Charles Mousseau. In the early 1800s, Mousseau left Montreal, Quebec with 60 other men bound for America, said Glancy, who researches buildings' and people's histories for a living.

They were voyageurs, traversing mostly by foot and canoe, and working when they could find employment. It was a difficult life; only about 16 survived the journey to the Minnesota territory.

Mousseau arrived in what would later become the Twin Cities in 1827. After marrying, he and his wife Fanny established themselves as a family of firsts.

They became the first nonnative people to own property in what is now St. Paul. In 1848 they received permission to homestead land near Lake Calhoun, where they birthed a son, Anthony, the first Caucasian male to be born in Minneapolis. Later they moved to what is now St. Anthony Main, where they had a second son who later married the first Caucasian female to be born in St. Anthony. Mousseau built the Col. John H. Stevens house, the first house on the Minneapolis side of the river, which now stands in Minnehaha Park.

Anthony Mousseau had a son, Charles A. Mousseau, who married a woman named Mattie, and they bought a plot of wooded land in Minnetonka in 1908 and built the Mousseau cabin soon thereafter.

At the time, Minnetonka and Excelsior were vacation destinations. The train would bring in people from throughout the country for holidays at resorts on the lakes.

"All around Lake Minnetonka there were resorts, some of which are still there," said Jada Hansen, executive director of Hennepin History Museum. "It was huge for that area at the time. It was kind of the ultimate vacation spot."

In 100 years, the cabin, which was located west of Highway 101 on Woolman Drive, had just two owners.

After 40 years of ownership in 1951, Mattie Mousseau sold the cabin to Grace Griffee, a single, 40-year-old woman from Minneapolis.

Soon thereafter she married a widower, Floyd, who had two children. After the children graduated, they added a two-bedroom rambler onto the cabin without otherwise altering it.

During their ownership, the cabin was listed as a Minnetonka historic site, which designated it historically significant without making it bound by the stricter state and national historical registries. They owned the cabin for 60 years until recently when the property was sold to Tom Gonyea, a real-estate developer.

Gonyea wanted to build seven or more houses on the property and planned to tear the cabin down. Griffee's stepdaughter, Ann Dwight Lewis, didn't want to lose the historic cabin where she spent so much time, so she began a search to find a new residence for the cabin.

"Ann Lewis called us and told us about this great place that should be preserved," said Hansen. "At the time we couldn't afford to take on the project but a donor stepped in and offered to transport the logs so we accepted."

The donor, Clyde Hanson of Lutsen, Minn., and his family were friends and neighbors of Grace and Floyd, according to Lewis. She approached Hanson and his father, Ray, and explained the cabin might be demolished and Hanson, who had many childhood memories at the cabin, wanted to help.

At first he offered to take the cabin but decided in the end that finding a location where others could enjoy it would be better.

Gonyea also offered to help with the expense and process of moving the cabin. He assisted Hanson in making sure the cabin was taken down and moved without damage. The task of disassembling the cabin took place in late August.

Currently the logs are being examined and some refurbished or replaced by a log cabin expert. The Hennepin History Museum plans to begin reassembling the cabin next summer on land near the museum.

"The museum is located in the middle of Minneapolis and we often have displays on topics related to the history of the city," said Hansen. "The cabin will give us a chance to show people what Hennepin County was like in the early 1900s outside of Minneapolis."

The museum plans to make the cabin into an interactive educational resource for children to show them what life was like in the early 1900s for Minnesotans.

"There will be things kids can pick up and handle so they can learn through doing," Hansen said. "And it will be outside so we can have a local garden that will show what they would have grown."

"All of the Dwights - my brother Tom, our children and our grandchildren, are very grateful that the museum has offered the perfect place for the cabin to settle," said Ann Dwight. "Our parents would be

absolutely thrilled with the outcome. We can picture their delight with the settling of their dear cabin in a wooded area in the center of Minneapolis and filled with inquisitive children."

While donations covered the cost of taking apart and transporting the cabin, the Hennepin History Museum is still working to raise funds for reassembling the cabin and the program material development.

"We're really looking to the community to get involved in raising money for the project," Hansen said.

"The cabin is such a great standing example of a family's and Minnesota's history and we want to put it together well so it's accurate."