

Historical Clippings

Three Lakes Museum

January 2025

In *The Pine the Plow and the Pioneer, vol. 1*, the late Walt Goldsworthy described in his article, *Water ... Wood ... Wildlife - The Three Lakes Story*, attributes of early settlers.

The architects of Three Lakes history, per se, were a colorful lot. As they passed across the lakes and through the pine forests they wove a pattern of life rich in courage and determination. The land was hard and the life style rugged. It bred humor, pathos and strength of character. Some failed, some anchored their roots into the land, others driven by a restless spirit moved on to distant Horizons. The passing of each fathered interesting incidents which reflect the evolution of the community.

Frank Epler was born in Warsaw, Indiana, in 1859, where he and his father cut fire wood and sold it to the Pennsylvania Railroad for their wood burning engines.

He came to Dunbar, Wisconsin, with a party of deer hunters in 1902, in search of a new home. Having heard of the Northwoods and lakes, when deer season was over they went to North Crandon (Argonne now). As the Soo Line Train did not stop at Gagen they had to get off at North Crandon and walk to Three Lakes. When they arrived at Stone Lake Bridge, they talked to a farmer who told them there were twenty seven lakes in this chain, that there were a few summer cottages and a couple resorts, and that all the lakes were good fishing lakes.

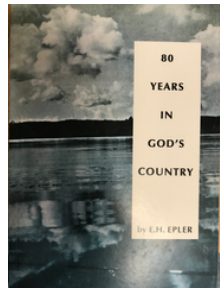
Epler, a carpenter who loved hunting and fishing, saw the future building potential, and moved his family here in 1904. Epler built actively in the next twenty five years. In 1905 he built Lakeside Resort for Wesley Beach and he built Carl Marty Sr. 's first summer home, south of the Northern Hotel.

In 1912, he helped build the bank, which is solid concrete.

Ed Epler was the young son of Frank Epler. Frank was a builder, Ed became a mechanic. He married Olga Johnson, built a home on Lake Julia and in 1973 published his stories of life in Three Lakes as he remembered it -

80 Years in God's Country

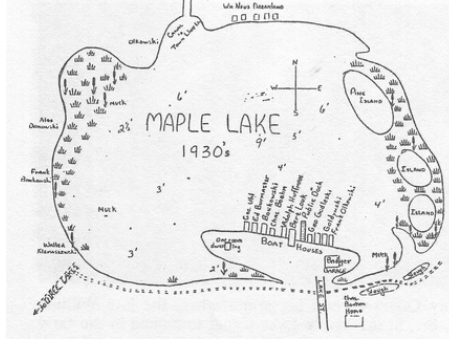
Epler's recollections of Three Lakes past is a wonderful read. It's finally in Chapter 13 that the Milwaukee Sentinel's *Jaunts with Jamie* wrote "*When the Auto Age Came to Three Lakes*". Epler talked about his history with early automobiles, mechanics, the roads and repairs. And for the 40 years owned the Badger Garage, a corner landmark on Superior Street across from the depot. This Clipping includes excerpts taken directly from the book with images from the Museum archives.



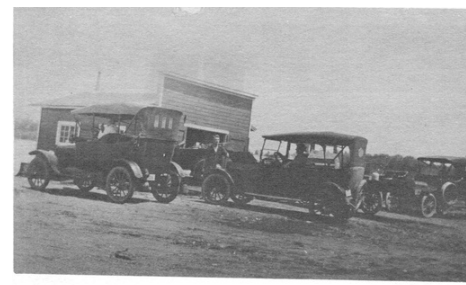
*...and 40 at the
Badger Garage
on Superior Street*

From *Jaunts With Jamie* -

"Ever since Ed Epler retired from the garage business at Three Lakes in 1960 we've been pestering him to tell us about the early days of the motor car which he helped to pioneer in Oneida and Forest Counties. He finally consented. In 1910 Ed was employed by Ace Rhinehart and together they built a little shop at Maple Lake, the first of a chain of 27 lakes. (** see the note below on Maple Lake) The shop was built to repair boat engines, mostly inboards at that time. Rhinehart built two launches which he used for trips over the chain. I drove a livery boat, said Ed. My pay was \$1.00 a day and the days were long.



Shop equipment included a Delco light plant, a small lathe, and a few hand tools, including one for smoothing babbitt in connecting rods. There was a blowtorch for preheating crankshafts before pouring babbitt, two babbitt ladles and two bearing scrapers. It was all pretty primitive said Ed. If we got a 750/o fit on a bearing that was considered very good and stood up well.



The first garage built on the bar at Maple Lake in 1910 to service and repair marine engines.

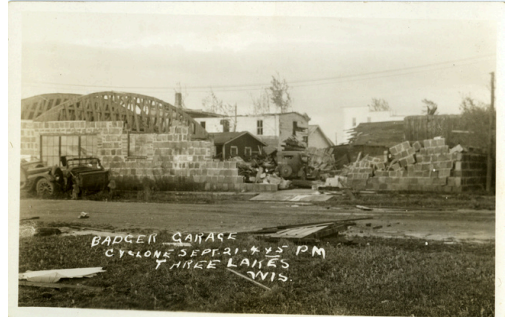
We also had a forge. If a piston ring broke, Mr. Rhinehart would make a new one from a cast iron bearing of an old wagon wheel.

I was the self-starter. It was always my job to start the tight, newly repaired engines with a hand crank to wear in the rings and bearings. Gasoline was shipped to Three Lakes in 50 gallon drums, carted to the shops and dispensed to the customers in one gallon containers. Mr. Rhinehart was a very particular mechanic.

Three Lakes residents began to buy their first cars from about 1912 to 1917. William J. Neu, a merchant, bought a 1912 Ford and installed a one gallon gas pump in front of his store - the first in town. Clark G. Kuney built the bank in 1912 and bought a 1913 Buick, the first car to make the then arduous trip to Rhinelander-22 miles. Today without exceeding the speed limit, you can make the trip from Three Lakes to Rhinelander in half an hour. Half a century ago it took Clark Kuney from sun up to sun down to make the journey in his 1913 Buick. The roads were not only impossible but impassable, said Ed.

In 1917 Ed and Ray Barker purchased the shop from Ace Rhinehart. When they went into service during World War I they sold out to Joe Kaskey and after the war bought it back. In 1920 they bought a downtown lot and built a garage. They enlarged the bulding in 1924 and began selling Chevrolets and Chryslers.”

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The Badger Garage employed up to eight mechanics to service the local and the tourist trade. Never less than four employees were on hand seven days a week. Like most of the town, the Badger Garage was not spared by the tornado that ran right through Three Lakes September 21, 1924. The Town was resilient and rebuilt. Ed Epler rebuilt the Garage. His roots were anchored to this community.



** *Jaunts With Jamie* referred to Maple Lake as being part of the Chain. This was only temporary as a canal was dug from Townline Lake to Maple Lake in 1904 to aid transportation to outlying lakes with no road access. A miscalculation in lake levels resulted in a drop of 8 feet in Maple Lake creating the sand bars. By 1939 it was determined the canal was no loner needed and the dam put in place raised Maple Lake levels back to normal. Refer back to the April 2021 *Clippings* to read more.



Ed Epler deepened his Three Lakes roots when he married Olga Johnson, daughter of Julius and Patrina Johnson, very early “architects” of Three Lakes. Ed is standing in the center with Olga by his side in front of the historic Johnson House, now home to the Three Lakes Historical Museum.

This history will repeat itself. It will snow again.

