



Lutsen Resort:

A RICH HERITAGE OF NORTH SHORE HOSPITALITY

BY BARB DANSON

Lutsen Resort, located on the North Shore of Lake Superior, celebrated its 125th anniversary last year. It was known as the oldest family-owned resort in the state until the Nelson family sold it in 1988. Current owners Scott Harrison and Nancy Burns are dedicated to preserving the heritage of their hospitality business while also updating it to 21st century standards. In essence, they are sustaining the secret behind Lutsen Resort's lengthy success: Maintaining an entrepreneurial spirit while holding true to fundamentals that have been there from the beginning.

It all started in 1885 with a Swede named Charles Axel Nelson ("C.A.A.") and his wife, Anna. They were pioneers in extending northern Minnesota hospitality, but C.A.A. also had his limits, as a U.S. President and a notorious Chicago gangster would discover.

The Nelson's Original Homestead

C.A.A. Nelson was born on April 27, 1863, in Norköping, Sweden. "He got a lure to see America," his son Carl once said, "so he took off" at the age of 18. After a stop in Minneapolis, C.A.A. moved to Duluth and married Anna Peterson, a native of his homeland. He earned a living as a tug boat captain and fisherman, and when the A. Booth Packaging Company offered him a supplier job along with a boat on credit, he accepted. It was time to settle down and build a home next to his workplace, the largest freshwater lake in the world. > > >



THE OLD HOMESTEAD AT LUTSEN,
LATER TO BECOME LUTSEN
RESORT

In 1885, C.A.A. paid \$12 to file a homestead claim for 160 acres along the North Shore at the mouth of the Poplar River, which was his favorite fishing cove. Anna stayed in Duluth while he temporarily lived in the shanty that staked his claim. The 90-mile distance between them required a boat trip with one overnight stay, assuming all went well. With bad weather, it could take much longer.

About a year later, after C.A.A. built a home, dock and fish house, Anna and their infant son, Carl, moved to the remote homesite. Their

nearest neighbors lived ten miles down the shore, and the only way to their home was by boat. By the first of December, they needed to stockpile enough supplies to

carry them through June. *America*, owned by C.A.A.'s employer, was the well-known steamship that regularly delivered supplies and passengers to the area.

Warm Hospitality and Hearty Meals

C.A.A. and Anna had a total of seven children,

four boys and three girls. As if they didn't have enough work with C.A.A.'s fishing business, raising their kids, hunting, growing potatoes, and logging their land with oxen, they extended themselves by showing hospitality to passers-by. The North Shore wilderness had a wealth of natural resources that attracted many adventurous souls. Lake Superior supported a bustling fishing industry, and the land drew hunters, loggers, mineral explorers and other settlers. C.A.A. even brought his parents and two brothers from Sweden in 1888.

With so many family members and guests, Anna worked hard cleaning the place and cooking hearty Swedish meals. She carried water up from the lake, which was a lot of heavy lifting considering a five-gallon bucket of water weighs more than 40 pounds. The children made sacrifices too, giving up their beds for guests. Sometimes those guests would even sleep in the hayloft.

The Nelson home quickly gained a reputation as a hospitable refuge. C.A.A. built a second-story addition in 1893 to house his frequent guests. During the last years of that decade, many visitors returned as paying guests, and soon this revenue began to rival his fishing

“ ... Capone riddled the place with bullets. When C.A.A. discovered the damage to the cabin and his favorite long-handled fish scoop, he demanded and received an extra \$20 payment.”

income. An early ad for one of the steamer businesses listed the "Nelson House" as a hotel on their route, and the rate was \$2 a night and \$9 a week.

Connecting Guests to the Great Outdoors

One trend benefitting the Nelson's new hospitality business in the 1890s was that doctors were prescribing pollen-free fresh air to relieve symptoms from hay fever and tuberculosis. Two Minneapolis physicians visited the resort and experienced relief from their own hay fever symptoms, and they in turn referred many of their patients. The Mayo brothers also came, providing further prestige and promotion for the Nelsons.

The family's hospitality business expanded even more when word about C.A.A.'s hunting and fishing guide services spread to the Twin Cities, Chicago and beyond. During some seasons they could host up to 100 hunters in the camp, and each of them could go home with a moose.

Lutsen Township

By 1890, the expanding "Nelson House" had developed into a settlement. C.A.A. applied for a post office, which required a named township. Poplar, the first name of choice, was already used by another postal location, so he chose Lutsen (originally spelled Lutzen). That name commemorates the Battle of Lutzen in 1632. It was during this decisive Protestant versus Catholic battle, part of the Thirty Years' War with Austria, that Sweden's King Gustavus Adolphus was killed.

Lutsen Township soon had a general store and a town hall. C.A.A. also had the foresight to provide formal education to this new settlement. He set up an in-house classroom named "The Birch Room" and hired a teacher in 1894. The first class included two Nelson children, Carl and Ida, along with six Ojibwa children.

By the early 1900s, C.A.A.'s hunting

reputation reached the highest office in the country. President Teddy Roosevelt met with him in St. Paul to request a moose hunt, but he wanted to do it on horseback. C.A.A. refused to ride a horse. Sorry, Mr. President, not even for you. Roosevelt never came to Lutsen.

Hydroelectricity, Highways and a Gangster Getaway

C.A.A. did something quite innovative in 1918. He built his own hydroelectric generator, powered by the Poplar River, to provide electricity to the resort and ten nearby homes. It wasn't until 1941 that power was brought to the area, so he was a quarter century ahead of his time. The original turbine and concrete housing are still at the resort, just north of the lodge.

Another opportunity to attract resort visitors happened when year-round roads were built. Greyhound Bus Company, which was founded in Hibbing, offered services from Hibbing to Duluth in 1926. At some point, the Nelsons convinced the bus company to add a regular stop at Lutsen. A transportation advancement that really opened up North Shore tourism was the completion of U.S. Highway 61 in 1926. The highway passed right through the Nelsons property.

During the Depression and Prohibition era, Lutsen Resort also became a getaway for Chicago gangsters, including John Dillinger, Baby Face Nelson and Al Capone. It's interesting that their hometown and getaway location shared the name Cook County. When Capone visited, he requested a secluded room, so C.A.A. put him up in his own private fish house a couple miles from the lodge. True to the gangster stereotype he helped create, Capone riddled the place with bullets. When C.A.A. discovered the damage to the cabin and his favorite long-handled fish scoop, he demanded and received an extra \$20 payment. It sure would have been fun to eavesdrop on that conversation.

> > >

THE FOURSOME MAN.
WELL SUITED



the
FOURSOME

FINE MEN'S APPAREL. BIG & TALL SIZES.
SHOES FOR MEN. WOMEN. & KIDS

Easy Holiday Shopping | Free Gift Wrapping
3570 Vicksburg Lane N. Plymouth 55447
763.473.4667 | TheFoursome.com

The House of *Amore & Fede* Exelsior
20% OFF through 12/24



Gift Cards Available

226 Water Street | Exelsior | 952.401.3392
Coupon must be redeemed at time of purchase. See store for details.





THE ORIGINAL ROPE TOW AT LUTSEN, OPERATED BY A FORD V8 ENGINE

The Next Generations

C.A.A.'s son George Sr. and his wife, Inga, successfully carried the family business into the next generation. George Sr. had a reputation as a determined man who worked seven days a week. Inga played a significant role in setting high standards in the dining room, something for which the resort has become acclaimed. They still serve her famous recipes for buttermilk pancakes, raisin-rye bread and white bread. The couple lived on the North Road in Lutsen for 27 years and then in a third-floor apartment of the main lodge for 42 years,

until they moved to Grand Marais in 1992.

George and Inga's son, George Jr. and his wife, Patty, became the third-generation Nelsons who continued the entrepreneurial spirit. After returning from WWII, where he had served with the 10th Mountain Division Ski Troops, George Jr. saw the Sawtooth Mountains with a fresh perspective: They provided an opportunity to make the resort a year-round destination.

George Jr. and his father paid two lumberjack brothers \$500 to use handsaws

and axes to clear two steep hills that they named "Hari-Kari" and "Chickadee." They set up a \$500 tow rope, operated by a Ford V8 engine, and also winterized the lodge so it could be used year round.

1948: A Sad but Transformational Year

After 63 years of running a successful hospitality business, the Nelsons suffered devastating losses in 1948. First, Anna passed away, and then C.A.A. died just 16 days later. On October 21 of the same year, the original lodge was destroyed by a fire that was thought to have started in the kitchen.

But this year was also transformational for the resort. After three years of preparation, the ski resort opened in 1948 and became a popular destination that drew many winter visitors to the North Shore. It also served as a great training area for George Jr. and Patty's five children, all of whom were avid skiers. Their daughter Cindy won a bronze medal in the 1976 Innsbruck Olympics.

Lundie-Designed Lodge Opens in 1952

The Nelsons recovered from the 1948 fire, and the next year they opened a new lodge designed by architect Edwin Lundie. Unfortunately, that second lodge was destroyed by another fire in 1951, which was believed to have started in the laundry. The Nelsons rebuilt once again, following the same Lundie blueprints. That third lodge was opened in 1952, and it stands on the property today.

Three years later, the swimming pool was protected from the cold northern climate in a revolutionary way. The resort claims that it had the first pool in the world to be covered by a DuPont Mylar bubble.

Resort development continued with the addition of new lodging options and activities. The Sea Villa Townhomes were built in 1974 and the Alpine Slide was added in 1977. Three years later, the Nelsons sold the ski area to Charles "Papa" Skinner.



MINNETONKA THEATRE

A little bit of Broadway in your own backyard.

Lutsen Resort Changes Hands

In 1986, George Jr. hired Scott Harrison to help him develop a golf course, which of course, would draw more visitors to the area. When Scott began working on the plans, George Jr. said, "You know, I would like help in selling the resort." Instead of becoming an agent, Scott put together a group to buy the business in 1988. He and his wife, Nancy, became principal owners, and the group also included Diane Loh, a grandniece of Inga. Diane is now officially retired after 50 years at the resort, although she still works two days a week during most of the year.

Owning a resort in Cook County provides Scott and Nancy – who met when they were both instructors for Outward Bound – the perfect opportunity to do something they are passionate about: introducing people to the great outdoors. Their passion is evident in the resort's long list of complimentary activities that include guided sea kayaking, hiking, naturalist programs, fishing and skiing.

Scott and Nancy have continued to update the resort with an assortment of modern rooming options and amenities that guests of today expect, such as massage services. Most importantly, they have preserved a rich heritage and maintained an entrepreneurial spirit while holding true to the fundamentals of hospitality that C.A.A. and Anna Nelson started back in 1885: extend warm and inviting accommodations, serve delicious hearty food and provide guided sporting activities that connect guests to the natural wonders of Cook County. With these three principles firmly entrenched, hospitality is as strong as ever along the North Shore.

Lutsen Resort

218.663.7212

800.2.LUTSEN

www.lutsenresort.com

The SOUND of MUSIC

Starring Minnetonka Theatre favorites
Jen Burleigh-Bentz and John Trones

Dec. 9-18, 2011

Tickets and subscriptions now on sale for both shows!
952-401-5898 MinnetonkaTheatre.com



20% OFF
with this coupon

offer only valid for in-store purchases
excludes installation
not valid with any other offer
expires Feb. 28, 2012

YAKIMA

THULE
SWEDEN



Rack Attack Minneapolis: 4170 Excelsior Blvd, St. Louis Park, MN, 55416
tel: (952) 926-7225 www.rackattack.com