

## Byrne's Rainy Lake Tales

Byrne Johnson recently turned ninety. That secret is out, and what better way to honor him and his family's connection to Rainy Lake than to tell a couple of his stories here in these pages. *Happy Birthday, Byrne*, and many thanks for all you have added and will continue to add to the lore of the lake.

Summer of 1936 was the last summer at Camp Koochiching for Don and Layna Johnson, Byrne's folks. The family story says that Pop Vance was proposing a mink farm in the off-season, and that Don Johnson wasn't about to become a mink farmer. At any rate, it was that same summer that the Johnsons began as caretakers for the Dahlberg family at *Redcrest* on Jackfish Island.

Those of you who live or vacation near what was "Redcrest" on Jackfish Island have heard of the Dahlberg family. Byrne recalled a number of details about the Dahlbergs: Mr. Bror Dahlberg's fortune had spun off of the E.W. Backus mill, and his formula for making wallboard became his formula for wealth at least until the banks crashed. His flashy years on Jackfish were the 1920s, and his first wife, Mary Dahlberg was quite the socialite. They divorced in 1931. Mr. Dahlberg later worked full time based in Chicago while summering on Jackfish Island. (He would fly back and forth to Chicago, even in those days.) And Byrne recalled a funny anecdote about that family.

When Dahlberg was traveling, remembers Byrne, he would instruct his secretary to go on over to the house and feed his goldfish. She did that for a while but soon thought it "stupid." One day she flushed the goldfish down the toilet; however, she did not forget, and on the day they were due back, she went to Woolworth's and bought a new goldfish!



### In the words of Ernest Oberholtzer...

After a May 1959 visit with his friend, Robert Hugh Monahan Jr, Oberholtzer writes:

"For pleasure, when I'm at the lake, what I look forward to are visits like your own for the good of all concerned and with no ugly complications of business. May we have many more, you and yours, half as rewarding as the one just conducted."

This same woman, Mr. Dahlberg's secretary, rented the Front House from Ernest Oberholtzer on Mallard Island in the 1940s. And it was during the 1940s that the Johnson family not only watched over Redcrest on Jackfish Island but occasionally watched over Ober on Mallard. Here for our winter-time reading enjoyment is Byrne's apocryphal story of the Buick that went through the ice, with quotes from the 1982 *Rainy Lake Chronicle* and our compliments to Ted Hall, writer, editor, etc.

It was January 2, 1945: "One balmy winter day, Ernie Maki visited the Johnson's from the French family place called *Green Mansions*, traveling (across the ice) in a fine Buick sedan the Frenches provided for his winter convenience. Mr. Maki was on his way to town, and his need to get provisions coincided with the need of the Johnson household, and as soon as all coffee cups were empty, an expeditionary force set forth in the Frenches' fine Buick with Layna Johnson at the wheel.

(Photo of Byrne Johnson by Eddie Blaha)

(Story continued on page 6)

## Dear Readers,

How dare we dream of open blue water? At this moment in time our favorite island is no island at all, but a mountaintop encased in ice. Small wooden buildings, showing their age, perch atop that mountain among the winter winds. If it sparkles like it is here today, that's our reminder that winter has its own stark beauty, and I know there are deer tracks or the occasional straight line of fox tracks defining our familiar trails.

Meanwhile, welcome to the winter Mallard Island newsletter pulling together some fun winter stories for all of us. We let Byrne Johnson have the seat of honor, and we read Janice Templin's 1956 memories on page 4. Winter is the time for stories. Thanks to Nancy Paddock as well, for her island-written poem on page 3.

**W**hy do people trust this newsletter? Or at least I hear that many of you, thankfully, sit right down and read its pages. One reason is that these articles are written for you and not for that indefinite "us" behind the pages. Another reason is that Rainy Lake's colorful history simply feeds us some great stories. (And if you know of other tales that should grace these pages, please send them along.) But maybe it's just because we write this newsletter to give back a little after all the support you've shown Ober's legacy across the decades. Whether you knew Ober or picked him up as the hitch-hiker he so often was, whether you ever slept on Mallard Island or are just glad something strange and unique like this island place has been allowed to persist, all of our energies come together year after year. Some see Mallard as an historical spot. Deer and mink are glad for all four islands preserved mostly as wild or semi-wild ecosystems. All I know on this sparkly winter morning is that the "magic" that so many name after a few days on Mallard Island begins right about now every year.

Please note the summer schedule. Note the special designations on the back cover and consider designating your next gift to someone you honor or remember. Do read Michael's letter on page seven; he works pretty hard on that every January. And, if you're snow-mobiling around International Falls this winter, wish our friend, Byrne Johnson a belated happy 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

- Beth Waterhouse



Rainy Lake Winter Road photo by Tim Gerlach

## To Contact Us:

Mallard Island is resting under a blanket of white. In this winter season, communications is top on our list, including this to you all and a 2019 annual report coming soon. Trustees will be meeting in Minneapolis in mid-February.

### Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation Trustees:

- Bill Forsyth, Minneapolis, MN
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Please visit our web site at < [www.eober.org](http://www.eober.org) > and check out some of the new entries of Ober's writings or in Ober's Address Book, new connections under "Anishinaabe," and a newly posted gallery of photos available under "Mallard Island/Buildings" plus many more small improvements. Thanks, Fiona Reid!

Also, please consider adding the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation to your annual giving list or to your long-term estate planning. We are a Minnesota nonprofit that has been active for over forty years, and your planned gift or estate allocation will carry your environmental legacy forward with authenticity and a northern flair.

We can receive gifts of stock. Call Beth for more information: **(952) 401-0591.**



## MALLARD ISLAND

### THE OBERHOLTZER FOUNDATION

*The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation maintains Ober's legacy and North Woods island home as a source of inspiration, renewal, and connection to Indigenous Peoples, kindred spirits, and the natural world.*

This newsletter is published twice per year, generally February and October. Cover sketch of Mallard Island is credited to Gene Ritchie Monahan. Send poems, stories or articles to Beth Waterhouse at [beth@eober.org](mailto:beth@eober.org)

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#### For more information, visit

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Please support this organization (and this newsletter) as you are able. To learn more about this Foundation, please contact Executive Director, Beth Waterhouse, at < [beth@eober.org](mailto:beth@eober.org) > Mailing address: 4370 Brookside Court, #205, Edina, MN 55436. (952)-401-0591.

*Thank you!*

## THE TURTLE...

...breaks from the blue-black  
skin of the water, dragging her shell  
with its mossy scutes  
across the shallows and through the rushes  
and over the mudflats, to the uprise,  
to the yellow sand,  
to dig with her ungainly feet  
a nest, and hunker there spewing  
her white eggs down  
into the darkness, and you think  
of her patience, her fortitude,  
her determination to complete  
what she was born to do----

and then you realize a greater thing--

she doesn't consider  
what she was born to do.  
She's only filled  
with an old blind wish.  
It isn't even hers but came to her  
in the rain or the soft wind,  
which is a gate through which her life keeps walking.

She can't see  
herself apart from the rest of the world  
or the world from what she must do  
every spring.  
Crawling up the high hill,  
luminous under the sand that has packed against her  
skin.

She doesn't dream.  
she knows  
she is a part of the pond she lives in,  
the tall trees are her children,  
the birds that swim above her  
are tied to her by an unbreakable string.

by Mary Oliver  
from *New and Selected Poems: Volume One*  
(Beacon Press)



This snapper climbs the rocks almost exactly on  
June 24<sup>th</sup> each year. This photo taken in 2012 by  
John Ratzloff.

## Extravagance

On a pristine morning in mid-June, as sunlight  
and white-throat sparrow song float above  
the channel between islands, a pale drift  
of pine pollen swirls like Jupiter's  
Great Red Spot, stretched out  
by the constant flow.

Looking for all the world like an industrial  
accident, this effluence of pines, this  
abundance of germ cells insures  
some will get through, enough  
to make seed, to continue.

Extravagance drives all life and threatens  
cataclysm. In the vertigo of this cosmic,  
helpless orgy of fear and desire, of  
famine and glut, how do we poor  
creatures of its deepest urges  
learn what is enough?

Written by Nancy Paddock  
June 17, 2008,  
Mallard Island.

## Enough

Enough clean clothes  
Clean-enough hair  
A room twelve by twelve,  
One chair.  
Decent bed.  
Friends down and over,  
playing Scrabble at nine.  
Food in the frig,  
And a boat that starts...

Is there more to life?  
Could there *be* more to happiness?

Oh, and the wind is gentle from the East.  
Oh, and the whitethroat still sings at sunset.

BEW

Mallard Island June 2014

## “Cooking for Ober”

Janice Templin cooked on Mallard Island in the summer of 1956. She had been hired by Frances Andrews and Ober who together placed an ad with the College of Home Economics at the University of Minnesota.

Now, over six decades later, Janice remembers highlights of her time on Mallard, and the people and “players” in the theater there that summer of '56.

Jim Banks would be there, at meals, and so would Oscar Gilbertson, a caretaker who lived upstairs of the Ice (Pump) House in those days. She remembered that Ray Anderson would commonly bring the mail from town, and would then take orders for groceries and return with food a couple days later. They had a fair amount of company, sometimes workers. Once a group of canoeists stopped by at the end of their trip—she recalls three young men who happened to land there for a time.

There were plenty of activities with the Anishinaabe on the lake. Charlie Friday and others might be camping on Crow Island. Janice recalls a time when Ober heard shots coming from Crow, and he was disappointed that Charlie would be hunting birds over there. Ober wanted it to be ‘wilderness.’ Later they learned that this was right, Charlie and friends had been hunting.

Janice recalls Dr. Hugh Monahan (ophthalmologist) doing cataract surgery on Charlie Friday in International Falls. When it came time to take the stitches out, they did that in the Wannigan. She remembers boiling water and bringing a clean dish towel.

Janice also remembers meeting the Hilke family: Bob and his father, Fritz, as well as additional members of the Monahan families—but especially Hugh who once took them all for a boat ride.

A typical day on Mallard was highly structured—by Ms. Andrews—and always focused on food. Janice would ring the bell at seven AM, which was a wake-up or wash-up bell, and then ring it again at 7:30 when breakfast was ready. Once she forgot to ring the first bell, and Frances said to ring it anyway, even late, because otherwise they would not know what each bell meant. Janice and Frances both lived in the “Front Cabin” that summer (Janice upstairs and Frances down), and she remembers bathing in the lake.

The buildings were all slightly different then, and their working names have changed. What we call the “wannigan” was commonly called the Kitchen Boat. What we refer to as Japanese House was the “Jap Cabin,” and Cedarbark House was called “Mother’s House,” at least by Ober. They had not yet named Cook’s House, and Winter House was usually referred to as the “Flood Control House,” since that was its first function—to store chairs or loose items in case of a flood on Rainy Lake.

*From a phone interview... Compiled by the Editor. Thanks for the memories, Janice!*



Photo of Front Cabin porch taken by Janice Templin in 1956

## Mallard Island Summer of 2020 “Creativity in Continuity”

*Summer of 2020 promises to bring creativity, fresh eyes and new experiences to an island offering its measure of beauty, history and continuity. Here is the island’s summer schedule as we now know it:*

- Ice-Out                    **Standard spring opening** tasks done by loyal volunteers. A new water treatment system is anticipated!
- May 26-30                *Opening Days of Reflection and Fasting*, culminating in a spring Drum ceremony.
- May 31-June 6            **Land and Buildings Work Week**, focus on carpentry and repairs. At the time of this writing there are still openings for volunteers in this work week. Contact [Beth@eober.org](mailto:Beth@eober.org).
- June 9-15                **Island and Gardens Work Week**, with its major focus on the perennial gardens and their care. Week is full. You could ask to be put on a waiting list for this annual work week.
- June 15-20                *Island Rest Week #1*
- June 21-27                “Writing as a Tool for Healing” hosted by Karla McGray, Minneapolis. A writers’ week for women writers who meet regularly to explore, express and heal life experiences that have brought pain, suffering, grief and loss. Mallard Island extends its quiet healing.
- July 28-July 4            *Island “Rest” Week #2*, with a focus on Strengthening the Cedarbark House under-structure.
- July 5-11                 **Stewards of the Wilderness II**. For a second season, this week calls together youth ages 20-25 to Mallard Island, offering experiences and education about the ecology of the place, Ober’s history, and Anishinaabe cross-cultural awareness plus traditional ceremony.
- July 12-18                **Individual Artists’ and Special Projects Week**. Hosted by the Foundation, this is a time for individuals to bring your ongoing artistic or legacy-related research projects. At the time of this newsletter, there are openings in this coveted week, and there will be a **lottery** of all applications sent in to the office by February 15, 2020. Contact [Beth@eober.org](mailto:Beth@eober.org). Don’t delay.
- July 19-25                **Women in Sustainable Agriculture**. Hosted by Mary Swalla Holmes and offering the island as respite and focus to a selected group of women engaged in small-scale agriculture across the Midwest.
- July 26-Aug 1             **Ojibwe Language Transcription Week** Hosted by Pebaamibines (Dennis Jones) as a time to bring students together to help in the preservation of the Ojibwe language and history as they transcribe stories of Nancy Jones, Tobasanakwut and Johnnie Whitefish from valuable recordings in Ojibwe.
- August 2-8                *Island Rest Week*, third of three. (Island rest is part of our ecological carrying capacity.)
- August 9-15              **“Ogichi Daa Kwe Reflect, Revitalize, Resume”** We offer Mallard Island as a place for selected camp staffers to come together after their season at Ogichi Daa Kwe. The idea is a self-led week-long retreat with the intent of easing transition from camp to the other ten months of the year and continuing to learn about Anishinaabe traditions with Pebaamibines.
- August 16-22             **“Oberholtzer Foundation Presents” again hosted by Prudence Johnson, Minneapolis:** A community connection with a talented group of artists and musicians who will offer a culminating event co-sponsored with the Backus Center. After time on the island, the event again includes a photo gallery and a Friday evening concert of music and storytelling. Mark your calendars for an August 21st performance!
- August 23-29             **Mallard Island Archives Week** Hosted by the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation. Volunteers will work to restore and care for Ober’s archives, especially books and maps. One 2020 project may be the creation of an interactive map for our web site. Annual book care includes inventory, assessment and repair. This week is full, but the wait-list is short!
- Aug 30-Sept 4            **“Crossing the Water II,” hosted by Carolyn Light Bell (and Lucy Bruntjen)** *Crossing the Water* is a select group of artists who are responding to the landscape of Mallard Island by moving into their most interior landscapes of the heart and mind in order to develop their best work. They collaborate through daily sharing their process with one another, thereby furthering their individual goals.

(continued from page 1)

“Those were neighborly days on the lake, and it was the Johnson’s custom to look in on their neighbor to the south who was Ernest Oberholtzer, and Ober was delighted when he looked down from his high house on the south edge of Mallard Island and saw Layna Johnson coming up the steps for his mail and shopping list. Mr. Maki and Buck Johnson and Sally Johnson and the dog called *Tuppence* remained inside the Buick which was just then becoming uncomfortably warm after the run across the ice.”

Just as Layna reached the lower kitchen door, she heard a loud and unmistakable sound. Everyone there heard it, and inside the Buick Ernie Maki thought he had a flat tire, but then TWO flat tires, and then “Let’s get out of here before we drown! The occupants of the car followed Mr. Maki’s suggestion and Maki himself out of the Buick, which was now settling through the shattering ice”... Fortunately the channel was shallow, and the Buick soon touched bottom and simply “waited for somebody to do something.”

Thus proceeded what can often happen on a winter day or, for that matter, the better part of three full days on a big lake such as Rainy when one neighbor now devotes his time to helping another. Layna and Sally walked home to Don, and Don brought their personal auto, chains and hoists and, in fact, their young, strong son, Byrne Johnson, and they all worked that afternoon and the next and a below zero third day to extract the nice, new Buick from the winter lake while “Ober made hot custards during the breathing periods.” Ted’s report explains that once the car was up on top of the ice, “Don Johnson and Ernie Maki built fires to thaw the frozen wheels.” And then Ted Hall’s fine story ends in glory. “Buck Johnson was stationed at the wheel of the iceberg Buick, and the others got into the Johnson automobile and towed the Buick to an automobile hospital where it recovered.” Don Johnson’s journal adds this comment: “It was a mighty cold ride. Ernie a happy Finlander when we pulled into garage. Layna, Buck and myself not sorry either.”

*Editor’s Note: Byrne will notice that I’ve edited the story a little to get him rightly inside of it, since Ted Hall’s decent version listed Byrne only as one of the “other items” Don Johnson brought over from Jackfish on that below zero January day. But Byrne remembers it well, and I can add that it is sheer joy any day to stand on that south side of the island, look down on the small channel between Hawk and Mallard and hear Byrne re-tell this winter tale.*

*And a final word of thanks to Byrne and his family and all who have helped get him to age ninety! Thanks for the time-travel back into the days of your youth on our favorite big lake, or even farther back to years before you were born through your dad’s stories on Jackfish or Grassy. Your belief in us has been part of our strength. We look forward to more years—all with good stories.*

*Compilation by Beth Waterhouse*

*Photo taken by Ernest C. Oberholtzer on January 2, 1945, from Foundation archives.*

*We also credit the journals of Don Johnson as edited by Byrne Johnson*



## Letter from the Treasurer

Dear Friends of the Oberholtzer Foundation,

One of the rewards of living in the North in the winter, particularly when it's subzero outside, is it forces us to slow down. We take a moment to look back at what took place and what to plan for the future. When it comes to the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation, there's no break; Mother Nature always reminds us that we are not in control, and we are constantly adjusting our plan.

I was recently reflecting on the new updates on [[www.eober.org](http://www.eober.org)], particularly absorbed by Ober's "address book" and writings, full of the people who influenced him and who became his close confidants. What was interesting, particularly later in his life, was how connected he was to Mallard, the upkeep and the constant attention he kept with the builders who helped him realize his architectural vision. What a joy it must have been to envision and build this landscape, starting with local houseboats and cabins from other islands, all finding their plot on this sliver of land. Structures started to rise above the trees and stretch over the waters, challenging builders to find ways to keep them intact across the decades.

**F**ifty years later, Ober's vision has certainly challenged the current caretakers, as we ask ourselves constantly how to keep his vision intact and at what expense. A perfect example is the Cedarbark cabin, (pictured here) once a house boat in its day, pretending to float above the water while disguising its underbelly of corroded steels posts and masonry piers that have finally met their match.

Last summer we managed to temporarily save this structure from a disastrous fate, knowing that to truly save this landmark (old houseboat) would involve some creative, yet expensive solutions. Fortunately we still have a group of people similar to the ones Ober use to rely on—local contractors familiar with the changes the lake takes including ice buildup and changes in water levels. All need to be addressed to keep this allusion of a want-to-be house boat.

All we need now is the same cast of characters that Ober had in his day, friends and "confidants" that could contribute to his vision, enabling many others to enjoy the playful design of his home. We realize that all the structures on Mallard are critical to keeping our programs vibrant, but the Cedarbark is a particularly important centerpiece, and we hope you think so as well. Please think about supporting us this year knowing that your contribution will enable us to keep another house boat "floating" for another 50 years.

Thank you all for your consistent support through the years,

With sincere thanks,

Michael Reid

Treasurer,  
Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation

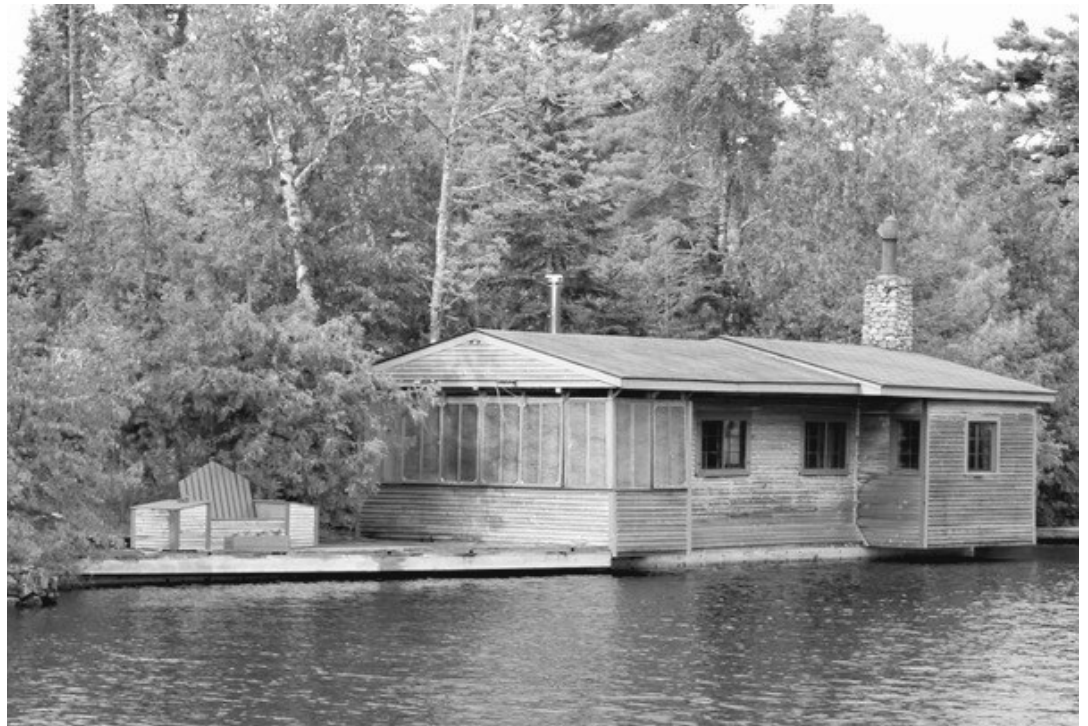


Photo of Cedarbark by  
Mary Swalla Holmes



## MALLARD ISLAND

Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation  
4370 Brookside Court #205  
Edina, MN 55436

### **2019 Gifts in Memory of Family and Friends:**

We're grateful when family members think of this legacy and the programs on Mallard Island in their time of grief and remembrance. Other gifts are often made in honor of the living. Last year, these special designations were made:

- Stephen J. Bubul, a gift in memory of John R. Gregg, Jr.
- Mairi C. Doerr, a gift in memory of Don D. Maronde
- Diane Friebe, a gift in memory of her daughter, Sarah Friebe
- John Grate, a gift in memory of Tim Heinle
- Chris Hale and Miranda Stone, gift in memory of Don Maronde
- Vance and Bonnie Haugen, gift made in memory of Don Maronde
- Joan Heinle, a gift in memory of Don Maronde
- Dana Jackson, gift also in memory of Don Maronde
- Esther Kellogg, a gift made in memory of her husband, Martin Kellogg
- Ardis Kyker, a gift in memory of Gladys Meade
- Sara N. Martineau, gift in honor of Bob Hilke
- Keith W. Meade, gift in memory of Gladys Meade and in honor of Nance Kunkel
- Bob and Mary Lou Norbie, gift in memory of Don Maronde
- Jean Sanford Replinger, a gift in memory of Don Maronde
- Duncan Steele Storlie, a gift made specifically as a youth scholarship
- Pat and Larry Wahl, gift made in honor of Jean Sanford Replinger
- Marianne Zarzana, a gift made in honor of Emily Deaver's birthday.

We add a special note of thanks to the foundations or other organizations who supported Oberholtzer's legacy in 2019:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| Sierra County Land Trust  | The Winter Wheat Foundation              |
| The Lenfestey Family Foundation                                     | The Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community |
| The Marshall N. Knudson Family Community Fund                       | Harry and Virginia Sweatt Family Fund    |
| <i>Crossing the Water</i> , writers group                           | The Longview Foundation                  |
| The Farley Family Charitable Foundation, in honor of Charlie Kelly. |  |
| One more Anonymous Family Foundation; you know who you are!         |  |

