



OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER: CITY OF ELY, ISD 696, CITY OF WINTON, MORSE AND FALL LAKE TOWNSHIPS

\$1



VOL. 49  
NUMBER 50,  
SATURDAY,  
DECEMBER 12,  
2020



NORTHERN GOSHAWK

Photos by Snotty Moose Photography.

## Kawishiwi Lodge to be listed on National Register of Historic Places

See exclusive story starting on Page Eight



Kawishiwi Lodge view from Lake One with the Boat House at the left, circa 1950s.



Kawishiwi Lodge Store, Kawishiwi Lodge, circa 1940s.



Kawishiwi Lodge, circa 1940s.



Kawishiwi Lodge Cabin 13, circa 1940s.



# Kawishiwi Lodge to be listed on National Register of Historic Places

by Nick Wognum

One of Ely’s oldest resorts will soon be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Kawishiwi Lodge, which opened in 1924, has been recognized by the National Park Service with having 18 structures of historic interest.

Located on the shores of Lake One, Kawishiwi Lodge is well known among canoeists traveling from the Lake One entry point to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area.



Kawishiwi Lodge Cabin 3, circa 1930s.

“The resort is a rare reminder of the small-scale, family-owned resorts that were once ubiquitous in the state,” the report states.

Owned and operated by Frank and Nicole Udovich, “The resort continues to offer a visitor experience reminiscent of a bygone era.”

For the Udovich family, the award recognizes the work done by the Zgonc family to build a resort when there wasn’t even a road to get there.

“The way they set the resort up in the 1920s still transcends time,” said Frank Udovich. “We’re doing the same things they did 90 some years ago. We still clean cabins on Saturdays

Snowbank Lake and did not extend to Lake One. Equipment and materials had to be hauled to the property over a trail. Nor was there electrical service in the early years. Construction of the resort’s buildings was completed by hand without power tools,” the report states.

It was John and Frank Zgonc’s sister Francis who owned Snowback Beach Resort with her husband Frank Rozman.

“John and Frank Zgonc started a resort on Lake One by way of foot trail

who had the foresight to buy this land and make it a resort,” said Udovich.

With cabins built from trees on the property, the craftsmanship was so well done that from the outside the original cabins look the same as when they were first built.

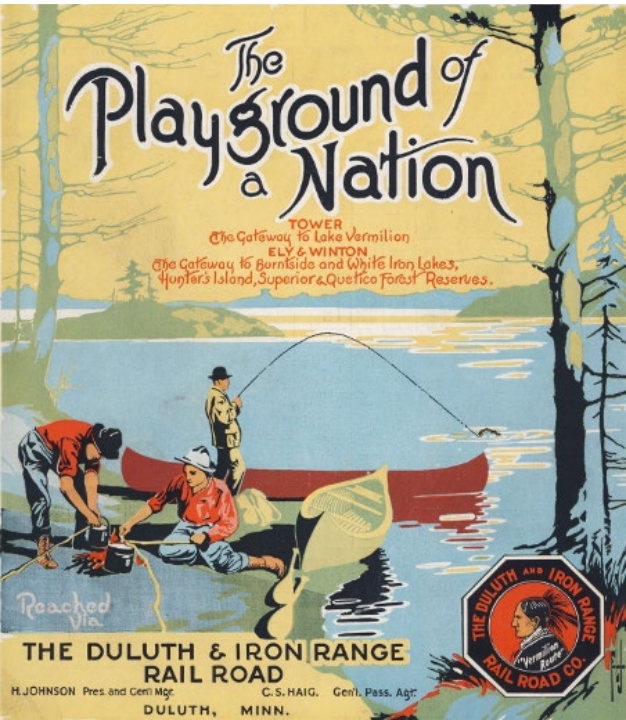
“How many people in Ely at that time could build a cabin in the woods. I’ve seen the great benefits of the beautiful log structures. The talent and the fortitude they had to have. So you get John Zgonc gather a bunch

try point is located roughly 1,000 feet beyond the entrance road to Kawishiwi Lodge, where Fernberg Road comes to an end. Canoeists pass by K6awishiwi Lodge as they begin their journey into the boundary waters.

Located on 115 acres on a bay at the northeast end of Lake One, Kawishiwi Lodge is characterized by its vernacular architecture and landscape. The buildings at the resort are largely rustic style log buildings that harmonize with their surroundings. The resort’s development and evolution were shaped by its rugged wilderness setting, with minimum manipulation of the land or intrusion on the natural environment.

Kawishiwi Lodge includes one contributing site, 18 contributing buildings, one contributing structure, as well as nine non-contributing buildings.

The circulation system also extends to the lake. Until 2005, cabins 15-17 could only be accessed by boat. Visitors crossed the roughly 300 yards across the bay to reach the three cabins located on the southeastern shore. The extension of the road to the opposite side of the bay provided vehicular access for visitors to Cabins 16-17, but Cabin 15 remains accessible only by boat.



itated and converted into a cabin. The Ice House is a one-and-one-half story rectangular building covered with a gable roof with asphalt shingles. The building is clad with rough-sawn board and batten siding. An exterior stairway along the north elevation provides access to the upper level. Several windows were added to the building as part of the rehabilitation, although the doors remain in their original location. The main level remains open as it was historically. The lodging quarters were installed in

the number of resorts in the state decreased by 80% from 1960 to 2017.

Visitor expectations have also changed. Today’s traveler may desire a variety of entertainment options and all the modern amenities of urban life. Many of Minnesota’s surviving resorts now offer a visitor experience that stands in contrast to the modest expectations of earlier decades.

However, Kawishiwi Lodge not only represents a rare surviving resort of an earlier time, but the resort continues to offer a visitor



Kawishiwi Lodge Cabin 7, circa 1930s. Note resort was referred to as “Kawishiwi Camp.”

The Lodge was built in the 1940s. The building includes the resort’s office and space where guests may socialize and recreate. At one time, the Lodge included rooms for guests or staff, as well as a restaurant. Previously, the office for the resort was located in present day Cabin 1.

This Ice House building was originally a 1930s-era ice house. It was rehabil-

the upper portion of the building.

Ice was harvested from Lake One during the winter and stored in sawdust in the Ice House for use during the summer months. Ice continued to be harvested from Lake One and stored in the Ice House through 1977.

Once the mainstay of the Minnesota resort industry, the small-scale resort is now a fading institution as

experience reminiscent of a bygone era.

Kawishiwi Lodge is also important for its association with the BWCAW. The story of the resort is intrinsically linked to the history and controversies surrounding the border lakes region that have ensued over the past 100 years.

Kawishiwi Lodge was established in response to the interest in experiencing



The wood on the walls may be a bit darker but the tables and chairs are the same in the lodge building at Kawishiwi Lodge.

and you can still come here, pay for a cabin and the owner will tell you where the good fishing spots are.”

He said Kawishiwi Lodge is different than other historic sites which no longer function as they were originally intended.

“Sure, you can go visit a medieval castle but there’s no knights there defending it. Here the use is the same as when the Zgonc family opened it in 1924,” said Udovich.

“The land that was to become Kawishiwi Lodge was purchased by John Zgonc in about 1916. The first cabin was rented in 1924. In the early years, Fernberg Road ended at the road to

ly, they could’ve been speculators thinking it would have oil or gold or timber value,” said Udovich.

John and Frank Zgonc would leave from Snowbank and walk the two miles on what is now the Kek Trail to get to Lake One.

“They had built six to eight cabins to start the lodge and we know they started with cabin two. Think of the mindset of the time. Larger cities were an industrial hell hole and people were looking to get out in the woods, led by Teddy Roosevelt who was making the wilderness popular again.

“Let’s call it a resort boom and an outdoor boom. Here you had the Zgonc brothers

**Historical Society Report**

Kawishiwi Lodge is located off Fernberg Road, 19 miles east of Ely, in the Arrowhead Region of north-eastern Minnesota. The resort adjoins the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW), a 1,090,000-acre wilderness area within the Superior National Forest. Extending along 150 miles of the U.S.-Canadian border, the BWCAW is a popular destination for canoeing, hiking, and fishing, and is one of the most visited wilderness areas in the United States.

Established in 1924, Kawishiwi Lodge is on Lake One, a popular entry point into the BWCAW. The en-







Kermit McCurdy bought one of the first Grumman canoes and vacationed at Kawishiwi for 50 years, starting in 1924.

the pristine wilderness of northern Minnesota.

Yet, the history of the region has involved ongoing disputes between those who would preserve the area’s wilderness character and those who preferred more intensive use of the land and its natural resources.

Ultimately, the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964 determined the future of Kawishiwi Lodge. The decision to position the boundary of the designated wilderness area along the immediate periphery of the resort resulted in its preservation, rather than forced removal, which was the case with all privately owned resorts and cabins within the boundary.

Thus, the resort is also a rare surviving representative of the many resorts once found throughout the boundary waters.

The Wilderness Act also led to the prohibition of motorized watercraft from Lake One.

Ironically, this prohibition in some ways returned Kawishiwi Lodge to the simplicity of its earliest years, when the beauty and solitude of the border lakes region attracted travelers to northern Minnesota in the first place, and inspired a movement to preserve the border lakes region.

In time, a vibrant resort community developed in the boundary waters, extending from Ely in the west to Grand Marais in the east. Certain areas were particularly popular, such as Basswood Lake, located about 10 miles to the northwest of Lake One. Basswood was a large lake spanning the U.S.-Canadian border that at one time included over 20 resorts and private cabins.

Little detailed information has been located about the resort’s early years, and the first published reference to the resort was found in an article from 1933. John Zgonc was visiting friends in Iowa, and while there he gave a number of presentations about the Ely area in order to encourage tourists to visit.

Mr. Zgonc was delegated by the Ely Commercial Club to make an extensive tour showing moving pic-

tures of the vicinity about Ely including the fishing, hunting, and woodcraft...and at present owns the Kawishiwi Outing camp, a most beautiful resort with many attractions for the nature lover.

Kawishiwi Outing Camp was the resort’s first name, and this name is shown on early postcards advertising the property. The name then appears to have been shortened to Kawishiwi Camp.

Finally, and perhaps in conjunction with the construction of the lodge building in the 1940s, the name was changed to Kawishiwi Lodge. The resort is also referred to as Kawishiwi Lodge and Canoe Outfitters, although the resort is commonly referred to as simply Kawishiwi Lodge.

In the 1930s, 10 additional cabins were constructed, as well as the ice house and shower building.

Access to the resort also improved with the extension of Fernberg Road to Lake One, which increased the lake’s popularity as an entrance point into the boundary waters.

The lodge building, the boat house and dock, and two additional cabins were built in the 1940s. The lodge included a store and restaurant.

A final building from the historic period, an additional cabin, was constructed in the 1950s.

At this point the resort boasted 15 cabins, which confirms its popularity as the average Minnesota resort had ten cabins or fewer based on a 1970 study.

A guidebook to the region written by the WPA in 1941 lists Lake One as the starting point for one of 15 possible canoe trips in the Superior National Forest. The suggested route required 11 days. Kawishiwi Lodge is mentioned as a resort on Lake One that offered house-keeping cabins.

A promotional brochure for Kawishiwi Lodge, which was printed by the late 1940s, described the resort and its facilities and services.

Throughout the brochure, the remote location of the resort at the end of Fernberg Road was emphasized with the following phrases, “Vacation at the End of the Road,” Summer Fun at the End of the Road,” and “True Wilderness at the End of the Road.”

Fishing was clearly a primary activity as a number of photos depict visitors either fishing, displaying the day’s catch, or preparing a shore lunch, with the scenic wilderness shown in the background. The brochure described the fishing, the outfitting services, supplies

that could be purchased, and the accommodations as follows:

Fishing – Fishing is of the finest in the North. Lakes One, Two, Three and Four are known for Great Northern Pike, Walleyed Pike, and pan fish. We then come into Lake Hudson and Lake Insula, two of Minnesota’s most beautiful lakes. Lake Hudson is the haunt of the scrappy fresh water tiger known as the Great Northern Pike.

Complete Outfitters – We outfit the tourist completely for a canoe trip of any size or duration. Outfits include canoes, tents, blankets, packsacks, axes, mess equipment, etc. All equipment to our knowledge is the best and most complete to be had anywhere. We have Grumman aluminum canoes. Why spend extra money to get your outfit transported from Ely? You can save money by getting outfitted at the starting point at the Kawishiwi Lodge. We are doing everything to make your trip into this unspoiled region a pleasant living memory. Free showers for canoeists.

Supplies – Fountain service, ice cream, sandwiches. Light lunches. Staple foods, fishing tackle, meats, etc., can be purchased here. Daily mail service. Baits, motors, fish packed for shipment.



Modern day photo of the lodge building at Kawishiwi.

Accommodations – Rustic Log Cabins with two and three rooms, with glass porches and screened porches, completely furnished for light housekeeping.

Electric refrigerators, bottled gas stoves for cooking and gas heaters. Electric lights, linen furnished. Meals on request. Central hot and cold showers and toilets. Modern lodge, modern and semi-modern cabins. (Modern cabins with inside flush toilets, sinks and showers.)

Rustic cabins have gas heat and gas cooking stoves. Completely furnished for housekeeping.

The rates to rent a cabin ranged from \$45-\$70 per week, depending on the size of the cabin and the number of guests. Cabin rental included one boat. Boats and canoes could be rented separately for \$3-\$3.50 per day. Two people could be completely outfitted for a canoe trip (less food) for \$9 per day, which included one canoe. The cost for four people was \$18 per day, but included two canoes.

An updated brochure prepared sometime prior to 1964 included a similar description of the resorts and its facilities. However, the prices had increased. Cabin rental ranged from \$80-\$195 per week; boat and canoe rental ranged from \$6-\$8 per day; and the cost to outfit two people cost \$19 per day. Both brochures shared a prominent statement: “Kawishiwi Lodge--on Lake One--Gateway to Adventure.”

John Zgonc sold the resort to his brother, Frank, by 1953. Frank operated the

resort with his wife, Marge, and his sister, Molly, who operated the resort’s restaurant.

This was a busy era for the resort. Chris Norman, who worked at the resort from 1970-1972, recalled how visitors might arrive at all hours, particularly for the opening of fishing season.

Groups would want to get outfitted immediately so they could embark on the lake as early as possible the next day. Ice from the resort’s ice house was in high demand for refrigerators, boating trips, and storing fish fillets. Chris recalls cleaning fish every day.

Frank Zgonc continued operating the resort until his death in 1977. He had spent the day before his death harvesting ice from Lake One for storage in the resort’s ice house.

His wife, Marge, continued to operate the resort for one more season. But she decided to sell the property once motor boats were prohibited from operating on Lake One beginning in 1978 as a result of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act.

The U.S. Forest Service then offered \$265,000 for the property, but the offer was considered too low and was declined. Marge Zgonc proceeded to sell the resort



UDOVICH FAMILY - Front: Penelope and Nicole, back: Violet, Frank Jr. and Frank III.

era. Cabins have neither phones nor televisions, and only a faint internet connection is available at the lodge. Yet, the allure of the wilderness landscape has remained constant.

As Kawishiwi Lodge approaches its 100th anniversary, the resort and its historic landscape continue to offer the type of wilderness experience that first attracted travelers to the region. Its history became intrinsically shaped by its proximity to the area that was to be designated as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Kawishiwi Lodge represents a rare, small-scale, family-owned resort once ubiquitous in the state and a reminder of the many resorts once found throughout the boundary waters.

#### Today's Lodge, looking back

Udovich said the document prepared for the historical society is more technical than tangible.

“It’s more of a technical document, it doesn’t show the intangibles or the feelings on something that’s a bit historic. I live it every day and I see the trail of the work that was done to get to this point.

“This was a tourist business from the start, it was never a logging camp or a CCC camp it was always supposed to be there as a resort. And, people still love it 100 years later. To last 100 years for any business is hard.

“One of the original customers was Kirmet McCurdy and he had one of first Grumman canoes ever produced. He and his wife Gladys used to come up and stay. There’s a photo of Kirmet with his canoe and Gladys with a pet woodchuck.”

Udovich said it’s the feeling of being able to get away from it all in cabins without internet that brings people to Kawishiwi Lodge year after for generations of customers.

“You can still walk to the end of the docks and almost everything looked the same. People enjoy camp fires, they want to go fishing and they want to be left alone.

“From 1924 to today the sky is the same, mosquitoes are the same - there’s not too many place you can walk back in time and you can do the same thing people were doing 100 years ago except the clothes were different. The guys were wearing suits and the women were wearing dresses,” said Udovich.

Over time the cabins have been updated on the inside to include bathrooms and running water, some have

had additions.

“When they started from 1924 to 1933 they had eight original cabins and a new lodge. Some of those cabins were originally 12x12 shacks and now they have three additions on them from the 1940s 1950s and 1960,” said Udovich.

One of those builders was Steve Smrekar Sr. who taught shop classes in Ely for 41 years.

“He built Cabin 6 and Cabin 10 as well,” said Udovich.

There were many workers at Kawishiwi Lodge over the years, including Norman.

“We have this beautiful stand of Norways from Cabin 2 to 7 and they’re tall enough now for the lower branches to be cut off. Chris said he planted all those trees. He said Frank Zgonc showed up with a box of trees and they planted them in 1970 to 1971 so they’re 50 years old now,” said Udovich.

The ownership of the resort nearly changed hands in 1971 when Frank Udovich Sr. tried to but the business. But Frank Zgonc backed out of the deal and retained ownership until 1978.

“In 1977 Frank Zgonc is married to a young woman, Marge who was very stylish and much younger than Frank. He had worked for the railroad for 50 years and was a Lake County commissioner. Frank died after putting up ice in 1977 and Marge ran it for a year before my dad bought it.

“Marge always lived in town and she tried to run it one summer without motors and lost half the business because of that. It was a disaster. They were going to try to sell it to the feds and she didn’t like that number so my dad came in with an offer that was 10 percent higher and bought it. I’m not sure he saw the benefits I saw.

“But he did the maintenance on the cabins and then he got it back into shape again. The infrastructure was there but there were only a few bathrooms and he started to fix it up. He did like to say, ‘The Americans and the Canadians are each setting up a million acres for canoeing.’

But it wasn’t easy to start. Ely was undergoing monumental changes after the 1978 BWCA Act.

The first year the Udovich family owned the resort their customer base dwindled to single digits.

“There was an article in

(Continued on Page 10)



Frank Udovich Sr. working in 1984 when he was building the maintenance shop that he bought from Reserve Mining for \$50.



Classic log structure at Cabin 3 at Kawishiwi Lodge on Lake One.



# Kawishiwi Lodge to be listed on National Register of Historic Places

(Continued from Page 9)

the Boundary Waters Journal where my dad said he had 15 customers. I asked him about it and said it was under 10."

But perseverance paid off and "Doc" Udovich continued to be available to his dental customers 24 hours a day in town, running back and forth to wherever he was needed.

And the location was always a big seller since canoeists had to paddle past their resort on their way from Lake One to Lake Two and beyond.

"Our biggest draw is people paddling past and they see the cabins and a stack of canoes.

"I don't make a great living renting canoes I need to rent cabins. One of the easiest things to do is rent a cabin and one of the hardest thing to do is to rent a canoe on a canoe only lake."

Struggles can come in all forms and at Kawishiwi it included federal legislation and a federal disaster in the form of the Pagami Fire.

"This really is an amazing place somebody put here with great struggle. At the time there were like 42 businesses sold off to the feds. You think about the resorts on Basswood Lake and this place would've been a resort just like the ones on Basswood."

Realizing the history of the Basswood Resorts was either burned to the ground or dragged out on the ice to be sunk to the bottom of the lake made Udovich realize the importance of Kawishiwi Lodge for the area's history.

"That's why I pushed to get it on the National Register. Ma and pa resorts are disappearing, there's not many left. I've been living at the resort for 28 years and if it's been here 100 years that's only about 25 percent of the time.

"One of the reasons it was successful was because

it was one of the first resorts that had power. And that's because Frank Zgonc was county commissioner and he got power out there.

You would not think of this as a luxury resort but it was before there were luxury resorts. It's like the American Dream where you had people who worked their rear ends off and they were rewarded for it handsomely.

"It was a busy place, you had to work all hours of the day and night and they're still like that where they're excited to get here and they want to go fishing in the morning."

Those customers who came with their children years and years ago have passed on the love for Kawishiwi Lodge.

"This year somebody told me they were the sixth generation of Kawishiwi customers. Now you think that goes back to the days when people would get out of their vehicles to go over the Garden Lake bridge or the crossing at Uncle Judd's Creek in case the car fell in."

Even today, many people arrive at Kawishiwi Lodge and don't make trips back to town.

And when other economies suffered, Kawishiwi and other Ely resorts did well.

"When you had the market crash in 2008 that helped us because they couldn't take expensive vacation. They couldn't go to Europe for \$5,000 but they could go to Kawishiwi for \$1,000. The average ma and pa operation had a boom.

"And Covid introduced a bunch more people to Ely, especially with the Canadian border being closed. Sometimes when there's a big downturn in the national economy, Ely reacts in the opposite," said Udovich.

"And I pass that money in a circle in Ely by buying products and services in town. And this year, especially with Covid, customers have never been more

appreciative than they were this year.

"I owe all of this to the Zgonc family and my dad. It's been a struggle at times but we've made it work," said Udovich.

That includes the Pagami Fire that ravaged the number lakes and reduced the number of permits available out of Lake One.

"People don't realize this but that killed one of the most easiest entry points. Fire is way of nature so is cancer but you don't want either one around. You want fire somewhere else or when you're gone. It decimated Lake One and then they cut permits by four."

The number of permits out of Lake One has dropped for 23 to 18 to 14.

Again, it was perseverance and hard work that kept the resort going with 2020 being one of the best years. Being the recipient of a national award may make some of the work seem worthwhile.

"I invited people from the Minnesota Historical Society to come up to see what we have and they were blown away by the significance and story of the property. Nothing holds a candle to its historical significance."

Udovich said the remodeling that was done on the cabins was on the inside, to leave the look the same as when they were built.

"We have redone all the cabins on the inside but if there was graffiti from 1930s and 1940s on the walls, we kept that."

While there are some who come back to reminisce it doesn't include the Zgonc family.

"There are very few Zgonc relatives around. John and Frank never had kids, Molly and Marge never had kids."

Since the Udovich family has owned the resort they have replaced two cabins and added three for a total of 19.

"With resort pushing 20

cabins the maintenance is staggering but the maintenance is kept up.

"It's still a sought after place and people love we're still making memories."

"We don't have granite countertops. I'm looking for someone who used to go in the Boundary Waters and now wants to stay in a cabin where the high water mark is the start of the BWCA. There's no internet in the cabins and very little cell service. And we don't allow any audible noise outside the cabins.

"It's a very specific niche market but there's a lot of people who want to be on a lake with a screen porch and a fire pit. You can have that on Insula or Basswood but you can't have a cabin. I put what we have with any place in the world except the owner works there.

"It being a canoe only resort helps my business. We're the only one in the world obligated by law to only have canoes.

"What's interesting is many years ago when there still wasn't a road here, Frank and John Zgonc dynamited the channel so it was deep enough to get a motorboat through.

"When the Fernberg Road was put in around 1932 to Lake One, people would go to the public access and motor from the public access to the bay to get here. There wasn't a driveway until the early 1940s.

"Also, our property was never logged. It has massive beautiful old growth pines on it. We've always had beautiful trees some of the oldest biggest trees are there."

Getting on the National Register is an honor for the resort and reflects the hard work of all those who have worked at Kawishiwi Lodge.



Lake One's Finest Molly Zgonc holds a northern pike at Kawishiwi Lodge.

"This is an amazing honor. It took parts of five years, we started in 2016 and we won't actually get the plaque until early next year."

Kawishiwi Lodge is a family owned and operated resort. Frank and Nicole have three kids and who are an integral part of the operation.

"They are like an attraction of their own. We have kids who come from year after year and our kids are ambassadors, they're like the liaison for kids. Right away they're teaching them to do stand up paddleboard or play ghost in the graveyard, catching frogs, playing pinball, fishing off the docks or cooking s'mores at the end of the day. We put 100 to 110 people in camp a week and up to 35 are under 16 years old."

Son Frank is just nine years old but he's in his second year of helping to clean cabins. Violet is a social butterfly at age 11 and Penelope is just four.

"Frank and I make beds together every single day. They do the garbage with me and they can talk about the lake, day permits and fishing."

"Violet is 11 and she's so social. Plus she can shut-

tle with the golf cart anything you need. She's the one spearheading the activities. The kids roam the property 16 hours a day. We may put sunscreen on them five times a day but I'm getting the full reward out of sacrifices my dad and the Zgoncs made.

Frank Udovich was sure to give credit to who he defined as the key to the whole operation, his wife of 13 years, Nicole.

"Nicole redid the website, answers phone calls and is emailing 24/7 while living and working

out there. "We lived out there for a few years without running water - how many women would do that? When she got here she bumped up the rates and made everything easier, more productive and more efficient."

Frank Udovich also acknowledged other resort families in the area who were always forthcoming with help and information.

"Like the Olsons, the LaMontagnes, the Hotalings, the Baltich's and the LaTourells for example, I am grateful for their help they gave me. Those people run good businesses."

Udovich also gathered much of the information on the resort from the Skraba brothers, Roger and Jerome and former manager Harry Homer.

And when the snow melts and people begin showing up at Kawishiwi Lodge in 2021, they may notice the plaque stating they are staying at a National Register of Historic Places site.

"They'll come and stay in Scandinavian style cabins with a view of the lake, just like people did starting in 1924," said Udovich.