



Newsletter

A Historical Resource for the whole Community

Britt Community Historical Society

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My One-Room School Years by Helen Maki Nelson Walker

I started my grade school years the fall of 1921. I was among the oldest in my class starting school, which was about a mile from my home. There were no buses then, and my parents would not let me walk that distance at six years of age (that was the age you started school back then).

The following year I went with neighboring children who were older. By the time winter was imminent we had a bus of sorts – a sled pulled by one horse, and with a canvas cover to keep out the snow and cold. In the spring and fall it was transferred to a wagon. Later on, of course, cars were available. I tell my children how I rode to school in a covered wagon – they would not believe me if I didn't have pictures to prove it.

Another drawback was the fact that I could not speak any English, but when I look back on it now it seemed that it took no time at all for me to learn it. The teacher showed us all sorts of objects – some each day – she gave us the names once and we had to remember them. What a task that must have been for her to teach us the language before she could go on with the subjects.

The school was a one-room structure with a front and back door and a large wood-burning stove with an outer cover of pressed tin. Behind it were shelves where we kept our lunch pails. In the front of the building were a small library and a larger room that served as a cloak-room. We had blackboards to write on that covered the front and side wall opposite the windows. We had kerosene lamps that clamped to the wall, a typical schoolhouse clock, and the American flag.



Helen Maki Nelson Walker, Early 1920's

We had eight grades, but only one teacher. The first graders sat on the right side of the school room ending with the eight graders on the left. The teacher boarded with a family a half mile from the school, the Bodins. Mr. Bodin came in the morning and stoked the fire and carried in the wood from the wood-shed, the water from the pump outside. Sometimes we youngsters had to take care of these chores.

Looking back, I must say that those teachers were amazing for what they did – they were very young, most under twenty years old. They went from grade to grade, teaching each subject according to the ages of the children. They did an exceptional job – I can well testify to that, as I entered the Virginia school system for high school, and I had no trouble joining that curriculum – did A & B work.

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My one room school house was what you could call a melting pot of nationalities. We had some of everything: a Polish family, Rokita; a Russian family, Zelich; an Irish family, Powers; an English family, Smith; a French family, De Noble; and of course the Scandinavians: Johnson, Aronson, Maki, Mattson, Kehto, etc.

My sister and I always had new dresses for the Christmas event. We went shopping to Virginia for them, which in itself was a wondrous event for us. There was great excitement in fixing up the stage for the program of skits, recitations and Christmas carols. Taking time to practice broke up the endless day of book learning. My folks always attended, although my mother could not understand English, but just watching the children was enough for her. And, of course, Santa brought oranges, apples, nuts and candy, and there was coffee and goodies for the parents.

My One-Room School Years (continued)

Research Update:

Interest in our past and present musicians and businesses portion of our history of the Britt area seems to have come alive.

In the last couple of months, names of musicians, instruments they played and where they played have been sent to us. We are so excited to receive all of this information.

As far as businesses are concerned, we still need a lot of information about them too.

If you find out that you can help us in any way, please call Janet Heglund at 218-749-6143 or e-mail BCHSMail@gmail.com



Helen Maki Nelson Walker, 2007

A new pleasure for us children was the introduction of hot lunches, not like they are at present. We had a small kerosene burner stove, and the teacher was the cook with the help of the older students. But it was always very appetizing to have something hot with our sandwiches.

An event that brought us to our best behavior was the visit from the Superintendent of County Schools from Duluth. His name was C.H. Barnes, and he probably held that position all the years I attended that one-room school, because his is the only name I recall. He visited 2 or 3 times a year, and our teacher put on display all our accomplishments. She went through the process of teaching her classes while he was present.

I accumulated a huge amount of knowledge in those eight terms from those very young teachers. I still remember some of their names: Myrtle Biederman, Lempio Heittala, Ann Mattei, Vivian McKenzie, Marie Gilness. Some of them stayed more than a year.

Helen Walker is a member of the Britt Community Historical Society, a regular volunteer at the Heritage Museum, a Life member, and a past board member.

Helen originally prepared this article for the Association of Iron Range Historians.

Greetings from the President

The winter season has welcomed a time for our working committee members and board members to indulge in an opportunity to expand our ever-growing research and archives. The response that our most ambitious member, Janet Heglund, has received on several of her independent research topics has become our most exciting topic at our quarterly board meetings. We thank all who have openly contributed information, interviews or documents to help us accurately record our past!

Our feature story, My One Room School Years by Helen Maki Nelson Walker, shares vivid memories of a by-gone era of education in our community. The Britt area was the home to several schools over the years and we hope to continue our research for future articles and archive collections. We encourage your stories and memories!

In addition, on the insert page of the newsletter, we are pleased to include the full story, Musicians Past and Present, A Memoir of Goody (Westby) Backlund, by Janet Marie (Backlund) Heglund as originally printed as an excerpt version of the story. We hope you enjoy this beautifully written story.

With the apparent imminent arrival of Spring this year.....(who recalls having several days of steady rain in February?) we look forward to the arrival of another busy summer season in the beautiful lakes area of Britt. Therefore, as a spring-time teaser, we have included an article submitted by Howard Emery on Roman Glinski and the profitable summer business of farm produce in our area. As always, we encourage your stories or information on either the unpredictable weather of our area, or memories of the real-life on working farms and produce gardens of the past, or present.

We also proud to announce our newest board member, Virginia McBride, to our organization. We look forward to her contributions and involvement with our group. We are also still looking for an additional board member to serve and invite any interested individuals to contact a board member for more information.

As always, we welcome you to our quarterly board meetings to join in our fun!

Jody Phennig, President

Did you know...

* Margaret (Eilertson) McCollester, daughter of David & Mary Jean Eilertson of Britt, will be seen at the beginning of the television show "The Unit" on CBS, Sunday, March 8, 2009.

The Strawberry Garden

On 3 September 1935, Roman Glinski, a 41 year old bachelor purchased the SE1/4 of the NW 1.4 of Range 27 from Ida M. Andeline. This land was originally homesteaded by William Wright in 1902 and became property of the Virginia & Rainy Lake Lumber Company in 1913.



Late 1940's

Prior to settling in the Britt community Roman lived on his farm, adjacent to the C.W. Stahl farm at Gheen, MN and he was the builder of the Novak Store at that community.

The sandy loam soil of the land was ideal for his intent of growing strawberries and vegetables and he was an intelligent, multi-talented farmer that was up to the task of turning the land into a profitable truck farm. Over the years Roman improvised a joker made from a GMC truck for a tractor, a dragline to dig ponds, an irrigation system and many other tools and equipment needed for his farm. He also provided employment for some ladies and boys of the community. He sold his produce from a stand that he built along side of Highway 53 for many years, His largest single crop was strawberries although he also grew raspberries, boysenberries, currants, bing cherries and vegetables for sale. During the peak of the berry season the International Falls bus would stop often to pick up cases of them to ship northward.

Roman was also a teacher for a couple of lads in the neighborhood instructing them in the fine skills of snaring snowshoe hares, checker playing, work and proper behavior.

For some years he spent part of the winter season in Florida and when he departed for there his pickup truck was full of birch Yule log candle holders that he sold there for the Christmas season.

Roman Glinski died outdoors on a cold January evening of a massive heart attack in 1968, at age 74, while thawing a fuel oil heating line. He was found the next day with snow shovel and tea kettle still clenched in his hands. This gentleman's death created a void in the community and he was dearly missed by all that knew him.



Roman, Susan Emery, Howard Emery with his little cousin wearing a raincoat & hat sitting on his shoulders.

Upcoming Events

* **Spaghetti Dinner Benefit for Jamie Heglund**
(Home destroyed by fire 1/16/2009)
Hosted by:
Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Virginia
Saturday, February 21, 2009 4:00-7:00pm
Suggested donations:
Adults \$7 / Children (5-12 yrs) \$4
(Children under 4 yrs free)
Take-Outs available
Matching Funds by Thrivent Mesabi Ch. 31310

* **Quarterly BCHS Board Meetings**
will be held at 6:00 p.m. at the USFS Sand Lake Guard Station on the following dates:

April 22, 2009
July 22, 2009
October 21, 2009

The public is welcome to attend.
Coffee and treats will be served.

BCHS Information

Officers:

President:
Jody Phenning
Vice President:
Lauren Nelson
Secretary:
Jessica Panula
Treasurer:
Ross Phenning

Board of Directors:

Howard Emery
Janet Heglund
Mary Kesanen
Charlene Luoma
Virginia McBride
Harlan Pernu, Sr.

Committees:

Historical Research
Membership
Events
Newsletter
Promotional
Website

Share your Story

Do you have a bit of local news or history to share with the membership?

Send your text or photos by postal mail to:

P. O. Box 477
Britt, MN 55710

or email:
BCHSMail@gmail.com

Seeking Board Member:

The Britt Community Historical Society is actively seeking a new board member.

Please contact a current board member or officer if you are interested.

Application for Membership to the Britt Community Historical Society:

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Mobile: _____

E-mail: _____

Please choose an annual membership level: (BCHS Year is from July 1 to June 30) Renewal New Member

\$15 Individual

\$100 Lifetime Individual

\$25 Family

\$175 Lifetime Family

Mail Application to: BCHS, P. O. Box 477, Britt, MN 55710. Please make checks payable to the Britt Community Historical Society.



Mystery Photo

Do you have additional information or knowledge about this photo?

We encourage your stories and memories of the past to add to our growing archives!

Previous Newsletter Mystery Photo Answer:

The map is from a January 1, 1965 Map Revision of the State of MN, Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Land Ownership/St. Louis County.

The map features the lake now known as 'Lake Fourteen.'

Do you know the location, owner or significance of this cabin located in Britt?

Britt Community Historical Society
P. O. Box 477
Britt, MN 55710

Musicians Past and Present

A memoir of Goody (Westby) Backlund

*Written By
daughter
Janet Marie
(Backlund)
Heglund*

I'd like to tell you about a very talented musician, one whom I admired and respected very much. This person was my mom – Gudrun (Goody) Petra Backlund. Mom was born on May 18, 1915 in the hospital in Virginia, MN. She was the daughter of John and Marie Westby and the fourth child of nine. Their home was located in Brittmount and she lived there until she graduated from Virginia High School. Mom was the only one of the nine children who played an instrument. Then to top it all off, she played by ear. (I understand many musicians during this time also learned to play that way.)



1937 - 22 years old.

Mom lived in a home where she was exposed to music at an early age. My grandma had an organ which she used to sit and play on. I was told the type of music that she played was mostly religious. Then too, grandma and grandpa used to love to dance, so you see, mom was exposed to different types of music early on. Dancing was a big part of people's entertainment during this time. What was a Saturday night if you couldn't go out dancing?

Mom told me the story of how and when she started her musical career. One day my grandma was singing or humming (I don't remember which) a tune and my mom went over to the organ and before long was playing the notes to accompany grandma. Can't you just imagine the shock it was to grandma because you see at the time, my mom was only around four years old. That day was the beginning for mom and she played right up until a month before she passed away. Mom started playing on an organ and then eventually went to an accordion. She did have a few lessons but she didn't have a real interest in playing that way. It was just easier for her to play by ear. She could still read notes though if she had to. I have a picture of mom when she was just 17 and already playing the accordion at the area dances. Music just seemed to run through her veins. From other pictures that I have, it looks like mom had had four accordions. The one with her name on she bought out in Comstock, MN where she worked cooking at her grandparent's farm. Two relatives from there borrowed her the money to buy this beautiful instrument. I'm sure many of you have seen it at one time or another. Did any of you ever try to stump my mom on a song? Well, it was pretty hard to do. If she didn't know it, all you had to do was hum or sing a few lines and before long she was playing right along with you and in any key you wanted. No song seemed to be too big a challenge for her. From her teens into her twenties she continued to entertain at dances or wherever you wanted special music. Mom and dad were married in 1938 and she kept on playing for dances until we moved out to Britt in the early fifties. I can remember as a child living in Virginia how I used to love it when mom and the band she played with would come to the house and practice. I'd sit there and take it all in and to this day I think that's one of the reasons I love music so much. I eventually learned to play the piano, but only by reading notes. No, I never did receive her talent of playing by ear, but that's okay.

Mom continued playing at different functions after we moved out to Britt but it wasn't until 1981 when my dad passed away that she really became more involved. Piano or accordion it didn't make any difference. Mom especially loved playing for her family. She'd sit and play for you until you had had enough. It seemed like she could play on forever. Area Nursing Homes, Senior Centers and various other activities were also places she enjoyed entertaining at. Shortly before my mom died, a gal who attended the Laurentian Senior Citizen's Club came to the house and told mom how much they had missed her being at the meeting and playing for them. Mom turned to me and said, "it is your turn now Babe." What an honor this was for me to hear her say this.



1932 - 17 years old



1983 - 68 years old

Young and old always enjoyed mom's music. Today there is no more – only what memories we have of her. We tried to get her to make a tape of her music but she never did. I guess I should have taken the bull by the horns and sat some day and just listened to her play and tape it at the same time. Too late! That's okay though because I'll always carry her music in my head and heart. Mom died in 2000, and so now her accordion (the one with her name on) sits in one of my closets – silent – because no one in my family ever learned to play an accordion. Sad! When mom passed away, I found she had a large mouth organ and a ukulele too. Can you believe it? I had never heard her play either one but I'm sure she did. The days of mom's playing are over but her music will live on forever with those who heard and enjoyed her style of playing.