

There's no place like Horton Bay for the Ohles

By Betsy Baxter Blondin

Bill and Peg Ohle live in Horton Bay on the street that goes down to the lake.

Bill says what makes him interesting is that he may be the only person alive who attended Ernest Hemingway's first wedding at the church in Horton Bay. Bill was 10 years old on that occasion.

But there are things more interesting about Bill. One of them is "Miss Peggy," his wife of almost 56 years. They were married August 17, 1940, and their wedding trip was one of Peg's first visits to Northern Michigan.

They vacationed at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island and then traveled to the Ohle family cottage in Horton Bay – which Peg says wasn't so grand. "It was the most desolate-looking place I had ever seen."

She wrote a story about their arrival at the cottage, recalling that "a rowboat was stored in the living room, and damp mattresses were suspended from the ceiling to protect them from mice."

Bill's father had built the original family cottage on Lake Street in 1914, and it hadn't been used for a couple of years.

Peg also wrote that in 1990, she and Bill returned to Horton Bay from a cruise celebrating their golden wedding anniversary. Although the house was in grand shape by then, she would not have traded anything for their first homecoming 50 years earlier.

Though their lives together weave one story, Bill and Peg have individual stories, also.

Born in St. Louis in 1910, Bill started coming to Horton Bay for the summers with his family when he was a baby. His father was a professor in mechanical engineering at Washington University in St. Louis, so they had summers off.

Bill's local roots, though, started growing long before 1910. His grandfather, another William H. Ohle, came to Horton Bay in the 1870s as a civil war veteran and homesteaded one square mile of property he purchased for \$1.25 an acre. He came to Northern Michigan with his brother-in-law, Alonzo Stroud, and the two men started a sawmill on the bay.

Much of Bill's family history in the Horton Bay area is recorded in two of the books he has written: "One Hundred Years in Horton Bay, Charlevoix County, Michigan 1876-1976," and "How it was in Horton Bay."

"Horton Bay was a great place to grow up as a kid," Bill says, "a summer place where families would come, with mostly swimming and fishing for amusement."

And of course, Hemingway was one of the summer people Bill would see year after year.

"Hemingway used to spend time in Horton Bay because he liked it. He slept in the woodshed at Dilworths and ate leftover chicken," Bill says. "He had a little romance with this Bump girl, and he used to eat on our porch."

Marjorie Bump was Bill's cousin, and the Ohles still have the table at which Hemingway ate.

When Bill was not playing the summers away in Horton Bay, he was in school in St. Louis. At Washington University, he earned a liberal arts degree in English and history and did one year of graduate work toward a master's in history.

He then entered the world of advertising and went to work for the Chicago Tribune, selling ads. Bill said, "I wasn't advancing fast enough at the newspaper, so I looked for another job."

That search took him to Wilding Picture Productions and a studio on the north side of Chicago where 'guess who' was working. That's right, Peg. And that's how they met in 1937 or '38.

"She was my boss," Bill says. "That was before Hollywood. Peggy was in charge of distributing cooking school films that were sponsored by small-town newspapers.

"Miss Peggy was always telling me where to go next. She sent me to Ohio, Minnesota, Kansas and Arkansas."

"It wasn't quite that bad, Dear," says Peg.

"You've forgotten," Bill says with a chuckle.

Born Margaret Priscilla Adams in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, in 1912, Peg lived about 50 years of her life in or near Chicago. She earned a bachelor's degree in journalism at the University of Illinois and a master's degree in journalism from Northwestern University in Evanston.

Besides working in the commercial motion picture industry, Peg had also worked for the National Editorial Association and edited two monthly publications.

Two years after the Ohles were married, their only son, William Adams Ohle, was born. Starting in 1944, Bill served two years in the Navy, making gunnery training films. During that time the couple lived in Washington, D.C., New York and Pensacola.

The Ohles returned to Chicago after the Navy, and Bill worked in advertising. They stayed there until 1971 when they moved to Northern Michigan, and after living in Petoskey for a while, moved to the house in Horton Bay in 1974.

That same year, after 32 years of not working, Peg became a reporter at the Charlevoix Courier and spent the next 17 years writing "about almost everything that came along."

After ten years at the Courier, Peg wrote that though she was young at heart, "one of these winters it will be too difficult to fight the ice and snow along the highway and even for Bill to chauffeur me to work in our old Bronco. Then I'll have to trade in my leather spectator pumps for my Horton Bay tennis shoes. That won't be the end of everything, though, because I've been promised my 1951 Smith-Corona typewriter as a going-away present."

Peg did retire in 1991, and the 1951 Smith Corona "with worn-down keys" went home with her.

"I enjoyed working at the Courier. If it weren't for my eyesight, I'd probably still be working," she says.

"She was a good interviewer," Bill says.

Bill has written two books besides the two about Horton Bay history – "People Places Happenings in Northern Michigan" and "Opening and Closing with Prayer" a history of Boyne City's First Presbyterian Church. "But," he says, "I'm really not a regular writer. Peg's a much better writer than I am."

Since the Ohles came to live in Horton Bay, they have not only recorded local history, they've helped make it.

They have both served on the Bay Township Board of Trustees, and Peg has been a member of the Charlevoix County Commission on Aging for about 10 years, helping to run the meal program and other services for senior citizens.

In 1975, Bill started the Horton Bay parade after reading about the village's founding in 1876 and thinking about its centennial.

“Nixon was doing a big thing for 1976, so I thought we should have our own.”

“Bill wanted to have a parade in 1975 that would be a warm-up for 1976,” said the Ohles’ next-door neighbor Jon Hartwell. “He wanted to have a party in the Red Fox Inn grove, and he said, ‘Jon, we’re going to have a parade, and you’re in charge.’ You can’t say no to Bill Ohle – I call him ‘the governor.’”

“He was on the parade committee and was the public relations and marketing man until about four years ago. He’s a wonderful person.

“Bill and Peg Ohle have been my mentors. I would go across to their house to discuss parade problems and situations, and we would work things out together. This has happened hundreds of times over the last 20 years.

“They don’t always agree with each other, but they’ve helped me through parades, Windigo hunts, and winter olympics – events that are off-beat, out of step, and wild and crazy.

“The Ohles have always participated or given advice, and they’re very generous people. They would do anything for you. They’re probably the finest people in Horton Bay, in my opinion. But the village is small, there are only about 20 people between the two signs.

“I can’t say enough about Bill and Peg. I dearly love my friends down below me, and I think my septic flows right into their water.”

One of Bill’s greatest interests has been in collecting books about the history of the Great Lakes and Northern Michigan, and in 1973, he donated his collection of books to the Petoskey Public Library in memory of his father. At the time, the more than 700 books, maps and atlases were valued at about \$50,000. Some of the books are over 200 years old.

Bill was instrumental in having Horton Bay designated as a historical site and having the plaque placed by the town hall, according to Jon Hartwell.

Though they have four granddaughters and one great granddaughter in Bethesda, Maryland, where their son is now retired, the Ohles seem to be planted in Horton Bay.

Bill and Peg love the village, but Peg says, “I’m basically still a city girl, and you can’t take the city out of me.”

“Peg still would like to walk into Marshall Fields,” notes Bill.

But about living in Horton Bay, Peg says, “I like the security as much as anything.”

“Big cities are not much fun to live in anymore,” says Bill. “You don’t have all the worry in country living. In Chicago or New York, you can live in an apartment building for years and never know the people next door.

“In fact, in big cities you go out of your way not to know people,” and then Bill and Peg finish the sentence in unison, “because you’re afraid you’ll become one of them.”

In Horton Bay, they’ve done more than go out of their way to become “one of them.”

Their lives have become anchored in the area’s history the way their house is nestled among the trees that have stood through time with them.

And no matter how the future’s history turns out, in the hearts of people who know and love them, Bill and Peg Ohle will forever live in Horton Bay on the street that goes down to the lake.