

The Year was 1949 (part one)

By Ron Parker

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I must admit that I really didn't give the matter much thought at the time but thinking back on it now in the opening decade of the next century, the year 1949 was a watershed year on Diamond Lake. In a series of articles, I tried first to construct an image of what life was like to a summer resident on the lake before 1949, and then, an image of what changed. What was so special about 1949? In a word it was the year electricity arrived in these parts. And that made all the difference. What changed: I can recall a palpable dismay felt by those with whom I spoke after arriving at our summer residence at the Cottage in the early summer of 1949. It was a "good news – bad news" event. The good news was that we had electricity. The bad news was the destruction of the forest caused by the placing of utility poles and stringing the wire. I can recall that there were some protests about the seemingly needless felling of trees. The response usually came something like this: "You wanted electricity, didn't you? Losing a tree or two is the price you pay." As usual, the argument was a bit more involved than that.

Electrical engineers will tell you that sending electricity down a wire is a heat-producing process. If the wires were coated with insulation, the heat would not dissipate as readily. Hot wires breed all kinds of electrical transmission problems. Then too there is a need on the part of the lineman to access the line in the event of an outage. This was best accomplished by placing the line near a roadway so that problems could be quickly and easily spotted from the road. The wires that were attached to the individual houses were insulated, but by the time the wires got to your house the voltage had been stepped down through a number of transformers so that heat was no longer a big issue.

The electric service provided by Bayfield Electric Co. in the early days was not much to get excited about. There were long periods when the electric service was "out". Just about any summer thunderstorm would provoke an outage. You didn't buy things as gallon ice cream tubs. A thunderstorm would often mean that anything frozen would be on the table in the next day or so. The good news was that the refrigerators got a more-or-less regular defrosting. I can recall receiving the Bayfield Electric News on a monthly basis. Usually tucked somewhere in the paper was a list of numbers to be called in case of an outage. Usually at the bottom of the list, the name and phone number of the general manager of the utility was included. The building codes concerning the retrofit placement of electrical outlets was a product of the times. "I can't imagine needing more than one electrical outlet per room. Can you?"

Just about universally the first appliance to be obtained was a refrigerator. You might say that the ice delivery business went into almost instant meltdown. Actually, there was a good deal more afoot than just getting electricity. Following WWII many returning service men came back to start families and to pick up their lives. Industries in Europe and Asia had been bombed into oblivion, and the only working factories were right here in the USA. After making war material from 1942 to 1945, it took U.S. industry a relatively short period of adjustment to make civilian products again. And make them we did! There was virtually no competition, and the demand was overwhelming. People wanted cars, radios, and all sorts of appliances. Serious competition from Europe and Asia didn't really begin until the 1960's. Some might call the period from the late 1940's to the mid 1960's the high-water mark for US manufacturing businesses. Unemployment was practically non-existent. Around here radios appeared. But I think that the next big appliance that appeared was getting running water. Although there were a few purists around that wouldn't mind venturing out in a pouring down rainstorm to pay a visit to the privy, there were many others who preferred indoor plumbing, thank you. And showers. The atmosphere cleared

considerably. Housing construction boomed here on Diamond Lake as well. By my count, we went from about a dozen and a half dwellings to several dozen. When I first became aware of boathouses, there were three and a half on the lake (one in West Bay was perpetually under construction). Two more were added before it became illegal to build a boathouse. The construction on the one in West Bay was halted, and one burned down leaving us with the current four.

Boat design seemed to run the gamut from flat-bottomed home-made boats to round-bottom rowboats, to V-hull outboards to fiberglass inboards and personal watercrafts to pontoon cruisers. It is getting hard to remember the last time I saw a boat being propelled by oars.