

## **YOU CAN'T SAY OTTER LAKE WITHOUT THINKING KOWALIK**

I'm going into the third year with this column, which does not seem possible. As the old saying goes, "Time flies when you're having fun," which is exactly how I feel about this week's episode. Otter Lake and its characters in general - and two in particular - are my subjects.

There were five bars in Otter Lake at the time: Chute Inn, Old Dutch Inn, Eddie's, Charboneau's and Kowalik's Hotel. All were popular places, well patronized by the locals and by seasonals.

Viv Norton (undisputed mayor) and Buzz Norton (proprietor of Otter Lake Supply) were the leading lights. Charley Warren owner of the general store was next, followed by Barney Youngs and George Fox. Eddy Deufrense rounded out the contingent of locals with the exception of my main subjects - Joe and Stella Kowalik.

Don Dauer, seasonal resident since 1926, introduced me to many of the above. Joe and Stella Kowalik ran the popular hotel that still bears their name today. It was known then, as it is today, for its friendly atmosphere and fine food.

Joe was an avid hunter and fisherman, as well as a trapper. It was, perhaps, this bent that led to game dinners, which featured beaver as well as the usual fare. A contractor by trade, he operated an excavating business on the side. He brought his passion for flying to Otter Lake with him. His float plane service provided tourists with an additional recreational outlet. It also led to his proposing and developing an airport near the hamlet. State regulations forced its closure in 1961.

Joe's unexpected death in 1962 left Stella with two young daughters and a business to run. The fact that the business is still going and daughters Mary-Ann and Jean take an active part in its operation prove she was more than equal to the task.

Mary-Ann was 12 and Jean, 9, at the time of their father's death. Young as they were, it is evident they were a big help to their mother, even at their tender years.

Stella has worked hard to make a living and a success of a tough business. She is the inspiration for the bumper sticker: "I fight poverty. I work." She is a no-nonsense woman who appreciates your business, but lets you know when you're out of line.

She provided me with a good laugh a short time ago when she reproached a good friend of mine for bracing his feet on the rungs of his chair. It was a prime example of her motherly attitude and provided my down state friend with an insight into life in the real world. It is one of the few places I know where you can still see and feel the past as it was.

I have been planning this article for some time and with Mother's Day having been celebrated this past weekend, I feel it's the appropriate time. I am sure Mary-Ann and Jeanie, as well as all who know Stella, will agree she deserves a salute.

Besides, I have waited years to get even with her for sending me home with a cat as a peace offering!