

The History Corner

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### **"Rooted" to a Land**

Wendell Berry in his book *The Unsettling of America* writes, "A culture is not a collection of relics or ornaments but a practical necessity – a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. A healthy culture clarifies our inescapable bonds to earth and to each other. (It) is based upon familiarity and can grow only among a people soundly established upon the land."

I believe a part of what Wendell Berry is saying is that there is great value to be gained from living the entirety of one's life in a single place. That there is an importance in being "rooted" to a land and to a community that, over decades of time, one grows to know intimately. It is rare for someone to be so connected to a place these days, to know the lay of the land as well as one may know the texture and furrows of one's own skin. Modern life does not encourage settling in as much as it seems to promote moving on. Yet, our community is unusual in that respect, for we have a great wealth of people who know this land very well and whose roots here run deep, and it has been my great fortune over the last several years to get to know many of them.

Melvin Johnson was one of these people. Melvin was born in 1913, the son of Finnish immigrants who moved from West Duluth to French River when Melvin was just two weeks old. When I first met him, a little over twenty years ago, he was already in his sixties. I was new to this community then and having just purchased a piece of land, needed to find someone who could cut a road into the site. It seemed like everyone I talked to recommended Melvin. Within a day or two he showed up, inspected the work I had already done, told me I had cut the stumps too close to the ground to be able to bulldoze them easily and then proceeded to fix my mistakes and create for me the road and building site I needed. I doubt there are many gravel roads and driveways in our area that, at one time or another, have not known the handiwork of Melvin Johnson.

Ken Hendrickson loved to farm. I remember seeing his pastures filled with grazing sheep as I would drive north along the Ryan Road exploring the community I had now become a part of. Ken's family were Swedish immigrants who had settled in French River in 1914, only a year after the Johnson's and less than two miles from them. Ken was born in 1926, the same year his family moved from the one room log cabin that had been their home for a dozen years into their newly constructed frame farmhouse. The first time I met Ken was several years ago when I was interested in purchasing some "cover hay". When I arrived at his farm Ken told me to back my truck up to the large hay stack next to the barn. After loading some full bales Ken told me to fill the rest of the truck with whatever broken bales were laying around and since I would be doing him a "favor" by cleaning up the area, there would be no charge.

As years passed I got to know Melvin and Ken quite well. I would listen to their stories of the early days, of farming and logging and horse drawn snowplows that would get stuck in drifts of snow higher than a man's head. I would ask Ken to identify for me pieces of old farm equipment in photographs nearly a hundred years old. From Melvin, I would listen in fascination to stories of the copper mine on West Knife River where he was employed as cook's helper at the age 13. On February 9th, Ken died, less than a week later Melvin was gone as well. Together, their lives encompassed over 160 years of intimacy with this land and its people. Few of us will ever know this piece of earth as well as they did but we can all feel fortunate that our community was the place they both called "home".