

ONCE TEACHER, NOW OPERATES OLDEST RESORT

Bride Half Century Ago Carries on After Her Husband's Death

WOODRUFF, Wis., July 31—(Special)—Mrs. Gertrude Coon, a spirited little woman of this community who ignores her years as other women ignore minutes, this summer opened, for the 50th successive year, the north woods' oldest resort, Coon's Franklin Lodge . . . thus carrying on, despite the handicaps of war and personal loss, a tradition dear both to the north woods and to her own family.

Fifty years ago these north woods of Wisconsin were a magnificent, almost unbroken forest of great pines. There were few roads and no automobiles to travel them even had they been good roads.

There were railroads to carry out the timber which was beginning to be cut, but only an occasional passenger train. The skies were as blue, however, the lakes as clear and cold, the earth as lush and green and blooming, and the air as crisp and cool and fresh as it is today. And certainly there was as much game in the forest and fish in the waters.

When Franklin Jennings, a Chicago man, was ordered by his doctor to "get out in the woods, find an outdoor man, and live with him there," then, one of his lumberman friends, returned from reconnoitering these woods, told him:

"I know exactly the place for you, and the man. The place is northern Wisconsin, the most beautiful spot in the world, and the man is Jesse Coon who knows all there is to know about the outdoors."

THAT WAS THE START

In the spring of 1892, then, Franklin Jennings, the city bred man who was seeking health, and Jesse Coon, the northwoodsman who had lived on the rivers, in logging camps, and deep in the forests of the north all of his life, walked along the shores of Trout lake, the deepest, clearest, most beautiful lake they ever had seen, and decided it was there that they wanted to live. Mr. Coon bought 40 acres along the southwestern shore and began to cut the trees to build a camp. Later he bought more land so that the 40 acres are 300 now.

At that time there was only one place in the north where hunters and fishermen could come to stay, and the two men, thinking of other men like Mr. Jennings who would find both joy and health in such a place, decided to build their camp large enough for them also. And thus Coon's Franklin Lodge, still, after half a century, the most famous of all north Wisconsin resorts and still carrying the names of the two friends who built it, was begun. The other camp, which had been built earlier, changed hands many times and finally, in 1942, burned so that Coon's is the only rendezvous of those early days still standing.



Half a century in the North Woods has treated Mrs. C. J. Coon lightly. Here she is as she appears today.

FELL TREES FOR BUILDING

All that spring and summer the two men worked at the building. They felled giant tamaracs, peeled them, and cut them into 40 foot logs, built the logs into the walls of 36 foot square rooms, laying each row of logs entirely around the building . . . a splendid but unusual way of doing it. And in each of the great rooms they built fireplaces of smooth, round stones gathered from the lake shore. Upstairs, of course, there were bedrooms.

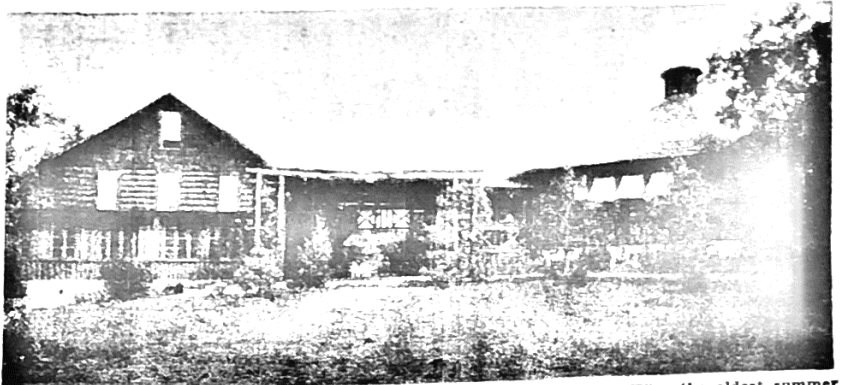
At first the tamarack logs, peeled of their rough bark, were the palest creamy yellow, almost white, but the years have turned them slowly into the deep, glowing color of buckwheat honey.

When the building was finished Mr. Coon went to Oshkosh, where he had lived at one time, and brought back the bride whom he had left there when he and Mr. Jennings began to build. The bride who had been a school teacher in the city and who, scarcely 5 feet tall, looked about as equal to coping with a primitive life in the north woods as a child would be.

PLUCKY BRIDE IS SOLDIER

There was as much energy and pluck and stamina and ambition in Mrs. Coon's scant 5 feet as there was in her husband's rugged, broad shouldered 6 feet 2, however, and from the summer of 1893, when they opened the lodge for a dozen guests, until six years

How Mrs. Coon and Her Lodge Look Today



Remodeled, added to and brought up to date with enlarged facilities here is Coon's Franklin Resort at Woodruff, Wis., the oldest summer resort in the state, as it looks after 50 years.

ago when Mr. Coon died, they shared the work and responsibility equally between them.

Since then Mrs. Coon and their son, Phil, shared it. In the spring of 1942 Phil left the partnership temporarily to teach flying in an RCAF school in Florida, and many people who did not know Mrs. Coon well thought that, with the shortage of help, food rationing and threatened gasoline rationing, Mrs. Coon would not open the lodge. But she did, and despite many handicaps, had a successful 49th season.

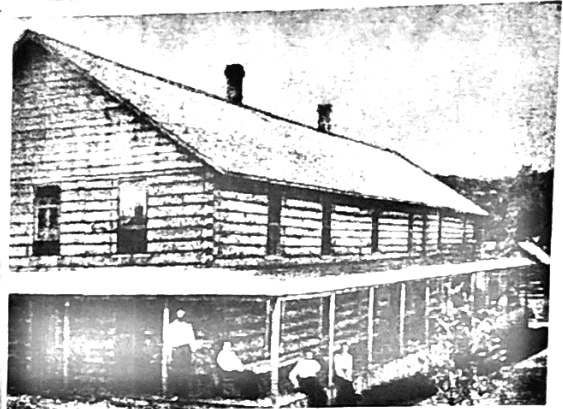
When the summer of 1943 loomed dark ahead, with help even scarcer than last year, with food and gasoline rationing realities, and with other transportation difficult, even those people who knew Gertrude Coon's determination and drive, were sure she wouldn't try to open the lodge alone again.

KEEPS RECORD INTACT

But she asked in amazement: "And spoil our 50-year record? Spoil the golden anniversary we've looked forward to? Certainly not! Besides, our people from Rockford and Milwaukee and Sikeston and Chicago expect to come, the same as they always have."

And come they already have, many of them, since she opened, June 10, just 10 days later than usual. And many of these "old-timers" have been reminiscing and chuckling over those first halcyon years of the long 50.

Said one visitor: "Jessie was almost as famous for his prowess as a lumberman in the north as was Paul Bunyan. He was a mighty man and I've seen him pick up a log large enough to stagger two ordinary men and carry it up or down a pile of logs. Every



This is how Coon's Franklin Lodge looked shortly after its completion half a century ago. On the porch are Mr. and Mrs. Coon and a couple of their fair guests.

old lumberman in the north even today knows and respects his name. He was a magnificent host, too, but it was Mrs. Coon who looked after the business. Together they had everything such a place needed, and together they made it famous and profitable."

HELP IS "PERPETUAL"

It was . . . and is . . . the kind of place, for instance, where the cook stayed for 34 years, until she died two years ago; where her assistant who has been there more than 20 years, still is in charge of the kitchen, and where the pastry cook, practically a newcomer among the help, has been on the job 16 years.

In those early days visitors coming for the south were met at the train at Woodruff, just as they are today, but there was no sleek station wagon to whisk them quickly over the eight miles to the lodge. Instead they had a choice of three means of transportation: They could ride in bumpy state in a buckboard (later a surry and then a stage coach), which took four hours. They could walk the short distance to the lake shore and chug-chug over in the Coon's awninged launch. Or they could, if they were the fun loving kind, careen joyously and dangerously along the lake shore on the handcar which Mr. Coon bought especially for the purpose and operated on the railroad tracks which ran to nearby logging camps.

The first buckboard had three inch tired wheels, but as the roads became better, the tires on the surry and succeeding stage coaches became narrower. One of the surreys, still standing in the barn at the lodge, has hand-

some fringe around the top. But it was the handcar, also still in the barn back of the lodge, which real Old-Timers, like L. A. Lecher, of Milwaukee, who's been here every summer for 44 years, remember best.

He said: "Most of the time the ride on the handcar was really uneventful, although it always seemed a grand lark. But now and then we'd meet a logging train puffing slowly down the single track toward us and THEN there was great excitement. We'd jump off, throw our baggage into the woods, pull the handcar off the tracks, and scramble up the hillside or onto the narrow strip of beach until the train had passed."

Sometimes, when there were more guests than the handcar would accommodate, someone else remembered, the Coons would rent a flat car from the railroad and they'd all climb on and go up into the woods or to a logging camp for a picnic.

\$7-\$8 PER WEEK

Mrs. Coon said: "Board and room were \$7 and \$8 a week per person in those days. There was no popping in and out for a week. Most families stayed all summer, and NO ONE ever came for less than a month."

And many of those families, besides the Lechers, still are coming for a month, or for the summer. Judge R. K. Welsh of Rockford, for instance, who's been an annual guest almost since the place opened, now brings three generations of his family, himself, his son, Frank, and Frank's sons.