

History of Fishing on Sand Island

By Bob Dahl



The Carl Dahl Sr. family and the *Egersund*: c 1950
L- Carl Jr., Connie, Sharon and contributing author- Bob Dahl
Carl Sr. and Alma Hansen-Dahl Family Collection

Soon after the last Ice Age receded, a series of randomly located hills stuck above the melting ice, like a halo gracing what was to become thousands of years later, The Bayfield Peninsula. The western most of these major protrusions became known as Wababiko Miniss (Island of the White Rock) by Native Americans, Massachusetts Island by Schoolcraft and Sand Island by the time regular settlers arrived in the mid to late 19th Century. Another natural phenomenon that occurs is relatively shallow water (50 to 100 feet deep) around the island, dropping off to very deep water (200 to 300 feet deep) to the north. Lake Superior trout and whitefish thrive in this environment. In the summer they move up and over these shallow places and back into deeper cooler water.

Sand Island was the first to be seen traveling east from Duluth, by water and the last to be seen going west, but was the least accessible from the mainland side as few roads had been hacked from the wilderness north of Bayfield. Although covered with good native, yellow birch and pine timber and blessed with some of the best fishing waters in the Apostle Islands just north of Sand Island on the edge of Sand Island Shoals, its inaccessibility from the landward side kept any true development from occurring until the 1860s.

“Just like Norway” the ads read. Other than being cold with lots of water all around, Sand Island wasn’t much like the mountainous Norway, but that didn’t deter the more hardy immigrants from across the sea. In fact, they found the soil, poor by Midwestern standards, to be more tillable than that found back home, with the fishing grounds mere minutes away by sailboat, the most common means of transportation from place to place in the 1860s.

Once here, the earliest settlers encouraged others from their home regions to follow them to the Promised Land. Louie Moe, Jacob Johnson who came to Sand Island in 1891 and Herman Johnson, Sr., not related, came early. Pete Hansen came a little later as well as the Norengs, all from the same area, north central Norway. Pete Hansen’s son married Jacob Johnson’s daughter. East Bay became the area of choice for these early settlers, but the south side of the island had fishermen farmers as well. Frank Shaw and Burt Hill fished these same waters. Louie Moe and Jacob Johnson had a logging business together that cut timber on the west side of the island, later to be known as the West Bay area, with the West Bay Lodge being built in 1912, not as a logging staging site, but for recreation –later to be used as a logging camp.

By the early 1900s, the fishing community grew to about 10 boats sailing off the island to the fishing grounds. The catch was picked up by Solly Boutin’s company out of Bayfield. Later Booth fisheries had the rights to Sand Island fish, using the *Turner* and then the *Apostle Islands* to gather the catch. There is evidence that the earliest fishing may have been done with long lines strung between two buoys and lines and hooks attached every five feet or so. No bait was used, just the shiny hooks to attract the fish, usually lake trout. A similar method of fishing is used in the Atlantic when fishing for tuna. We also saw similar outfits in Norway in the 1970s. The evidence found to suspect that this is how they fished is twofold. Bundles of such lines and hooks was found in the upstairs of the Moe dormitory and our father, Carl O. Dahl told a story of them sighting schools of trout off York Island and he and his father, Harold Dahl, took this type rig to try and catch them. As far as I know, they were successful.

Next to Madeline Island, Sand Island had the most years-round inhabitants. In fact, in the late 1800s everyone on Sand Island was a year around resident. It wasn't until Camp Stella was built in 1886 that tourists came to the island on a regular basis. The "fish camp" mentality lasted only a short time, as all the East Bay fishermen brought their families with them, building homes, not huts and shacks as on several of the other islands in the Apostles.

The author was fortunate to have experienced virtually every home and out building built on Sand Island's East Bay. Starting in the central bay there was Herman Johnson Senior's second Island home, his first having been removed from the island over the ice. Behind his was Noreng's home on the beach, having abandoned their farm home, a quarter mile into the interior. The Norengs had a good sized barn. A bit farther north along the shore stood Jacob Johnson's home, later purchased by the Bjorn family. These three homes were typical in that they had a small living area, a kitchen area and a bedroom down and either an open attic for sleeping or a division into two bedrooms, one for boys and one for girls. There was no plumbing so no interior space was taken up by bathrooms.

The Moes' had multiple buildings on their property. A rather nice home with dormers on the second floor was built. It was a little larger than most island homes, with two bedrooms down and two up. They had a blacksmith shop where virtually anything could be made or fixed plus a dormitory for loggers and a large barn. The dorm looked like a large home, but hadn't an interior stairway so access to the second floor was from an exterior stairway. The whole second floor was open as only men worked the logging camp, except for a cook who may or may not be female or more than likely was one of the Moe women.

North of them was the Peter Hansen place that became his son Fred Hansen's home after Pete's death. Their farm was as extensive as the Moes with barns and multiple work buildings, chicken coops and pig sties. The earliest settlers had built homes north of the Hansen's, but these homes were either moved or torn down to build new homes either close by or farther into the bay. Harold Dahl and his family lived behind the Hansen's in a home similar to the Herman Johnson/Noreng/Jacob Johnson homes. Harold Dahl used the Moe's dock for fishing.

As all were fishermen, everyone had their own dock except for Noreng and Dahl. Those docks, built early to the north of the Hansen's were ravaged by the wind, waves and ice in a virtually unprotected harbor. The nor'easters would pound into any obstruction between the lake and the shore, pulverizing anything manmade into

splinters, leaving only the dock rocks to settle back into whence they had come at the bottom of the lake.



The Louis Moe, Fred and Pete Hanson Fish Stations
BHA Pike Research Center Archive Collection- Gil Larson Collection
Photo Identification- Bob Dahl

Every dock built by the early pioneers is gone. In several cases the cribwork can be seen below the surface where wave and ice can't reach. The Hansen dock anchored the north end of the bay. When they lived there, they had several fish houses on the dock and could make repairs of loose logs and boards as they occurred, so in spite of the ravages of weather, the docks survived from year to year to year. Once neglected, it didn't take many years for any of the docks to wash away. The Moe's dock, the best and safest in the bay, either created a protected harbor by its construction or enhanced an already safe mini-bay. Their protective area tamed the worst of northeast storms, turning monster waves into ripples inside their harbor. Multiple buildings graced their dock and shoreline. Space was available for reeling nets, soaking nets and oiling and drying corks. Not only the Moes used their dock, but others off loaded or on loaded there when weather precluded using the other docks.

Johnson's second dock, located in the middle of the bay near their home, had at least three fish houses over the years. The Norengs used this dock, as well as Moe's dock, for their fishing operations. Two sheds on the shore held gear with the shoreline shed for Johnsons and the one behind it for Norengs. As a child, this was the dock that the Booth Fishery ships, *Turner* and later the *Apostle Islands*, would dock with passengers and to pick up the fish caught by the fisherman in the bay. The next, and last,

generation of fisherman in the bay were the sons of pioneer families; Harold Noreng, Jacob Hansen and Carl Dahl. Herman Johnson Jr. who fished for many years, moved off the island and set up his fishing operation in Little Sand Bay on the mainland.

By far the most long-lived operation on the island of this generation was that of Carl Dahl's who fished out of the East Bay. He started fishing with his father as a preteen and fished off Sand Island for over 35 years. Elvis Moe and Bill Noreng fished off the island for a couple of years and Jake a few years more.

All these men fished the same sets (fishing grounds) as their fathers. Sightings like "Eagle Island Open" or "Lighthouse in the Branches." Or "Sleeping Giant off Swallow Point," showed them where to set and lift. All the boys of yester-year could find their nets in the worst fog or stormiest weather. Starting with cotton nets and progressing to linen, the final natural material, these fishermen then moved on to nylon and monofilament which is still used today. Cotton and linen needed preserving in blue vitriol, whereas nylon/monofilament withstood the worst of wear with little maintenance other than to patch the holes caused by unusually vigorous fish or twigs and sticks getting caught and tearing the nets.

Beginning with sailboats, the earliest settlers on Sand Island were hampered by the whims of the weather. Not much of a problem getting to their sets as they were so close - - two miles at most, but if they wanted to go to town or to Rocky Island where relatives lived, the weather became a factor. With the advent of the small internal combustion engine, even the weather, were it not too severe, wasn't a factor. They were only limited by the amount of gasoline on board, and even then they had sails as a backup to the engine and oars as a backup to sail.

Most of the early sail only boats had no names or at least names that survived. Some of the power boats' names that have been recorded are the *Anna* of Herman Johnson, Sr., the *Sand Island* of Herman Johnson Sr., the *Star* of Harold Dahl, the *Lady Grace* of Fred Hansen, the *Dorthea* of Fred Hansen, the *Nancy Lee* of Elvis Moe and the *Bobbie* of Bill Noreng. The 1940s and 1950s boats on or around Sand Island were the *Egersund* of Carl Dahl the *Sand Bay* of Herman Johnson, Jr. and the *Twilight* of the Hokenson Brothers.