Tofts' Conservation ethic goes back to early settlers at Baileys Harbor

Many Advocate subscribers are familiar with the Toft name in Baileys Harbor through the late Emma Toft, one of the founders of the Ridges Sanctuary. The family story, however, goes back even further.

By RUBY VOEKS TOFT

PART I

Thomas Kresten Toft was born in Gundunlum, near Aalborg, Denmark, in 1844. Fourteen children were in the family, so it was no surprise when two of his brothers wanted to come to America with him. He was 19 years old and in Denmark, his name was Jensen. When they arrived in Racine, WI there were so many Jensens, the boys decided to change their name to Toft, the name of their area in Denmark. Many years later three more of the brothers and sisters joined those already in America. Some settled in Kansas, some in Minnesota; Thomas settled in Wisconsin.
For two years the brothers worked in the pineries out of Racine. It was there that Thomas was given the nickname “Big Tom.” He was tall, husky and stalwart. They next bought a farm in Minnesota. Eventually Tom sold his interest and came to Door County to work for a Michigan Stone Company quarrying at Mud Bay. Stone joined forest products and fishing as Door County’s early exports. It was 1871 when Tom became foreman of the thriving venture-hiring, housing, and directing the loading of stone on the point.

Ships would approach the Lake Michigan (east) side to load, a process that became perilous when a strong wind or storm was brewing. The ships had to be loaded quickly. Sometimes this required extra crews. The men were fed and housed at the main lodge that had been constructed out of wood brought from Michigan by the Company.

Young William Tishler was one who worked for Tom during the week—walking the 12 mile trip home-to farm—and back home on Sundays. The stone was not only used for building breakwaters, but with sand and gravel added to the crushed stone, mortar was made.

A working lime kiln, used only a few times, can still be seen at the Point. Crushed limestone, heated for three days and nights and mixed with water, became a whitewash used to paint the inside of barns, chicken coops and houses. The runways, where the cars would transfer the stone to the shore, are moss covered now, but still show the paths used over a hundred years ago.

It is sad to see the main building disintegrating for it is a marvel. Three sides of the two story main lodge building at Mud Bay are of vertical boards, never painted, which has taken on a lovely grey patina over the years and has stood up to over 100 years of weathering. The front side is of horizontal siding, and was painted at one time. The barn and outhouses were constructed at the same time of chinked logs. Professor Simon, an artist in oil in the early 1900s, painted a landscape including the main lodge, which shows no porch. The porch was probably added in the 1920s. Two one-room cabins in the woods, a chicken coop and a garage by the water’s edge to house the boats were added later. The last to be built were the Thor and Juleyanne cottages, and the converting of the chicken coop to Jeannie cottage, which I will write of later.

The opening of the newly dredged Sturgeon Bay Ship Canal in the late 1870s brought an end to a thriving business at the Baileys Harbor Point. Ships found out that the Sturgeon Bay Laurie Quarry was more protected, and loading was easier as there were no high seas as on the Lake Michigan side. The Michigan Company could no longer meet even the expenses or wages due, and a sheriff’s sale followed. Thomas Toft acquired some of the Point at this time and as adjacent land became available it was purchased by him until Toft’s Point of 275 acres was formed.

1874 brought the marriage of Thomas Kresten Toft to Juley Anne Panter, the oldest of eight children of Rebecca (Coe) and Thomas Panter, who had come to America in 1862 out of Northhamshire, England. The Panters had first settled in Jacksonport and helped establish the Village of Jacksonport. They later homesteaded on 120 acres of land west of Baileys Harbor. Thomas Toft was 30 and Julie Panter Toft 16 when the couple began married life at the Point. It must have been difficult for Tom and especially for Juleyanne, what with feeding the large crew and taking care of a growing family—as the first four children were born only a year apart. These were William, Olive, Mary and Thorwald—the latter surviving only two months. Sam, Lucy and Emma followed and the youngest—Elsie—was born in Baileys Harbor in 1892.

In early days, there was an encampment of Indians in the Southwest field, which was in those days the shoreline. A ridge now separates the field and the waters of Mud Bay. This field was tilled by Tom and many Indian artifacts surfaced. Ultimately he had a showcase of them that were given to his grandson, Thorval.

In the 1970s Professor Mason of Lawrence University identified them. Great grandson Thomas, catalogued and arranged them for their law offices in Sturgeon Bay, now the law office of great granddaughter Trudy.
In the days of Thomas, one old Indian would come back every summer to stay at the Point and visit with him. He gave Tom two powder horns. One dated 1846 shows great sensitivity in its incised pictures, the work resembling a sailor’s scrimshaw. Delicate figures of snakes, four footed animals, birds, a mermaid, and white men are carved on it. It would be interesting to know the history or these powder horns. One wonders where this Indian acquired it.

Another friend of Tom K’s was Bues (rhymes with moose) of Bueses Point on the north point of Mud Bay and on the way to Cana Island. In good weather Mr. Bues would come across the bay in a rowboat to visit the Tofts or to take the shortcut to Baileys Harbor. This small boat was pointed at both ends and Tom was worried about his friend’s safety. Luckily nothing happened.

When Bues left Door County for the State or Washington, he tried to get Tom K. and family to go with him. After much consideration, Tom declined to go. Bues gave his rowboat to Tom, and it lay in the shed at Mud Bay for many years. When grandson Thorval needed a small boat, his father Will had this one refurbished by Baileys Harbor boat builder Ernest Anclam. It needed caulking, new planks and new siding for that is the way this boat had been built. It became a thing of value to the child.

As the children grew there was much for them to do. In the fall and spring the older children had to walk the 2 ½ miles to school in Baileys Harbor. In the winter, when the snow was deep, they were pulled on a sled made by Thomas K., by their dog. There were always chickens to be fed, cows to milk, horses to feed, a large garden to attend to the warm waters of Mud Bay and the cold waters of Lake Michigan to swim in or fish in. The magnificent forests to play in or walk in. Their father believed in conserving the land. He didn't believe in cutting down the trees. There are to this day groves of virgin pine because of his philosophy.

In 1891 Tom moved his family to the village of Baileys Harbor. May 7, 1892, for the sum of $400, Thomas Toft purchased the Miles Carrington house at the corner of Doe's Hill (Bluff Road) and Main Street. It was called Doe's Hill because Doctor Voight lived on it just below the bluff. Tom’s substantial house in the heart of the town had been built on a lot 82’ by 138.5’.

To appreciate the odd sized lot one has to be aware that Baileys Harbor was platted in stages. The earliest (Plat of Baileys Harbor) ran south from Bluff Road, and appeared to be platted without benefit of surveyor. The second (Citizen's Addition) ran North from Bluff Road. These lots were established by metes and bounds (so many feet each way) and later platted by Roger Eatough. Most lots were odd sizes, the exception being the town hall (132’
square) and Eatough’s own lot (99’ by 159’, a rectangle). A third Baileys Harbor Beach (Northshore Addition) and a fourth (Rottman’s NS Addition) were platted later in the school area to the Northwest.

There were two grist mills in Baileys Harbor. Karl and Louis Preuter (spelling of record) built the first at the North end of the village. After a time this ceased to be used. Later, one was built close to the shore in the center of the community (in back of Hjertehjem) by Thomas Toft, Thomas Toseland and the miller-William Fruemmer. When two of the partners sold their interests to the Prueter family. Thomas Toft followed suit. The second of several horrendous fires in Baileys Harbor occurred Feb. 22, 1923, when this grist mill burned to the ground. Many times, son Will’s family would talk about the first fire—a massive one—which had burned most of the businesses and homes in the village. The date was never pinned down but it may have been the one which occurred in the spring of 1868 as mentioned in the Door County Advocate. Rumor had it that the Bill Hickey House (originally located where the Baileys Harbor Town Hall is today) was the only one left standing.

This fire brought on the necessity of quickly building housing for the winter. In 1868 the Carringtons built a temporary two family home, reflecting their New England origin, north of the corner lot, later sold to Tom Toft. The roof line resembled a saltbox with a lid. Each side was evenly balanced, having two rooms downstairs- a kitchen and a parlor-and one upstairs-a bedroom, separated by a common stairwell. An attic ran across the back of the house, with a shed below added later. This “temporary” house, built over 124 years ago, is still standing, and is now the site of The Red Geranium. The new owners, the John Roseberg, have retained the pioneer feeling, exposing the wooden floors, adding blinds, leaving the ash wainscoting added by Will Toft in the kitchen, and retaining the front door with its beautifully etched waterfall scene. Only the location of the stairwell has been changed, for the old one had very shallow, narrow steps, and for safety reasons had to be changed.

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