Bets were off when shipmates saw Will Toft’s rowing speed

PART II - Continuing the family history of the Tofts of Baileys Harbor.

The home sold to Tom Toft in 1892 was more substantial and spacious. Its only drawback was a well owned and used by adjoining owners. The father talked his 25-year-old son Will into buying from Joel Carrington and Alice, his wife, the two family home and lot (145’ frontage that ran 178’ back) to the North so that they would share the communal well. It is interesting to note that again the sum of $400 was paid and, in 1900, Will owned the property.

In his youth Will had a problem with stuttering. His folks thought it was caused by being with the men, one of whom had the habit. He was sent to a stammering school in Michigan, and had to slow down his speaking. He did overcome the handicap, but only by being careful and talking slowly. It probably also affected his actions, for he was always deliberate but he was thorough, thoughtful and honest. He was the oldest of seven children so was often asked by his mother to take over. The story is that he got tired of having his siblings’ toys all over the floor. He gave them one hour or everything would be put in the kitchen range. They knew when he spoke he meant it. They learned to mind!

Both Will and his sister, Emma, had white hair from a young age. People always added on years because of this. Emma was spry and this amazed people because they considered her to be much older. She could outwalk men 20 years younger.

There was a barn with each house — stalls for cows and horses, chicken coops separate. Tom’s was a smaller and colder barn, so when Will was married in 1905 his barn was used by both families. Originally the whole barn was built in a “stovewood” technique — a rarity in Door County. This is a technique whereby the short pieces of plastered cedar blocks are stacked and the ends covered with plaster. It was not an enduring process. Gradually the walls were replaced with modern construction, until only the west wall of “stovewood” remained. The Bill Tishlers’ home adjoined Will’s lot on the North. They had several talented children. A painting of this barn, by high school student Leland Tishler, hangs in the home of son Thorval. Eventually the barn roof caved in and in 1983 the barn had to be destroyed for reasons of safety.
Thomas K. had become an American citizen 10 years after he arrived in America, and revered his adopted land. He always spoke English, and asked his friends to do the same in his home. If Danish was spoken publicly, his reply was always in English. How one wishes he had written the translation of the 1880s and 90s letters received from his Danish brothers and sisters. Perhaps they will eventually be translated, as his great great granddaughter, Laura Toft Graan, is studying Danish at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Son William Toft was married in 1905 to a native Austrian, Anna (Hammersmith) Hafner. Anna had been but seven years old in 1887 when she, with her parents and three of her brothers, Pius, Lucas and Anton, came to America from Wallem, a city about 20 miles from Vienna.

![Wedding picture of Ann and Will Toft, September 1905.](image)

The Hammersmiths settled not far from the Hafners in the farming area about 4 ½ miles northwest of Baileys Harbor. Later another brother, Charles, and a sister, Mary, were born in Door County. Anna had worked away from home at a younger age, first in a Sister Bay Resort, then as a dressmaker in Baileys Harbor. She loved to dance, was a happy person and loved music. One of her earliest purchases was an upright piano of quarter-sawed oak.

As a young man, William had worked at a number of jobs — in the upper Michigan pineries cutting wood, as an assistant in his Uncle Sam Panter's Meat Market (now the Yum Yum Tree) and as a U.S. Coastguardsman stationed at Baileys Harbor. One of his duties was to patrol the lighthouse area south of the Coast Guard Station. Just a few years ago Roy Lukes, Ridges Curator, found a large rock in this area that Will had carved his name on almost 85 years ago. Recently, Roy took Thorval and wife to the site. Will's patrolling had been done at night, and this was a rocky, circuitous path to walk in the daylight. It must have taken quite a while to chisel the deep letters by lantern light.
While in the Coast Guard, Will had owned a round bottomed boat that was very fast. He had boasted that he could row across the bay in 15 minutes. Unluckily his shipmates watched when Will practiced, and all bets were called off. This round bottomed boat, built by the predecessor of Palmer Johnson's Sturgeon Bay Boatworks, was unbeatable. In the 1990s son Thorval gave this boat to the Door County Maritime Museum at Sturgeon Bay.

Other well known Coastguardsmen of that early time were Cooney Grovogel, Henry Christenson, Reinhardt Hickey and Captain Lavanger. Sam Toft, Will's younger brother, made the Coast Guard his vocation, much of the time stationed in Michigan.

Of the seven living children of Thomas Toft, the oldest, will, had one son, Thorval, who has been an Attorney at Law in Sturgeon Bay since 1937 except for the years 1942-45 served in WW II in Italy and France. Olive, the oldest daughter, married Franz Esser, a German violinist who had come to Chicago from the world Exposition with Frederick Stock and stayed to become a member of the Chicago Symphony. Frederick Stock became conductor, and had a summer home at Little Sister.

The Essers had two sons, Walter and Franz, Jr. Walter followed his father's musical bent, becoming a musician — a member of the Minneapolis Symphony. After 52 years in Chicago, the senior Essers together with their son Franz, Jr. retired to Baileys Harbor to spend their remaining years.

Three of the seven became teachers. Mary, (who later married Frank Bunda of Sister Bay), had one son, Marcus. Lucy (who married Max Wilson of Jacksonport), had four children. Wesley was killed in WW II in the Battle of the Bulge, Harry is retired on the family farm. Harriet and Virginia (Johnson), were both teachers. Emma taught school in Door County and in South Dakota before turning to a nursing career interrupted by her father's death in 1919. Sam, the Coastguardsman, married Florence Marshall of Marshall's Point, Liberty Grove. No issue. The youngest, Elsie, married Christian Johnson, Baileys Harbor barber, in 1918. No issue.

In the 1910s, Baileys Harbor was a town of less than 200 people. The Tofts continued, until the late 1940s, to have their animals in the heart of it, selling excess milk and eggs, and smoking meat for others as well as their own families. The milk was so rich: a fitted spoon gently eased down in the neck of the quart bottle brought up pure whipping cream. The cows had to be led up the bluff each morning to pasture, and down each evening to milk and bed down. When the house was being dismantled prior to its sale in 1984, the back of a calendar contained will's recipe for curing a large amount of ham — many pounds of brown sugar, salt peter, etc., all noted in Will's precise calligraphy.

About 1900, Tom Toft had purchased Government Lot three, a tract the equivalent of 40 acres, on the Baileys Harbor Bluff, from Ellen Leist. It was a 40 wide and a 40 along the left side of the Bluff Road to the Heinrichs property. The Tofts had several gardens up there. Elsie had the one called “the cabbage hole” garden, because
cabbage could be buried in this hole in the winter and not freeze. Will had his gardens, and Tom and family had others. There were raspberry patches, and plenty of maple trees. In the spring, the trees would be tapped and maple syrup made.

Emery Oldenburg, son of Toft’s neighbor, Shoester Oldenburg, said his happiest childhood days were the occasional ones when he would skip school and be permitted by Will to lead the horses up the bluff. He had a love affair all of his life with horses, and in retirement had a fine collection of Appaloosas. Emery was five years old in the spring, Thor and Carl Zahn were four but in another two months five, when the three friends began grade school. The first day Thor dashed home with an ultimatum; either his mother cut his long curls or he would never go to school. Baileys Harbor had a two-room school. Miss Jameson was the first teacher, and was followed by Miss Empey in the lower room: Louis Willems was followed by Ernald Viste in the upper room.

In 1920 Henry Heinrichs no longer wished to be postmaster of Baileys Harbor, and Will Toft became postmaster. The north front room of the Will Toft house in the center of the village became the Post Office and continued into the late 1940s. Anna was assistant postmaster. The mail was brought from Sturgeon Bay daily, by truck in summer and by a leftover WWI sleigh or a stagecoach in winter.

Early drivers were Charley Panter, Henry Schultz and Dave Jacobsen. The roads were bad, sometimes under water, sometimes impassable. About halfway between Baileys Harbor and Sturgeon Bay the driver would change horses. When the snow on the road was too deep the fence lines, with prior permission, would be cut, and the sleigh would run across the farmer’s fields. A small pot bellied stove heated the stagecoach.

Walter Kinsella, a farmer, used a bobsled to transport the high school students to and from Gibraltar High School. The bobsled had two runners in front and two behind with a covered area across the center for protection from inclement weather. For many years the rural mail carrier was Jens Jensen. He was a kindly man who was wooing a daughter, and was maneuvered into marrying the mother. Jens didn’t work on Saturdays so Will would sort the mail and, on Sundays, give it to the church-going Polish people.

Will would have the Post Office open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day. He would accommodate the village by cashing checks and supplying change for the small businesses. In the 1980s, when the home was being readied for sale, we found the Post Office wall above the business shelf to be covered with graffiti. Names of teenagers like Bernice Hartwig, Helen Herbst, etc. brought on a wave of nostalgia for the late 20s and 30s.

Anna, besides being assistant postmaster, loved to pick raspberries, and would save the money earned from the sale of them for her son’s college education. She was a fine cook. Freshly picked peas from her garden, her own chicken baked in a wood stove. Two kinds of cake might be served. One was an angel food (Thor’s favorite) which used the whites of the eggs: one a golden cake (Will’s favorite) which used the yolks.

Will Toft had one hobby that he shared with everyone, a large flower garden. It was on the south side of the house, informal, colorful, well tended, and alive with Canterbury bells, tulips, narcissi, poppies and rows of Madonna lilies. Besides the enrichment from animal sources, the waste from the kitchen cooking was deposited in the fertile fields. Many people paused, looked, asked to photograph this picturesque garden hidden behind the cedar hedge which fronted the property. Some plants, especially liked by Hedvig Peil, found their way into the gardens at Boyntons and Jennie Burke, courtesy of Will Toft.

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