

Lake has been anchor in life of longtime resident

By Steve Engelbert
The Janesville Gazette Staff

FORT ATKINSON--Tall, powerful Jim Bowler lounges against the fender of a roadster, a bird in his hand and a shotgun broken open across his knee.

A buddy strikes a similar pose on the other side of the classic car. The sign on the building behind him says "Bowler's Tavern." The year is 1940.

Another picture shows the wide-shouldered Bowler holding a shotgun under one arm and an end of a long 2-by-4 in his other hand. A lean, dark buddy wearing a fedora holds the other end of the board. Perhaps 20 dead ducks hang between them.

That one is from opening day of the season on Lake Koshkonong, 1940.

Further into the album, you can see the lines of Bowler's face change with age. The big body thickens and grows stooped, but the sense of physical strength remains.

The cars change, from the narrow-tired, high-fendered antique in the 1940 pictures to '50s-era Studebakers, to the sports utility vehicles of the late '80s.

In a hundred pictures taken over 60 years, the themes repeat themselves: Jimmy Bowler with a rod or a gun, with his buddy or his wife, and with a brace of birds or a catch of big fish.

A lot of those fish made their fatal dining decisions on Lake Koshkonong, where Bowler has lived for maybe 70 years. A lot of those birds made their final descent before Bowler's guns on the big lake.

Bowler trapped enough muskrats from a swamp near the lake one year to earn a down payment on a house.

He has pictures of himself sitting red-faced on a bucket on the lake's ice, waiting for the Koshkonong panfish to hit the bait.

But now the trapping and ice fishing part of his life has passed, he said.

"I just can't take it anymore," Bowler said, without regret. "I'm getting over the hill."

Bowler has lived on the lake long enough to have collected hammer stones and dozens of arrowheads. He found the first when he was 12. He was walking barefoot in the manner of small boys, and the arrowhead stuck in his foot.

Bowler fixed many of the points in patterns, put them on mats and framed them.

"I kept 'em in a shoe box for 40 years," he said.

The Winnebagos had a campground on top of the hill near the house he lives in now, Bowler said. He figures Indian artifacts still lie in the dirt in the fields surrounding the north shore.

But time has changed agriculture. Local farmers cultivate with chisel plows now instead of turning the soil over with big plow blades. Fewer arrowheads turn up.

Time has wrought other changes at the lake, just as it has transfigured Bowler's face and frame. The former excavator, former deputy sheriff and lifetime sportsman has been there to watch them.

"It was a walleye lake," Bowler said. "A lot of northerns and walleyes. You hardly ever caught a catfish."

Now, of course, the catfish are legion.

"The water was crystal clear," Bowler said, casting his mind back to the days of his youth. "It was good for the boaters and the property owners. I was on the lake all the time when I was a kid.

"I've lived here since I was 12 years old," he said. "I'm close to 80. I ain't saying which side."

But he admits he was 13 during the flood of 1929. He has pictures from that year, showing his house and his parents' business awash nearly to the roofs.

"That was the worst flood," Bowler said. "We've had a lot since."

Ice came up on the porch and pushed the house 100 yards from its foundation. Other cottages that had been right on the lake were moved, too.

"The ice came along and smashed them all to hell," Bowler said. Those cottages were rebuilt further back and along the road by their owners.

Bowler's folks, John and Alma Bowler, moved to Koshkonong during the Depression. John Bowler's dad was a furniture maker in a Milwaukee piano factory. No one bought pianos in the Depression, so the Bowlers came to the north shore.

The Bowlers had a cabin, and friends from the city liked to visit to go fishing.

"My dad bought six boats from Hoffman Lumber in Fort Atkinson," said Bowler, surrounded by memorabilia at his ranch house, a quarter mile from the lake. "We ended up with about 50. We used to get \$1 a day for a boat."

The family built a bar and grill about where the North Shore Inn is now.

"Your job was to keep the boats clean," Bowler said, meaning that was his job.

Weeds choked the lake late in the season in the early days. Sometimes a storm would deposit tons of weeds on the shore at the Bowlers, and the family would move the stinking mess away with pitchforks and trucks.

Bowler has a tiny, fuzzy snapshot showing the weeds.

The weeds of August and the crystal-clear waters of June are only memories now. Nutrients promote the growth of microscopic plants, which means the water is nearly always murky. And the weeds are gone. The weeds provided habitat for fish, and their mass kept the lake from getting dangerously rough, Bowler said.

"Our weeds disappeared, but there is still good fishing off and on," Bowler said. "These guys can go out there and troll and catch a lot of walleyes."

The fishing pressure is nothing like it was in the 1940s and '50s, Bowler said. Now the big lake looks empty, even on a perfect day in June.

The loss of the weeds meant another big change at the lake.

"We had the weeds, and it was probably the best duck hunting lake in the U.S.-- canvasback. They used to ship 'em back to New York when they still shot them commercially.

"We don't get no ducks anymore. Very few."

Bowler wishes the dam keeper at Indianford would keep the lake six inches or so deeper than it was in June. He doesn't see the lake as a playground for Jet Skis and water skiers.

"My idea of a lake might be different than most people's," said Jimmy Bowler, who has fished, hunted and watched Koshkonong, and even forked weeds on it for 70 years.

"My idea of a lake is ducks, fish, deer," he said, paging through the album that has so many pictures of all of those things.

"Wildlife."

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