

# Camp Trotter was once a chicken farm

In 2018, both Steve Dunlap and Jim Hribal sent me an article from the Historical Society of Michigan about Northland Farm, a chicken breeding and hatching operation located on Bills Lake. It seems that Keasha Palmer, a granddaughter of Will Sproul, was rummaging around in her mother's attic in 2007 when she found a treasure trove of documents about the famous family business. "As I was reading through several brochures and catalogs, I began to realize what a huge and important endeavor the business truly was," she says.

That's because her grandfather, whose hobby it was to raise chickens in the backyard of their house on Fulton St. in Grand Rapids, sold chickens to friends and neighbors. His day job was as an accountant for the Pennsylvania Railroad. This gave him the logistical knowledge to make the next step.

For 30 years, Northland Farm operated an operation that sent chickens throughout North America. They weren't just run-of-the-mill birds. Mr. Sproul paid highly-respected British breeder Tom Barron \$1,000 for his starting stock of ten hens and a cockerel.

It was a superb investment. Mr. Sproul became a pioneer in ship-

ping day-old chicks. He (and they) won top prizes every year in many national competitions that took place back then. He consistently obtained a high U.S. Record of Performance ranking which was established by the Department of Agriculture to protect poultry buyers from unscrupulous breeders who might inflate their brood's egg-laying records in order to sell their chickens.

Sproul had no trouble selling chickens. Over the years, he received glowing letters from satisfied customers confirming the superiority of Northland's layers.

As opposed to farming operations today, Sproul was proud of how he treated his chickens at

Bills Lake. "They can see the clear lake all day and hear the ripple of the blue water all night," he wrote. "Nowhere in the entire country will you find a poultry farm with such ideal climatic conditions with all the natural advantages that we enjoy." The article was entitled: Where Northland White Leghorns Live Like Resorters."

For more than 30 years, Northland Farm was a thriving entity that put thousands of poultry raisers all over the continent on the road to success. Will Sproul never actually lived on the farm but instead had a manager oversee the breeding opera-



tions on the lake. Pretty soon, as the farm's reputation grew, demand for Northland's layers came from government institutions and agricultural colleges as well.

But Grandpa Will died in 1945. A company in Holland may have ended up with the business and removed the chickens to another location, according to Will's granddaughter.

What happened next is a mystery. Camp Trotter's website states that the land was donated by Ralph (not Mel) Trotter, a veteran of World War I and a former VFW Department of Michigan Commander in 1949. I have yet to learn how Trotter came to own the land.

This coincides with an article that Cindy Sharp, a Newaygo County Museum volunteer research assistant, unearthed for me. Found in the *Newaygo Republican* dated May



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26, 1949, it takes the reader around Bills Lake where improvements were being made by various residents: employing a bulldozer to fill in around cottages, building a new road around the lake, construction of a new cottage, and landscaping a smelly, mosquito-infested area that had been the source of many complaints.

The article goes on to say: "Workmen were busy Monday on the remodeling of the former hatchery building that is now to be the Veterans of Foreign Wars children's camp. We are informed that all but the two-story part is to be torn down and that part to be refinished for the dining room and kitchen. Cottages or dormitories are to be built and considerable landscaping and game courts are planned. The resident caretaker is due to arrive shortly and camp activities get underway.

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----Will Sproul, owner of the chicken farm, talking about the living conditions on Bills Lake of his "free range chickens" who had the run of the property which would become Camp Trotter.

As it turns out, that resident caretaker that very first summer was Tommy Morrison, uncle of John Morrison who had opened a popular restaurant in Grant in 1945. Moreover, John owned a cottage on Bills Lake at the time.

Tommy had an incredible story to tell to Ralph Trotter, the VFW commander for the state of Michigan who bought the camp two years after the chicken farm operation was sold and the chickens were removed. Ralph was a World War I veteran.

So was Tommy. Having been gassed in battle, his body was placed alongside many others who were presumed dead. A message was sent to his family in Grant informing them of his demise on the very same day that he walked through the door. That's because amazingly, he woke up from the gas attack. Not surprisingly, he was commander of the Newaygo VFW Post at the time that he got the job as Camp Trotter supervisor. He had certainly earned the distinction.

In that very first group of campers was Jim Morrison, Tommy's nephew and son of John Morrison, the Grant restaurant and motel owner. More is written about both John and Jim later in this document but one significant thing should be noted here. Jim, who is still alive and lives in the Grant area, is a relative of the Bills family. His mother was Eleanor Stray. His grandfather was Charles Stray. His great-grand father was Orson Stray who married Mary Elizabeth Bills. Mary Elizabeth was the daughter of Abel Bills.

Abel (1807-1885) and Almira Bills (1810-1882)

Orson Stray (1834-1908) married their daughter Mary Elizabeth Bills (1840-1908)

Their son Charles Orson Stray (1875-1961) married Lillian Carlson 1885-

Their daughter Eleanor June Stray (1915-1990) married John Morrison (1911-1976)

Their son Jim Morrison (1942) still lives in the area.

**This was in World War I. Having been gassed in battle, Tommy's body was placed alongside many others who were presumed dead. A message was sent to his family in Grant informing them of his demise on the very same day that he walked through the door.**

# Camp Trotter Epilogue

Given what I have been doing in preparing this history, I was very interested in Keasha Palmer's quest to find the property on which her grandfather raised prize chickens. She was born in 1947, two years after Grandpa Will died. She got her start in terms of research in 2007 by finding in an attic so much of the literature that advertised the business.

This created a need to visit Bills Lake. She recruited her cousin Betsy who had been to the farm as a ten-year-old but didn't remember anything about where it was.

Finally, on a beautiful fall day in 2016, these 78 and 69 year-olds made the trip. They visited the Newaygo County offices and looked up the plat number for Northland Farm. She handed that to the clerk who gave them the specific address for the property. It was simply a matter of plugging it into Google Maps.

"We were all so excited that we were actually going to see where our Grandpa Will oversaw his broods and grew his business all those years ago," she writes. "Because it was on a

lake, we fully expected the property to be developed and populated with cottages. So you can imagine our shock and delight as we drove down the road and saw wide-open spaces with just several buildings which we immediately recognized from old photos as the chicken coops and hatchery."



*The author (left) and cousin Betsy Bares in 2016 at the previous site of Northland Farm.*

"But an even bigger thrill was yet to come when we discovered what the property had become. And it is gorgeous. Formerly known as VFW Buddy Poppy Camp, it is now called VFW Camp Trotter

for Children and run by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The chicken coops have been converted to cabins and the former farm manager's house, which sits high on the bluff overlooking the lake, is now home to the camp director. The land, buildings, and hill where chickens once roamed freely and happily are still there in one form or another."

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