



Short Ears, Long Tales

Courte Oreilles Lakes Association

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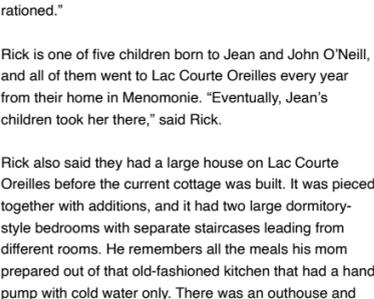
'We are all closer because of the lake'

By Kathy Hanson
Contributing Writer

Some might call them legends or trailblazers—maybe forerunners is the best word—when we speak of three people who spent most of their lives on Lac Courte Oreilles and now have left its shores: Jean Higbee O'Neill departed September 24, 2016; her sister, Nancy Higbee Pollock, departed December 1, 2016; and Tom Austin departed May 9, 2017.

Jean Higbee O'Neill

Jean was born Aug. 9, 1916 in La Crosse to parents Jesse and Edna Coren Higbee. Her paternal grandfather was Judge Edward Higbee, a Wisconsin circuit court judge whose circuit included the Hayward area. Judge Higbee started visiting the Reserve area around 1912 and found that his hay fever was relieved when he was in the area. In 1919 he and his wife Grace purchased property from Henry La Rush; in 1924 they purchased an additional 120 acres. That became their summer retreat and the rest, as they say, is history.



Higbee "Camp at Reserve" circa 1913. Photo submitted.

Jean's son Rick recalls, "Jean started going there at a very young age with her parents and grandparents. She probably went there every year of her life except possibly one or two years during World War II when gasoline was rationed."

Rick is one of five children born to Jean and John O'Neill, and all of them went to Lac Courte Oreilles every year from their home in Menomonie. "Eventually, Jean's children took her there," said Rick.

Rick also said they had a large house on Lac Courte Oreilles before the current cottage was built. It was pieced together with additions, and it had two large dormitory-style bedrooms with separate staircases leading from different rooms. He remembers all the meals his mom prepared out of that old-fashioned kitchen that had a hand pump with cold water only. There was an outhouse and various boats and canoes. The lake was the entertainment—a lot of time was spent on the water and in the woods.

Rick also said the large house allowed for Jean's two sisters—Nancy and Mary—and their families to be together, "which is why we remain a close extended family," he said.

Rick also remembers that the Higbees became friendly with some of the local Indian families, especially the Gokeys. Jean's grandmother, Grace Higbee, arranged for some of the Indian children to get milk and also arranged for some of the Gokey girls to attend Aquinas High School in La Crosse. Jean was greatly influenced by these kindnesses and when the LCO College was established Jean donated books to its library for many years at Christmas.

Jean's daughter Barbara remembers her mother at the cottage doing a lot of "planning and fixing of meals for lots of people, supervising the clean-up, sweeping and straightening the house, fixing broken things, weeding the beach, mowing the lawn, pruning, planting. At the end of the day she usually relaxed and shared a cocktail with the other adults. After dinner she would play games with us, or we sat around singing or listening to my grandmother read stories aloud to us."

Asked how her mother would want to be remembered by people on the lake, Barbara said, "As a friend of all the neighbors in the LCO area, a strong woman who was passionate about books and education for all, and a steward of the water and land resources." Jean lived 100 years—a lifetime of summers spent on the southeast shore of Lac Courte Oreilles. All of her five children, her daughter-in-law, three grandchildren and four great-grandchildren continue to enjoy that same land and lake.

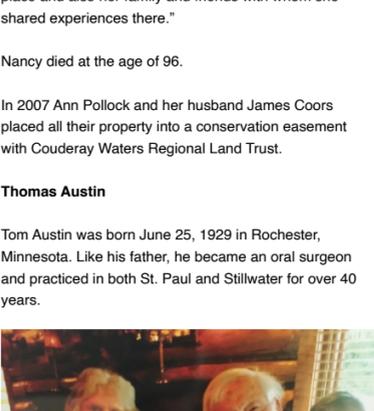
Nancy Higbee Pollock

Nancy was born March 1, 1920 and, of course, shared much of her family history with her older sister Jean, including her love of Lac Courte Oreilles.

Her daughter Ann said, "My mother claimed at the end of her life that she had visited or lived at the lake every year of her life."

Nancy and her husband had two children, Ann and James, and she and her husband moved the family from La Crosse to California in 1951. For most people that would have put a stop to summers in Wisconsin, but those ties to Lac Courte Oreilles were too strong. Ann said they returned to the cottage every summer and stayed for weeks, sometimes months.

"It was a huge part of my childhood and I know my mother was happier in Wisconsin than in California," Ann said.



Jean Higbee O'Neill and Nancy Higbee Pollock in 2011. They are standing by what was inside the kitchen of their old LCO cottage. Photo by Jim Coors.

Ann said that eventually her grandmother divided the property—approximately 100 acres—among the three daughters, Mary, Jean, and Nancy.

"They each got what they thought was the best deal: The flat point that jutted out into the lake; Jean the central property with the old cottage and my Grandmother's newer small cottage, along with the beach; and my mother got the creek property. My parents built their log cabin from a kit ordered from Vermont in 1971. They spent more and more time there and, at some point in the 1970s, they began to spend about half the year there," Ann explained.

Mary Cameron, who was Jean and Nancy's older sister, also loved being at the cottage and on the lake, and retired there with her husband Alex. After Mary's death, Alex continued to live there for a number of years.

Nancy had an interest in the natural history of the area and in particular the plants, especially the ferns on the property. She and Ann's dad, John Pollock, developed a nature trail with numbered markers that corresponded to entries in a little booklet they had printed.

Nancy was on the COLA history committee for a period of time as well.

Ann said her mother's love of Lac Courte Oreilles only increased with age, and her children tried to get her there as often as possible.

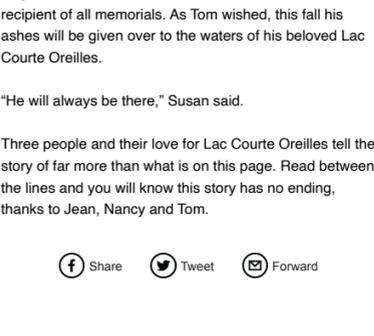
"She had a strong spiritual connection to the lake and property, which had to do with both the physical, natural place and also her family and friends with whom she shared experiences there."

Nancy died at the age of 96.

In 2007 Ann Pollock and her husband James Coors placed all their property into a conservation easement with Couderay Waters Regional Land Trust.

Thomas Austin

Tom Austin was born June 25, 1929 in Rochester, Minnesota. Like his father, he became an oral surgeon and practiced in both St. Paul and Stillwater for over 40 years.



Tom and Mary Austin. Photo submitted.

You didn't have to know Tom long before you heard him joke about how he "married Mary for the lake," which had been in her family before he met her. He fell hard for both apparently. Tom and Mary started coming up to Lac Courte Oreilles in 1950 and built their own cabin on the southern shore. From 1970 to 1999 Tom and Mary owned the remarkable Old Chicago Club, a purchase that saved the remarkable landmark from becoming a trailer park. His daughter Susan recalls that "he stayed up all night, couldn't sleep a wink as he wrestled with that decision . . . He was sick about the whole thing, and then it was done . . . he decided to buy the club."

Susan said it was a huge amount of money for him and not necessary as the family already had a new and lovely home on the lake. But he and mom, she said, wanted to preserve that beautiful, 17-bedroom property—and they did, renting it out to large groups and families, hosting several national sailing regattas and using it themselves for the occasional family reunion.

Tom was a sailor. Susan said it was his passion and she remembers him building his first sailboat from a mail order kit one winter out in the garage of their first home in St. Paul.

"It was a Sailfish, a sweet little boat with one sail that got him started! He graduated to a M20 a few years later and got the bug for racing. He also bought two butterflies and a wind surfer and yep, an ice boat too. Anything with a sail, my dad wanted to have!"

Indeed Tom was a charter member of organized sailboat racing on Lac Courte Oreilles when it began in 1969 with a group of lake sailors who got together at the Austin cabin to fabricate three large sailing buoys. Tom himself wrote "The LCO Sailing Club" history for the COLA website. His love and expertise for sailing are obvious in that document.

Susan's memories of her dad also include time skiing at Telemark, duck hunting, her father's remarkable athleticism and the day when he saved a drowning man on Lac Courte Oreilles—like it was just another day at the beach.

But what stands out most sharply in her memories of her dad is his love of family and how that is connected to the lake.

"I really do believe that my brothers and sister and many of my cousins on my mother's side are so much closer and more connected because of the lake. We spent time together every summer, often under the same roof, and there was an intensity to that time during the gorgeous days and nights of summer at the lake, the crazy things we did and enjoyed that created a bond that just doesn't happen over dinners here and there. The experience of the lake is like no other. In my heart I know we are all closer because of the time we spent together at the lake," Susan said.

Tom died unexpectedly on May 9, 2017 after a sudden onset of a blood infection. He was 87 but it seemed far too early for him to leave, his daughter said. His wife Mary and his children received countless letters and cards and they listed the Lac Courte Oreilles Foundation as the recipient of all memorials. As Tom wished, this fall his ashes will be given over to the waters of his beloved Lac Courte Oreilles.

"He will always be there," Susan said.

Three people and their love for Lac Courte Oreilles tell the story of far more than what is on this page. Read between the lines and you will know this story has no ending, thanks to Jean, Nancy and Tom.

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COLA'S WEBSITE IS BEING REMODELED

COLA'S website is being completely redesigned. Many new features will be unveiled in the coming months. The extensive revisions may entail periodic disruptions, so if you can't get to the website, wait a bit and try again. And let us know what you think of the new look.

ALL OF LAC COURTE OREILLES EXPECTED TO BE LISTED AS AN IMPAIRED WATER BODY

The WDNR draft 2018 impaired water list will be published for public comment during the third or fourth week in September. In addition to Musky Bay, all of Lac Courte Oreilles is expected to be included based on depleted dissolved oxygen levels.

COLA requested this action, which was spurred, in part, by last fall's extensive fish kill along with the well-documented low oxygen levels and high water temperatures ([more](#)).

LCO CREEL SURVEY REPORT MAY 7, 2016 TO March 5, 2017

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources regularly conducts fishery surveys of area lakes and reservoirs to gather information on species composition, population size, reproductive success, size/age distribution, and growth rates. [Here are the recent results for LCO.](#)

WISCALM ASSESSMENT AND GUIDANCE UPDATED FOR LCO

Wisconsin's Consolidated Assessment and Listing Methodology (WisCALM), from the WDNR, provides guidance on assessment of water quality data against surface water quality standards and for Clean Water Act reporting on surface water quality status and trends. WisCALM is updated for each biennial surface water assessment cycle and was recently updated for the 2018 assessment cycle. See the [update for Lac Courte Oreilles](#).

Assessing waterbodies against water quality standards and identifying impaired waters that don't meet standards is part of the overarching federal Clean Water Act (CWA) framework for restoring impaired waters. See more [details about WisCALM on the WDNR website](#).

COLA ACHIEVES CRITICAL STEP IN GETTING LONG-NEEDED PROTECTIONS IN PLACE

Governor Scott Walker has approved a scope statement submitted by the WDNR on May 15, 2017 that initiates the rulemaking process to establish a more protective water quality standard for LCO. The current phosphorus standard for the lake is set at 15 ppb by the state. COLA and the LCO tribe have asked that the limit be lowered to 10 ppb ([more](#)).

LCO WILL BE FEATURED AT THE 2017 MINNESOTA WATER RESOURCES CONFERENCE

Hans Holmberg, a Senior Engineer and Associate Vice President with LimnoTech, will be presenting a talk entitled,

"Protecting Two-Story Lakes: A Battle Against Phosphorus and Climate Change"

at the 2017 Minnesota Water Resources Conference to be held at the Saint Paul RiverCentre in Saint Paul, Minnesota, on October 17-18, 2017.

This presentation will discuss the basis for and approach used to develop a site-specific phosphorus criterion for Lac Courte Oreilles. The conference will be attended by about 700 water resource professionals.

Holmberg's presentation will be provided in upcoming SELT issues and on COLA's website.

VULNERABILITY OF AGRICULTURAL LANDS TO EROSION IN THE UPPER COUDERAY RIVER WATERSHED

COLA recently commissioned the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point to conduct an erosion study of the Upper Couderay River Watershed. Results are summarized by UWSP GIS Education Specialist, Douglas Miskowick, in this [presentation](#).

"LEGACY PHOSPHORUS" AND OUR WATERS"

A [new study](#) quantifies the need to reduce phosphorus in our soils—for the health of our lakes and rivers.

By Jenny Seifert, Grow - Wisconsin's Magazine for the Life Sciences, UW College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

PLEASE RENEW YOUR COLA MEMBERSHIP FOR 2017!

COLA membership is a pretty good deal. For only 25\$/year, you help COLA protect LCO, and you get a picnic in return!

[Renew your membership](#) today in one of Wisconsin's most active and respected lake associations.

Are your neighbors and extended family members of COLA? If not, please ask them to [join](#).

LAKESHORE PROPERTY OWNER GUIDES

These guides provide guidance on selection of native plants as well as simple and inexpensive best practices for lakeshore property owners.

[Healthy Lakes 350 ft2 Native Planting Companion Guide](#)

[2014-2017 Wisconsin's Healthy Lakes Implementation Plan](#)

SAWYER COUNTY LAND & WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN 2017 - 2026

Sawyer County is faced with ever increasing public demands on its unique natural resources.

This plan is an important tool to guide local government, various state and federal agencies, and individuals ([more](#)).

SHORELAND BUFFER GRANT MONEY AVAILABLE

COLA is helping LCO property owners develop shoreland restoration plans, make bulk plant purchases, and arrange construction and installation services from area landscapers. COLA will also help provide continuing education and a hands-on buffer zone training in partnership with the Sawyer County Lakes Forum and other local groups. The primary intended audience for education efforts extends to the Upper Couderay River Watershed lakes including Whitefish, Sand, Grindstone, Windigo, Sissabagama, Osprey, Round and Little Round.

For questions and details, email Kris Sivertson, at krisw3690@gmail.com or call [715-210-0818](tel:715-210-0818).

NEW COLA WEBSITE FEATURE - LAKE OBSERVATION FORMS

The COLA website has been revised to include a much-needed feature - a place to record [lake observations](#). There are forms available for those who want to report dying fish, invasive aquatic plant species, algae blooms, ice on/off dates, loon sightings, and other events.

COLA'S LAND USE POLICY STATEMENT

COLA recently developed a new land use [policy statement](#), addressing developmental pressures on LCO, and it proved useful for evaluating the merits of a recent request to [rezone a property adjacent to Fleur de Laine](#).

SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS

If you have friends or family on nearby lakes who would enjoy Short Ears, Long Tales, [let us know](#).

Help COLA by sharing this newsletter with friends.

DO YOU HAVE ANY OLD PHOTOS TO SHARE?

