Our Brick Home on Lake View Road

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Abstract

ABSTRACT: In 1998 Will & Ginny Craig bought an old farmhouse on Washington Island at the far tip of Door County, Wisconsin. Through library research and personal conversations, he has been able to develop the history of the farm and people who lived there. The story starts in 1869 when a local man filed a homestead on 160 acres of Island land. Real settlement of the farm began in 1878 when a Danish man, George Lycke, bought the farm and moved his family there. The Lyckes had two more children in that new farmhouse, Laura and Waldemar. Those two would each receive half the farm in 1905. Laura and her new husband got eastern half, including the farmhouse, and farmed it until 1941 according to her grandson who provided both photos and information. The Jensen family bought the farm and owned the farm until 1983; their children provided wonderful memories. Small farms were no longer viable, the farm was sold and split into multiple parts. The farmhouse deteriorated and occupancy was spotty until the Craigs bought and restored with the help of Island craftsmen.

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Our Brick Home on Lake View Road
by William J. Craig
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Introduction

Washington Island sits in Lake Michigan, a 30 minute ferry ride beyond the tip of Door County, two hours north of Green Bay, Wisconsin. The Island was settled in the late 19th Century, first as a fishing community, then an agricultural one. It is a relatively small place, four miles by five, with a year-round population of 700 people. Its summer population explodes with hundreds families coming to enjoy its serene beauty. Those seasonal residents live in a mix of new homes and old farm houses. This is a story about one of those old farms.

In 1998 my wife and I bought a house on Lake View Road, half-way between Range Line and East Side Roads. It was a place that had attracted us on visits to the Island for two decades. The house was made of brick, like another brick house next door, but ours was set farther off the road in a swale dropping away to the south.

We knew it was old, but didn’t think about its history until we entered the house with our Realtor, Chick Richards, and saw a cedar log cabin inside the brick walls. Apparently, the first settler had built a log cabin to house his family that first winter, but bricked over the outside to make it look modern. Who was this guy? And where did he come from? More questions came. Why were there two brick houses next to each other? What is the short silo-like building at the end of the driveway? What happened to the original farm?

Our interest was further piqued by people stopping by with stories about the place. Merwin and Hazel Nelson lived down the road and stopped by with stories about the Lucke School next door and Merwin’s grandmother living in this house when it was a farm. One of the Jensen girls wrote a note about her memories of growing up on the place. Mack Gunnlaugsson said his mother described it as “the showplace of the Island.”

The seed was planted. I had to know more. Many people, websites, and offices contributed to this story. Much of it is based on records already in the Washington Island Archive. Photos were provided by Merwin Nelson and Carol Jensen Pease.

This is a personal story about a particular house and farm but it is reflective of the kind of research that is increasingly being sought by historical societies around the country. Personal house and land histories are regarded as invaluable tools in documenting the lives and stories of unique families, places and communities.

The Beginnings

Like other parts of the Midwest, Washington Island was part of a Public Land Survey System designed by Thomas Jefferson to facilitate settlement of the land. Land was surveyed into square townships and sections making it easy to identify and record land rights. This explains the square road pattern on
Washington Island. Wisconsin lands were surveyed beginning in 1833. The farm described here is located in section 7, Township 33, Range 30 East.

The crew surveying Washington Island marched down the boundary between sections 6 and 7—what is now Lake View Road between Range Line and East Side—in March/April 1835. Their description of the land shows nothing surprising: “Land much the same as the last mile,” punctuating some listings with notes about Sugar (Maple) or Beech, 12 and 14 inches in diameter.¹

The Homestead Act of 1862 allowed individuals to claim 160 acres of land, one-quarter of a section, at no cost. If settlers improved the land and worked it for five years, they were granted a deed. On December 10, 1869 Joel Westbrook Jr. was issued a homestead certificate for the original 160 acres of our farm.² Westbrook lived on the island in the West Harbor area with his father, Joel Sr.³ He knew the land and chose the middle of the section rather than a standard quarter-section; he chose the western half of the NE quarter and the eastern half of the NW quarter—two contiguous 80 acre segments. (See accompanying map, Figure 1)

The Door County Register of Deeds has a curious record of what happened next with the land title. Westbrook received his deed from the federal government and recorded it on April 16, 1874.⁴ The next record for the property is an affidavit signed in Chicago dated November 9, 1876, verifying that one George Lycke had purchased the land from Peter M. Sagoni and wife.⁵ We know the senior Westbrook left the Island about 1870 and went to Illinois,⁶ but nothing about junior; one can only imagine him moving too, eventually selling his Island land to Sagoni. About Sagoni we know nothing; he may have been another immigrant considering Washington Island for his new home or a speculator wheeling and dealing in homesteads.

The Lycke Era, 1876-1946

¹ Wisconsin Public Land Survey Records: Original Field Notes and Plat Maps - http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/SurveyNotes/SurveyNotesHome.html
³ From the 1870 Census we know the Westbrook family was born in Canada and Joel Jr. was 28 years old; this means he was no more 22 when he homesteaded the farm. The Washington Island Archives contain many references to Westbrook Sr., but little about his son. The senior Westbrook was an interesting character. He is variously listed as a fisherman, farmer, constable, keeper at Pilot Island, owner of the West Harbor Hotel, and Justice of the Peace. Two fascinating stories are told about him. According to Miner (1937, 3) he came to West Harbor in 1852 and soon got into a series of conflicts with the Craws at Washington Harbor that culminated in Westbrook being charged with burning down Craw’s barn, then spending 8 months in jail (with one of his sons) before being freed by a jury (additional details in Eaton, 2006, 31-33 and Holand, 1917, 279-80). In their chapter on Bethel Church, the Knudsens (1996) describe Westbrook’s 1854 role in scaring out a West Harbor settlement of 9 Negro families, possibly run-away slaves, with his “snoopiness.”
⁴ It’s not clear whether Westbrook ever lived on the farm. The 1870 Census lists him still living with his father in West Harbor.
⁵ Westbrook’s deed is recorded in Vol.K, p.16. The Lycke affidavit is recorded later in that same volume, page 594.
⁶ Miner, page 3.
George Lycke was born in Vejle, Denmark, a city/county in southern Jutland, in 1841 (See Figure 2). He married Anna Katherine Olson (b. 1842) and they had three children: Adolph (b. 1864), Louis (b. 1868), and Dorothea (b. 1871). Shortly after Dorothea was born, the young family moved to the US and settled in Chicago where Anna (b. 1872) and Frank (b. 1876) were born. George had trained as a mason in his native Denmark and practiced that trade for seven years in Chicago.\(^7\)

In November 1878 the family moved to Washington Island and took up farming. We suspect they built the house on the farm where we live (“A” on map, Figure 1). The 1880 Census of Washington Island shows the Lycke family with 39 yr. old George (farmer), 37 yr. old Catherine (sic, keeping house), five children ranging from age 2 to 15 years, and Charles Olson, age 27 and Anna’s brother, who worked on the farm. Despite the close quarters, George and Anna had two more children in their new home: Waldemar (aka Walter) in 1881 and Laura in 1884.\(^8\)

What pushed George and Anna out of Denmark in 1871? A colleague in the Danish government has a potential answer. Denmark was in a dispute with Germany over the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein. The Second Schleswig War was fought in 1864. “The Danish army was quickly defeated in the spring and the peninsula of Jutland – including Vejle – was occupied by German soldiers for months. As a 23-year old, George Lycke was most likely in [that] war. Vejle was still part of Denmark after the war, but the defeat and loss of 1/3 of [our] territory had a significant impact on [the] economy and the ‘spirit’ [of] Denmark. Therefore … it was obvious why many afterwards sought emigration to the US.”\(^9\) This was the period when Danes became the dominant ethnic group on Washington Island.\(^10\) At some point family members began spelling the name Lucke, easier to say in English, but George and Anna’s Island tombstone displays the original Lycke spelling.\(^11\)

There was no school in the southeast corner of the Island, so the Lycke’s contributed to establishing one. Land for the Lucke School was carved out of the farm and the building erected in 1890 (“B” on map, Figure 1). This became one of four schools that served the Island until after WWII when the

\(^7\) From George Lycke’s obituary Oldest Island Resident Dies, published on March 16, 1933 in the Island Reporter and reprinted in the Washington Island Observer, November 12, 1998.

\(^8\) Much of the information in this paragraph comes from Dorothea’s obituary in the March 1, 1949 issue of The Islander newsletter. Other information comes from records of the Washington Island Archives. Besides spelling discrepancies, the 1880 Census records shows Frank and Annie [sic] born in Wisconsin, while the obituary implies they were born in Chicago. Washington Island Archive records listed another brother, William, born the same year as Walter, but he is not mentioned in any of the other material studied for this history and probably existed as a clerical error.

The 1890 Census manuscripts were lost to fire, so we have no record for that year, but the 1900 Census lists 24 year old Frank, 19 year old Walter and 15 year old Laura. The other children had left.

\(^9\) Email from Morten Lind, Danish National Survey and Cadastre, July 29, 2008.

\(^10\) See historical maps at the Washington Island Art and Nature Center compiled by Bob Arends. Copies are displayed at the Farm Museum.

\(^11\) Walter (1881-1948) and son Paul Lucke (1917-1984) are buried nearby, perhaps confusing visitors to the Washington Island Cemetery by the slight spelling difference. The Anglicizing his surname is not the only change Walter made; 1900, 1905, and 1910 US Census records list him by his Danish name: Waldemar.
The youngest Lucke children must have been in the first class: Laura (6) and Walter (9). Frank would have been 14 and his participation doubtful.

By 1905 George was 64 years old, most of his family had left and it was time to decide on the future of the farm. Only youngest children, Laura (age 21) and Walter (age 24), were still at home. Dorothea had married Berend Anderson in 1895 and had been given a house on one corner of the farm (“D” on map, Figure 1) where they raised daughter Gladys and son Milton (known as ‘Cap’). On December 29, 1905 he broke the farm into three parts. Son Walter got the western 80 acres as separate farm; that farmhouse still stands (“C” on map, Figure 1). Dorothea Anderson was given title to her home and one acre. Laura Lucke we given the deed to original farm and home (“A” on map). She married Carl Nelson in 1907 and gave birth to son Lester in 1908.

In 1907 the family gathered for a photo taken by an itinerant photographer from Cedar River (Figure 3) Michigan. The photo shows people wearing their finest, wagons and animals, a fine home, and multiple out-buildings. Perhaps this photo was taken to celebrate Laura’s wedding. My Danish colleague commented on the design of the house, saying the arches over the windows look like those of late 19th-century Danish homes, but the porch is a unique American addition. The Anderson house

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12 Most of the detail comes from a chapter in the Nelson and Berquist (1998) book on “New Uses for Old Buildings” by Goodwin Berquist. He says “The Lucke School on the East Side became the central part of Gunnerson’s dry goods and hardware store. Today [1998]: it serves as the summer residence of Esther, Mary and Ruth Gunnerson.” The Gunnerson sisters are the current proprietors of the Kaupstadur Shop at the ferry landing. Their father, Roger Gunnerson, had purchased the property from Washington Island School District in 1946.

13 Special 1905 Census of Wisconsin. Laura’s age is listed as 20 in the Census, but I’ve adjusted here to keep the children separated by three years.

14 Dorothea’s 1949 obituary lists her husband’s name both as Berend and his nickname Berndt.


16 This information is taken from the Door County Register of Deeds. It is interesting that these Island farms were given to the youngest children, not the oldest as would be the case in more valuable farm country.

To complete our record, it should be noted that another two-acre parcel was sold off to one Gisli Mathiason in 1889. This land was in the extreme NE corner of the original farm. The soil is thin there and of little value to the farm. There is no known personal relationship between Mathiason and Lucke.

17 Merwin’s mother’s Bible provides this detail. It says Laura and Carl were married in September 1907. Lester, Merwin’s farther, was born in February 1908.

18 The photo was undated, but the photographer’s name was embossed in the matting: John Jacobson. Contacts with the Michigan Historical Society revealed that the Jacobson Brothers photographic enterprise existed in Cedar River only one year: 1907.

19 Lind, 2008. “I believe that the construction of the brick walls – including the arches over the small windows are – original. This building method is like the ones used in Danish ‘Railway-cities’ during [the] late 19th Century.... The porch is not a Danish tradition – it must have been adopted from America where warmer summers make it a nice thing to have.”
next door has the same appearance. The Danish appearance is no surprise given George’s earlier training as a mason.

Laura married Carl Nelson later in 1905. The senior Lyckes deeded the farm to them, but continued to live there for nearly three decades. Anna died in 1921 at age 79, but George carried on until 1933, finally passing away at age 92. It couldn’t have been easy for Laura and Carl to farm 80 acres and raising a young son (Lester, b. 1907) while dealing with her elderly parents. George and Anna Lycke are buried side-by-side in the northwest corner of the Island cemetery. Carl Nelson died in 1941 at age 59 and is buried beside them. Laura moved to Arizona with her son Lester about 1950 and is buried there.  

We have a picture of Laura that answered one of our mysteries (Figure 4). About the time of George’s passing, 1933, Laura posed for a picture with her grandchildren in front of the small, silo-like building. Merwin explained this was the “Milk House” where fresh milk was taken, cooled, and stored until it could be taken to the dairy once per day. Our Milk House has a 1½” diameter hole on the north side providing access to the original well. Cold water was pumped from the ground and run into the Milk House, turning it into a refrigerator.

Laura was the last Lycke on our farm. In 2011 Merwin Nelson and his wife Hazel gave us an original hand-colored and framed picture of his grandmother Laura. We have displayed it prominently. She is back in Wisconsin and back in the home where she was born.


For several years following Carl’s death, Laura rented out the farm. In 1946 Raymond Jensen bought it and moved his small family here: wife Grace (b. 1919), sons Harry Lee (b. 1939) and Mel (b. 1945), and daughter Ethel Rae (b. 1941). It was a good time for agriculture on the Island and the Jensens prospered. The historic Island Dairy had moved from processing milk for local use into a commercial facility selling cheese and other products to the outside world. More Jensen children arrived: twins Eldon and Eloise (b. 1947), David (b. 1953), and Carol (b. 1960). It was a good start. (See family photos in Figures 5 and 6)

Harry Lee Jensen stopped by in 2007 to show the place to his grandchildren. He sketched the layout of the farmyard to us (see Figure 7). Many of the buildings in the 1907 photograph (Figure 3) remained during his time though most are gone now. The large dark barn, partly obscured by the brick chicken

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20 Lester Nelson lived across the road in Lonnie Jorgenson’s home where he raised his own family, including a son Merwin (b. 1932) who lived on the Island until 2013. Merwin attend the 1-room Lucke School and visited his grandmother Laura regularly. Lester bought the shipyard and moved the family to the old house down there, though Merwin continued to attend the Lucke School. About 1950 Lester moved to Mesa, Arizona, where he purchased a small lumber yard and grew it into a substantial business, eventually taken over by Merwin and his brother. Grandma Laura moved to Arizona with Lester and lived there until she died in 1971; Mountain View Cemetery outside Mesa is her final resting spot. Early in life she had contracted polio, but got along fine until her later years when she wore a leg brace. Detail provided by Merwin and Hazel Nelson, starting in July 2008. Laura’s birth, death and wedding dates are listed in Merwin’s mother’s Bible.

21 These and other dates were provided by Harry Jensen in an 8/11/2013 email. Elton died in 1992, David in 2007.
coup on the left of that photo was the “Hay Barn,” used for storing feed for the long winter. The milk cows\textsuperscript{22} were sheltered and milked in a small portion of the larger barn adjacent the large round silo that still exists. Other out-buildings included a pair of chicken coops, a pump house,\textsuperscript{23} a wood shed, an equipment storage shed, and of course, an outhouse.\textsuperscript{24}

Eldest daughter Ethel Rae Jensen Stenzel stopped by in 2011 and talked with our granddaughter. She talked about how things worked inside the house. The main room had no load-bearing walls and her mother constantly rearranged the layout of the rooms. The children slept upstairs in the loft, which was divided into two rooms – one for boys and one for girls. The home was heated by a wood stove that was used to bake five loaves of bread every day. Baby chicks, delivered by mail, were kept warm on the coldest days in back of that stove. She remembers her dad taking the kids for hay rides in the summer and sleigh rides in winter – pulled by Raymond’s trusty horses Prince and Babe. She wrote a book in 2004 about her time and spiritual journey on the Island called Connections of the Heart: A Door County Wisconsin Girl’s Journey to Faith. John Herschberger remembers Raymond sitting on his wagon, always with a Bible on his lap. Faith was important in the Jensen household.

Despite a rosy start, it became increasingly difficult to make a living in agriculture on the Island. Raymond was a hard worker,\textsuperscript{25} but returns were diminishing. He began spending most of his time working off-Island as a commercial fisherman. Harry Lee was doing most of the farm work while attending school full-time. In 1957 he graduated from high school and left the next day for work elsewhere and a career in the Navy.\textsuperscript{26} The Island Dairy was on its last legs. Raymond moved the family to Waukesha in 1963.

The Jensen kids loved the farm and visited whenever they could. Harry Lee and Ethel Rae talk about chartering a small plane to come home for Christmas 1960 because the ferry wasn’t running. In later years the family returned to their Island home for summer breaks. Pictures of this period show a run-down place, the porch without shingles, and a small trailer that looked barely habitable. In 1973 Grace died. Raymond had a stroke in 1983, sold the farm to Lonnie Jorgenson, and moved into a rest home in

\textsuperscript{22}Ironically, these were Holstein, named after the territory that led to the Lycke emigration to the Island.

\textsuperscript{23}Harry drew a map of showing the layout of the farmyard (Figure 7). The drawing shows the square pump house ("5" on drawing), but does identify the round building ("8"). The milk house was not used as such by the 1950s. Electricity came to the Island after WWII.

\textsuperscript{24}Harry Lee also built a scale model of the barn, which he mailed to me later. I am incredibly grateful and cherish both the sketch and model.

\textsuperscript{25}There is some dispute about Raymond’s work ethic. Dave Hanlin remembers him from Raymond’s later visits to the Island as a man who had given his all and was “worn out.” Merwin Nelson heard about all the time Raymond spent on religion and how little time he spent working the farm; unused bundles of shingles sat beside the barn as the roof leaked, eventually leading to its collapse.

\textsuperscript{26}Email from Harry Jensen, July 30, 2007.
Waukesha. The children were not consulted about the sale and some resented it. Raymond died in 1988.27

Jorgenson sold the house and five acres to Anne-Marie Trueblood in 1985. Trueblood later sold it to Pete Curley on a contract. We bought from Curley in 1998, who then paid off the contract with proceeds from the sale. It’s not clear who lived in the building or for how long after the Jensens left. We’ve heard rumors of our abandoned home being used as a party house. Curley was basically camping out in the house. He’d torn out the loft in the main cabin, re-enforcing the remaining structure in questionable ways. He’d done some patching of the brickwork with cement instead of mortar. He lived in house with his huge French Mastiff dog, supposedly a retired co-star from a Chuck Norris film.

Will and Ginny Craig, 1998-present

We bought the place in 1998. We had discovered it on earlier trips to the Island, beginning in 1978. For 20 years we visited the Island and toyed with the idea of buying. This house was on the top of our list – both because of the beauty of the house itself and because of its setting in a swale off the road. We spoke to a Realtor who discouraged us. His wife too had been interested in the house, so he had paid a visit. The place was a mess inside. Worse, the bricks had fallen off the south side.

In 1998 we got serious about buying an Island home and had Chick Richards show us around. Nothing appealed to us like this house. We scheduled a visit (Curley was supposed to be out) and were astonished to learn the inside was a cedar log cabin. We’re guessing that Lycke had built it for family survival the first year, then plastered the inside walls and bricked the outside to look civilized. Curley had stripped the plaster and re-chinked the logs.28 The walls, brick and log, are 12” thick. John and Will Herschberger fixed up the place. We had Kirby Gunnlaugsson build a stone fireplace in the Great Room. With logs, stone, and a view of the meadow, it is my favorite room in the world.

We wanted more space and had the Herschbergers put on an addition with new bedrooms and baths. Patty Hersberger found bricks to match the original. The problem was finding a bricklayer who could fix the south side and make the addition look like it belonged. There were no bricklayers on the Island and few outsiders wanted to live here for weeks doing the work; these were boom times and plenty of work was available elsewhere. Daniel Nerenhausen suggested Bill Llewellyn, an Island boy who was a master bricklayer in Chicago. Bill had family and friends on the Island and agreed to do the work. Bill’s dad Jim was his helper for those weeks and the two were able to enjoy the work and each other.29

The front porch was gone. Only a slab remained, along with wood plates in the east brick wall to show where it had been attached. John Hershberger said, “I bet someone on the Island has a picture that will

27 Email from Harry Jensen email, August 11, 2013.
28 Julian Hagen told me he was one the people who did the re-chinking. July 6, 2013.
29 Jim was the former owner of the Middle Bar. He had retired many years before, but was sharp as a tack until the previous winter when he hit his head in a fall. People told us that summer’s physical work brought back his sharp mind. Vi Llewellyn, Jim’s wife, drove the Island taxi for years; like Laura Lycke, she was afflicted by polio.
show us what it looked like.” Merwin had the picture (Figure 3). John used it to reproduce the 1907 porch. We live on that porch most days. Daniel Nerenhausen and his crew did the landscaping.

We were pretty proud of the new place and hosted a housewarming for ourselves in 2001. We invited neighbors, previous owners and descendants, and all the workmen who had made it so beautiful. We ordered up dozens of steaks from Mann’s Store and let people cook their own. We got coolers of beer from Brothers Too. I think people had a good time. Previous owners in attendance included Ethel and Carol Jensen and their families, Merwin and Hazel Nelson, and Lonnie Jorgenson. Ethel loved the place and said, “Oh, I wish my mother could see this.”

We combined with the current owners of Dorothea Anderson’s house, Fritz Damler and Mari Anderson to show our sister homes on the 2008 House Tour. Sisters Laura and Dora were together again.

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30 We mailed the invitation from our Minneapolis home, planning the party for shortly after our arrival. Of course many little finishing touches remained. My neighbor Fritz Damler told us our yard was full of pick-up trucks the day after our invitation arrived on the Island, as workers arrived to finish their bits. The place was immaculate.

31 Through coincidence, my own mother and her sister were similarly named Laura and Dorothy.
Publications Cited


Figure 1

Map of Original Joel Westbrook Homestead, purchased by George Lucke in 1876

The original farm was 160 acres.
Around 1905 the farm was split between two Lycke children

① Laura and Carl Nelson
② Walter Lucke

Four buildings

A Original Lycke farmhouse (ca.1878 – 1265 Lake View Rd)
B Lucke School (1890 – 1227 Lake View Rd)
C Walter Lucke farmhouse (ca.1906 – 1377 Lake View Rd)
D Dorothea and Berend Anderson (ca.1895 – 1299 Lake View Rd)
Figure 2

George and Anna Katherine Lycke, Vejle, Denmark. ca. 1863
Figure 3

Lycke Farm, 1907. Photo by John Jacobson, Cedar River Michigan.
Figure 4

Laura Lycke Nelson, ca. 1933

Standing before milk house with grandchildren Merwin (in arms) and Janice
Figure 5
Grace and Raymond Jensen
(Taken about the time of their wedding in June 1938)
Figure 6

Jensen Children, ca. 1963

Back Row: Ethel, Eloise, Eldon, Harry Lee

Front Row: David, Carol, Melvin
Figure 7
Jensen Farmstead Layout
Sketched by Harry Lee Jensen, 2007
(Note: This is the view from Lake View Road, looking south)

1a Equipment Storage
1b Equipment Shop
2 Corn Crib
3 Chicken Coop(s)
4 Hogs
5 Pump House
6 Wood Shed
7 Outhouse
8 Milk House (not labeled in Harry’s original sketch)