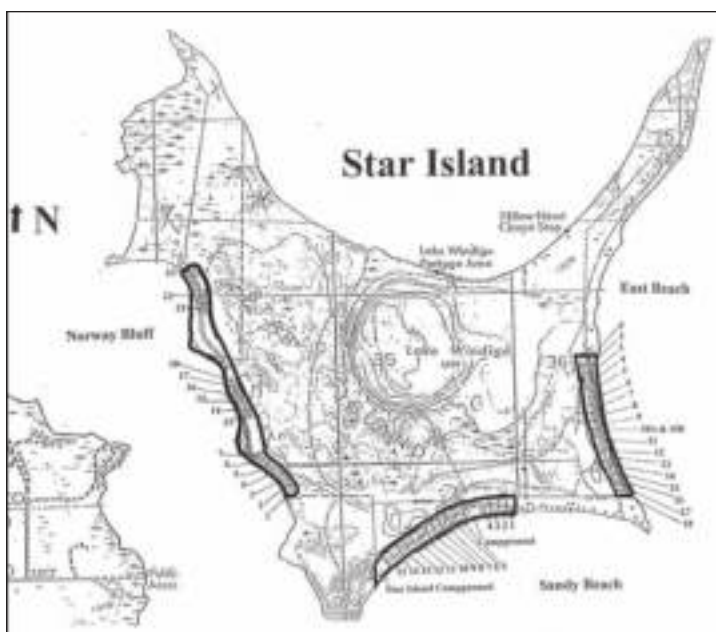


# The Missing Cottage on Star Island: Fred A. King Converts Louis W. Hill Houseboat

Steven Nelson Jonnes

Star Island is a summer resort community located on Cass Lake about 20 miles east of Bemidji and 50 miles west of Grand Rapids, Minnesota. The island, most of which is owned by the U.S. Forest Service, was developed into a summer community beginning in 1909. Owners of the 150-foot cottage lots along three sides of the island lease their land from the Forest Service and can only access their properties by boat, typically from marinas located in the village of Cass Lake, situated in the southwest corner of its eponymous lake.



Ex.1 *Star Island, Cass Lake, Minnesota*. Source: “*Star Island Site Map*,” *Star Island: National Register Evaluation Final Report* – February 2004 – Abstract (2004), submitted to U.S. Forest Service, Cass Lake, Minnesota by Loucks Associates, Minneapolis, Minnesota, page 5.

The fact that the vast majority of leases have remained in the same families for over a century is strong testimony to its allure. Much of the attraction is due to its isolation. Most of the cabins were built earlier than 1930 and the architecture, and indeed the lifestyle, of Star Island evoke a time and a culture long past. The island is also notable for extensive beaches, a relative rarity in northern Minnesota where most lakes have rocky shores.

The author’s family has an interesting, scarcely remembered, history with Star Island. The author’s second great-grandfather, Fred A. King (1857-1920), owned a cabin that sat for some 25 years on Star Island. However, the cabin is not noted in two major histories – *Star Island: A Minnesota Summer Community* and the *National Register Evaluation of Star Island*.<sup>1</sup> Although both publications provide detailed information about many lots and many former residents, Fred and his cabin are never mentioned.



Ex. 2 *Fred A. King, Grand Rapids, Minnesota*. Photo from Beverly Bonn Jonnes collection.

Fred A. King is the maternal grandfather of the author’s maternal grandmother, Helen King (Vermilyea) Bonn.<sup>2</sup> Fred A. King was a businessman, real estate agent, banker, and politician. He was born and raised in Saginaw, Michigan, but moved to northern Minnesota at the age of 33, first to Grand Rapids, where he

1 Carol Ryan, *Star Island: A Minnesota Summer Community* (Saint Paul: Pogo Press, 2000). Carol Ryan is the preeminent historian of Star Island. She conducted numerous interviews with island residents in 1976 and 1985 for her PhD dissertation, which were later used as source material for the book. Although the Fred A. King cabin is never discussed in her publications, references to it can be found in her source materials. *Star Island: National*

*Register Evaluation Final Report—February 2004—Abstract (2004)*, submitted to U.S. Forest Service, Cass Lake, Minnesota by Loucks Associates, Minneapolis, Minnesota. This is a report by a private research firm, Hess, Roise and Company, recommending that the summer homes on Star Island be listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The report provides detailed histories of each cabin lot in all three beach communities.

2 Helen King Vermilyea was born 24 January 1909 in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, the first-born child of David Mead Vermilyea (1882-1950) and Mabel Alicia King (1885-1938). She married Bertram Edwin Bonn (1902-1964) of Montevideo, Minnesota in 1930 and had four children: Beverly, Stephen, Susan, and David Bonn. See the pedigree chart in *Minnesota Genealogist* 47:1 (Spring 2016), p. 6, or view author’s “Jonnes Family Tree” on *Ancestry.com*.

ran a real estate sales and title company called Kremer & King, Inc. for 23 years, and eventually to Cass Lake, where he died.

In December 1913, Fred A. King was appointed by President Woodrow Wilson the Receiver of the U.S. Land Office for the Cass Lake District of Minnesota. He moved from Grand Rapids to Cass Lake in February 1914 and his wife, Lena, joined him in May 1914.<sup>3</sup>

## Memories of the Cottage

In addition to a residence in the village, Fred owned a cottage on Star Island, about two miles across the water. The cabin stood from the early 1910s to the late 1930s, but the exact years it was built and removed remain unknown. The author's family knows of the cabin because of surviving photographs and the recollections of family members and other residents. "Grandma Bonn" (Helen King Vermilyea) told many stories about Cass Lake and Star Island to her children and grandchildren.

Grandma Bonn remembered the cabin from the earliest years of her life and spent part of every summer there until 1936 or 1937. She became a champion swimmer from swimming the two miles from Star Island to the village and back on a daily basis throughout her teenage years. She also talked about the adventurous road trips the family made from Coleraine to Cass Lake. The road was primitive, so it was quite an exciting trip, if only 60 miles. The car would be loaded with belongings; their dog Korack, a German shepherd, would lay on the running-board. It sounded like they were driving right through the woods with branches rubbing on the sides of the car. She thought her dad, David Vermilyea, was an awful driver.<sup>4</sup>

The cabin was unlike any other on Star Island because it was a converted houseboat. According to Grandma Bonn,

her grandfather Fred A. King hatched the unorthodox idea of acquiring a luxury houseboat that had been used on the lake and converting it into a cottage. He later built a living room attachment, making the cabin quite large. The houseboat was a two-decker, with an open upper-level porch where family members often congregated. After Fred died in 1920, ownership of the cabin probably transferred to his widow Lena S. King, and then, after her death in 1932, to his daughter Mabel and her husband David Vermilyea – or possibly it went directly to David and Mabel in 1920.<sup>5</sup> At some point in the late 1930s, the King cabin disappeared. Its absence from Star Island for so long must explain why current histories overlook it. A photo (Exhibit 3) from the late 1910s shows the King cottage alongside other properties on Sandy Beach.<sup>6</sup>



Ex. 3 Cabins on Sandy Beach Lot 11 (foreground) and Lots 12 and 13 (background), ca. late 1910s

The author's mother, Beverly Bonn Jonnes, born 1932, still remembers the houseboat cabin. She went up to Star Island each summer from Montevideo with her mother; her father, Bert Bonn, would join them when he could. Her first

3 Fred A. King's family history and career are presented in two earlier articles by the author: "Searching for the Parents of Fred A. King of Saginaw, Michigan," *Minnesota Genealogist*, 47:1 (Spring 2016), pp. 6-11 and : "Fred A. King, Early Entrepreneur and Politician in Northern Minnesota," *Minnesota Genealogist*, 47:2 (Summer 2016), pp. 9-21.

4 Email interview with David Bonn, 31 October 2015.

5 Research in Cass County deeds might clarify the disposition of the property.

6 "Cabins on Sandy Beach Lot 11 (foreground) and Lots 12 and 13 (background), ca. late 1910s (photo:

Mrs. Stanley Johnson)," *Star Island: National Register Evaluation Final Report—February 2004—Abstract*, submitted to U.S. Forest Service (2004), page 33. From the beach view, the left half of the King cabin was the front end of the houseboat while the right half was the living room addition.

# The Missing Cottage on Star Island

steps as a toddler were taken on the Sandy Beach sidewalk in 1933. Beverly believes she last visited the island at the age of four or five, placing her final visit in 1936 or 1937. Photo (Exhibit 4) shows Beverly playing in front of the cottage and the extended family during a summer visit. A 1935 hand-drawn sketch of the cottages (Exhibit 5) on what was then called South Beach, now Sandy Beach, clearly indicates the “King” cabin located between the Woodruff and Rauch cabins.<sup>7</sup>



Ex. 4 *Beverly Bonn Jonnes playing on Star Island sidewalk, 1933.*

Foster Woodruff, the current owner of the Woodruff cottage on Lot 11, also remembers the King cabin from his childhood.<sup>8</sup> During a 2014 interview, he recalled that it was a converted houseboat. He could not remember when or why it was removed, but thinks it must have been gone by 1940. The King cabin was next door and to the east of the Woodruff family cottage. Woodruff was puzzled, though, about how there could have been another cottage between his place and Lot 10 since each lot is only 150 feet wide. There does not seem to be space for another cottage.



Ex.5 *Sandy Beach Cabins on Star Island, 1935*

Interviews that researcher Carol Ryan conducted in 1976 and 1985 answer Foster’s question about the placement of the King cabin. Cabin owners Lucille Woodruff and Letitia Haecker both make it clear that Fred A. King’s cabin was on Lot 11 *before* their forebear Sam Foster built a separate cabin on the same lot. The Foster-Woodruff cottage was built on the west edge of Lot 11 near Lot 12 while the houseboat cabin occupied the other half of Lot 11 – the east half. Letitia Haecker, owner of Lot 12, explained to interviewer Carol Ryan:

“Did anyone mention to you about the houseboat ... that was pulled up there on shore? ... If you notice, the Woodruff cottage is right over near the lot line. It’s not in the middle of the lot at all. Well, my grandfather bought half this lot from Mr. King and on the other half of the lot, on the east side, was this houseboat that was pulled up on shore. It was a two story houseboat. It was huge! ... Lucille said (Mr. King) was the banker in Cass Lake, I don’t remember that... Then his son, Mr. Vermillion [sic], and they had six children, lived in it for quite a few years.”<sup>9</sup>

Lucille Woodruff, Foster Woodruff’s mother, also spoke to Carol Ryan about the houseboat.

7 Christian A. Rucknick, “A Map of Star Island, Chippewa National Forest, Cass Lake, Minn.” 1935. Available at Cass County Historical Society, Walker, Minnesota. This drawing by an island resident was noticed in a frame on the wall at Foster Woodruff’s cabin on Lot 11 during the author’s

visit to Star Island in August 2014. The photograph is by the author.

8 Conversation with Foster Woodruff, 16 August 2014. Foster is the grandson of the original owner of three lots along the south shore, Sam Foster of Lincoln, Nebraska.

9 Carol C. Ryan, “Star Island Oral History Project: Interview with Letitia Haecker,” 17 July 1976,” ID: OH 48 AV1995\_33\_27\_M, Minnesota Historical Society library, St. Paul, Minnesota, pages 3-4 and audio file.



“Next door to us, east, a Mr. King owned an old house, used to be an old houseboat but it was very large, two story. And it used to be on the lake, I understood, years ago. And that had been pulled up and made into a house.”<sup>10</sup>

Sam Foster bought the western half of Lot 11 from Fred A. King and constructed what is today the Woodruff cabin. Sam purchased it from Fred in May 1915 for \$500.<sup>11</sup> That makes Fred A. King the original owner of the U.S. Forest Service lease on Lot 11, not Sam. Because Star Island histories have overlooked Fred A. King, they have missed this important fact. For example, the 2004 *National Register Evaluation of Star Island* summarizes the history of Lot 11 as follows:

“This cabin and related outbuildings on Lot 11 are one part of a family complex built on three lots in 1915 and 1916 by Sam A. Foster of Lincoln, Nebraska. There is a resemblance in buildings and site planning between Lot 11 and Lot 15. According to Foster’s granddaughter Suzanne Woodruff Batten, Emil Johnson did the construction. Sam’s daughter Lucile married Reginald D.

Woodruff, and they took over the permit for Lot 11 in 1937. ... The permit was transferred to the Woodruffs’ son, Foster Woodruff, and his wife Sydna in 1975.”<sup>12</sup>

The King cottage on Lot 11 survived until at least 1935 and was probably torn down between 1936 and 1938. The Carol Ryan interviews explain why. Lucille Woodruff stated:

“... later on, King’s daughter Mrs. Vermillion [sic] and her husband decided they didn’t want to come any more. They lived in Grand Rapids... So they decided they didn’t want to live here anymore so I bought that, their part out, and tore that house down.”<sup>13</sup>

Letitia Haecker corroborated this and added details about the condition of the cabin:

“Somewhere along the line Lucille bought it from them and tore it down. It really was getting in terrible shape. In fact I was on the second floor up there at one time, the living room quarters, and my leg went right through the floor. I mean it was just rotting away and she bought it from them and tore it down.”<sup>14</sup>



Ex. 6 King Family in front of cottage, 1933. Grandma Bonn is holding one-year-old Beverly’s hand in front row. L to R: John Vermilyea (age 12), Chuck & Coop Falkenhagen, Jack Carson (kneeling), Mabel Vermilyea (in back), Catherine Carson (Jack’s wife), Caroline Vermilyea (age 9), David Vermilyea (in back), unidentified woman, Beverly Bonn (age 1), Helen Vermilyea Bonn, Phyllis Vermilyea (Helen’s sister), and Minna & Paul Kief. The Falkenhagens and Kiefs were friends from Montevideo.

10 Carol C. Ryan, “Star Island Oral History Project: Interview with Lucille Woodruff,” 26 July 1976,” ID: OH 48 AV1995\_33\_75\_M, Minnesota Historical Society library, St. Paul, Minnesota, page 3. (The transcript spells King as Caine. However, it is clear that King is spoken when you listen to the audio.)

11 Carol C. Ryan, “Star Island Oral History Project: Interview with Letitia Haecker,” 17 July 1976,” ID:

OH 48 AV1995\_33\_27\_M, Minnesota Historical Society library, St. Paul, Minnesota, audio file.

12 *Star Island: National Register Evaluation Final Report — February 2004 — Abstract* (2004), submitted to U.S. Forest Service, Cass Lake, Minnesota by Loucks Associates, Minneapolis, Minnesota, page 33.

13 Carol C. Ryan, “Star Island Oral History Project: Interview with Lucille Woodruff,” 26 July 1976,” ID: OH 48 AV1995\_33\_75\_M, Minnesota Historical Society library, St. Paul, Minnesota, page 2. (Text is slightly edited for clarity.)

14 Carol C. Ryan, “Star Island Oral History Project: Interview with Letitia Haecker,” 5 August 1985,” ID: OH 48 AV1995\_33\_88\_M, Minnesota Historical Society library, St. Paul, Minnesota, page 12.

# The Missing Cottage on Star Island

The sale of the cabin occurred about the time Mabel Vermilyea developed colon cancer. She passed away 7 October 1938. So, her illness or death may have been the trigger that prompted David Vermilyea to sell the other half of Lot 11 to Lucille Woodruff, who then dismantled the structure.

Although the cabin is long gone, another structure built by Fred A. King remains on Star Island today. Grandma Bonn loved to tell the story of her grandfather building a log playhouse for her when she was eight years old. First, he tricked her by saying he was building a chicken coop. Then, when it was complete, he blindfolded her and said he had a surprise. He walked her to the playhouse, which was set back in the woods a little ways from the cottage. She opened her eyes and he said, “It’s yours.” He had cleaned and decorated the interior and placed curtains on the windows. He also placed the name *Helen* above the doorframe. She was thrilled! A treasured photo (Exhibit 7) shows the playhouse within a year or two of its construction. The playhouse still has Helen’s name in gold lettering above the door, but is now used as a toolshed by Foster Woodruff.



Ex.7 David “Bud” Vermilyea, Helen King Vermilyea (Grandma Bonn), and King Vermilyea, in front of Helen’s playhouse, probably 1918. Photo courtesy of Beverly Bonn Jonnes.

The 2004 *National Register Evaluation of Star Island* described the structure as a “small rustic playhouse, formed of logs and covered with a gable roof.” However, the Register’s assessment of its history amusingly misses the mark:

*“The log playhouse was reputedly built for James J. Hill’s granddaughters. It was on the lot at least by 1961, although the building appears to date from the 1930s. Suzanne Woodruff Batten talks about playing in it as a child, although she seems to suggest that it was on Lot 15 at that time.”*<sup>15</sup> [Italics added for emphasis].

## No Ordinary Houseboat

Over the years, family memories and unanswered questions contributed to a certain mystique about the houseboat. Grandma Bonn always claimed that the double-decker houseboat that was converted to a cottage had belonged to James J. Hill (1838-1916), the Minnesota railroad tycoon who built the Great Northern Railway connecting St. Paul and Seattle. She said that her grandfather bought the houseboat from Hill – indeed that Fred A. King and James J. Hill were friends.

So, the family has wondered about many questions. Did the houseboat really belong to James J. Hill? If so, why did he sell it? How did Fred A. King know James J. Hill, and how well did he know him? When was the houseboat converted into a cabin? Grandma Bonn reportedly said that Hill originally built the houseboat as a wedding gift for his son Louis W. Hill (1872-1948), or that Louis used the houseboat as a honeymoon cottage. A separate recollection is that it was used for a daughter’s wedding. Grandma Bonn also said that the houseboat was converted into a cottage because it was not very “seaworthy.”

Some, but not all, of these questions can be answered. The dates of certain events have proved difficult to ascertain, but the main thrust of the story is accurate – Fred A. King converted a houseboat that had been owned by the James J. Hill family into a summer cabin. The Minnesota Historical

15 *Star Island: National Register Evaluation Final Report* — February 2004 — Abstract (2004), submitted to U.S. Forest Service, Cass Lake, Minnesota by Loucks

Associates, Minneapolis, Minnesota, page 33. Italics added for emphasis.

Society has an early photograph (Exhibit 8) of the houseboat before it became a cabin.<sup>16</sup> Note the similarities between the houseboat in this photograph with the 1933 photograph of the King cabin (Exhibit 6) – particularly the cross-stitch pattern of the wood framing on the upstairs porch.



Ex. 8 *Louis W. Hill houseboat, 1900; Photo courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society*

It was Louis W. Hill, however, who owned the boat, not his father James J. Hill. Louis contracted to have it built on Cass Lake in 1900. In May of that year, Louis corresponded with a ship building company in Chicago about construction and delivery of a steamboat that would be used to tow the houseboat. This was Louis's direction to the Marine Iron Works:

"What I want is a forty or forty-five foot light draft, wooden hull, stern wheel boat, flush deck with small awning, no house or pilot house. The boat is to be used on Cass Lake and rivers running in and out of it, to tow a house boat. *The house boat is 48 feet long, 14 feet beam, scow 40 inches high, and will draw about seven*

*or eight inches. It is built of East Coast fir, so that it is very light draft.* In order to handle a house boat of this size, the towing boat should have considerable power and a reasonable amount of speed, as the Mississippi River running from Cass Lake to Winnibigoshish Lake, a distance of about eighteen miles...."<sup>17</sup>

Marine Iron Works eagerly responded with a promise to deliver the steamboat in 90 days for the price of \$3,200. A steam-powered vessel to propel the houseboat was needed because internal combustion engines were not yet then in wide marine use. The family legend about the houseboat not being "seaworthy" might have been based on this feature of its navigability. Possibly the houseboat did not adapt well later to attempts to add an outboard motor.

Louis W. Hill did not accept the services of Marine Iron Works. Instead, he obtained a steam launch for the much cheaper price of \$1,200 from the D.M. Swain Company of Stillwater, Minnesota.<sup>18</sup> (It was possibly an already existing vessel.) The steamboat was named the *Mud Hen* and probably arrived at Cass Lake in August 1900, because on 14 August 1900, a Minneapolis newspaper reported:

"Louis W. Hill, vice-president of the Eastern Minnesota Railway, has completed a new houseboat which will be used on Cass Lake. The boat is thoroughly modern and supplied with up-to-date furniture and fixtures. It is understood that Mr. Hill, with a party of friends, will arrive from Duluth in a few days and spend a week or ten days here fishing and recreating."<sup>19</sup>

Louis himself visited Cass Lake on 19 August 1900 to launch the houseboat. Reported the *Duluth News-Tribune*,

16 "Houseboat: Possibly in North Oaks or on Lake Minnetonka, 1895," Collections Online: Photo Reprint, ID Number: Louis W. Hill 228 (Locator Number SV), Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, per Use Agreement #4468 with Steven N. Jonnes dated 10/22/2015. A hand-written comment underneath the photograph states, "Created in 1895. Used on Lake Minnetonka and Cass Lake." (The hand-written comment was discovered by Susan Quella at the Gale Family Library, St. Paul, Minnesota in November 2015.) The references to

Lake Minnetonka and 1895 confused research for some time, until further information proved the houseboat was built in 1900 on Cass Lake and was never on Lake Minnetonka, although there was an aborted attempt to move the houseboat to Lake Minnetonka in 1903. The labeling must be an archivist error.

17 Louis W. Hill, letter to Marine Iron Works, Chicago, Illinois, 16 May 1900; photocopy, Minnesota Historical Society library microfilm M680, reel

453. Note the specific dimensions of the houseboat. Italics added for emphasis.

18 Louis W. Hill letter to Mr. Toomey, 19 1900; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.J.G.9; title LWH Personal Papers Jan-Oct 1901.

19 "Hibbing to Case Lake Business Men's Association Arranges a Sunday Excursion," *Minneapolis Journal* (Minneapolis, Minnesota), 14 August 1900, page 2.



# The Missing Cottage on Star Island

“Hill arrived here today and is furnishing his house-boat the *Maison de Bateau*.”<sup>20</sup>

Louis returned a couple weeks later for the family’s first big excursion on Cass Lake. This is corroborated by an entry in the diary of Mary T. Hill (1846-1921), Louis’s mother, on 8 September 1900.

“Mamie Charlotte Samuel Mary M. and Louis off at Cass Lake on House Boat. Only Gertrude and I at home.”<sup>21</sup>

Included in the family adventure were Louis W. Hill, age 28, his younger sister Charlotte, and his older sister Mary Francis Hill, known as “Mamie,” as well as Mary Francis’ husband, Samuel Hill (no relation) and their 11-year old daughter, Mary Mendenhall Hill (“Mary M”). Fortunately, several photographs of the Hill family on Cass Lake in September 1900 exist. One (Exhibit 9) shows the houseboat being powered by the *Mud Hen*.<sup>22</sup> Another (Exhibit 10) shows the houseboat docked along shore.<sup>23</sup>



Ex.10 *Louis W. Hill Houseboat, docked, Cass Lake, 1900*

Building the houseboat cost more than acquisition of the steamer. Labor and material totaled \$1,522.96 – \$662.66 for materials and \$860.30 for labor. The largest expense was \$343.40 for the “carpenter force building [the] house-boat on scow.”<sup>24</sup> The total expense of buying the steamer *Mud Hen*, building and furnishing the houseboat, and operating them during the 1900 season came to \$3,166.80.<sup>25</sup> For an annual premium of \$103, Louis W. Hill maintained \$3,500 insurance on the boats (steamboat \$1,200, houseboat \$1,800, and furniture on the houseboat \$500).<sup>26</sup>

Mrs. Hill’s diary tells of a second Hill family vacation on Cass Lake a year later in October 1901, again involving several of the young adults. The first entry from 10 October reads:

“Louis, Maud, Ruth, Gertrude and Mr. Anson Beard went to Cass Lake last night.”<sup>27</sup>

The last entry on 16 October 1901 shows they came home after a week: “Louis Maud and girls came home yesterday after wet and cold experience at Cass Lake.”<sup>28</sup>



Ex.9 *Louis W. Hill houseboat pushed by paddle-wheeler, Cass Lake, 1900*

20 “Means Much for Cass Lake,” *Duluth News-Tribune* (Duluth, Minnesota), 19 August 1900, page 7. This was likely a one-day trip because Louis joined his parents for a several-day boat cruise on Lake Superior beginning 20 August.

21 “Mary T. Hill Diary, 1900,” Hill, Mary Theresa Mehegan, 1846-1921, Mary T. Hill Papers. Minnesota Historical Society, entry for 9 September 1900, page 39.

22 “Houseboat being pushed by paddle-wheeler, Louis W. Hill vacation, 1900,” Collections Online: Photo Reprint, ID Number James J. Hill 683 (Locator Number SV), ), Courtesy of the Minnesota

Historical Society, per Use Agreement #6648 with Steven N. Jonnes dated 1/8/2016. Additional photographs of the houseboat are accessible online at <http://www.mnhs.org/>.

23 “Unidentified people on or near houseboat, Louis W. Hill, vacation, 1900,” Collections Online: Photo Reprint, ID Number James J. Hill 682 (Locator Number SV), ), Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, per Use Agreement #6648 with Steven N. Jonnes dated 1/8/2016.

24 H.H. Parkhouse letter to Louis W. Hill, 5 February 1901 with accompanying accounting sheets; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill

general correspondence, Box 22.I.G.9; title LWH Personal Papers Jan-Oct 1901. Based on a simple inflation calculator, \$1,522.96 in 1900 is equivalent to about \$44,300 in 2016 dollars.

25 Ibid.

26 Louis W. Hill letter to Mr. Toomey, 19 October 1901; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.J.G.9; title LWH Personal Papers Jan-Oct 1901.

27 “Mary T. Hill Diary, 1901,” Hill, Mary Theresa Mehegan, 1846-1921, Mary T. Hill Papers. Minnesota Historical Society, entry for 10 October 1901, page 42.

While the details are not completely clear, it appears that during this second vacation a thunderstorm put the family in some danger. The *Mud Hen* ran ashore and sank in 12 feet of water. Mr. Anson Beard (Ruth's future husband) wrote a letter to Louis two days after their return apologizing for abandoning the vessel and trying to get help ashore, but explaining that he felt it the best course of action at the time. He especially apologized for the "unhappy hours" suffered by Louis' wife Maud, who apparently caught a cold from the ordeal.<sup>29</sup> The impression from this letter is that some members of the party may have been stranded for a considerable time, possibly overnight.

Other undated photographs at the Minnesota Historical Society appear to show the same boat (Exhibits 11 and 12).<sup>30</sup> Possibly these are from the 1901 trip. They are identified as a houseboat called the *Maison au Duluth* at Duluth, Minnesota. However, because the features are starkly similar to features of the Louis W. Hill houseboat, they are almost certainly the same boat. It is suspected the location was erroneously identified as Duluth because of the name. Note that a portion of the name is legible on the bow. The *Mud Hen* is stationed behind the houseboat in the first image. Both photographs were likely taken on the Mississippi River near Cass Lake.

Possibly because of the bad memory left by the stormy second outing, the family never used the houseboat again. The September 1900 and October 1901 vacations are the only two ever taken by the Hill family on Cass Lake. By 1902, Louis W. Hill's recreation interests had shifted to Devil's Lake, North Dakota.<sup>31</sup>

The timing of the 1900 and 1901 Hill family houseboat adventures does not lend itself naturally to Grandma Bonn's story that the houseboat was a wedding gift or was related to a honeymoon by one of the children of James J. Hill. There were no weddings in 1900 by any of the Hill children, so the construction of the houseboat that summer and its first use in September 1900 could not have been related. On the other hand, two long-time residents of Star Island independently related similar stories to the one passed down in the author's family. Lucille Woodruff told interviewer Carol Ryan in 1976 that she had heard a story that James J. Hill honeymooned on the lake.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Letitia Haecker said that it was her understanding that the president of the Great Northern Railway took his honeymoon on the houseboat. She assumed this meant James J. Hill.<sup>33</sup>



Ex. 11 *Maison au Duluth*, undated; Minnesota Historical Society, Louis W. Hill Collection.

Certainly James J. Hill never honeymooned on the lake – he was married in 1867, long before the houseboat was built

28 "Mary T. Hill Diary, 1901," Hill, Mary Theresa Mehegan, 1846-1921, Mary T. Hill Papers. Minnesota Historical Society, entry for 16 October 1901, page 43.

29 Anson Beard letter to Louis W. Hill, 18 October 1901; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.J.G.9; title LWH Personal Papers Jan-Oct 1901.

30 "Unidentified people on the Houseboat, the Maison au Duluth," Collections Online: Photo Reprint, ID Number Louis W. Hill 822 (Locator Number SV),

Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, per Use Agreement #6652 with Steven N. Jonnes dated 1/8/2016. "Unidentified people on the Houseboat, the Maison au Duluth," Collections Online: Photo Reprint, ID Number Louis W. Hill 823 (Locator Number SV), Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, per Use Agreement #6652 with Steven N. Jonnes dated 1/8/2016.

31 In subsequent years, Glacier National Park became a family focus as Louis W. Hill promoted the park during the 1910s and built a number of hotels and

chalets there. All these vacation spots (Cass Lake, Devil's Lake, Glacier Park) are located along the route of the Great Northern Railway.

32 Carol C. Ryan, "Star Island Oral History Project: Interview with Lucille Woodruff," 26 July 1976," ID: OH 48 AV1995\_33\_75\_M, Minnesota Historical Society library, St. Paul, Minnesota, page 3.

33 Carol C. Ryan, "Star Island Oral History Project: Interview with Letitia Haecker," 17 July 1976," ID: OH 48 AV1995\_33\_27\_M, Minnesota Historical Society library, St. Paul, Minnesota, page 3.



# The Missing Cottage on Star Island



Ex. 12 *Maison au Duluth*, undated; Minnesota Historical Society, Louis W. Hill Collection.

or Cass Lake was even a town. If there is any truth to the legend, it must relate to son Louis W. Hill because he is the one who built and owned the boat. Louis became engaged to Maud Van Cortlandt Taylor in April 1901 and married her in New York City on 5 June 1901.<sup>34</sup> The explanation for the legend could be that the second houseboat vacation, the one in October 1901, was considered an extension of Louis and Maud's honeymoon, even though their formal honeymoon was a tour of Europe earlier that summer.

However, one of Louis' younger sisters, Charlotte Hill, was married in St. Paul, Minnesota on 9 October 1901 to George Slade.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the second houseboat vacation began that day. Louis left the evening of the wedding for Cass Lake, accompanied by his wife Maud, his two sisters Ruth and Gertrude, and Ruth's beau, Mr. Anson Beard. So, a more plausible explanation for the legend is that Hill family members joked that they were on a honeymoon because they had just come from their sister Charlotte's wedding.<sup>36</sup>

When the family was not using the houseboat, Louis W. Hill allowed the Cass Lake Boat Company to rent it out

to well-heeled vacationers.<sup>37</sup> Louis W. Hill appeared not to have any financial stake in the company, and there is no evidence that he even received remuneration from the use of the boat as a vacation rental. A boat captain named Jacob Yotter, who went by the nickname *Steamboat Jake*, was associated with the company and maintained the *Mud Hen* and houseboat for Louis. It is suspected that Louis W. Hill allowed Yotter to make money off excursions on the houseboat in exchange for keeping it maintained. In addition to the *Mud Hen*, Yotter owned his own steamboat, the *Columbia*, which he piloted as an excursion vessel on Cass Lake beginning in 1899. He was a trusted boatman whom Louis employed for many years. A Cass Lake newspaper article from 1914 reminded readers that Jacob had been a previous resident.

"Jacob Yotter, who placed the boat *Columbia* on Cass Lake about fifteen years ago, is renewing acquaintances. He spent last summer in Glacier Park, Mont., where he had charge of a boat for Louis Hill."<sup>38</sup>

During 1901 and 1902, and probably 1903, the Hill houseboat was available for excursions. For example, the owner of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, W. J. Murphy, chartered the houseboat for the week around Labor Day 1901.

"W. J. Murphy, proprietor of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, accompanied by wife and three children, Charlotte, Kingsley, and Paul, arrived here in a private car last Sunday for the purpose of enjoying a week's fishing and hunting. The party has been on-board the Cass Lake Boat company's house-boat enjoying themselves since their arrival."<sup>39</sup>

A Congressional delegation chartered the houseboat in late September 1901. A number of U.S. senators and congressmen along with William A. Jones, the

34 "Biographical Note," Maud Van Cortlandt Taylor Hill, 1870-1961, Maud Van Cortlandt Taylor Hill Papers. Minnesota Historical Society, Manuscripts Collection online, accessed 8 September 2016.

35 "Mary T. Hill Diary, 1901," Hill, Mary Theresa Mehegan, 1846-1921, Mary T. Hill Papers. Minnesota Historical Society, entry for 9 October 1901, page 42.

36 The wedding couple, Charlotte Hill and husband George Slade, honeymooned for a week at the family country estate in North Oaks, Minnesota immediately following the wedding and did not join the outing to Cass Lake.

37 Jacob Yotter letter to H.H. Parkhouse, August 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.1; title

LWH Personal Papers Jan 7-Aug 28 1903.

38 Newspaper note about Jacob Yotter, *The Duluth Herald*, 28 March 1914, page 22, columns 1 and 2; microfilm Minnesota Historical Society library, St. Paul, Minnesota.

39 "Likes the Place: Mr. Boardman Astonished at the Country's Natural Wealth," *Duluth News-Tribune* (Duluth, Minnesota), 7 September 1901, page 7.

Commissioner of Indian Affairs, undertook a fact-finding mission to the Cass Lake Indian reservation.

“On the 19th, they will take the houseboat of the Cass Lake boat company and make a tour of the lakes, inspecting the schools and the Winnibigoshish dam, returning to Cass Lake on the 22nd, when they will return to Red Lake. .... Jake Yotter has been overhauling the *Columbia* this week, and fitting her out ‘spink and span,’ in preparation for the visit of the senatorial delegation next week. Jake will act as head mariner for the notables during their visit here.”<sup>40</sup>

Judging by the amount of newspaper coverage, the year 1901 is the busiest on Cass Lake for the houseboat. References from the 1902 season are sparse. There is one promotional news item stating that the Cass Lake Boat Co. was overhauling its houseboat and large boat house and “putting matters in shape (for the season).”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, business conditions may have deteriorated significantly, because by the beginning of the 1903 season, Louis W. Hill and Jake Yotter talked about selling their boats.

“Louis, There was a man here yesterday from Cloquet by the name of E. E. Geer looking at the Mudhen your Steam Boat, I think perhaps he will buy it. That is iff [sic] you want to sell it. I am having the House Boat cleaned up now. Business is on the bum am just about making expenses, picking up rock on the Lakeshore with the scow. I might have a buyer for my boat in few weeks. I had to resign with the Government job the first of May on account of the bad business now. Iff [sic] I sell out my outfit what would you have for me to do. I could get back with the Forestry Bureau next

fall iff [sic] I want to. There is nothing to be made here with a boat iff [sic] things continue here the same as now... Wishing you Success, Yours truly Steam Boat Jake, Cass Lake.”<sup>42</sup>

Louis replied generously the same day:

“If Mr. Geer makes any inquiry in regard to purchasing my steam-boat, I shall be glad to take the matter up with him. If you sell your boat I have no doubt we can find work for you in almost any of our shops, if that would suit you. If you do not want to work in the shops, I can, probably find work for you in some other place, either on or off the line.”<sup>43</sup>

Louis W. Hill also received a letter from the Dunn & Marcia lumber company in Cohasset, Minnesota inquiring about the steamboat.<sup>44</sup> Louis possibly placed a newspaper advertisement, prompting the sudden expressions of interest. The proximate cause for wanting to sell the boats may have been a dunning notice Louis received on 24 April 1903 from Cass County Sheriff George P. Hardy for \$13.45 property tax on his boats for the year 1902, apparently overdue.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the inquiries, the *Mud Hen* was not sold in 1903, nor was the *Columbia*. It is unclear why, although one suspects that, by this time, Cass Lake did not exactly command Hill’s primary attention. A letter from Jacob Yotter in August 1903 reaffirmed the lack of business – “Cass Lake is pretty tame this year.”<sup>46</sup> At that point, Hill gave up the idea of maintaining the *Mud Hen* and houseboat on Cass Lake. Under the signature of his private secretary H. H. Parkhouse, Louis asked Yotter to assess the costs of shipping the *Mud Hen* and houseboat to Lake Minnetonka, just west of Minneapolis.

40 “Visitors Coming: Distinguished Congressional Party will Inspect Indian Schools,” *Duluth News-Tribune* (Duluth, Minnesota), 14 September 1901, page 7.

41 “Railroad Men Visit Cass Lake,” *Duluth News-Tribune* (Duluth, Minnesota), 5 April 1902, page 7.

42 Jacob Yotter letter to L W Hill, 16 May 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, microfilm M680, Reel 2,

title LWH Personal Papers Jan-Oct 1903 thru Box 9 LWH (part1), Personal Papers May - June 1905. (Punctuation added for clarity.)

43 Louis W. Hill letter to Jake Yotter, 16 May 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, microfilm M680, Reel 2, title LWH Personal Papers Jan-Oct 1903 thru Box 9 LWH (part1), Personal Papers May - June 1905.

44 James Marcia [?] letter to L W Hill, 16 May 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill

general correspondence, microfilm M680, Reel 2, title LWH Personal Papers Jan-Oct 1903 thru Box 9 LWH (part1), Personal Papers May - June 1905.

45 L.W. Hill letter to George L. Hardy, 24 April 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.1; title LWH Personal Papers Jan 7-Aug 28 1903.

46 Jacob Yotter letter to H.H. Parkhouse, August 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.1; title LWH Personal Papers Jan 7-Aug 28 1903.

# The Missing Cottage on Star Island

“Mr. Hill tells me he is figuring on moving the house boat and steamboat to Minnetonka this Winter and would like to know what you think it would cost to load the steamboat and knock down and load the house boat.”<sup>47</sup>

A few days later, Yotter was instructed to ship all the furniture on the houseboat to the Hill residence on Summit Avenue in St. Paul.

“While you are in Cass Lake will you please arrange to send by freight or express to Saint Paul the chairs, tables, beds, mirrors, and any other furnishings, except the stove, that were left on the house boat.”<sup>48</sup>

Yotter questioned whether this included the “bath tub and closet stool” and their connecting pipes, but was told to ship only the “moveable furniture” and not remove the bathroom fittings.<sup>49</sup> The houseboat furniture arrived in St. Paul, Minnesota on 8 October 1903.<sup>50</sup>

Moving the two boats to Lake Minnetonka, however, hit a snag. One of Hill’s railway managers cautioned that it was too risky:

“Replying to yours of the 7th instant, asking if a flat car loaded with a barge to the height of 16 feet above the car floor, would be able to reach Minnetonka from Cass Lake. Beg to advise that some of the overhead bridges under which this barge would pass only affords 20 feet clear head room above the top of rail. Under these circumstances, it would not do to accept this barge for transportation.”<sup>51</sup>

Louis W. Hill was at Devil’s Lake, North Dakota when this letter arrived, so in his absence, Mr. Parkhouse conducted additional research and concluded the railway manager’s assessment was correct. He wrote to Louis on 12 September 1903:

“I have talked this over with Mr. Clarke: He says that two of the bridges have a clearance of just barely twenty feet; of course Western Avenue has only eighteen feet, but this could be avoided. If the house boat is fully sixteen feet high, loaded would make a pretty snug twenty feet, and probably, would be dangerous to move as it is.”<sup>52</sup>

The idea to move the *Mud Hen* and houseboat to Lake Minnetonka was abandoned.

Efforts to sell the boats began anew in 1904. Louis W. Hill concluded, “I shall probably have no further use for the house boat,”<sup>53</sup> and became more serious about disposing of it and the *Mud Hen*. Several buyers surfaced. A dentist in Grand Forks, North Dakota named Dr. R.S. Ramsey evinced interest in the houseboat as a family recreation vessel and offered \$350.<sup>54</sup> Other parties interested in the houseboat included Cass Lake residents William Kirchhof and H. F. Young.<sup>55</sup> Mr. Young said he had a potential buyer who “would strip (the houseboat) and use it as a barge.”<sup>56</sup> Heber L. Hartley, a manager with the Cass Lake Land Company, communicated an offer of \$400 on behalf of some local businessmen, led by the druggist, John T. Gardner.<sup>57</sup> There was considerable correspondence among

47 H. H. Parkhouse letter to Jake Yotter, 27 August 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.1; title LWH Personal Papers Jan 7-Aug 28 1903.

48 H. H. Parkhouse letter to Jake Yotter, 5 September 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.2; title LWH Personal Papers Aug 29 1903 – Apr 25 1904.

49 Jake Yotter letter to H.H. Parkhouse, 9 September 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.2; title LWH Personal Papers Aug 29 1903 – Apr 25 1904.

50 P.J. Pheneey expense notice to L.W. Hill, 12 October 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis

W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.2; title LWH Personal Papers Aug 29 1903 – Apr 25 1904.

51 F. E. Ward letter to L.W. Hill, 10 September 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.2; title LWH Personal Papers Aug 29 1903 – Apr 25 1904.

52 H.H. Parkhouse letter to L.W. Hill, 12 September 1903; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.2; title LWH Personal Papers Aug 29 1903 – Apr 25 1904.

53 L.W. Hill letter to R.S. Ramsey, 16 May 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – Jan 5 1905.

54 R.S. Ramsey telegram to L.W. Hill, 9 June 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – Jan 5 1905.

55 William Kirchhof letter to L.W. Hill, 30 May 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – Jan 5 1905.

56 H.F. Young letter to L.W. Hill, 8 April 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.2; title LWH Personal Papers Aug 29 1903 – Apr 25 1904.

57 Heber L. Hartley letter to L.W. Hill, 6 June 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – Jan 5 1905.



these parties during April, May, and Jun 1904, and some confusion as the offers and counter-offers went back and forth, but in the end, no agreement was reached.

The condition of the houseboat was a factor. Dr. Ramsey mentioned, for example, that “considerable money will have to be spent on it to put it in a presentable condition.”<sup>58</sup> Jake Yotter confirmed this when he returned to Cass Lake in June 1904 to work for the J. Neils Lumber Company:

“When I got back here I found the House Boat in bad shape. The snow & rain had filled the thing up over the floor & the wind had it driven up against some logs so it leaned over on one side. I got the steam boat ... [illegible] ... & took it out of their way. I carried the anchor out on shore, fastened it so it won't blow away, but it is impossible for me to keep it locked up. I go over once in awhile [sic], I find the locks broken, I have nailed the doors, they pry them open. Well this is a hell of a place anyway.”<sup>59</sup>

Hill responded: “Even considering the condition I understand the house boat is in, I think it should be easily worth five hundred dollars and believe I should not accept less.”<sup>60</sup>

The year passed without sale of the houseboat. Hill had more success selling the *Mud Hen*. Dunn & Marcia, the lumber company in Cohasset, inquired again. The company was anxiously searching for a boat to tow lumber. “We need a boat now badly.”<sup>61</sup> Although Hill had asked \$1,750 for the steamboat in 1903, he was prepared in 1904 to sell it for \$1,200.<sup>62</sup> After a quick round of negotiations, Louis W. Hill agreed to sell it to Dunn & Marcia Lumber Company on

30 April 1904 for a total of \$1,000, to be paid in installments: \$400 immediately, \$200 in sixty days, and the remaining \$400 by 15 November 1904.<sup>63</sup> The first \$400 was received on 7 May and Dunn & Marcia took possession of the *Mud Hen* a few days later.

After May 1904, only the houseboat remained on Cass Lake, and with Yotter gone, no one was left to care for it. On 5 September 1904, Louis W. Hill received a letter from Mr. J. Neils, the treasurer of the J. Neils Lumber Company at Cass Lake. Mr. Neils informed Louis that his houseboat was not being tended properly.

“It has occurred twice this season that your house boat has been torn loose and drifted on the lake and if we had not sent our steamer after it it might run against some rocky points and gone to pieces. We caught it again last Friday... You better ask someone to look after it.”<sup>64</sup>

Louis thanked Neils for his consideration and asked him if he would “look after (the houseboat) for such use as you can make of it?”<sup>65</sup>

Neils responded: “I will look after your house boat and if it is still here next summer, my children will be much pleased to have an outing in it.”<sup>66</sup> Louis agreed to this arrangement and Neils apparently assumed care of the houseboat through 1905.

In 1905, Louis W. Hill was less aggressive about selling the houseboat, perhaps because he was preoccupied with other matters. In April, a Mr. David LaBelle saw the for-sale sign on Hill's “green two storey [sic] House Boat which stands just north of Neils Saw Mill” and wrote to Hill asking for

58 R.S. Ramsey letter to L.W. Hill, 30 May 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – Jan 5 1905.

59 Jacob Yotter letter to H.H. Parkhouse, 4 June 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – Jan 5 1905.

60 L.W. Hill letter to Heber L. Hartley, 8 June 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – Jan 5 1905.

61 Dunn & Marcia letter to L.W. Hill, 29 April 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – Jan 5 1905.

62 L.W. Hill letter to Mile Carrier, April 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.2; title LWH Personal Papers Aug 29 1903 – Apr 25 1904.

63 L.W. Hill letter to Dunn & Marcia, 9 May 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – Jan 5 1905.

64 J. Neils letter to L.W. Hill, 5 September 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – January 5 1905.

65 L.W. Hill letter to J. Neils, 9 September 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – January 5 1905.

66 J. Neils letter to L.W. Hill, 14 September 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.3; title LWH Personal Papers Apr 27 1904 – January 5 1905.

# The Missing Cottage on Star Island

the price.<sup>67</sup> LaBelle never responded to Louis's return letter. No other sales inquiries have been found for the remainder of the 1905 season.

Then, in November 1905, Heber L. Hartley of Cass Lake Land Co. wrote to Louis W. Hill about a potential new buyer – Mr. Herbert H. Martin of Minneapolis, Minnesota.

"I have been requested to submit to you an offer of \$350 for your house boat just as it stands today... his name is H.H. Martin, and he is, as I understand it, the manager of the Minneapolis branch of the Columbus Buggy Company. He has had his family here for three months this summer and has spent considerable time here himself, likes the country well, and is already making arrangements to return here for next season."<sup>68</sup>

Hill, however, continued to insist on \$500, and another winter passed at Cass Lake without a sale.

Finally, in 1906, the houseboat was sold. On February 27, J. E. Johnston of the Johnston & Toole hardware store in Bena, Minnesota, asked Louis W. Hill how much the houseboat would cost. He had a buyer who wanted to convert the hull into a barge.<sup>69</sup> He offered \$250, but Louis still wanted \$500.<sup>70</sup> Louis sent his response on 1 March, but had a change of heart over the weekend. On 6 March 1906, he sent a letter to Heber L. Hartley:

"Some time ago I believed you wished to purchase the house boat I still have at Cass Lake. At that time, I thought I might have further use for the boat, but find it will be impossible to use it as I anticipated. Do you still want the boat? If so, I shall be glad to dispose of it at \$300.00."<sup>71</sup>

Heber L. Hartley promptly notified H. H. Martin, the buyer.

"You will recall that on November 11th last, I submitted to Mr. Hill for you an offer of \$350 for this boat and at that time he thought he might have further use for it, hence was unwilling to sell. Believe this boat, at \$300, is decidedly a bargain."<sup>72</sup>

The deal was apparently closed in late March. Louis W. Hill instructed Hartley: "I shall be glad if you can arrange to sell this house boat at three hundred dollars as suggested, and thank you for the trouble you have so far taken in the matter."<sup>73</sup>

## To Make a Long Story Short

Louis W. Hill owned a luxury houseboat on Cass Lake for six years: 1900 to 1906. It was a large, two-story houseboat that must have been custom designed and built – almost certainly a one-of-a-kind. Louis used the houseboat once in 1900 and once in 1901, both times for a week or more with sisters and other family, but apparently made little, if any, use of it thereafter. He rented the houseboat out for excursions led by Jacob Yotter of the Cass Lake Boat Co. in 1901, 1902, and probably 1903. However, the excursion arrangement proved unviable, and in late 1903, Louis entertained the idea of shipping both the houseboat and its steamer to Lake Minnetonka, where it would perhaps be of greater use by the family. That scheme was abandoned because of the shipping risk, and the houseboat lingered at Cass Lake for almost three more years before being sold.

The new owner, Herbert H. Martin, planned to use the houseboat as a summer retreat for his family. He also purchased a lake cottage on the shores of Cass Lake in 1906. Martin moved permanently to Cass Lake from Minneapolis at some point in the 1910s and was instrumental in

67 David LaBelle letter to L.W. Hill, 13 April 1905; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.4; title LWH Personal Papers Jan 7 – Nov 15 1905.

68 Heber L. Hartley letter to L.W. Hill, 13 November 1905; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.4; title LWH Personal Papers Jan 7 – Nov 15 1905.

69 J.E. Johnston letter to L.W. Hill, 27 February 1906; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill

general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.5; title LWH Personal Papers Nov 16 1905 – April 13 1906.

70 L.W. Hill letter to J.E. Johnston, 1 March 1906; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.5; title LWH Personal Papers Nov 16 1905 – April 13 1906.

71 L.W. Hill letter to Heber L. Hartley, 6 March 1906; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.5; title LWH Personal Papers Nov 16 1905 – April 13 1906.

72 Heber L. Hartley letter to H.H. Martin, 8 March 1904; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.5; title LWH Personal Papers Nov 16 1905 – April 13 1906.

73 L.W. Hill letter to Heber L. Hartley, 26 March 1906; Minnesota Historical Society library, Louis W. Hill general correspondence, Box 22.I.4.5; title LWH Personal Papers Nov 16 1905 – April 13 1906.

improving the village's lakeshore and boating facilities. He and Fred A. King must have known each other because both were officers in the Cass Lake Commercial Club. In 1919, for example, H. H. Martin was chairman of the Boatlanding Committee and Fred A. King was chairman of the Manufactories Committee.<sup>74</sup> Martin was President of the Cass County Democratic Party in 1916, so may have known Fred through politics as well.<sup>75</sup> Mr. Martin died in Cass Lake on 3 July 1921.<sup>76</sup>

While association certainly created opportunity, it is still not known how ownership of the houseboat passed from H. H. Martin to Fred A. King. The lack of information about the houseboat after 1906 leaves a gap of several years during which its usage and ownership is in question. It can be imagined that H. H. Martin maintained it for a few years and then sold it to Fred A. King. As previously reported, Fred and Lena King moved to Cass Lake from Grand Rapids in 1914. Certainly, Fred could have purchased the houseboat earlier than that, but likely not before 1909 when the U.S. Forest Service first offered lots on Star Island. Although Fred moved to the village of Cass Lake in 1914, his obituary in the *Duluth News-Tribune* indicated he came to Cass Lake in 1912. Possibly that is the year he acquired the houseboat.

“Fred A. King, register of the United States Land Office, died at his home here this afternoon, after a long illness. He came here from Grand Rapids in 1912. Mr. King had a wide acquaintance in the state and held many important offices in Grand Rapids and Itasca County.”<sup>77</sup>

## A Legend with a Large Kernel of Truth

Conversion from houseboat to cottage in 1912 makes sense in King family history. Grandma Bonn was three years old in 1912; she said she did not remember a summer

when she did not visit the cabin on Star Island. H. H. Martin could easily have spent six years, 1906 – 1911, using the houseboat as a family resort while his children were growing up and then selling it to King when either his family was no longer interested or the houseboat was deemed too hazardous for further use on water. Obviously, the family legend about Fred buying the houseboat from the Hill family is wrong. Certainly, the houseboat had a Hill family connection, and that was enough to seed a family legend that Fred A. King had bought the boat from the great railroad tycoon, James J. Hill. The lack of a direct sale, however, does not preclude the possibility that Fred personally knew James J. Hill (or Louis W. Hill), which Grandma Bonn always claimed. In his capacity as a real estate agent with Kremer & King, Inc. in Grand Rapids, Fred could have dealt on some level with one or both men. There is a reference, for instance, to Kremer & King, Inc. being “agents for thousands of acres of railroad land” in Itasca County.<sup>78</sup>

The family will always remember Fred A. King for his entrepreneurial spirit, organizational skill, popularity, trustworthiness, and civic charity. Reportedly, he had a great sense of humor and possessed a creative, open mind. According to Grandma Bonn, her grandfather Fred A. King “always had unusual ideas.” The best example is when he converted a custom-built, luxury houseboat into a vacation cottage on Star Island.

---

**Steven Nelson Jonnes** is a native of Stillwater, Minnesota, who has spent most of his career in Washington DC as a government research analyst and manager. He speaks Mandarin Chinese, spent 19 years as a Little League coach, and loves golf. Steve became hooked on genealogy in 2010 and has been actively building his family tree since then.

74 “Cass Lake Club Plans a Season of Great Activity,” *Duluth News-Tribune* (Duluth, Minnesota), 2 February 1919; Volume: 50, Issue: 267, page: 5.

75 “Democrats Organize,” *The Pioneer* (Bemidji, Minnesota), 22 December 1916; Page: 6.

76 “Former Oil Official Dies at Cass Lake Club,” *Duluth News-Tribune* (Duluth, Minnesota), 4 July 1921; Volume: 53, Issue: 52, page: 3.

77 “U.S. Land Official Dies,” *Duluth News-Tribune* (Duluth, Minnesota), 26 July 1920; Volume: 52, Issue: 70, page: 2.

78 Barbara Sanderson, *The Kremer Family: A Northern Minnesota Legacy*, October 1987; copy provided by Itasca County Historical Society, Grand Rapids, Minnesota.