

A Thumbnail History of Wandawood Resort

By Carolyn Palmer Shah

Today's Wandawood is the culmination of over 150 years of evolution from a homestead farm and orchard operation on the frontier of settlement, to a summer resort property with a history of vacation rentals going back to the late 1920s.

The property on which Wandawood Resort is located was settled in the mid-1800s by my great grandfather (Moses Fish Gates), who farmed the land. One of his daughters, Mina, married Delos Wilcox in the late 1800s and they decided to continue the family farming tradition, in addition to Delos' career as a consultant on municipal utilities and Mina's teaching. In April of 1908, my mother, Emily, was born to Delos and Mina.

During the early 1900s most of the buildings at Wandawood were devoted to farm usage, including barns, storage sheds, an ice house, apple packing sheds, and pump houses.

In 1924, Wandawood Hall was constructed to the northeast of Pilgrim, the family's original lake home, which was completed in 1899. Pilgrim now houses the Wandawood Office, my summer residence, and Upper Storey. Wandawood Hall was intended to be the family's permanent residence on Elk Lake, with a large second floor office facing the lake designed for my grandfather's writing studio. My grandmother, Mina, planted a special garden on the southside of Wandawood Hall and encircled it with white lilacs.

After Delos' sudden death in 1928, Mina continued to run the Wandawood Farm until her death in 1948. In order to make ends meet, in the late 1920s she began converting farm buildings to cottages for summer rental purposes and also started letting rooms in Wandawood Hall for overnight guests.

In 1938 my mother, Emily Wilcox, married Carlos Palmer from Imlay City and together they built a total of nine cottages, including the Vagabonds, the Ramblers, the Ventures, Fancy Free and the last duplex Wayfarer which was completed in 1948 after Mina's death. During this period, my parents had two children, my brother, David, born in 1943 and myself, born in 1944.

Until Mina's death, my parents and Mina ran the resort together. After her death in 1948, the original estate was divided among the three surviving siblings, Emily, Paul and Helen, with my mother Emily keeping the resort and a section of Bay frontage, totaling around 100 acres.

David and I grew up spending every summer at Elk Lake in the midst of Wandawood Resort and have many special memories of what it was like to be resort kids in the 40s and 50s. During that period longer vacations were typical and several of the resort families spent the whole summer at Wandawood. We both helped out at the resort, particularly in our teenage years, and made many friends among the resort families. After graduating from high school and then moving out of state, David spent little time at Wandawood, while I continued to be actively involved, helping out as much as I could, while raising a family and having a career.

Emily and Carlos continued to run Wandawood Resort until their deaths in 1979 and 1980. Then I took over and have maintained the legacy.

A significant change in the resort occurred in 1999 when Cairn Highway, the county road which previously bisected the resort and had grown increasingly busy over the decades, was realigned to loop around the resort buildings. I initiated this change and the cost was covered by Wandawood Resort.

As a result of the road change, the Wayfarer duplex was sold to my daughter, Kamala, and is no longer a part of the resort rentals. In addition, the Postscript, Cheerio and Orchardside cottages were moved to accommodate the road change and the Hide-away cottage was demolished.

Much of the rich history of Wandawood Resort is retained in the cottages and their furnishings. Wandawood has appealed to vacationing families for decades and has many repeaters who have built strong family traditions at the resort. While retaining the atmosphere of "The Way Things Used to Be", the facilities at Wandawood are maintained and improved to meet current expectations.