

Chicog-Then and Now for December, 2025
JoAnn Malek

Etta Mae Rothenbuhler called to tell me of grandfathers who homesteaded in the area. Samuel and Martha Stoneback came to Chicog in 1886 and applied to homestead on Bramer Road. Gustaff Bramer, from Germany, lived across the way. William and Mary Frances Mack came by conestoga wagon in 1899 and settled in Brooklyn. When they completed homestead requirements they received a patent letter of approval signed by President Grover Cleveland.

The Homestead Act of 1862, sanctioned by Abraham Lincoln, has been called one of the most important pieces of legislation in U.S. history. Adult heads of families, at least 21 years of age, were granted 160 acres of surveyed land for a minimal filing fee and five years of continuous residence. Approximately 270 million acres, 10% of the entire U.S., were claimed by private citizens, a revolutionary concept for distributing public land.

Acquisition of the Public Domain: "The richest free gift that was ever spread before civilized man." *Francis Jackson Turner*

Homesteaders were required to live on the land, build a home, cultivate and raise crops, graze animals, make improvements. The patent they received represented hard work and determination. The Bureau of Land Management records 30,000 total homestead entries in Wisconsin from 1868-1961.

The Stoneback family lived in a small house while Samuel built their large log home. He pulled balsam logs from the swamp and cleared the land north along the lake, called Stunce Lake at that time. Later he donated land for the Chicog cemetery. Etta Mae was born in that house in 1932 to parents Gilbert and Etta May (Stoneback) Mack.

Tell me about your grandparents, I asked. Her grandpa Stoneback was a mail carrier. Etta Mae knew only one, her grandma Martha, who was "lively, even at 82. She had her own animals, milked for herself, kept her fire." A nighttime fall resulted in a broken hip. She was found the next morning and hospitalized but eventually succumbed to pneumonia. "I was 8 years old when she died, and was given a small Martha Washington cup with her birth and death years. I had that keepsake for a long time but it's gone now."

Tell us about your childhood in Chicog. The youngest of eleven children, "I was the baby doll. My sisters curled my hair and painted my nails." Some siblings were married with families. Nieces and nephews were her classmates. Her father, Gilbert, built their family home on the west side of Bramer Road. "A

spring in the creek in front of the house was our source for water. We would wrap food and preserve it in the cold water. We'd swim in the creek, too. At the bend in Stuntz Brook there was a puddle deep enough to dip in. Oh, it was cold!"

High bush cranberries grew along the river. "We stood in the wet bog to pick them. Mother stored cranberries on the stairway; we'd take a handful, and a little salt, on our way up to bed. Chicog is also blueberry country. We picked them to eat and to sell for a penny a quart. Our farm had cows, pigs, sheep, chickens, horses used for plowing. I always had one special horse to ride. When an old horse wandered off and died, my brothers dug a horse-shaped grave right there and rolled her in."

Tell us about the schools. "There were eight grades together in the one-room schools, perhaps 4-5 students per grade. We began the day with the pledge of allegiance. Then, one by one, classes were called to the front to sit in a circle with the teacher and recite their lessons. Back at our desks, the rest of us listened and probably learned."

"We brought our bag lunches. There was a nice grove of trees outside. Across from the school was a field and lowland swamp where we played and could sled or ski. I remember baseball games, boys and girls of all ages included. We didn't fight. We were friends. On holidays we put on programs." Parents and siblings would crowd into the small schoolroom to watch.

Aunt Cora boarded Stuncebrook teachers including Edna Evenson, from Minong, who taught for four years in a row. "She was a good teacher and kept everyone under control. Some teachers couldn't manage the older boys." One male, Elliot Chappel, who had been in the service, was a tough teacher and able to keep the boys in line.

Etta Mae went to Tadpole School for one-half year while the family lived next door. At the end of school each day that winter she would sled down 'tadpole hill' to her home. After moving back to Chicog Etta Mae attended Stuncebrook School, just a half-mile from their house. Everyone walked to school; some had almost two miles. When it snowed her father would walk the trail to make a path for her. Later she went to Twin Lake School, the old fire department building that stood on the site of the present Chicog town hall.

Twin Lake School – First Building



“Wherever I went, I walked. My father had a car but gas was difficult to procure.” She walks still. When we met at the Spooner library on a rainy autumn day, sure enough, Etta Mae had walked over.

Thank you for reading Chicog-Then and Now

Town Website: www.townofchicog.com

Do you have stories to tell about Chicog-Then? I'd like to listen.

Call or text me at (612) 250-0301.

IMPORTANT DECEMBER DATES

Wednesday 12/10, 6pm, monthly Chicog meeting

Wednesdays 12/10&24, Namekagen Transit Service

Thursday 12/11, 10:30-12, Bibliodragon bookmobile, town hall

Wednesday 12/17, 10:30-12, Books&Bread, Beaverbrook