

Jeff Hedtke

The Petersons of Star Lake

Ottertail County with over 1,000 lakes has the most surface water acres of any county in Minnesota. High-quality lakes and important wetlands are found throughout the county. The abundant water resources, woodlands and fish and wildlife resources probably attracted immigrants to the area.

Star Lake is located in the north-central part of the county. The surface water is over 4,700 acres and the lake is more than 90 feet at the deepest point. A one-mile-long point of land juts into Star Lake from the southwest shoreline.

The point dissects the lake, forming the south bay with its scattered islands. It was on this point where a Swedish immigrant, Charles G. Peterson, homesteaded and settled.

Peterson was born October 1858 in Sweden. After completing his school education, he became a carpenter and mason. He came to the Fergus Falls area with his parents, Peter and Kristine, and a brother, Walter, in 1882. Another brother, Peter, came to the Fergus Falls area a year earlier to start a carpentry business. At first, the family lived with him.

About 1884, Charles Peterson heard that a parcel of public land had been surveyed and could be homesteaded on Star Lake. He filed a preemption claim for the parcel with the land office and homesteaded 83 acres on the point. Eventually this area became known as "Peterson's Point."

At first, Peterson stayed living in Fergus Falls and walked the 20 some miles to the land. He improved the property by clearing the woodland and building a road. He built a two-story farmhouse, a round-roof barn with a hayloft and other outbuildings. The house was built on a ridge overlooking, and several hundred feet back from the north shoreline of, the lake. The other buildings were built closer to the lake.

Peterson built a small house for his parents, who lived on the homestead until their death. At their request, they were buried on the farm, Peter in 1901 and Kristine in 1923. A gazebo was built along the driveway and was the first building seen by visitors. Charles Peterson received his ownership patent for the land in 1890.



Charles G. Peterson, 1858-1945, original homesteader and owner of "Peterson Point" on Star Lake.

He tended livestock and did some general farming, but his main occupation was carpentry work. He was a skilled workman and he built many buildings in the area, including schools. He was active in civic affairs and served on the school boards. He had a reputation of being honest with a friendly disposition and made many friends.

The Ball family from St. Louis got acquainted with Peterson and his family. The Stockstrom family, also from St. Louis, owned a cabin on the northwest side of the lake. It was possible the Ball family knew them (Stockstrom family) and would travel to Star Lake for vacation.

Peterson built a small cabin at the end of the point for the Balls to use. This cabin stood into the 1970s until vandalism and trespassers forced the Peterson family to burn it down.

Charles Peterson married Hannah Hanson, also a native of Sweden, in 1889. Two sons were born to the marriage, Fred in February 1890 and Oscar in July 1894. They

were both born on the Peterson Point farmstead. Both sons followed in their father's footsteps by working in the construction trade. Their mother, Hannah, died in 1928 and Charles died in June 1945 at Frazee.

Fred Peterson lived on the farm most of his life. He was a veteran of World War I and because of failing health became a resident of a nursing home in Wahpeton, North Dakota. He died there in November 1969.

Like his father, Fred Peterson was a skilled carpenter, especially in finish work. Oscar was skilled in concrete and masonry work, specializing in building split-rock fireplaces. Sometimes, on a bigger job, they would work together. Oscar doing the masonry and heavy framing and Fred the finish work.

After electricity came to the area in the early 1940s, the Petersons made their own power tools such as a band saw, radial arm saw, shaper and lathe.

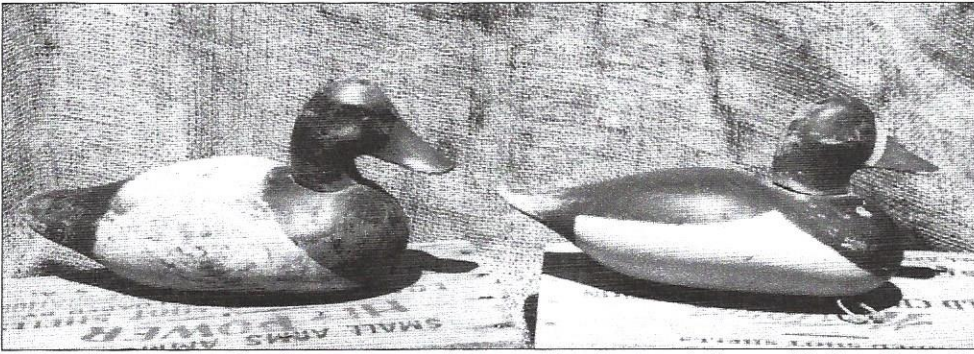
Ottertail County was a waterfowling paradise. The abundant water resources attracted countless waterfowl during the spring and fall migration. Local breeding ducks fed the hungry until the fall migration started.

Star Lake was a stopover for diver ducks. The south bay was used heavily with Peterson Point providing shelter from the northwest wind. Oscar Peterson was a waterfowl hunter. He probably did some subsistence hunting and also hunted for sport.

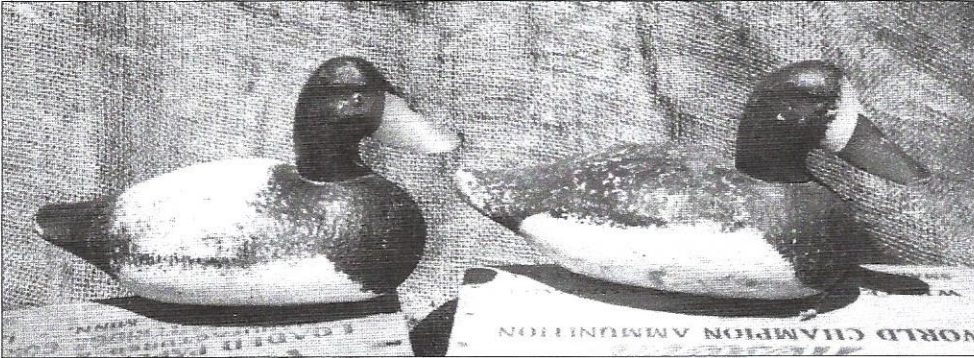
Fred Peterson did not hunt as much, but recognized an opportunity to make some money and provide a need for the waterfowler by making duck decoys. He started making duck decoys sometime in the mid to late 1920s.

Peterson made decoys during the winter months to supplement his income because of the slower construction season. It is believed he used basswood for the bodies because of its abundance in the area.

The bodies were turned on a pattern-duplicating lathe that Peterson specially hand made. The lathe would keep turning the bodies while he worked on the heads. The lathe left turn-marked ridges on the body. Decoys have been collected that were sanded smooth. It is believed that the smooth bodies



Fred Peterson scaup: Top decoys were sanded smooth prior to painting and believed to be his earliest work.



These were not sanded as much and have a rougher finish.

were some of his earliest work.

He made bluebill decoys with drakes exceeding the hens in numbers made. To date no other species have been documented, so it is believed bluebill decoys were exclusively made. They were made to decoy the diver ducks frequenting the large water bodies in the area, especially Star Lake.

The chunky bodies were about 11 inches long and after coming off the lathe were trimmed and balanced using lead strips. The heads represented Peterson's carpentry and carving skills. They were well made and fitted tightly to the body using a dowel.

Fred Peterson used upholstery tacks for eyes and painted the decoys by hand. While his decoys were made a little smaller than one might expect, they are very stylish and no doubt very functional. Hunting diver ducks in big water requires a larger set of decoys. The smaller scaup decoys allowed a hunter to bag up to two dozen decoys in a gunnysack and to carry and set a larger rig of decoys for the hunt.

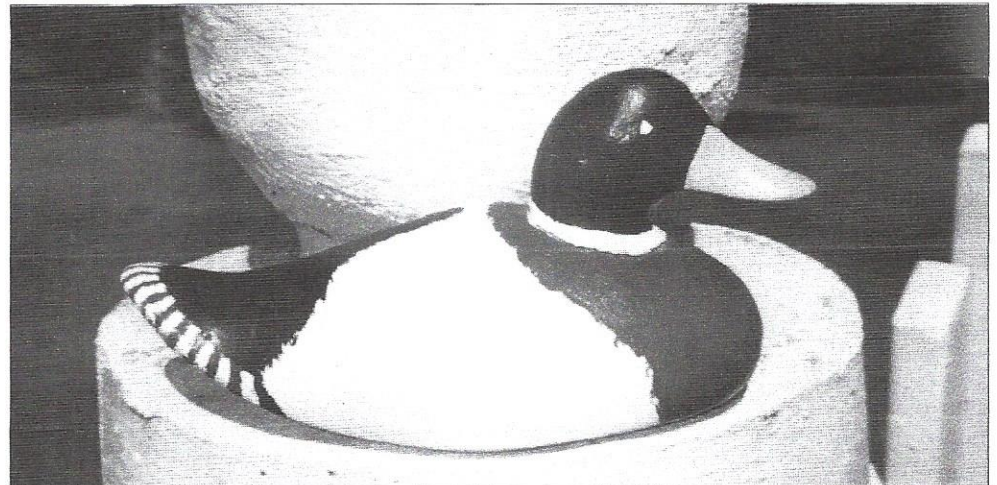
Peterson did not advertise his decoys, but sold them by word of mouth. His typical price was \$12 per dozen in the late 1930s. He carved into the late 1940s, so it is believed he made several hundred decoys.

His carving slowed later because the decoys were not selling as well. The demise of his business may be attributed to the material itself. In the 1940s, new material, such as papier-mache, rubber and plastic, was being used to manufacture decoys. Wood for use in making decoys was slowly being replaced by the other materials that were lighter in

weight and cheaper to use.

In addition to his decoy carving, Fred also enjoyed photography and taxidermy work.

Another landmark in the area that the family was involved in was the Star Lake Store. It was located about four miles south of



A duck decoy made by Oscar Peterson from his personal rig. Oscar never commercially made and sold duck decoys. This decoy has been repainted by a family member.

Star Lake on the west end of Dead Lake. The store was built in 1886 by the Jenne family. It was an early stagecoach stop and the site of the first post office in the area. Later the Vogel family owned the store.

Oscar Peterson married a Vogel daughter, Grace, in 1929. Two daughters were born to the marriage, Virginia and Marian. The family lived in Battle Lake where Oscar ran his construction business.

While there he did some extensive remodeling at the Glendalough retreat.

The retreat has an interesting history in itself being named after a monastery and city in Ireland. It started as an 80-acre camping retreat in 1927 when owned by Fred Murphy, the publisher of the Minneapolis Tribune newspaper.

Adjacent parcels were purchased especially during the 1930s Depression. Eventually it totaled 2,000 acres. It included several hundred acres of cropland that was farmed along with some pristine undeveloped lakes, wetlands and woodlands.

Murphy sold the Tribune to the Cowles family in 1941 and the Glendalough retreat was part of the deal. After completing the remodeling of the lodge and guesthouses, Oscar Peterson was told that Dwight Eisenhower would be visiting the retreat.

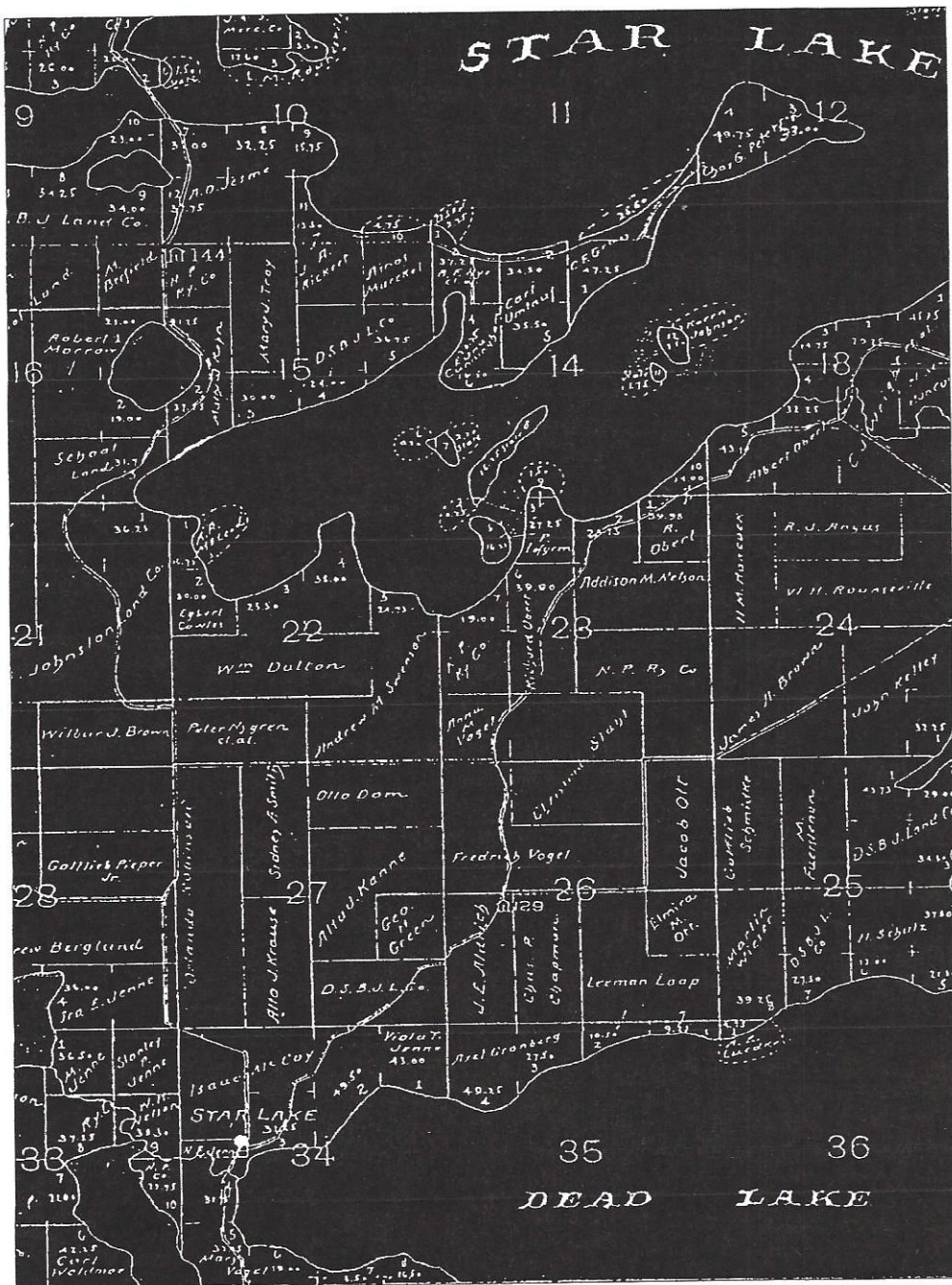
In 1990, it was donated to the Minnesota Chapter of the Nature Conservancy and now is a state park. Oscar Peterson stayed in touch with the Tribune people. For several years they leased the Star Lake point from Peterson for waterfowl hunting.

In 1949, the family moved to the Star Lake Store. Grace's mother, Anna, was still operating the store but her health was failing. She died in March 1950. Oscar remained in the construction business and the family also operated the Star Lake store that they took over from Grace's mother.

Oscar had relatives in Florida and would travel there to visit. Family members believe he visited Cyprus Gardens on one of his trips.

From that trip he got an idea to develop a similar garden by the store.

He started the project around 1954. It took him about a year to plan and construct his Star Lake Lagoon Gardens. An advertisement from 1955 touted the following: "Come and spend a few peaceful, happy hours in our beautiful flower gardens with many different attractions including flower beds, beautiful lawns, boats, birch bark



This 1902 Star Lake Township plot shows the Peterson property on the point and location of the Jenne property and Star Lake Store on the west side of Dead Lake.

tepees, 22 islands, 21 bridges, haunted house, water wheel, miniature castles, fountains and dozens of novelty miniatures."

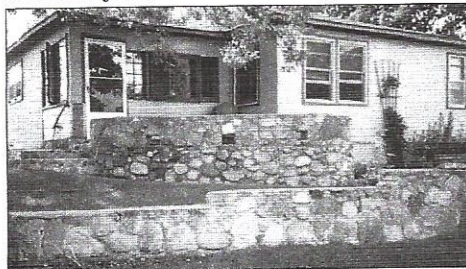
It was a stopover point and tourist attraction that Peterson operated for about 10 years.

A whiff of smoke and an excited cat woke Oscar Peterson one morning in 1968. The Star Lake store was on fire! Clouds of smoke were billowing from the basement. Oscar and Grace escaped from the burning house, but their personal belongings were lost.

The store had been in operation for 82 continuous years before the tragedy struck. Oscar was almost 75 years old, but he still rebuilt a new home at the same site. He added his personal touch by building a split-rock keyhole concrete arch and a curved castle-like

wall that accented the raised patio adjacent to the house. They lived together in the new house until Grace died in October 1977.

As mentioned earlier, Oscar enjoyed waterfowling. He often hunted with cousin and family friend Ken Clambey, who was 25-

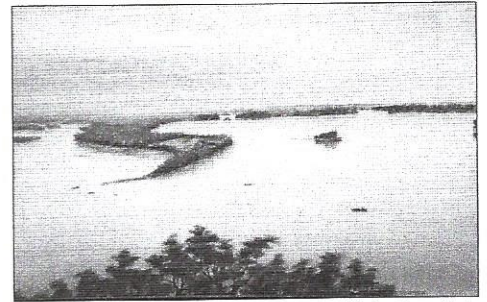


Castle-like stone walls built by Oscar Peterson accent his patio and house that was located at the old Star Lake Store site.

plus years younger than the Peterson brothers but remembers very well Fred's decoy-making days and hunting with Oscar.

Oscar Peterson made a rig of decoys, but only for his own use. He liked using sleeper heads and had several in his rig. His decoys did not look like Fred's. They were carved by hand and made rather square. Oscar Peterson also made fish-spearing decoys. They were made about 4-1/2 inches long; left unpainted, they were a natural wood color.

Oscar used tin from tobacco cans to make the fins. He dipped the decoy in boiling lard to seal the wood and fin insert. He speared many pike from Star Lake using his decoys. As fast



Oscar Peterson was an accomplished artist. This stunning scene displays the sun setting behind his point on Star Lake.

as he would lose a decoy he would make another. Fred was never documented as making any spearing decoys.

Like Fred, Oscar did taxidermy work and he was a veteran of World War I. He also was an accomplished artist. Oscar had a natural talent to draw that dated back to his childhood and school days when he drew pictures for his schoolmates.

In the mid-1920s, he took a correspondence course from a Minneapolis art school. He painted landscape scenes from the Ottertail area and around the world. Several of his paintings were given to his friends and some are still a treasured family possession. His painting of a sunset over the Star Lake point is striking. From his days in the war, he painted a scene from the French countryside where he was a spotter during the preparation of an allied offensive.

The fireplace he built in the new house was decorated with waterfowl paintings of ducks common to the area. Oscar made boats and bow-facing oars. His daughters especially liked the oars. They could row the boat on Star Lake and always see where they were going.

Oscar Peterson inherited the farm from his brother after Fred died in November 1969. The original farmstead was left unoccupied after Fred's death. Vandalism and trespassing took its toll. Oscar died in February 1980.

His two daughters at the time were living out of state. They asked their family friend, Ken Clambey, to organize an auction sale that was held during the fall of 1980. Oscar's




Oscar Peterson, at age 85 in 1979, stands in the split-rock keyhole concrete arch he built.

personal belongings as well as items from the farm were sold. The auction was held at Oscar's house. A few duck decoys from Oscar's rig sold for \$39 each.

The old farm buildings were eventually taken down. The barn, the most difficult of the buildings to demolish, was a final tribute to the carpentry skills of Charles Peterson.

The Peterson family, except for selling a few lakeshore lots on the northwest corner of the farm, still owns the property.

The Peterson brothers contributed not only to the waterfowl and fishing heritage of Ottertail County but also Minnesota. The Star Lake bluebill decoy is a nice addition to a duck-decoy collection. 

Jeff Hedtke, an officer with the MWA's Game Lakes Chapter and an avid collector of duck decoys, is a wetland restoration specialist for the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources. He resides near Waconia and is available at any time to discuss decoys, duck calls and other collectible antiques related to waterfowling. The author would like to thank the Ottertail County Historical Society and the Peterson family for their help with this article.



AN ESSAY BY ANTHONY

Darwin R. Anthony

He Stands Alone

He has been a part of a huge flock all winter, but now *he stands alone!* He and his mate have followed the instinct to separate themselves from the others. It is nesting time! The large Canada goose gander has such a lonesome look. He stands diligently waiting. The small rise of marsh provides him with a clear view. It is surrounded by water.

His sharp vision and hearing notice anything that moves or makes any kind of noise in his immediate area. His long, black neck stretches to see. He seems to look bigger than usual! Do you suppose that he tries to look large to intimidate anything that comes close? Is he like so many other things of nature? We know that his nesting mate is nearby and she is depending on him to protect her nest of eggs and herself!

He has stood in the same spot for several days. The large Canada goose stands watching. His shrill voice shouts his concern and warns everything of his presence! He realizes the importance of the duty of protecting his nesting mate.

The goose watches me closely as I walk along the shoreline of the lake. He is uneasy about my being so close. He shouts his warning! He means business! He claims this area of the shoreline as his own! He wants me to know that I am treading in dangerous territory if I get any closer!

The instinct of survival is a wonderful thing in nature. In no species do we see a stronger urge to protect the nesting mate than in the Canada goose. His patience has to be admired. He waits for his progeny to come forth.

He waits for things to happen. But for today, *he stands alone!* 