

The Bird House Inn at Excelsior Bay History

Also known as **The Historic James H. Clark House**, this was the first home of James H. Clark whose life story includes adventures that make up the fabric of our country. Clark was born in Vermont in 1830, and left his home at 17 when his father died. His goal was to go west, and he had his heart set on making his fortune in the gold mines of California. He worked his way across the country taking any job he could, but by his own admission was destitute much of the time. He was able to spend one winter mining gold near Deer Creek, and also worked on a dam site at Yuba City, CA. He spent many of his early years crisscrossing the country, and endured the privations and hardships suffered by many of his contemporaries.

In 1851 he began farming in Illinois. Four years later, he and his wife moved to Minnesota, spending time in St. Anthony and Long Lake, before settling in Excelsior in 1857. Here he built a small frame house, putting down some roots until Civil War duties called. In the spring of 1876 he was back in Excelsior with his family where he became known as a carpenter, merchant and farmer. He was able to take advantage of the “Ginseng Rush”, acting as an agent in moving the harvested roots by rowboat from Excelsior to a forwarding agent in Wayzata, with the ultimate destination being exotic China. Ginseng was growing in abundance all around the Lake Minnetonka area, and every able-bodied man, woman and child would be up at dawn, harvesting the plants and trying to get a piece of the action. During this period he served in many offices within Excelsior township and village and was a representative to the state legislature during the 1870’s.

The original small frame two-story section of the Clark house built in 1858 is toward the east and was subsequently added onto, possibly twice, by Clark. As early as 1876 the J. H. Clark Boarding House was advertised and in 1883 could handle 30 boarders. The house stands today as then except for an improvement in the rear.

The Knowlton Family-1921

Mark L. Knowlton, Sr. and his son, John E. Knowlton and family purchased the Clark house from the children of H.J. and Mrs. Clark. Knowlton Sr. was born in Liberty, Maine in 1836. He served as a drummer boy in the Civil War, and came to Minnesota early in the 1870’s. He was the postmaster in Clear Lake and later moved to Minneapolis where he worked for the Pillsbury Company. In the early 1900’s his family was living in Edgewood at Lake Minnetonka and he would ride his motorbike from the Lake into Excelsior, (Anyone owning a motorized vehicle in those days was noticed) where he’d park during the day, and catch the train or streetcar into Minneapolis. The process was reversed in the evening. In later years the family remembered the good bread that “Grandpa” brought home from the testing kitchens at Pillsbury.

Mark Knowlton, Sr. was the last GAR veteran living in Excelsior, and at the time of his death in 1929 the flag of the Halstead Post of the FAR was retired. Other Knowlton family members connected to the house included J. E. “Jack” Knowlton who ran a

delivery service around the lake via launch, horse and wagon and was also the proprietor of Knowlton's Cabin Camp on lake adjacent to the south, at 411 Water Street, from 1932-1948. Mrs. J. E. Knowlton always had roomers in the big house. She was born Alice Howard, granddaughter of homesteader Silas Howard, for which Howard's Point on Lake Minnetonka is named.

The J. E. Aldritt Family-1948

The J. E. Aldritt family purchased the Clark House from the Knowltons in 1948. They had a homestead at Lake Minnewashta, but had spent 18 years wintering in upstairs rooms at the Clark House. They lived in the house full-time for an additional 40 years. J. E. Aldritt was a farmer, fisherman and hunter, living off the land as so many families did. He was also a butcher, going wherever he was needed to ply his trade. The Aldritt's had three daughters, who all ran businesses; two in Excelsior and one in Minneapolis.

Present Day

Dave and Gretchen Wahlstedt have owned and operated the Bird House since xxxx. They were married on the grand patio of the house, and lived in the house for several years before hiring an innkeeper and moving to a house that Dave owned in Minneapolis. In 2011, they met Rick and Jeanne Carter of Minneapolis, who were interested in running a B & B. In 2012 the Wahlstedts moved back on -site into the carriage house and entered into a partnership whereby the two couples would operate the Inn cooperatively, sharing in the risks and rewards (and work!) of running a modern-day Bed and Breakfast. All four of us welcome you to the Bird House!