

# Third chapter of hotel saga unravels

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(This is really part three of what has become an unanticipated long-range series. The tale began to unfold in the Sept. 4 edition of Country Life — in a story that concentrated on a remodelling effort that transformed the old Ottertail Hotel into a home for Leonard and Evelyn Minge.)

When that story appeared, Country Life learned that the Ottertail Hotel had another story rooming within its history. Camilla Just, now a resident of Fergus Falls, called to say that her father had built the hotel. Camilla, her sister and her brother explained how the hotel grew with the railroad's expansion into the Ottertail area in the Sept. 18 Country Life.

The tale of the Ottertail Hotel now had a beginning and an end. But what happened in the years between 1916, when the Justs sold the hotel, and the beginning of the Minge's remodelling project?

If it's possible, it somehow seems that the hotel wanted its full story told. Another telephone call explained that the hotel's interim years had been filled with the story of another unique individual, Leona True. Leona operated the Ottertail telephone switchboard on and off for 45 years. Part of that time, the lines met at the Ottertail Hotel.

And it all has the most unusual way of tying together. Not only are "Just" and "True" adjectives, they were both surnames of the hotel. Emil Just and Leonard Minge are both well-known as local jack-of-all-trades handymen although

their work on the hotel was 75 years apart. And, before beginning the Ottertail Hotel remodelling project, the Minges redid a 100-year-old house near Rush Lake — the same house that Leona True was born in.)

It was 1934, nearly mid-point in the Great Depression, when the woman was widowed and left with sole responsibility for five children.

This is the stuff melodramas are made of, a Little-House-on-the-Prairie-Waltons-type struggle against adversity, but in this case a true story. It's true in more ways than one, since the central character in this tale is Leona True.

Leona is probably best known in the Ottertail area for her work as a switchboard operator. Until the advent of dial telephones in 1955, she ran the Ottertail switchboard off and on for 45 years.

When she was about 15 years old, Leona answered the first long distance call that came into Ottertail, she said. "I was so glad I could answer the phone," she added. "You know how children are."

The call came from Wahpeton and a great deal of interference on the line made for a poor connection, she said. The telephone switching device was located in her father's store, according to Leona, and there was only one line coming into the town.

This later grew to two lines, then four and finally a switchboard that was designed to handle 20 lines. Only 19 were ever used, Leona said, because one of them just never seemed to work right.

She was married in 1916 and later her father sold his store to her husband. Eighteen years later, however, her husband died. "I kept the store at first," Leona said, adding that her oldest son, who was 14 at the time, was good with figures, but her younger son wanted to work in "wide open spaces."

One of the reasons Leona kept the store, she said, was that it cost her \$13 to pay for transportation to get her children to Perham High School. All five children graduated from Perham.

The store proved too difficult to manage and in 1939, Leona sold the store. She kept the switchboard, however, and moved it into the Ottertail Hotel. She and her husband had purchased the hotel in 1929.

There had been no permanent tenants in the hotel building since the Justs left it in 1916, according to Leona. "Why don't we buy the hotel building?" I said to my husband," she explained. Leona knew the man who owned the hotel building because he traded in her father's store.

Although one might think that a family of six could almost fill the rooms in the small hotel, Leona continued to rent out rooms after purchasing the hotel. After selling the store, the income from the hotel did not provide the sole support for the family, but it helped, Leona said. The switchboard and limited premiums from her husband's insurance policy figured into the finances.

Most of the hotel's occupants were people that stayed at the hotel previously, according to Leona. One group of duck hunters stayed at the hotel during hunting season for 29 years, Leona's said. "They stored their boats in our garage," her daughter, Harriet added.

"Off and on, we had people we knew staying with us," Leona added. Teachers who worked in the area and the game warden stayed there for 75 cents a day. Leona's mother-in-law also stayed with the family.

Leona said she never felt she had to entertain the tenants at the hotel. "They could go their way and I went mine," she commented.

This may have been true in theory, but fact proves that Leona did get involved with the hotel patrons — especially those who had no other place to go. Young depot agents were in this group, according to Harriet. If the young men had no place to go for Christmas, Leona had them join the family. "Ma had presents under the tree for them," Harriet said.

The hotel was something of a gathering spot because of its size. "It was fun," Leona remembered. The woman who had to hang the mail sack for the trains often had to wait up until 2 a.m. and sometimes spent this time visiting with Leona.

Wedding receptions, showers, parties, and baseball league meetings were among the events that took place at the hotel.

Doctors used to come from Perham once a week and examine patients in one of the rooms at the hotel. It was almost like a branch clinic, Leona said. It was easier for the

(True)

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