

A Place in the Woods
John Erickson, October, 2009

As a direct descendent of the two families in the “Old German cemetery” in Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, the Werner’s and Erickson’s, my cousin John Werner and I have worked to keep the site pristine. Over the years this has been a family tradition passed on from my father John, my uncle Leonard and cousin John’s father John to repair, replace and keep the plot clean. The history of the cemetery goes back four generations to my great-great grandfather Fredrick and his wife Margretha and my great grandfather Abraham and his wife Katie (Fredericks and Henrietta’s daughter). Both families were homesteaders in the Port Oneida area and helped build the community out of the virgin woodlands to productive farms and families. As the effects of the Northern Michigan weather play out in the cemetery on the Werner homestead the condition has deteriorated and fallen into disrepair. We the living direct descendents of these hardworking homesteaders have tried to maintain the peace and serenity of this beautiful place in the woods.

Located in the SBDNL at the top of a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan 350 feet below the cemetery borders a hiking trail used by many who stop and enjoy the vistas. On a recent trip back to Northern Michigan I went to check on the cemetery and noted that some folks had broken down the trailside fence to gain access instead of using the gate on the other side of the cemetery. While I tried my best to tie up the broken fence a young family with two small children in tow asked if I knew who was buried here. I answered them that I did know and in fact they were my ancestors. This led to a dialog on family history, the reason they were buried here, how they came to America as a result of the European Famine and Diaspora in the 1850-70’s in Germany and Sweden and how tranquil it is here in this place in the woods. The dabbled autumn sunlight and cool lake breezes along with the majestic basswood and maple trees offer hikers a milieu of peaceful tranquility, thought and reflection. Far from my home in Northern California this place anchors me to my past. Hopefully it does the same for others who come across the cemetery while using this National Lakeshore trail.

“I think I said too much!” Abraham offered in his Swedish accented English as a retort to Katie’s question as to why he was now so quiet. A little earlier as they rode through the rolling hills on snow covered trails in a rented cutter sleigh, Abraham had asked Katie to be his wife. This is but one of many family history anecdotes which I think of while visiting the cemetery. How hard life must have been to leave family and friends in Sweden and Germany to come to a land unknown and to cut a life out of the woods. The barn that Abraham and his family raised with their hands and lumber from the woods still stands on Henke Road. A far, far place from the home he knew outside of Stockholm where famine and an arrogant Baron who insisted each of his workers genuflect to him in order to receive their hard earned pay was more than this prideful man could endure. Stories like this, his run from Good Harbor to Leland before the Land Office closed to sign his homestead deed, to staying in the woods with Indians who were on the homestead that very first night fill me with wonder and admiration. Many families have

similar stories of building a new life and what it took to survive in the woods of Northern Michigan in the mid to late 1800's but these are mine.

With cedar fence posts put in place by my father, cousin and me six years ago and a newly installed new fence, it is once again a place of tranquil reflection. Others have helped us in our efforts to maintain this serene place from Kim Mann with the National Park Service to Kerry Kelly, the Chairman of the Friends of Sleeping Bear Dunes. Mostly, I see this place as an effort to maintain and keep my family's history alive. It is a responsibility I enjoy to pass onto my family for many generations to come and enjoy this serene and peaceful place in the woods.