

## **Kraftwood, Elcho's Hidden Treasure**

J.L. Kraft was one of eleven children raised in Fort Erie, Canada. In 1903 he moved to Chicago, Illinois, bought a horse and wagon and became a cheese wholesaler. By 1907 the business had grown and six of J.L.'s brothers joined him. Eventually, another brother, William, and his family joined them. In addition to wholesaling cheese, the family experimented with cheese preservation and provided tins of cheese to the troops during World War I. In 1921 they introduced processed cheese into the market.

In 1922 the Kraft Cheese Company, based in northern Illinois, decided to expand its operations to Antigo, WI. J.L. fell in love with the natural beauty of Langlade County and in 1923, purchased land west of Elcho on the shores of Lake Mach-Kin-O-Siew (now known as Enterprise Lake) for a summer home. By 1927, the property had been expanded to 400 acres including a six-acre garden.

Within the next few years, the property had grown to 900 acres and included nine guest cottages, each equipped with electricity, a community dining hall and laundry, a small farm, a chapel, a lakeside overlook, and an icehouse. The cottages were supplied with boats, including a 22-foot Chris Craft wooden motor boat. The entire complex was named Kraftwood.

William Kraft had been the manager at the Antigo Kraft operation, in the early 1920's but jumped at the chance to oversee things at Kraftwood. William and Ida Kraft raised their nine children on the grounds in a renovated farmhouse that had been there. In 1928, J.L. began construction on "the big house", a two-story mansion constructed of California redwood and cost \$30,000, a large sum for a home at that time. The main floor included a large, central entry with a spacious living room that led to a solarium on one side and a glass-enclosed dining room on the other, a spacious kitchen and a bedroom. Each room featured its own fireplace. Four bedrooms, two of which had balconies, made up the second story, each having their own bathroom. Mahogany trim was featured throughout the house, and the kitchen and all bathrooms displayed tile from the Kraft Tile Company of California.

From the 1920's through the 1950's Kraftwood was one of the main tourist attractions in the Northwoods. The grounds were open to the public from 1938 until 1953, from July 4<sup>th</sup> through Labor Day. The gardens were known for their beauty and uniqueness. They included a Greek garden, complete with statuary, an Oriental garden with a bridge, a Rose garden, a Dahlia garden, a perennial garden, a sunken garden containing carnivorous plants, and a cactus garden. In total, 30,000 to 50,000 varieties of plants and flowers graced the grounds. The gardens were tended by five gardeners. Imagine the work it took to dig up many of the plants in fall, store them in the estate's greenhouse, and replant them in spring (especially the cacti)!

As beautiful as the gardens were, they weren't the main attraction on the grounds. In 1926, J.L. purchased two totem poles from the Kwakiutl tribe in British Columbia. He donated one to the city of Chicago, and the other he had shipped by train to Elcho. The one ear marked for

Kraftwood had to be cut into four pieces and transported by truck to the estate. The 50-foot totem named Kwa Ma Rolis contained images of human faces, an alligator head, a bird with a large beak, and other carvings. The totem still stands on the grounds and is an impressive sight.

The estate also boasted a museum, filled with objects of many of J.L.'s interests including several hundred species of mounted native birds, meteorites that had been cut to reveal their insides, Native American artifacts, and semi-precious stones. Another interesting feature on the grounds was Sanibel Island, also known as "shell island". J.L. and his wife loved the seashells in Florida, so they had a truckload shipped to Kraftwood where they created the small island on the lake shore. Every year they would have to replenish the shells because visitors liked to take them as souvenirs. There was also a deer park and duck pond that visitors would visit. A windmill provided water to the main house and used to irrigate the plants in the gardens. An interesting feature was the "magnetic rock". Legend had it that if an unmarried woman threw one of her hairpins against it and it stuck, she would marry within the year.

Ruth (William and Ida's daughter) and Roy Anderson became caretakers of the estate after William's death in 1940. In 1953, J.L. died and interest in maintaining Kraftwood waned. Part of the estate was sold to the Boy Scouts, part became a public boat landing, with the remaining land still owned by the family.