

WORKING AT THE  
POKEGAMA LAKE TUBERCULOSIS SANATORIUM  
The Memories of Virginia Haugen-Christensen

I first worked at the Sanatorium (San) the summer before my senior year in high school. After graduating from Pine City High School in 1937, I worked at the San for another year. I helped in the Hospital's diet kitchen. Food came from the kitchen in the Administration Building through a tunnel connecting it with the large brick Hospital Building. The Hospital contained patient rooms, a full medical operating room and the mechanical plant. The food was wonderful.

Then I went to Minneapolis before returning in 1940 after my brother Bob called and told me they wanted me to come back to work at the San. I would make \$25.00 a month plus room and board (Women staff stayed in the Administration Building). So I returned and helped as a waitress in the dining room. Some people were afraid they might contract tuberculosis if they got too close to the patients but it never scared me. I enjoyed helping and visiting with everyone.

The patients were all from wealthy families except one bed was free, making the hospital a nonprofit hospital. Dr. Callahan, who lived in Pine City, was the head doctor. Other doctors came from the Minneapolis/St Paul area.

Here I met Hans Christensen on June 12, 1940. He had moved from Askov to work at the San. He helped take care of the plumbing, boilers and furnaces. Even though he was somewhat shy, he talked a lot when he was alone with me. One day he proposed. My folks always said I must have asked Hans to marry me as he was so shy. We were married at the Zion Lutheran Parsonage November 9, 1940 with Reverend Steging officiating.

Hans and I made our home in a little cottage across from the San. That's where we were the Sunday after our wedding. The weather got funnier and funnier. It started raining and then it turned to snow. It was still snowing on Monday morning when Hans left for work. And it kept snowing. Soon the electric lines were down and there was no radio or telephone. It was the deadly Armistice Day Blizzard.

Hans had taken the car to get to work but got stuck in the deep snow. He walked the rest of the way along the shoreline to the San. A transformer had blown. Hans and Dr. Callahan's son-in-law walked all the way to Pine City through the deep snow drifts to get the electric company to come out and fix the transformer. Hans didn't return home until Wednesday. I hadn't seen or heard from him since Monday morning. During that time I didn't know if he was alive or dead.

We lived in the uninsulated cottage all winter. Cold, winter winds howled around the door and windows and blew the linoleum six inches off the floor. Water froze in the metal pail overnight. I baked and cooked on a kerosene stove and made my first bread on that darn thing.

I worked at the San in the mornings, cleaning the Administration Building. Times were



hard. We made very little money and worked long hours but we also had fun. We always had lots of company as all the "kids" (younger staff) would come across the frozen lake from the San. My brother Bob also worked at the San on the grounds crew. His family lived across the bay from us. So we'd walk across the lake to see them.

Then in the spring, we moved to the San farm house. It was on a little knoll west of the big red dairy barn and I was a little afraid at first when Hans wasn't home. Hans took over the care of the cattle. He had a cart with one horse that he used to transport milk to the hospital.

I had a big garden and canned everything possible. We had to thoroughly clean the farm house as no one had lived there for quite some time. That winter was so cold that all my flowers in the house froze. One morning I went outside and found a dog sleeping in a snow bank. We already had a dog named Tippy. We had to leave both of them when we left the farm.

Then came WWII. Our first child was on the way. Before Hans worked at the San, before we were married and before the War, he had gone to Minneapolis to enlist in the Marines. The Marines told him he was one inch too short. Now with our entry into WWII, the Draft Board wanted him. Dr. Callahan went to the Draft Board and told them they couldn't have him as he was needed more at the San than in the service.

At the same time, the San was in the process of closing as tuberculosis was on the wane. But not before Sharon Nancy was born at the San Hospital. Hans came to see me in the Hospital before Sharon was born but kept fainting so finally the nurses told him to stay away. He sat the rest of the night in the furnace room with his boss, Larry Cummings.

In October of 1943, we moved to Elk River where Hans had a new job awaiting him. And our story goes on from a short stay in Elk River back to Pine City where we remained the rest of our lives.

The Sanatorium closed and became the home of the Catholic Redemptist Fathers. At Christmas a life size Nativity Scene appeared in front of the former Hospital Building. A lighted star shown down on the manger as Christmas carols echoed through the night. We always stopped to look, listen and remember.

Recorded by Barbara Christensen