

LOCALNEWS

A lifetime of memories

Mike Williams debuts book about Kettle Falls

BY EMILY GEDDE
Staff Writer

About 40 miles through Rainy Lake's vast wilderness sits a spot near and dear to Mike Williams' heart.

Kettle Falls has been part of the International Falls resident's life since the day he was born.

"In 1918, my grandfather, Robert Williams, purchased the historic Kettle Falls Hotel on Rainy Lake for \$1,000 and four barrels of whiskey," Williams said. "This marked the beginning of my family's involvement with Kettle Falls."

Through the years, enough bonds have been formed and memories have been made at the spot recognized by the National Register of Historic Places that Williams decided they were too good to be lost forever.

So, he wrote them down. "About five or six years ago, I wrote a story," Williams recalled. "A week later, I'd write another one and a month would go by and I'd write six in a day. So I started a file."

Soon, years of memories jotted down on backs of napkins and scratch paper turned into the newly-released "Life at Kettle Falls," a book of stories about Williams' experience – both as a young boy and adult – at his favorite place to be.

"It's a collection of stories that stood out to me," he said. "It wasn't necessarily the day-to-day life at Kettle Falls, but the moments worth remembering."

And there are more where that came from.

Even the day Williams brought his collection to be printed into a book at North Star Publishing, he admits to adding a few forgotten moments that morning.

"I even had to go back to add more," he said with a laugh. "And I still have more. Maybe enough for a sequel, if this one sells out."

But with almost 70 years of family history packed into such a unique location, it seems easy to lose track of all the memories made between Rainy and Namakan lakes.

Special spot

It's nothing like staying at the Hilton, but the Kettle Falls Hotel is an intricate part of the Williams family and Borderland's history.

Nestled on a remote Kabetogama peninsula between Rainy and Namakan lakes, the sight at Kettle Falls, which is accessible only by water or air, is unlike any other. Near the dock harbor, golf carts zoom by transporting guests up to the hotel and trucks are busy portaging boats between two of Voyageurs National Park's lakes.

As visitors make their way up the road to the hotel, music can be heard playing from an original nickelodeon to entertain people of all ages who crowd the veranda enjoying the breeze.

In the dining room, guests work to satisfy their appetite with a "voyageur cup" of wild rice soup or "catch of the day" walleye, while others can be found quenching their thirst in the hotel's notorious bar with its slanted floor – which can make for an interesting game of pool.

"As a young fella, I always wanted to be at Kettle Falls," Williams recalled. "I'd be fishing with my dad, not knowing where we were on the vast Rainy Lake, and I'd

ask where Kettle Falls was. I was always so pleased when he said it was right around the corner, and we'd pay a visit."

And that excitement hasn't worn off.

"At the end of the summer, my wife and I have friends who visit and we all stay at Kettle Falls for a week," he said. "I look forward to that more than going to Florida."

Early years

Williams' grandfather's tenure as the hotel's owner lasted from 1918 until his death in 1956. The following year, Williams along with his parents, Charlie and Blanche, and two siblings, Chuck and Peggy, spent their first full summer at the remote location.

"I was 10 years old at the time and it was so exciting to spend the whole summer there," Williams said.

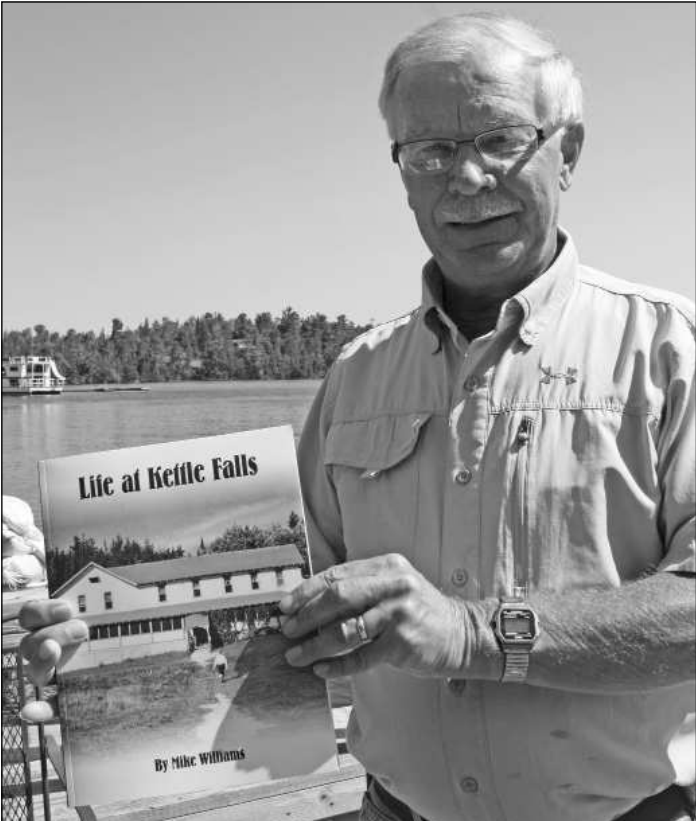
However, the excitement about having a Huckleberry Finn-like summer didn't match what youngster had in mind.

"We weren't allowed to spend any time at the lake unescorted," he said. "Here I thought I'd be fishing off the dock the entire summer."

That all changed the following year when Williams was not only allowed to spend time by the water, he could also use a boat with a motor.

"Things changed completely," he said, noting he started guiding fishing trips around the time he was 11 or 12 years old, which eventually funded his college education.

Spending the summer of 1958 on Rainy Lake was in large contrast to the this summer, Williams said Monday from a booth overlooking submerged docks at Thunderbird Lodge. That year, he said, the water was low and



STAFF PHOTO BY EMILY GEDDE

Mike Williams shows off his newly-released book, "Life at Kettle Falls," a collection of stories about his experiences at the remote Rainy Lake location.

all the dams at Kettle Falls were closed.

"It was perfect for kids exploring and looking for Indian artifacts," he said with a smile. "I would only come to town for a hair cut or a dentist appointment. I would start counting the days I'd have to go back to school at the end of the summer and I'd be sick to my stomach over the thought of leaving."

Second generation

Still, another year of school would come and go and it'd be time to return to Kettle Falls.

Halfway through the summer of 1959, Williams' grandmother became ill and his parents officially took ownership of the hotel.

"My dad would commute daily to the paper mill," he said of the about 40-mile trip.

And so the trend of spending summers – and sometimes year round as duties increased – at Kettle Falls

continued into Williams' young adult life.

In 1965, his father took over as dam keeper before handing the reigns to Williams in the early 70s and, eventually, Chuck in 1983 until his retirement 30 years later in 2013.

In charge

After spending two years of active duty in the United States Marine Corps, Williams and his wife, Mary, moved to Kettle Falls in 1971 while they were expecting their first child, Frannie.

For the first six years of Frannie's life, and four years of her younger sister Betsy's, the family lived at Kettle Falls meeting new people and enjoying "the finest years of this wonderful life," Williams said.

The family, along with Williams' brother and sister-in-law, operated the hotel and dams even after Voyageurs National Park purchased

Kettle Falls in 1977. Today, it is still owned by the park and operated by Rick and Sean Oveson.

The next step

Williams and Mary sold their interest of Kettle Falls to Chuck in 1982.

"That was the end of my working at Kettle Falls," Williams said. "But I've always been a frequent visitor."

In fact, he was planning a trip Monday for the following day – maybe to make more memories for his book.

A week into its June 30 debut, Williams said he has already received positive feedback on "Life at Kettle Falls."

"I'm excited to finally have it done," he said. "It's been quite a few years in the making."

Holding the book in his hands, the author is noticeably proud of the final product.

He credits his two author friends – Jan Jenson and Peggy Roeder – for their "gentle persuasion" into finishing the book.

"This winter, I thought if I'm ever going to do this, I need to get it done," he said. "Through the years, (Jan) continually would encourage me to keep writing and get it done."

The process would delay itself, however, as more stories made their way from Williams' memory onto paper.

"I'd think of another story and it would delay the book for another week," he admitted. "That went on for months."

Still, he conquered writer's block – or the opposite of it – and is ready to show off the finished product.

"I hope people read this, enjoy it and put Kettle Falls into their travel plans," he said. "Once you start going to Kettle Falls, you keep going back. The fishing is great and the scenery is amazing. It's worth the trip."



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