

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT: THE BLECHER FAMILY AT CANOE LAKE

By Mary I. Garland

Canoe Lake, Algonquin Park, in the early 1900s was in the first stages of recovering from decades of lumbering. The shore was mired with dead trees from the constant raising and lowering of the water levels by the lumber companies, and the landscape was marred with slash, chip yards and rotting remains of lumber camps. Despite this desolation, people from Toronto and area wanted to come “north” to enjoy the wilderness. Spurred on by Superintendent George Bartlett’s enthusiasm for outdoor pursuits, people began to see value in a camping vacation, and they needed places to stay. Robert Galna, charged with looking after the Gilmour and Company assets after the lumber company abandoned the mill and the little town of Mowat, rented rooms in the old Gilmour bunkhouses to travellers off-loading at Canoe Lake as early as 1904. He was followed by Shannon Fraser who went on to create Camp Mowat in 1907.

By 1908 other lodges had been built on Cache and Joe lakes, establishing the area as a desirable vacation destination. In 1907, Reverend George Richard Turk, a Methodist Minister from Owen Sound, had the 1.12 acres surrounding the original Park headquarters house on Canoe Lake surveyed, and obtained a lease for the property, including the headquarters house and outbuildings. In 1909, Reverend Turk assigned the lease to Martin H. Blecher Sr. of Buffalo New York, for \$275.00, retaining the northern 60 feet with the smaller log cabin for himself, paying Martin Blecher \$5.00 per year for the use of that section. Martin H. Blecher and his family immediately started using their new summer home, and would continue to do so until the late 1940s, despite difficulties and a self-sustaining web of innuendo, gossip, opinion and accusation that still exists.

In 1917, when Tom Thomson died at Canoe Lake, the events surrounding his death and following investigation were not clear then and are not clear now. In the various publications about Tom Thomson, Martin H. Blecher’s son, Martin H. Blecher Jr., is usually presented as suspicious, dangerous, or antisocial, characterizations based on hearsay and opinion. Examples are many, and one of the most prominent is the portrayal of Martin Blecher Jr. in William T. Little’s book, *The Tom Thomson Mystery*. Little describes Martin Blecher as a bad-tempered man who drank heavily, and as brash, outspoken, and boastful (1), comments made with no factual substantiation. Mark Robinson, Park ranger from 1907 to 1936, liked Martin Sr, spending

time on camping trips with him, but he was not so friendly with Martin Jr, commenting in 1917: “I am of the opinion he is a German spy.” (2). There was no reason for Robinson to think this, much less write it in his journal. Martin Jr. registered for the U.S. draft in 1917, failed to report for duty in 1918, triggering the gossip that he was a deserter, when his failure to report was in error and he was later discharged honourably from the military. Unfortunately, the aura of misconduct seemed to hang on to him: “He later became a draft dodger, when the States declared war.” (3) Daphne Crombie, a Mowat Lodge guest, described Martin Jr. as an “unattractive, blousey sort of individual. He had a German accent.” (4) The gossip continued to entrap Martin Blecher Jr. Harry Ebbs, doctor at the Taylor Statten camps for many years, rambled on in an interview for the Algonquin Park Museum and Archives oral history series (5), accusing Martin Blecher of everything from being a draft dodger, to doing all kinds of illegal things, especially shooting Tom Thomson from his boathouse. All are unsubstantiated opinion trussed and presented as facts in a damning interview. It was not all bad, although the good comments do not seem to make it into publication. Dan Stringer, one of the Stringer clan from Potter Creek, said: “They got all those stories about him (Thomson) and Blecher and all that, that’s so much bull a lot of people hated this Blecher, but Martin Blecher was one of the nicest fellows I met.” (6) Rose Thomas, of Kish-Kaduk Lodge, remembered that Martin would keep to himself, a behaviour pattern that can be interpreted as rude, and might explain why Martin Jr. was not as popular as his father was.

In articles by Peter Webb (7) and Neil Lehto (8), Martin Blecher’s unpopularity is attributed to his being the son of “German immigrants”, and with the First World War changing the global stability, everyone was on edge about “enemy aliens”, as Germans were labelled by the Canadian War Measures Act of 1914. Martin Blecher Jr. was not the son of German immigrants, he was the son of American citizens, and he would not have had a German accent, as per Daphne Crombie, he would have spoken with a New York accent. Martin Blecher Sr. was American and proud of it. If people thought of the Blechers as being German, it may have been from Martin Jr.’s ill advised comments about Germany’s supremacy in the war (2).

Martin Henry Blecher Sr. was born on July 2, 1857, in Buffalo, New York State. He was the son of Henry and Mary Blecher, who were immigrants from Germany. Henry died circa 1861, leaving Mary Blecher with her young son Martin to support, which she did with her seamstress business and the help of her brother-in-law. By 1862 she remarried widower Martin Kratz and

they continued to grow their blended family. As a young adult, Martin started his career as a carver while his half-brother William was a machinist (9). It did not take long for the two of them to pool their resources and on January 1, 1884 they started their furniture manufacturing business. Martin reverted to his birth surname and they called their company Blecher and Kratz Furniture Manufacturing Company (Figure 1). The company started modestly, making cloth- and wood- topped tables from their factory at 59 Maple Street in the Fruit Belt district near downtown Buffalo. By 1889, the business had progressed to making school and other contract furniture and had moved to larger quarters at 496 - 504 Carlton Street, in East Buffalo. Martin Sr. stayed active with his company until his death.

In 1885 Martin Blecher married Louisa Jekel, third eldest of twelve children, also living in Buffalo. Their daughter, Louisa M. (Bessie) was born in 1886, followed by their son, Martin Henry Jr. in 1891. Martin Sr. was an active community man. He joined the Harmonie Lodge Number 699, Free and Accepted Masons of New York in 1895, obtaining his third degree and status as a Master Mason later that year. He served as the Harmonie Lodge Master in 1904 and 1905. As a Master Mason, he was eligible to join other Masonic-related organizations, and he became a member of the Oriental Guide of Ismailia Temple of the Mystic Shrine, and was its Potentate in 1911. He was also a member and King of the Mount Sinai Chapter Number 293, Royal Arch Masons of Buffalo, as well as a member of the Hugh de Payens Commandery and was Commander in 1912 and 1913 (10). Martin Sr. was equally active in the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, obtaining membership in the Valley of Buffalo lodges, serving as T.P. Master of Palmoni Lodge of Perfection in 1912, and obtaining the highest honour of the 33^o in 1914.

Martin Sr. was a member in other lodges in Rochester, Detroit, and Canadian lodges in Toronto and Hamilton, Ontario (11). For the years 1907 through 1908, Martin Sr. was the District Deputy Grand Master of the 38th Masonic District of New York State, earning the title of Right Worshipful. In his capacity as District Deputy, Martin Sr. represented the Grand Master of the New York State for his District and would have been required to visit each of the twenty-five lodges within the District, attend important ceremonies and manage administrative issues (12). To be chosen District Deputy Grand Master is an impressive honour, and reflects the ethics of the man and the admiration of his peers. In 1914 and 1915 he was called upon to act as Deputy

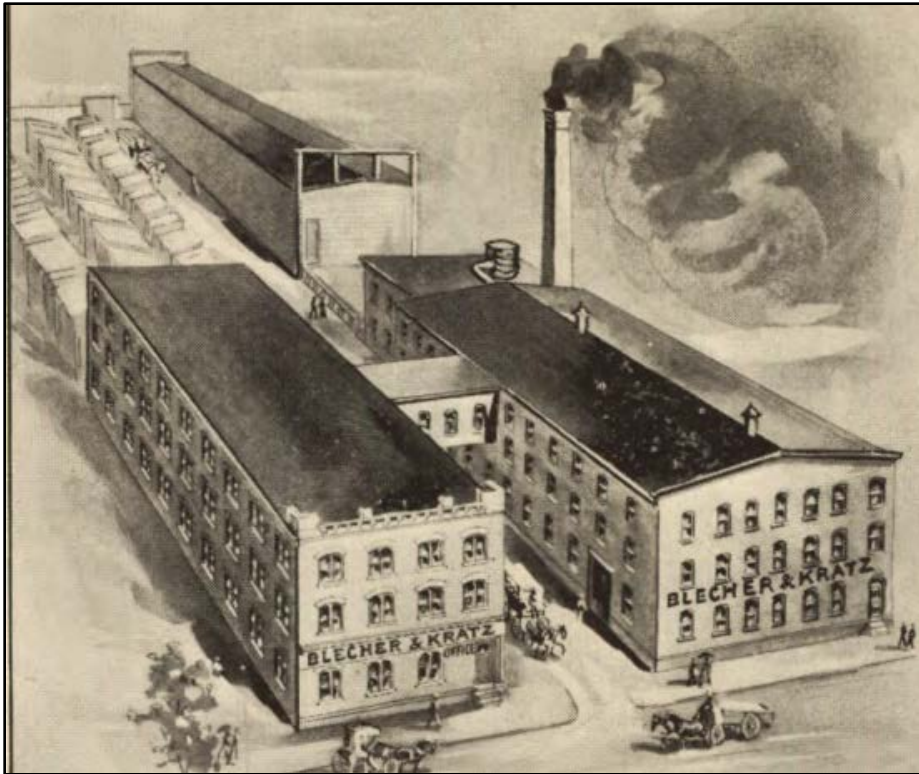


Figure 1: Martin Blecher Sr., above left, and William C. Kratz, circa 1890, above right, founded the Blecher and Kratz Furniture Manufacturing Company, shown here circa 1902 at the Carlton Street location.

(Photograph of Martin Blecher courtesy of Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite Northern Masonic Jurisdiction; William C. Kratz from the Collection of the Buffalo History Museum, used by permission; Kratz and Blecher courtesy of Library of Congress)

Grand Master for two ceremonies for the Tyrian Lodge 925 in Buffalo, including the inception of the Lodge in 1914 (13).

Martin Sr. was also a staunch Republican and was active in the Party business in Buffalo. He was involved with reform within the Party, and he was sought after for his insight and influence in various councils (14).

When Martin Sr. had the opportunity to acquire a summer residence in Algonquin Park, he accepted Reverend Turk's offer. With his wife Louisa and children Bessie and Martin Jr., he wasted no time in travelling north to their new summer place on Canoe Lake, and immediately became involved with the local people and took advantage of the outdoor recreation. Robinson notes in his journal for July, 1909 that he, Martin Sr., along with three others camped on Great Island Lake, and a few days later Martin Sr. and his son went to Rainbow Lake with Robinson. Mark Robinson seems to like Martin Blecher Sr. and has no problems with him. In 1910, when Mark found Martin Sr. flying the American flag, he asked him to take the flag down, and Martin did so. Like his neighbour Reverend Turk, Martin Blecher Sr. was also becoming an active participant in the community. He seems to have brought his leadership and work ethic to Canoe Lake and was well-liked and respected. Jack Wilkinson, whose family worked for the railroad and lived upstairs in the Canoe Lake Station, remarked in an oral interview: "I liked the old folks (Martin Sr. and Louisa). They were really nice." (15)

Martin Sr. died December 1, 1917, leaving Louisa to carry on the family. Martin Jr., then 26 years old, had been an electrician and involved with the draft, but by 1917 he was working as an investigator for the Burns Detective Agency in Buffalo and he stayed with this career until 1928. According to various newspaper accounts through the early 1920s, Martin Jr. was a successful investigator, even handling national cases. He married Patricia Bahner in 1918, and continued the family tradition of summers at Canoe Lake. He and Patricia divorced and he remarried, sometime after 1925. His second wife, Carolyn, helped out at the Joe Lake store. Bessie, teaching in Buffalo, also spent summers at the family cottage.

After Martin Sr.'s death, relationships between the Blecher family and the other residents of Mowat start to show some strain. Martin Sr. was the diplomat of the family, and his social grace and intelligence seem to have kept the family in good stead. With his death late in 1917, and the death of Tom Thomson in July of that year, suspicion towards Martin Jr. grew without the buffer

provided by Martin Sr., and was not helped by Martin Jr.'s reluctant attitude and social awkwardness.

Louisa also felt the strain and lashed out at her neighbours. In 1919 she and Martin Jr. fenced in the land around their lease, obstructing the landing that led to the post office. Shannon Fraser got 34 people to sign a petition protesting this fence and sent it to the Deputy Minister (16). She again had fence problems in 1925, by expanding her property too far to the south. She complained about the garbage and toilet refuse from the Taylor Statten camps, and she accuses local people in general of stealing Martin Jr.'s tools after his death in 1938 (17). Martin Jr. complained about the mud in the parking lots. Bessie, managing to stay out of the fray, continues to use the cottage until her death in 1950.

The Blechers probably just wanted to be left alone. While Martin Sr. was alive, the family was respected and liked. After the events of 1917, the family was placed on the defensive by reaction to Martin Jr.'s pro-German sentiment, and the suggestion that Martin Jr. was a "bad guy", all based on hearsay, opinion and clique mentality. The Blechers were an upstanding American family. Martin Sr. started a company, his son was an investigator with a prestigious firm, and his daughter worked as a teacher and then as an assistant vice principal. Martin Sr. gave back to his community through his work with the Freemasons and politics. Martin Jr. was not of the same ilk as his father, but he certainly never deserved the treatment he received during his life and long after his death.

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