An Interview With Lowell O’Brien; Bridge and Building Crewman

by Bernie Uran

I interviewed Lowell O’Brien on February 16, 2016 in Bemidji. Lowell and his crew repaired or rebuilt most of the wooden piling-type train trestles along the Northern Pacific rail line between Bemidji and International Falls, as well as further south towards Brainerd.

Lowell was raised by his parents, Guy R. and Blanche O’Brien, near Hines, MN. His grandparents were living in Gemmell, MN, at the time—as his grandfather worked for a cedar pole company. In fact, Lowell was born in Gemmell. His mother went there to stay with her parents as the time approached for his birth (July 7, 1922). His maternal grandparents were named Frank and Gertrude Cook. They had moved from the Detroit Lakes area to find work in the woods.

Lowell stated that he moved into the house in 1953.

An interesting side note is that the Northern Pacific Railroad, January 1, 1949—and was hired out of Bemidji onto the Bridge and Building crew. That crew had responsibility for projects from Bemidji to International Falls, as well as other assignments.

An interesting side note is that Lowell and his brother-in-law, Albert Pater Jr., bought the original two-story train depot in Northome (built in 1903). Between 1950 and 1952 they tore down and salvaged the building. They used some of the lumber themselves. For example, Lowell and his father built a house on the east shore of Gull Lake along the old Main Street—south of the old Tenstrike logging rail spur (from the main line down to Gull Lake)—but north of the gravel street which runs out to the tar road (Co. Rd. #29). Lowell stated that he moved into the house in 1953.

As part of his job, Lowell helped to construct the “new” (replacement) Northern Pacific depot. (circa 1952) at Northome. It was one story in height and was located on the west side of the main track—a few hundred feet north of the original depot. That “new” depot was eventually sold. Steve Dahl and Dr. Jim Prosser, a former Northome dentist, moved it out to the shore of Island Lake south of Northome and used it as a cabin (Frenzel property in 2016).

When the M and I (Minnesota and International which later became the Northern Pacific) Railway was being constructed northward from Bemidji, in the fall of 1901 (December 9, 1901), the construction progress was halted because a wide, difficult sinkhole was encountered by Coburn Creek, in Blackduck. The crossing required the construction of a trestle of at least 500 feet in length. As the railroad encountered the sinkhole, the crew encountered a large amount of lumber and maple flooring. They used some of the lumber themselves. For example, Lowell and his father built a house on the east shore of Gull Lake along the old Main Street—south of the old Tenstrike logging rail spur (from the main line down to Gull Lake)—but north of the gravel street which runs out to the tar road (Co. Rd. #29). Lowell stated that he moved into the house in 1953.

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Operating out of the Beltrami County History Center | Hours: Wed.-Sat., 12-4 | Groups and Researchers by appointment

Twitter: @beltramihistory | Instagram: beltramihistory | Facebook: facebook.com/BeltramiHistory
President’s Report

“Wishing you a rainbow – for sunlight after showers – miles and miles of Irish smiles for golden happy hours – Shamrocks at your doorway for luck and laughter too, and a host of friends that never end.” (Irish Blessing)

Since my last column we’ve completed several great annual events in November and December. Thank you to everyone who joined us after Thanksgiving. Many took advantage of great historical events to visit the Great Northern Depot. The History Mystery was another great success and the mystery was solved! Hope you had the opportunity to see the “Fur Trade” traveling exhibit from the Minnesota State Historical Society.

We have many people to thank for all they do for us at the Historical Society throughout the year and over the past 68 years of the Historical Society. Many donate time and money with no desire for acknowledgement. Such as: renewing your membership, making additional monetary donations, or donating items from your family’s history related to our area, photos, doing research for us, attending events and programs, and sharing our county history with family and friends. I’d like to highlight one individual who has donated her time and graphic skills in designing and laying out the last issue of our newsletter. Jackie Pechin and her husband are fairly new to our area and Jackie has a creative design business called “BareBonz Design.” Jackie also did the design and layout of this issue and we’re thankful for her talent and time for our benefit.

The board is working on two ideas for fundraisers this year. As these two fundraisers become more formal we will put you to work. And, for those of you with expertise in graphic design, website editing skills, we’ll be coming to you. It will be fun and, you’ll get to work with people you enjoy working with.

From the Desk of the Director

The calendar says spring, but the thermometer is holding out on us. As we embark on a new season (sure it is it) let us recount the last.

Though few people stopped by the center during the colder months, our special events more than made up for it. Attendance at the annual History Mystery reached record levels; we cele- brated the 105th anniversary of the Great Northern Depot with a nice crowd of history devotees; and, our Women’s History Month lecture series was the best yet. We also reached thousands across Greater Minnesota with appearances on Lakeland PBS’s Currents and the Great Northern Radio Show.

Thanks, as always, are due to our many volunteers, contributors and members for helping make our work possible. We’re especially grateful to the townships in Beltrami County and Bemidji’s Sunrise Rotary Club for their generous donations. If you’d like to help out, there are numerous ways to support history preservation and education: we’re always in need of office assistants, docents, researchers and writers. If you have social media or website editing skills, we’ll put you to work. And, for those with a Bemidji State University connection - students/parents, faculty, friends or otherwise - we’re collaborating with the school to help celebrate its centennial and are looking for any memorabilia you’ll be willing to lend. Contact me at (218) 444-3376 for more information. Your efforts will make a difference!

Finally, two upcoming commemorations worth mentioning: May 11th marks 160 years of Minnesota statehood; you may wish to pay homage by indulging in some blueberry muffins (the state’s official muffin flavor) or munching on some morels. And, in honor of National Poetry Appreciation Month in April, here’s a reminder that, spring or not, a world of wonders awaits us out there.

Dust If You Must
by Rose Milligan

Dust if you must, but wouldn’t it be better
To paint a picture, or write a letter,
Bake a cake, or plant a seed;
Consider the difference between want and need?

Dust if you must, but there’s not much time,
With rivers to swim, and mountains to climb;
Music to hear, and books to read;
Friends to cherish, and life to lead.

Dust if you must, but the world’s out there
With the sun in your eyes, and the wind in your hair;
A flutter of snow, a shower of rain,
This day will not come around again.

Dust if you must, but bear in mind
Old age will come and it’s not kind.
And when you go (and you must go)
Yourself, you will make more dust.

Bemidji’s Great Northern Depot

Bemidji’s Great Northern Depot was built in 1896 just west of the current building. As Bemidji grew, there was a need for a larger, more modern depot that could accommodate passengers as well as freight. The Bemidji Commercial Club, forerunner to the Chamber of Commerce, looked to James J. Hill, Great Northern Railroad mogul, to commission a new depot.

Just east of the old wooden depot, the Union Station, a modern brick structure, was built in 1910. To not be outdone by the competition, Hill commissioned the new Great Northern Depot and made the announcement on April 24, 1912, at Bemidji’s Markham Hotel. Construction would begin immediately with George Kretz as contractor. The brick and limestone depot would be 217 feet long by 32 feet wide (7,000 square ft).

Before the end of the year, the depot was completed. James J. Hill’s last depot, it was dedicated on January 17, 1913. Hill died in 1916.

The depot served both passengers and freight for over four decades. Passenger service ended in 1959, but freight was still shipped through the depot until the early 1980s. Great Northern had merged with Northern Pacific to become Burlington Northern in 1970.

About 1983, the depot was closed and the building, abandoned. Vandalized and damaged by the elements, the empty depot was doomed for the wrecking ball until citizens rallied to save the building. In 1988, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In January of 1997, the Historical Society Museum Committee held its first meeting to develop a plan to restore the depot and convert it into a historical museum. In 1998, the Bemidji Heritage Preservation Commission was formed. The city purchased the building and leased the land on which it is situated. Grant money from the State of Minnesota, funds raised locally, and money from the City of Bemidji and Beltrami County were used to restore the depot and remodel the interior for use as a museum.

After a nearly $2 million restoration job, the Beltrami County Historical Society moved into the building in October of 2010. The old depot now houses the Trails of Time exhibit, a research room, meeting room, gift shop, and archives. The building is also home to the Northern Iron Horse Road Society. Instead of being demolished, Bemidji’s Great Northern Depot became a repository for the history of which it is a part and a place for visitors to enjoy learning about that history.

There’s no better time to visit a museum
by Sue Bruns, BCHS Board Member

Have you been to the Depot lately? Often we hear visitors say: “I’ve lived here all my life, but I’ve never been to this museum before.” There’s no better time to check out the Great Northern Depot, home to the Beltrami County Historical Society and museum. We also love to hear about other museums you’ve visited recently. Send us a picture or two and a paragraph about your visit to a museum, and we will share your information in our newsletter and/or on our website.

This month’s feature museum is the MARSHALL COUNTY MUSEUM IN WARREN, MN

In April of 2017, I accompanied our director to Warren, Minnesota, for a meeting of the Minnesota Historic Sites. I’d not been to Warren before, but about a hundred years ago, my father and his family lived in the Warren area for a while. Warren has a few news several times for an incident that occurred in August of 1979 involving a glowing UFO that hit a sheriff’s squad car, leaving the driver/deputy sheriff stunned and the vehicle with a broken headlight and windshield (see photo on pg. 5).

You can learn more about the incident and see the squad car at the Marshall County Museum, but there’s much more to see.

The museum, located at the Marshall County Fairgrounds, includes Settlers’ Square, a small village of the 1880s, complete with a school, a depot, store, storefront shops, log cabins, a country school and more. Inside the exhibit hall you’ll find a wide assortment of items ranging from war relics to agricultural tools and a collection of antique vehicles. For more information, check out their website and then visit this great not-so-little museum: http://www. mnhistoricmnm.org/museums/county- museums/marshall-county/
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There are usually 5 pilings in each row on the trestle. The middle one is straight up and down, and the two pilings on either side are driven at an angle pointing inward slightly. Lowell stated that there wasn’t a gauge on the machine to determine the angle of the poles. An experienced crewman or foreman stood out ahead of the pile driver and motioned the operator of what angle was correct for each pole being driven. The operator would then move the right levers to get the desired piling aimed properly.

The pilings usually arrived by railcar and before being driven into the ground the men would taper both ends of the piling so as to minimize the chances of splintering or breakage of the pole while it was being driven. The tapering was done manually with an adze, which is an axe-like tool—lots of physical exercise for the men. Often times, trestle construction and repairs were done in the dead of winter because a thick layer of ice was needed to help support the equipment. Manually operated ice saws were often utilized to cut access holes through the ice—meaning that you often got wet and cold on a regular basis.

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The conclusion of this interview appears on our website. http://beltramihistory.org/2018/03/30/lowell-interview/
feet in length. The trestle and sinkhole are located just northeast of where the present (NP) had two different pile drivers which Lowell and his crew utilized in their work of pile driving.

Piling is an interesting term describing long wooden poles, sometimes steel in other construction, which are driven into soft ground—deep enough to become stable and to support heavy loads. Railroads often utilized wooden pilings, because they were readily available, strong, durable, and would bend a little—but not break easily.

The rotting process of wooden pilings takes place over time through the activity of microorganisms, usually fungi. The microbes need moisture and oxygen, in favorable amounts, in order to break down the wood fiber (we call it rott ing). As with fencer posts around the farm, the most extensive rotting usually takes place at ground level, or with pilings, where the wood emerges above the surface of the water. The preservative treatment to the wooden pilings has to be a product that blocks the growth of the fungi and penetrates into the sapwood of the piling. Higher up on the piling it is often too dry for rot to proceed, and down below the ground or water surface, it is too wet or there is not enough oxygen for rotting to occur.

Certain tree species also contain naturally produced chemicals which help to inhibit rotting (in addition to the treating compounds). Creosote type products seemed to give the best results for wooden tie and piling preservation. Nowadays the piling is treated with a preservative to inhibit rot and to help the piling last a long time. Lowell started out as a fireman on the pile drivers and in a short time moved up to the job as operator. As I understand it, both the little pile driver and the larger unit were steam powered. The “little” driver was self-propelled and generated steam by means of a coal fired boiler. To properly operate the machine, it was necessary to build a fire each morning before work began. The water in the boiler heated up to a temperature where lots of steam was produced in order to operate the steam powered pile driver piston and other related functions on the pile driver unit. Lowell was taught how to fire the machine to get the most steam production by a fireman on that smaller driver. The fireman was a good fellow and had figured out how to best distribute the coal in the firebox so as to get the most steam production and most “mileage” or BTUs out of the coal. The “working pressure” of steam in the little driver was 145psi. The smaller pile driver was kept in Minnesota and was utilized when possible. Although one-time Lowell had to go out to Missoula, Montana, to help bring the larger or Western pile driver unit back to Minnesota.


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feet in length. The trestle and sinkhole are located just northeast of where the present (2016) Coop elevator is located in Blackduck. In the 1950’s, as part of Lowell’s work duties, he helped to replace the diagonal piling bracing of the Blackduck trestle.

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Historically, many times equipment settled into the peat and was retrieved with great difficulty. In a number of cases the machinery was lost forever down in the wet, structureless bog—never to be seen again.

**Past Events**

Congratulations to BCHS member and frequent History Mystery portrayal Kevin Cease, recipient of the Oxoars Lifetime Achievement Award for his commitment and dedication to community theater in the Bemidji area.

Executive Director, Gary Rozman, surveys the Marshall County Museum’s display of the squad car that was hit by a UFO.

See the article “There’s no Better Time to visit a Museum” pg. 71.

**Photo Feature**

JUST IN TIME FOR SPRING TRAINING!

For this issue’s Photo Feature we’re highlighting an antique, hand-stitched “Official Clincher” Kitten ball (courtesy of BCHS board member Jim Thompson).

To help celebrate the start of the season, we’re discounting our vintage “Home Baseball” tabletop game from the collection of the New York Historical Society. Mention this ad and enjoy 20% off. Limit two (2) per customer.
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Lowell drive piling for the new trestle near Shingobee Island in the summer of 1952 and 1953. Photo courtesy of Lowell O’Brien.

Douglas fir pilings arrived from out west in November 1953. The 125-foot-long pilings arrived on 3 railroad cars (two flat cars and one gondola). The boat channel section required an extra-long pole for the new trestle near Shingobee Island. The 125-foot-long pilings arrived on 3 railroad cars (two flat cars and one gondola). The boat channel section required an extra-long pole for the new trestle near Shingobee Island.

The Sutter Brothers! Saturday, May 12th at 2pm

Bart and Ross Sutter have established individual reputations as a musician and a writer, but when they perform as a pair their work has the kind of counterpoint and easy intimacy unique to sibling acts. A Sutter Brothers performance is a fun-filled blend of music, storytelling, and poetry, highlighting their small town, Preacher’s Kid roots and Scandinavian heritage. FREE!

Add a cup of nostalgia to this classic recipe

Have ice cold 3/4 of a cup of butter, chop fine into two cups of flour, mix with 1/2 cup ice water a little at a time using a fork to mix it. Flour board and pin. Turn out dough and roll to the thickness of a silver dollar; sprinkle well with grated sharp cheddar cheese and salt; roll it up like a newspaper and roll out about six inches in width and as long as the dough will admit; cut in strips 1/4 inch wide, place in unbuttered pan, sprinkle with cheese and coarse salt. Bake at 450 degrees for 12 minutes. DAYTON AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, Cook Book, pg. 114.

Don’t be bored! Join us for a fun afternoon of vintage pastimes. $5/person donation to Beltrami Bingo – chock full of local trivia! Plenty of prizes, and plenty of options for player of all ages - Ticket to Ride, Bemidjiopoly, Clue, locomotive-themed jigsaw puzzles and more. All proceeds support the Historical Society.

JUNE GENEALOGY
Saturday, June 9th at 11am

Ever wonder who your father’s father’s father was? Learn how to research your family history using resources available in our reference library. Kids will enjoy making Father’s Day cards with complimentary craft supplies. Browse our museum store for that perfect present for dad. Or, give him the gift of history: Family Memberships for new or renewing members are discounted 10% (in-person, one-day only).

Calendar of Events

THROUGHOUT SPRING - HISTORY BOOK CLUB

This year we’re reading a beloved classic about place-naming in the United States written during World War II in a conscious effort to pay tribute to the heritage of the nation’s peoples. George R. Steward’s love of the surprising story, and his focus not just on language but on how people interact with their environment, make Names on the Land a unique window into the history and sociology of America. Engage with other members by using the hashtag #BCHS-BookClub and posting questions, comments or your favorite excerpts to our Twitter account, @BeltramiHistory.

SAVE-THE-DATES:

June 13th: Community Pint Night at Bemidji Brewing
June 30th: BCHS Annual Meeting at the History Center
July 26th: Melodrama Fundraiser at the County Fairgrounds

BINGO AND BOARD GAMES
Saturday, May 19th at 4pm

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CHEESE STRAWS

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To paint a picture, or write a letter,
Bake a cake, or plant a seed;
Ponder the difference between worse and need?
Dust if you must, but there’s not much time,
With rivers to swim, and mountains to climb:
Music to hear, and books to read; Friends to cherish, and life to lead.
Dust if you must, but the world’s out there
With the sun in your eyes, and the wind in your hair;
A flutter of snow, a shower of rain,
This day will not come around again.
Dust if you must, but if you must,
Old age will come and it’s not kind,
And when you go (and you must)
Yourself, will make more dust.

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After a nearly $2 million restoration job, the Beltrami County Historical Society moved into the building in October of 2010. The old depot now houses the Trails of Time exhibit, a research room, meeting room, gift shop, and archives. The building is also home to the Northern Iron Horse Rail Road Society. Instead of being demolished, Bemidji’s Great Northern Depot became a repository for the history of which it is a part and a place for visitors to enjoy learning about that history. ➤

Bemidji’s Great Northern Depot

Bemidji’s first Great Northern Depot was built in 1896 just west of the current building. As Bemidji grew, there was a need for a larger, more modern depot that could accommodate passengers as well as freight. The Bemidji Commercial Club, forerunner to the Chamber of Commerce, looked to James J. Hill, Great Northern Railroad mogul, to commission a new depot.

Just east of the old wooden depot, the Union Station, a modern brick structure, was built in 1910. Not to be outdone by the competition, Hill commissioned the new Great Northern Depot and made the announcement on April 24, 1912, at Bemidji’s Markham Hotel. Construction would begin immediately with George Krezat as contractor. The brick and limestone depot would be 217 feet long by 32 feet wide (7,000 square ft.).

We have many people to thank for all they do for us at the Historical Society throughout the year and over the past 68 years of the Historical Society. Many donate time and money with no desire for acknowledgement. Such as: renewing your membership, making additional monetary donations, or donating items from your family’s history related to our area, photos, doing research for us, attending events and programs, and sharing our county history with family and friends.

I’d like to highlight one individual who has donated her time and gift skills in designing and laying out the last issue of our newsletter. Jackie Pechin and her husband are fairly new to our area and Jackie has a creative design business called ‘BareBonz Design’. Jackie also did the design and layout of this issue and we thank Ms. Pechin for giving of her talent and time.

The mission of the Beltrami County Historical Society is to provide community services to preserve and interpret the history of which it is a part, and a place for visitors to enjoy learning about that history.

There’s no Better Time to Visit a Museum
by Sue Bruns, BCHS Board Member

Have you been to the Depot lately? Oftentimes we hear visitors say that they’ve lived here all my life, but I’ve never been to this museum before.” There’s no better time to check out the Great Northern Depot, home to the Beltrami County Historical Society and museum. We also love to hear about other museums you’ve visited recently. Send us a picture or two and a paragraph about your visit to a museum, and we will share your information in our newsletter and/or on our website.

This month’s feature museum is the MARSHALL COUNTY MUSEUM IN WARREN, MN

In April of 2017, I accompanied our director to Warren, Minnesota, for a meeting of the Minnesota Historic Preservationist. I didn’t know Warren before, but about a hundred years ago, my father and his family lived in the Warren area for a while. Warren has been in the news several times for an incident that occurred in August of 1979 involving a glowing UFO that hit a sheriff’s squad car, leaving the driver/deputy sheriff stunned and the vehicle with a broken headlight and windshield (see photo on pg. 5). You can learn more about the incident and see the squad car at the Marshall County Museum, but there’s much more to see.

The museum, located at the Marshall County Fairgrounds, includes Settlers’ Square, a small village of the 1880s, complete with a train depot, a church, storefront shops, log cabins, a country school and more. Inside the exhibit hall you’ll find a wide assortment of items ranging from war relics to agricultural tools and a collection of antique vehicles. For more information, check out their website and then visit this great not-so-little museum: http://www.mnhistoricw.org/museums/county-museums/marshall-county/
An Interview With Lowell O'Brien; Bridge and Building Crewman

by Bernie Uran

I interviewed Lowell O'Brien on February 16, 2016 in Bemidji. Lowell and his crew worked for the Northern Pacific Railroad, January 1, 1949—when he was hired out of Bemidji, MN. At the time—as his grandfather worked for a cedar pole company. In fact, Lowell was born in Gemmell. His mother went there to stay with her parents as the time approached well as other assignments.

Lowell was raised by his parents, Guy R. and Blanche O'Brien, near Hines, MN. His grandparents were living in Gemmell, MN, at the time—as his grandfather worked for a cedar pole company. In fact, Lowell was born in Gemmell. His mother went there to stay with her parents as the time approached well as further south.

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