

A Brief History of John and Mary Elm

These packets of keepsakes will go to many people. Friends of Mary and John, John's brother and sisters-in-law, Mary's sisters and brother. But most of all they are going to their 20 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren. There will also be some extra packets to give to great-grandchildren not born as of this date, June 3rd of 1982. What follows is a brief history of the two unique and wonderful people that you all knew and loved that have now left us.

Mary Leota Eather Gonyon was born July 27, 1904 in Gould City, Michigan. Her mother was Maryanne Polly Gonyon. The Polly's had come to Upper Michigan from Ohio in a covered wagon to claim the free homestead land offered by the U.S. Government. Maryanne was one of nine or ten children, most of whom died as children. She was the only one of this large family to have children of her own. Her father was Isaac Gonyon, a French-Canadian widower who came from Canada with his team of huge trained oxen to look for work. Maryanne Polly and Isaac Gonyon married and homesteaded land next to the Polly farm. Isaac farmed during the summer and worked as a logger, and lumberjack in the winter. They had six children: Mary, Joseph, Stephen, Edith, Ellen, and Amy. They were very poor. Mary, the oldest, was only able to attend school until about the fifth grade. Then she had to stay home to work on the farm.

John Elm was born John Elm in Violet, a small logging camp near Gould City on September 15, 1897. His mother was Marie Elba Beng Elm. She was an orphan who was born in Helsinki, Finland. She was a servant who saved her money from the time she was child to buy her passage on an emigrant ship to the United States. She arrived nearly destitute in a strange country, unable to speak a word of English. She worked as a servant until she married. She spoke Finnish, Swedish, and English. She was only 4 ft. 10 inches tall but was a woman of great willpower and strength.

John's father was John Elm Sr. He was born in Stockholm, Sweden. He was the only son in a family with five daughters and one son. He was apprenticed as a Hydraulic Machine Engineer at the age of fourteen. (In the days before electricity lumber mill machinery was run by the power of falling water. He was trained to set up these systems.) When he was eighteen years old he signed a contract to come to the United States to set up a lumbermill in Upper Michigan where he met Marie Beng. They married and homesteaded a farm near Gould City. They had six sons and one daughter, Wilhelm, Fredrick, Oscar, John, Victor, and Anna. In addition to farming the Elm family owned a commercial fishery with their own boats and dock. They also ran a lumbering operation for many years. But John Sr. was suffering from a kidney deformity and the resulting infections that eventually

killed him. He was nearly six and a half feet tall and known for his strength but as his health failed John Chin Jr. was forced to drop out of school to help his ailing father. He had only about ~~the~~ seventh grade education because of this. The Gongon and Chin farms were near Gould City which is in Mackinaw County on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. It was a small, isolated community where every family knew the other families very well.

Navy Leota Esther Chin and John Chin Jr. were married on April 2, 1921 when she was sixteen and he was twenty-three. They went to work at a lumbercamp almost at once. The early years of their marriage was spent in lumbering and fishing but John had trapped fur bearing animals as a sideline since he was a small boy and more and more of his time was spent on this occupation.

They made a trip to Florida where his brother Joel had moved. There he became partners with a man named Snake Johnson, an ex-convict who engaged of killing several men. They trapped and shot alligators and snakes in the Florida Everglades for their hides. Navy helped skin and stretch the hides and the venture was very profitable. However they soon became afraid that Snake Johnson might kill them too, and so they got out of the alligator and snake business and returned to Michigan. When the State of Michigan started a force of authorized trappers to catch animals feeding on livestock John was hired. He worked for the State of Michigan for about 10 years and then went to work for the Federal

Bureau of Biological Survey which also hired trappers to trap animals such as wolves, coyotes, bobcats, and bears which kill livestock. During the years in Michigan he began teaching other trappers as a sideline along with trapping beavers, musk, etc for their fur. His new job with the Federal government led to many transfers as John became a trouble-shooter for the Department, being transferred wherever a big problem needed solving. He worked in several states. Navy and John had a house trailer, several tents, and a panel truck. Most of the time they lived in their rigs instead of a house because they were moving around so much. By this time they had four children; Clifford Bell, born in 1924, Louise, Joy, born in 1926, Lorraine Ann, born in 1930, and Rose Marie, born in 1937.

John continued to develop his trapping courses for fur trappers. He wrote columns for several trapping magazines. He wrote and published 6 books on trapping which he sold thru the mail along with scents, trap-covers, and other trapping supplies. In 1940 John contracted a spinal inflammation which caused him great pain. It was impossible for him to do the walking and heavy pack carrying needed in trapping. The Doctors told him he would probably never recover and to live in a warm dry climate. John and Navy looked in several states but finally decided on Southern California. They moved to Sun Valley, (then called Roscoe) in March of 1941.

They bought a vacant lot and began building a house. Before the house was finished people were stopping to ask if it were for rent and they realized there was a great need of housing in the area due to the burgeoning aircraft industry. They decided to build rental units instead of the stone they had originally planned on having. As they needed money for the construction both Mary and John went to work in the aircraft factories. They built many of their rentals with the help of their children, doing the actual construction themselves. They also moved in houses from the area cleared for extending the airfield. In all they acquired nearly 100 apartments, houses, furnished rooms, etc. John quit his job at Lockheed after a year or so but the strain of working eight hours a day and then building many more hours a day started a heart condition. Mary and John ran their business, The Old Trappers Lodge, for 40 years with their children's help. They lived to see 20 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren. John was a man of fierce determination and great pride in his family. He was also a great storyteller and loved being a character. He started dressing in western style as publicity for his trapping and rental businesses but continued it because he loved the attention and being considered unique, which he was! He built huge cement statues as a memorial to his wife and children, using their faces and names for his creations. He assembled a huge, unique museum collection of western oddities. He was written about in many magazines. A program on public television was about him. He is mentioned in books on folk art as a genuine American Folk Artist. His Hotel-Museum has been used as a setting for several movies and television programs.

Mary Goyon Ehr was a much more private and reserved person. In her own way she was just as special as John. She raised her family under very trying conditions and always carried a large workload. She always tried to do her best. Her viewpoint on life was always kind and she had many friends. She loved to do things for people, give them little gifts, help them in many ways. When she was younger she loved to cook huge meals every day for her family, friends, employees. She loved people and people loved her. She loved color, her yard was full of flowers and her house was full of bright curtains, furniture, knickknacks. Her home was a bright and cheerful place for friends and family to come to. She was a loving and courageous human being. We shall always miss her.

John Ehr died December 26, 1981, after breaking his hips, of heart failure. He was 84. Mary Ehr died April 2, 1982, of a series of heart attacks, on their 61st anniversary. She was 77.

This packet includes one of the primitive Indian necklaces John made and some pieces of Mary's huge costume jewelry collection. Also a picture taken on their 60th wedding anniversary and a card from their business and perhaps a knickknack from their home. We hope these few things help keep their memory alive in your heart. In this way they still live as a part of us all, their friends and descendants, everyone that knew and loved them.