**Showcasing the DNR: Missing in the Porcupine Mountains**

*Family members search for clues in missing Wisconsin man’s disappearance*

**By JOHN PEPIN**

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On May 9, 1969, Ontonagon County Sheriff Donald R. Powelson sent a letter nearly 300 miles south to a home on Fremont Avenue in Madison, Wisconsin.

There, the parents of a second-year University of Wisconsin student had been waiting for more than a year for news concluding the case of their son, Michael, who had gone missing in April 1968 under curious circumstances.

The sheriff wrote that when the snow left that spring, a search had resumed as planned.

“We organized many search parties and combed the entire area thoroughly without results,” the sheriff wrote. “Also, there was a very extensive air search conducted.

“We are sure that you would like to know that many local citizens gave of their time and efforts assisting in the search parties. We are now giving up the search as we feel we have done everything possible.”

More than half a century later, the case remains the only unresolved missing persons case at Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park.

**The disappearance**

On April 22, 1968, the morning edition of the Wisconsin State Journal reported that Easter break had concluded for college students. The airport in Madison had been packed with students the previous day, with at least 34 flights arriving.

“It’s back to the books for University of Wisconsin students, and not too many of them looked happy about this prospect as they stepped from planes and buses Sunday,” wrote reporter John E. Mollwitz.

“… The weatherman is predicting cloudy skies and rain for today, an atmosphere devised to dampen not only the ground, but any energy that might have been built up over the vacation.

“For many, however, that energy will have to be restored quickly. For the undergraduates, there are the fears that come with final examinations.”

Nineteen-year-old student Michael Larson lived in the dorms while attending classes at the University of Wisconsin, but that Monday morning he had been at his parents’ home on Fremont Avenue.

At about 10:30 a.m., Michael told his mother he was leaving to go get his hair cut.

She didn’t realize she would never see him again.

Michael left in his green, 1962 Volkswagen sedan, wearing green trousers and a black sweatshirt.

Investigators would later determine he had also taken a poncho and a map of Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. He had withdrawn $650 from his savings account at the Lake City Bank, leaving a balance of just over $40.

**Strange clues**

Two days after Michael left his parents’ home, a Michigan Department of Conservation (precursor to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources) officer discovered a vehicle parked on a remote side road, at a gravel pit off the South Boundary Road in the Porcupine Mountains.

The place where the car was found is about 2 miles from Highway 107, which is the eastern gateway to the roughly 60,000-acre park known for its numerous hiking trails, remote atmosphere, superb vistas and storied hemlock and hardwood forests.

The door to the abandoned vehicle was unlocked, the keys were in the ignition and the gas tank was full.

Police said the V-21221-tagged Wisconsin license plates from the car were missing and there were small drops of blood found on the front seat cushions in the car’s interior.

There were no signs of the driver.

The sheriff speculated that whoever removed the license plates from the vehicle might have cut their hand, resulting in the finding of blood. It appeared to him that the car had been abandoned.

“The owner of the car was traced through oil change stickers,” an article in the Ironwood Daily Globe reported.

A federal law requiring vehicle identification numbers on passenger vehicles was passed in 1968 and took effect Jan. 1 the following year.

**Odd coincidence**

Sheriff Powelson contacted police in Hurley, the nearest Wisconsin town, asking them to perform a license check to determine who owned the green Volkswagen found in the woods at the park.

At 8 a.m. April 24, a phone rang at the home of a patrol officer in Madison.

“He asked if I was Michael Larson,” the officer wrote in his report. “I stated that I was. And then he asked me what my car was doing in Hurley, or in the area of Hurley.

“I informed him that my car was presently at home, and he stated that he had my name from a license check on this vehicle, which they had picked up for abandonment.

I informed him that they must have the wrong Michael Larson, and that I was on the police department in Madison, and he asked me if I could check further and find out anything about the situation.”

An officer was dispatched to the Larson home on Fremont Avenue.

Mary Larson told police she hadn’t seen her son since Monday when he left for a haircut – now almost 48 hours earlier.

“Mrs. Larson stated that her son, Michael, is a top student at the University of Wisconsin. He has no known illness, no enemies, no family or girlfriend problems,” the officer typed in his report. “She also stated they have no relatives in the Hurley area, and she has no idea why her son would be there at this time.

“She stated, Michael has always been very quiet and has been described as an introvert by friends of the family.”

Officer Larson called the Hurley police chief back and told him that Michael John Larson, 19, of Madison was “being reported officially missing today.”

Michael “Mike” Larson was described as 6 feet tall, weighing about 170 pounds, with brown hair and blue eyes. Madison police confirmed he “had never been in trouble with the law, other than a traffic accident.”

An article published on Friday, April 26 by the Wisconsin State Journal said investigation by police in Upper Michigan had revealed no leads to the whereabouts of the missing college student.

“The Ontonagon chief said he was attempting to locate a Michigan state policeman or a deputy sheriff who reportedly saw Larson’s car, with only a man driver, traveling slowly Tuesday in the gravel pit area where the car was found,” the article said.

Madison Police Capt. Hiram Wilson told the newspaper that as of late Thursday night, Mary and Glen Larson had received no word from their son.

“They said his university grades are excellent; he is not facing military service at this time; and he had no apparent problems that would cause him to leave without telling them,” Wilson said.

**Portrait of a missing person**

Mike Larson was the oldest of four boys in his family. At the time of his disappearance, his brother Tom was 18 and in his first year of college, also at the University of Wisconsin.

He also had a brother Glenn, who was then 15 and a brother, Dan, who was 12.

Mike didn’t spend a lot of time listening to music or playing or watching baseball or football. As a kid, he liked to build things with erector sets. He didn’t have many friends outside the immediate neighborhood where he grew up.

Tom said Mike knew how to read topographic maps and use a compass and he had backpacked, canoed and camped before. He enjoyed paddling on the Wisconsin River.

“We had a cottage north of Madison when we were growing up,” Tom said.

The cottage was purchased in 1961 on the shoreline of Patrick Lake, a 50-acre lake situated in Adams County. The Larsons loved spending time there, and they still own the cottage there today.

“Mike was always looking at maps,” Tom said.

He had an interest in geology, a subject that he might have eventually declared as his major. He read nonfiction and loved to research things. With plans and instructions he’d obtained from a magazine, he and Tom built a kayak that he used a lot.

Tom still has it.

Mike wasn’t an angler or a hunter, but he loved to plan trips. He and Tom had gone canoeing in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in northern Minnesota, and on another trip, Mike took another brother into Canada.

Tom’s first backpacking trip was with Mike when they traveled to Grand Portage, Minnesota to take a boat to Isle Royale National Park, hike its considerable length and then ride a boat back to the Upper Peninsula.

“Mike liked being outdoors and doing those kinds of things,” Tom said.

In fact, in March 1966, when the two boys were in still in high school, they took a spring break trip with a neighbor to the Porcupine Mountains – the same place where Mike’s car had been discovered in April 1968.

The plan to go to the Porcupine Mountains to hike and stay in cabins might best have been postponed until a warmer time of the year.

“It was his idea (Mike’s) and it was a tough hike,” Tom said.

The trio of boys encountered hip-deep snow to walk through. Their itinerary included spending nights in cabins at Lake of the Clouds, Mirror Lake and the Buckshot Cabin, situated along the Lake Superior shore.

The trip provided lasting memories for the boys.

**Hunting for clues**

On Nov. 14, 1968 – a day before the opening of the firearm deer hunting season in the Upper Peninsula – Sheriff Powelson asked hunters to be on the lookout for any clues related to the disappearance of Michael Larson.

That same day, Powelson wrote a letter to Glen Larson telling him investigators were still looking for evidence or clues into the whereabouts of his son.

“There are three mine shafts in the area where your son’s car was found, and the entrance of one is covered with rock. The state park personnel have been checking these mines regularly,” Powelson wrote.

The sheriff said the license plates had not been found.

“I have again contacted the radio station and requested them to rebroadcast this information on the air,” Powelson said. “Now that deer season starts tomorrow it is possible someone may be able to help us in our search.”

Powelson said he had also contacted the U.S. Border Patrol in case Michael might be in Canada.

The sheriff’s letter to Glen Larson came after Larson had written to the sheriff to inquire about the case.

“We appreciate you feeling you could have probably done some—thing to find him if you had searched too,” Powelson wrote. “But let me assure you again there really was nothing you could have done that was not already done by people who know the area.”

Powelson closed the letter reassuring Mr. Larson that he and his deputies had not forgotten about his son.

An article in the Ironwood Daily Globe on Nov. 14 said, “Hunters have been asked to report any clothing or other items they might stumble onto while hunting, and to report any cabin that appears to have been lived in or broken into.”

**Discoveries**

Two days into the hunting season, a hunter from the Detroit area was in the Porcupine Mountains hunting a couple hundred yards from the rim of Lake Superior, about a mile east of the Buckshot Cabin.

He saw something ahead of him in the distance, protruding from a cover of about 2 inches of freshly fallen snow.

“He saw what looked like a boot laying on its side with a long branch sticking out of it,” said former park ranger David Young in an account he published in his book “True Bear Tales.” “On investigating, he found that it was a boot laying on its side, but it was not a long branch sticking out of it. It was a human leg bone still attached to a foot inside of the boot.”

Young wrote that the hunter was shaken as he blazed a trail to the shoreline to mark the location and then left the area to report his discovery.

The next day, a search of that immediate area was conducted by Sheriff Powelson, deputy Gene Shankle, park manager Dave Balbough, ranger Andrew Poulos, conservation officer Karl Haltug and Michigan State Police Trooper John Carey.

“They turned up the mate to the boot about 50 feet away from the first one, and several pieces of bone which had been chewed on,” Young wrote. “The boot, which was still laced with the foot inside, had deep teeth marks in the inseam and sole. The other boot had chew marks on the heel. The bite marks appear to have been those of a bear.”

The Escanaba Daily Press reported that the human bones recovered had been sent to the State Crime Laboratory in Lansing in hopes of determining sex, age, height, weight and other details.

In January 1969, Sheriff Powelson told the Bessemer Herald that a study of the human remains by the University of Michigan Science Department determined that they were those of a white male over 17 years of age.

“The department said there was insufficient bone material to determine the height or weight of the unknown individual,” the newspaper reported.

Powelson said no search of the mountainous area where the remains were found would take place until after the spring thaw.

**Mysterious campsite**

In February 1969, a campsite was discovered by accident in a remote section of the Porcupine Mountains, about 10 miles from the place where the human remains had been discovered three months earlier.

Speculation that the abandoned campsite might have belonged to Michael Larson were apparently dashed in October 1969 when the Ironwood Daily Globe reported that a man named John Corser of Land O’Lakes, Wisconsin claimed the gear as his.

The newspaper said the campsite “contained a canoe, tent and a supply of canned goods that had been wrapped in plastic bags and hung from trees.”

Corser was reportedly “unable to explain why he waited so long” to claim the items.

Tom said Mike worked at a youth camp one summer near Land O’Lakes. He wondered whether he and Mr. Corser might have met.

This week, Tom Larson contacted Mr. Corser, who at 90 years old still lives in the area.

He told Tom he moved from Land O’Lakes to Phelps, Wisconsin and eventually Ontonagon. Corser said his camp was located along the Little Iron River, which has its headwaters inside the park, west of Summit Peak and east of Mirror Lake.

The camp was there for recreational dispersed camping. He said he didn’t recall why it took him so long to claim the gear from the camp, but said he remembered that when he set up the camp it would be some time before he would be able to return to it.

Corser said his family stayed in many of the cabins in the park. He did not recall seeing anyone matching Michael Larson’s description. He said he never worked at a youth camp in northern Wisconsin and did not ever recall meeting Mike.

He said he somewhat remembers newspaper articles about Michael Larson going missing. He thought he might have even helped in the search.

**Speculation**

As is often the case with mysteries, speculation can lead to numerous theories, which remain nothing more than that, until they’re proven.

The complete answer to what happened to Michael Larson awaits discovery or is lost to time and the ever-deepening forests of the Porcupine Mountains.

“My brothers think he may have gone up there and committed suicide,” Tom Larson said, a contention he doubts.

In fall 1967, Michael had dropped his college classes, but picked them back up again in the spring of 1968 – perhaps to maintain a college deferment from being drafted into the Vietnam War.

Tom said he and Mike both had low draft numbers, which would have increased their chances of being drafted. He said if his brother had wanted to avoid the draft, going to the Porcupine Mountains wouldn’t be the best plan.

It certainly wouldn’t get him to Canada.

In 1970, the local draft board in Dane County, Wisconsin sent a letter to Michael Larson at his parent’s home back on Fremont Avenue in Madison. It said the board reviewed his file on May 18 of that year and his delinquent status had been removed.

During initial interviews after Michael’s disappearance, his father had told police he thought his son “might have planned a trip someplace, possibly Canada, and does not think that foul play has occurred.”

Tom said the car being found left unlocked with the keys inside and a full tank of gas might indicate that he wanted the vehicle to go back to his family.

Glenn Larson told Tom he had been present when their father got a phone call about the bones being discovered in the Porcupine Mountains.

“I remember Dad telling the caller not to call again,” Glenn said. “I think he figured it was better not knowing and having some hope than finding out Mike was dead.”

Tom said that over the years since his brother’s disappearance, when the family phone would ring and then stop, or when someone would answer and the caller would hang up, his father would suggest that maybe it was Michael trying to call them or wanting to speak with them.

“He never gave up believing Mike was still alive,” Tom said.

Glen Larson died in 1992, 24 years after his eldest son’s disappearance. Mary Larson suffered a stroke and died in 1978. She had been the last family member to see Michael, back in 1968 when he went out for that haircut.

Author David Young speculated about the human remains found in the park.

“A bear was almost assuredly involved in eating part of the body, but was it involved in the death?” he asked readers. “Nobody knows.”

Mike Knack, current park manager at Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park and experienced search and rescue team member there, said solo hiking is always a risky venture, especially in the early spring or late fall when temperatures can have extreme changes and snowfall is still possible.

“These are prime conditions for hypothermia, and/or getting lost due to fresh snowfall,” Knack said. “Depending on the terrain and elevation, the ground could have been snow-covered or muddy. Many sections of the trail are rocky and rooty. Michael could have sustained injury from a fall.

“Additionally, April is often the time of year when bears come out of hibernation and most desperately (are) in search of calories. The park typically experiences the highest frequency of bear-human conflict in the early spring.”

At this same time of year, when Michael disappeared, bears are opportunistic omnivores and will readily raid dumpsters, garbage canisters and campsites to claim a meal.

“I do find it to be highly unlikely that Michael’s disappearance and the discovery of the boots and bones are not related,” Knack said. “Although we do not know the exact route that Michael took, he had previously hiked to Buckshot cabin and was somewhat familiar with that area.”

**New horizons**

Over the past few years, Tom has led a renewed search by his family to try to conclusively determine what happened to Michael Larson.

Tom has gathered old police reports and newspaper articles and has communicated with law enforcement agencies, trying to find people who might have more information about this case.

With his parents deceased, he is unable to ask them any questions.

In November 2019, Tom provided the results of a test of his DNA to the Special Investigation Unit of the Michigan State Police in Lansing.

Like the sheriff did back in 1968, Tom Larson hopes hunters heading into the woods this firearm deer hunting season will keep an eye open for bones or other artifacts that perhaps could be compared with his DNA for a positive match.

Even after all these years, there could be something out there to find.

Attempts have been made, via law enforcement agencies, to find out whether the bones collected in 1968 are still available for testing. In all cases, either maintained records do not date back that far, no longer exist or – like the bones themselves – could not be located.

Michigan State Police confirmed in 2020 that the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, which is the national-level registry of unidentified remains, has no record of the Porcupine Mountains bones.

This past summer, plans were developed for law enforcement officers to conduct a search with cadaver dogs of the area where the bones were found.

The officers were planning to reach the site by boat, dependent on the relative calmness of the waters of Lake Superior.

In early June, dogs searched the area where Michael’s car was discovered. Tom and his brother, Dan, also came to the park in June and visited the Buckshot Cabin and other park locations.

On Aug. 16, park staff used a park rescue boat to transport a sheriff’s deputy, three state police personnel and two cadaver dogs to the location where the boots and bones had been found.

“The area was searched thoroughly but nothing of any notoriety was located,” Knack said.

A state police detective in nearby Wakefield has also reviewed information about the case, including logs written by visitors at park cabins dating back to the time of Michael’s disappearance.

At this point, the Larson family’s investigative options are dwindling. Tom hopes this article will jog recollections or inspire people with new information on this incident to come forward to finally conclude the still unresolved mystery.

If you have any information about the disappearance of Michael Larson of Madison, Wisconsin, please contact [Michael Knack](mailto:Knackm@michigan.gov), park manager, at 906-885-5274 or [John Pepin](mailto:pepinj@michigan.gov), story author and Showcasing feature series editor, at 906-226-1352

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