

Hard Hat Divers

Marie Thompson and Jerry Norick
form a union that carries on a family tradition



Marie makes a point to Jerry on a 1996 job at the Cutler Magner salt docks in Duluth.

All photos courtesy of Marie and Jerry Norick.

By Patrick Lapinski

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Editor's note:

Pat Lapinski, a Superior native with a passion for maritime history, prepared this article on a longtime family-owned business and most graciously provided the article to the readers of the *Nor'Easter*. We are pleased and proud to publish the article and its accompanying photos. Part 1 of the article ran in the 4th Quarter 2009 issue, Part 2 in the First Quarter 2010. This is the third and final part of the article.

As a project inspector for Soo Line Railroad during the 1950s, Jerry Norick found himself on the road quite often. For example, during the winter of 1957-58 he was assigned to oversee a two-year upgrade to the Soo Line's iron ore dock at Ashland, Wisconsin. The scope of the project was to extend the depth of the sheet piling along the face

of the dock. The goal was to prevent erosion of the dock cribbing caused by cavitation from ship propellers.

To avoid interrupting the shipping schedule, work began in the late fall and continued into early spring. The job was not complex or unusually difficult in any way, but much of the work was a cause of some concern for Jerry. While he could inspect the work being done above the water, Jerry had no real way of assessing the quality of the work being done beneath; he would have to take it on faith that the work was being done properly.

Two teams of divers were contracted to perform the underwater portion of the work. Over the course of the project Jerry befriended a number of the divers, in particular John Thompson of Duluth and his daughter, Marie, who accompanied her father as his tender. At the end of the day the workers would often congregate in one of the local pubs. Ever curious, Jerry found the diving teams fascinating and took advantage of the opportunity during the course of conversation one night to persuade some of the men to let him suit up for a dive, if time and weather allowed. The men all laughed at Jerry's desire to join Neptune's legions, but agreed that a short dive could do no harm.1

The next afternoon, when Jerry recalled the previous evening's conversation, the men rather sheepishly shifted from foot to foot before nervously agreeing to let Jerry take a test dive. A half hour later, layered in a body suit of waterproof material, wool socks, lead boots and rubber gloves and ordained with a brass breastplate and matching cylindrical helmet, Jerry stepped into the hole cut in the ice and disappeared from sight.



John Thompson needed a tender—and daughter Marie needed a job. Here they are at the Soo Line Ore Dock in Ashland in the 1950s.

As he dropped below the surface to a world of darkness and silence, Jerry took a deep breath. In the late 1950s man had only dreamed of walking on the moon, but for a moment, the surface of the lake bottom looked as alien as the face of any extra terrestrial body. The feeling of weightlessness, combined with a slight tug and pull from the current along the dock, added to Jerry's sense that he had discovered a whole new world. His dive lasted only about 10 minutes, and it would be a few more years before Jerry would make a second dive, but in that short amount of time he had satisfied his curiosity and piqued an interest that in a few years time would change the course of his life.

Being dive tender to her father was not the first career choice that the 19-year old Marie Thompson envisioned. Marie planned on a career in accounting and in May 1957 had just completed her first year of college. "You'd better earn some money if you want to continue your education," cautioned Marie's mother, Tyne, as Marie looked ahead to continuing that fall at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Marie didn't need to look too hard for work because her father already had a solution in mind for his daughter — she could assist him on a job in Ashland. "I need a tender," he told Marie and Tyne. It was summer, the weather was warm, and the sun-filled sky belied the change of season just around the corner. Marie accepted the offer.

Several months later, scanning the horizon, Marie saw little aside from the vast white, frozen expanse of Chequamegon Bay. Dressed in heavy wool pants, thick wool socks inside knee-high rubber boots, with layers of wool shirts beneath a large parka, she was barely recognizable. Concentrating on the work at hand, she kept an eye on the air compressor gauge while tending to the air hose and other lines draped over a hole in the ice. Focusing on the work helped to negate the bite of a stinging wind.

Where the ice piled ashore at Ashland, it created a harsh landscape of ridges, cones, mounds and translucent ice shards littered like broken glass. The sun did little to generate warmth. Marie knew that a clear sky on a winter day usually meant bitter cold.

Following the retirement of James Thompson, the Ashland ore dock project would establish Marie as her father's permanent dive tender for the

next several years. Far from thinking of herself as a pioneer, Marie just loved being outdoors and helping her father. If she was looking for romance, she'd already found it in the job and, unexpectedly, in a friendship that was kindling between her and the young railroad inspector, Jerry Norick. Following each dive, John now found himself keeping a bemused eye on the activity between the two.

To the Thompsons, the father-daughter team was business as usual, but to some in the male-dominated work environs in places like northern Minnesota, the sight of a young woman on a project provoked controversy. In one instance, the guards at a North Shore taconite plant refused to allow Marie to enter the property. She was allowed to proceed only after John threatened to not do the work.

Marie did not return to UMD that fall or winter, and throughout the following summer and fall she continued to assist her father on diving projects. It was a busy year, with projects on the old North Western Hanna dock, the Interstate Bridge Center Pier West for the Great Northern Railroad, the Superior City sewage plant and the Potlatch Dam at Cloquet.

In 1959, Jerry Norick began a two year stint in the Army. During his time in the service, Jerry warmed to the idea of commercial diving and planned to attend a West Coast diving school once he was discharged. His plan, however, never came to fruition. Following his release from the military, Jerry enrolled in the diving school but forfeited his tuition when he returned home to provide care for his ailing mother. Things have a way of working themselves out, and for Jerry and Marie, the courtship that slowly

evolved from their chance meeting in the shadow of an ore dock reached its inevitable conclusion when the couple married in 1961.

Within a few years, Marie relinquished her job as her father's tender to stay home following the birth of Peter, the first of four children for Jerry and Marie Norick. During this period

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of time John worked with a number of different tenders. Milo Miller, a student at the University of Minnesota Duluth, accompanied him to Grand Forks, North Dakota, while Dale Dahlen tended him in Two Harbors on a project to fortify the foundation of the Two Harbors power house, along Lake Superior. In 1969, Jack Rath was frequently seen working with John on projects around the harbor.

Jerry Norick, for his part, pursued his interest in diving under the tutelage of John Thompson. "I can teach you everything you need to know," John told Jerry.

Jerry's first lesson would come at Two Harbors on a warm June afternoon. In the summer, John would normally dive without wearing gloves. To prevent water from entering his suit, he would use snap tubing around his wrists. It seemed like the reasonable thing for me to do too, thought Jerry, as he entered the water with no gloves and the tubing around his wrists.

"I was in the water ... that was the second dive I ever made ... beautiful visibility, nice day for a dive and everything," recalled Jerry. He soon noticed that he couldn't feel his fingers. "About 10 minutes into the dive I looked at my hands, and they were blue."

Jerry returned to the surface, his hands almost as useless as stumps. While the result wasn't what he had expected, Jerry learned a lot that day about himself, and his environment. From that day on he always wore gloves, and he never lost his respect for how cold Lake Superior is, even in summer.

Jerry liked diving, but he did not plan on a career as a diver. Rather than work as a partner with John, he looked for a line of work similar to the position he held before entering the service. The possibility existed of returning to the Soo Line, and Jerry discussed his options with the railroad. After being away for two years he decided it would be unfair to bump someone else from a job just so he could have his old one back. He continued looking elsewhere.

At the same time, Mike Stark, the chief engineer for Zenith Dredge, was looking for a field engineer. Stark had been the lead engineer for Zenith on the Soo Line job at Ashland. He recalled being impressed by Jerry's work, so he contacted him about coming to work for Zenith. By the end of 1961 Jerry was employed full-time as a field engineer for Zenith Dredge.

By 1966 Jerry was diving for Zenith, using the skills he had learned from John Thompson. From that time onward, about a third of the work he did for Zenith involved diving. Although the start of Jerry's diving ca-

reer coincided with the widespread adaptation of SCUBA (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) equipment in commercial diving, Jerry remained dedicated to the use of the hard-hat style of diving and had no intention of changing methods.

Very little of the work Jerry did for Zenith was as adventurous as some of the early years of Horace and John Thompson, unless you ponder the retrieval of a 120-ton Burlington Northern locomotive that went off top of a train trestle into the harbor or the raising of Zenith's steam tug Essayons, which sank while fueling at its dock at 14th Avenue West in Duluth.

In 1969, Jerry worked on one of the biggest projects of his diving career, the Superior-to-Cloquet water line. The waterline starts out in Lake Superior, comes ashore to a pumping station on Minnesota Point and re-submerges across the bottom of the bay to come ashore again on the Wisconsin side. The pipeline continues westward across Superior until it goes back under the St. Louis River for a second time before emerging in West Duluth. From there, another pumping station sends the water through a 36-inch pipe, the uphill portion of the pipeline, to Cloquet, 26 miles from its point of origin.

It was on this project that Jerry Norick's diving days nearly came to an end after he suffered a case of the bends. In an interview with Duluth reporter (and longshoreman) Richard Pomeroy, Jerry described his experience as "severe, gnawing aches similar to what severe arthritis must be like..." The working depth at the time of his accident was 70 feet in Lake Superior.

John Thompson also worked on



Peter Norick begins a dive into the waters off Ontonogan, Michigan, in 1989.

the Cloquet waterline project. For John, then 68, it would be one of his last projects. He had been associated with the diving industry for nearly 50 years. Longevity in the business was a hallmark of the Thompson family. John's father Horace continued diving until the age of 72 before relinquishing the helmet. A modern era of diving was rapidly replacing the old-time hard-hat men.

For John, the hard-hat method was what worked for him and he could see no compelling evidence to change. "A good hard-hat man has as much maneuverability as a SCUBA man. And we're warm and dry and comfortable," he said. "I learned this way, and I have no desire to change."



In November 1980 Jerry and Marie's eldest son, Peter, made his first commercial dive. The opportunity came when Zenith Dredge received a call from its customer at Taconite Harbor on Minnesota's North Shore. Because of the way the current sets inside the sheltered area along the dock, it was common for iron ore pellet spillage to form a long ridge about 12 feet off the dock. Zenith had responded to this recurring problem off

and on since the dock opened in the mid 1950s.

On November 16, a ship loading at the dock unexpectedly touched bottom, resting on a ridge of pellets near doors 2 and 3. The vessel was able to continue to load, but the call went out to Zenith to remedy the situation as quickly as possible.

Sending a dive crew to smooth out the ridge normally wasn't a big deal, recalled Jerry, but since it was November, and hunting season, Mike Stark at Zenith could not get enough men to put together a crew. Mike called Jerry looking for help. "They're all back in the bushes," he told Jerry. "To get this crew together, I would be a very unpopular man."

Jerry agreed to drive to Taconite Harbor with Peter, who had recently graduated from high school, and do the job. No one would need to be called in from the deer stand, and the customer would be taken care of. Marie accompanied them as dive tender.

When they arrived at the dock, Jerry had already thought of a partial solution. His first step would be to remove as much of the ridge as he could with as little effort as possible. Explaining his plan to the captain, Jerry persuaded him to keep his ship at the dock, while working his propeller and rudder with as many rpm's as he could safely put on, letting the wash flush the pellets from the stern of the ship. After about a half hour of flushing pellets with its propeller, the ship departed and Jerry and Peter entered the water to begin their part of the job.

Over the next several days they used water from a high-pressure line on the dock to lower the ridge of pellets so that ships could again load. Moving a submerged pile of iron ore

pellets into deeper water was by no means a glamorous job for anyone, but for Peter it marked his entrance into the family line of hard-hat diving.

Small projects like the one at Taconite Harbor were one of the many examples Marie used in an effort to encourage Jerry to strike

out on his own as an independent diver. Jerry refused, remaining steadfast in his loyalty to Zenith until he had no choice.

Six years after the job at Taconite Harbor, in August 1986, Zenith Dredge closed its doors. Jerry parlayed other skills he had learned to pick up work. The year when Jerry became an independent diver, construction was announced for a \$380 million plant for Lake Superior Paper Industries, in West Duluth. Jerry's skill as an engineer secured him the job of laying out the building pilings along the waterfront. The project was the largest steel project undertaken in the state of Minnesota. At the height of this portion of the project, the company was driving about 200 pilings per day for the foundation.

To supplement his income, Jerry also began working in the harbor as a hydrographic surveyor. Hydrographic surveying involves measuring and mapping underwater surfaces to collect data that can be used for dredging, building docks and producing information for inclusion on navigation



Marie and Jerry aboard their tug, the *Horace*.

charts. In 2003 Jerry retired from active diving, shelving the hard hat that had served him well for roughly forty years.

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The end of diving for Jerry did not spell an end to the family tradition. Following in the footsteps of their grandfather and great-grandfather, all three of the Norick boys, Peter, John and James, all began their careers on the decks of work scows and small boats while their father Jerry worked below the surface. For a short while, Jerry and Marie's daughter Patty also tended her father on several dive projects.

In time, all three of the boys took

Peter's uncles John and James help their nephew out when they can, but are gone throughout much of the year, following the other family tradition — sailing on the Great Lakes.

Marie and Jerry, now in their 70s, continue to live an active life just down the hill a little, in a modest house close to the location of John Manton Upton Thompson's original log cabin. Marie runs a boarding stable for horses, a job that keeps her outdoors and active. On rare occasions, Jerry and Marie take their slide projector and family stories out in the public, presenting their history to a new generation of dive enthusiasts. ■

Other dive services are available here

The Noricks don't have a monopoly on diving services in the Twin Ports. Other providers of dive services are AMI Consulting Engineers (Chad Scott's engineering/diving company) and Krech Ojard Consulting Engineers (yes, the "Ojard" is part of the long line of Knife River Ojards, in this case Rich).