

A Retreat



American Legion Post #156 provides the honor guard during an annual Memorial Day service at the Lily cemetery.

LILY'S POPULATION is somewhat of a mystery. There were never that many houses — early families were large. Today nine houses within the city limits are habitable while four stand abandoned. Some are second homes or rentals, but after an exhaustive investigation we're fairly certain three permanent residents live in the tiny hamlet south of Webster. (We found someone who knew them, but she was tight-lipped with names.) More people filter through, drawn by hunting, fishing and even photography.

Howard Christopherson stumbled upon Lily in 2006. The Minneapolis photographer was a guest artist at Northern State University in Aberdeen. After giving a talk he had time to kill before meeting a friend. "I was driving down Highway 12 and thought, 'I'm just going to wander around in the back roads to see what I can find,'" Christopherson recalls. "I had this feeling that I was going to see something really cool to take

to Tiny Lily

Proof that a town is never too small to inspire

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOWARD CHRISTOPHERSON

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Though today's town is quiet, it once bustled with activity. "We had quite a main street," says Jim Anderson, Lily historian.

pictures of." He ended up in Lily, a town he found as charming as its name. "I've always been attracted to abandoned buildings and the like." He photographed Lily's remaining buildings, including a small house with a handmade "For Sale" sign on the front door.

Christopherson called the number on the sign a few days after returning home. After consulting with his wife Kristine, a "prairie gal" at heart, the home was theirs. "It's just been the greatest thing for me since then. I love it out there," he says. Christopherson uses the home, dubbed the Lily Pad, as a creative retreat, visiting up to twice a month in milder seasons to kick back, mow the lawn or pick fruit from his apple tree — an alluring feature when deciding to purchase.

The Lily Pad is also headquarters to the Highway 12 Road Trip Photography Workshop, born when Christopherson drove Sid Kaplan, a friend from New York, to visit the town.

"He was photographing all the grain elevators and all the old sites that you see on Highway 12 on the way out from Minneapolis. I was seeing some of it through his eyes, being more out of his element," Christopherson says. "He was having so much fun and so was I." The pair now lead the workshop, along with photographers Toby Old, from Brooklyn, Tom Quinn Kumpf of El Rito, New Mexico and Will Agar of Minneapolis. "What's been so cool is these guys really started loving Lily as much as I have. They come out on their own dime. I just put them up and feed them," Christopherson says. Around 15 students sign up for the workshop each July. The leaders stay at the Lily Pad with cook Gregory Ochs, from Minneapolis. Students stay in rentals across town. They explore Highway 12, Lily and its back roads, appreciating the history and country charm.

Lily was platted in 1887 and named by Ross Parks, the town's first postmaster, in honor of his sister. The railroad



Minneapolis photographer Howard Christopherson purchased a home in Lily as a creative retreat. The cottage is also headquarters to the Highway 12 Road Trip Photography Workshop. Last year's participants shared camaraderie and a late evening meal (far right).

reached Lily in the late 1890s, making it a bustling distribution point for grain. Soon the town had over 175 residents and numerous businesses, including a drugstore run by the parents of Hubert Humphrey, the politician who became Lyndon Johnson's vice president in 1965. Lily also boasted two banks, a hardware store, grocery store, post office and bar. "We had quite a main street. Just full of buildings on both sides," says Jim Anderson, Lily's historian.

Anderson lives in Webster but was raised in Lily and lived there until he was 24. He's a founder of the Buffalo Plains Historical Foundation, which preserves Lily's history and some of its buildings. The foundation maintains a tiny museum in the former post office. "Lily was famous for our basketball teams back in the early '50s. We had won three district tournaments, plus had a great win over Webster in 1949," Anderson says.

The museum houses trophies, Lily Wildcats jerseys, high school graduation photos and newspaper clippings of important town moments — like when Clark Gable and wife Carole Lombard hunted pheasants near Lily in 1941.

The foundation also preserves the Lutheran church, a Victorian home known as the Corbin house, a filling station and a small heritage park. Their buffalo feed in the Legion hall on the last Sunday in June invites former residents and friends to reminisce about Lily's past. Even more memories are told in a newsletter Anderson distributes each spring.

The town prospered for about 35 years before the real hardships began. A recession after World War I closed both banks by 1924. The railroad closed in 1979 and fire destroyed Lily's six grain elevators. Years of flooding in Day County, starting in 1993, challenged the town as well. "A lot of roads around





Bill Saylor (left) poses with his dog Suzy. “He taught me much of the history of Lily before he passed in 2013,” says Christopherson. Saylor’s funeral was held in Lily’s Lutheran church (above right), which is lovingly maintained by the Buffalo Plains Historical Foundation. A restored claim shack stands just outside of town (lower right).

Lily and all these places have been under water ever since,” Anderson says.

While fishing and hunting prosper, it’s a different climate for farms. Many early homesteads were ruined by floodwaters or taken over by larger operations. However, some farming descendants remain. Gary and Trudy Fossum work land on the east edge of town where Gary has lived all his life. And Bonnie and Steve Headley tend a farm 7 miles west of town that’s been in Bonnie’s family for 70 years — her grandfather bought it in 1946. When Bonnie’s parents retired 20 years ago she and Steve took over. “We’re farm kids at heart, so when we moved here we knew what we had to do to make a go of it. You have to be a very hard working person and you’ve really got to love it; you really have to sacrifice things,” she says.

But she’s proud to be from Lily and thankful to live each peaceful day on the prairie, because she knows not everyone gets to. “There are some young kids that would love to farm but they can’t. They’re unable to purchase any land or even the machinery or cattle. We’re just so satisfied with what we have,” Bonnie explains. “We don’t need a whole lot to be happy — it’s a lot just being family. We’re blessed to live here. We really are.” And maybe that’s why some of the remaining residents are so private. They don’t want their idyllic sanctuary spoiled. 🏡

Howard Christopherson’s next Highway 12 Road Trip Photography Workshop will be held July 20-23. Visit www.IceboxMinnesota.com for more information.



The banks in Lily failed due to the recession after World War I, though the bank building in the forefront still stands.