

“The Mansion”

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I don't recall at what age I became curious about the big white house on the corner, or when I may have first asked my dad about it. “Whose house is that?” “It's owned by a Merickel family” I was told. “Do they live there?” “I don't think so.” he replied.

In my youth that ever-vacant house was simply called the Merickel mansion. Eventually I realized there were several Merickel families living in Wadena. In fact, one of my best childhood friends is a Merickel and is still a good friend today. The only other information I remembered about the “Merickel mansion” family is that the dad and a son each died in separate plane crashes, in Canada, within a year. Over the last 50 years I have not forgotten the little I know about that mansion, but I have had very few occasions to think about it.

In 2018 I started researching the history of Wadena High School basketball. My initial interest was in 3 players from the second half of the 1950's. Upon completion of my research, I decided I would continue by finishing the 1950's and then start working my way back into the 1940's, the 1930's, and all the way back as far as there were no more WHS basketball materials to discover.

I found out Ted Merickel played from 1953-55, and from 1947-50 Pat Merickel was part of a dynamic duo consisting of him and Bob Hedstrom. From 1933-36 Franklin Merickel played. In fact, Franklin was the “6th man” on Wadena's most successful basketball team ever, making it to the 1936 MN State Tournament Championship game against Bemidji, before losing 26-20. The 1922 and 1923 WHS teams participated in those MN State Basketball Tournaments, with Maurice Merickel being on the 1922 team and later a star player for the University of Minnesota.

The Merickel mansion and the Merickel basketball players, is this leading to anything meaningful? Lucky for me, the answer is “yes.” Because of what I have just shared with you, I decided I would search for more details about the tragic events inflicted upon this family. Here is what I found.

In mid-May of 1959, the Merickel family was at their summer home in Sioux Narrows, Ontario. On Thursday, May 21st, Maurice J Merickel, and his brother-in-law, Sylvester Neises, were going to fly some 50 miles to Vermillion Bay to go bear hunting. Mrs. Merickel, and daughter Mary Lou, were expecting them to return Sunday the 24th. When they failed to return, Mrs. Merickel reported them missing.

The Royal Canadian Air Force, after covering 16,000 square miles, called off their search. Maurice 56, and Sylvester 54, were believed to have crashed their plane into Teggau Lake, Ontario. On Tuesday, May 26, a damaged canoe, and a pontoon nose pad were found on the shore of that lake, about halfway to their destination. These items provided sufficient evidence that the plane had crashed into the lake, whose maximum depth is about 600 feet. Dragging efforts were unproductive.

Maurice Merickel Sr. was an experienced pilot, having logged over 2,000 flying hours in the past 6 years, most of them for hunting and fishing excursions. He left behind his wife, two sons, and a daughter.

The following March of 1960, the eldest son Maurice Jr, 28, was about to go on a four-hour aerial wolf hunting expedition. He and his local pilot would fly out of Ear Falls Ontario on Sunday the 6th at 6:30 A.M. Their hunting destination was to the southeast, along the shore of frozen Lac Seul.

An air search was initiated when they failed to return as scheduled. Four Royal Canadian Air Force planes searched into the night and found no trace of the missing plane. Cousin Jack Merickel was one of many civilian pilots that soon joined the search effort. Jack's brother Tom said, "If anyone can get out of those woods, he can. He's strong, knows the country, and is very self-sufficient."

As the search resumed Tuesday morning, a total of twenty-four planes would participate, half were Royal Canadian Air Force and half were private. The missing Merickel's younger brother served as coordinator of the searcher's flight plans at headquarters in Ear Falls. Despite this massive effort, by the end of the day, no sign of the single engine Piper Cub was found. A night sweep of the area was also unsuccessful. The RCAF estimated they had covered 22,000 square miles between Ear Falls and Lac Seul. No flight plan had been filed so searchers based their operation on previous hunting expeditions by Merickel. Search conditions were said to be good with cloudy skies, light snow, and temperatures in the low 20's.

On the 5th day of the search the wreckage was spotted about 24 miles east of Ear Falls. The plane was concealed by heavy timber along the shoreline. Merickel and the pilot were dead and still in the plane.

A total of 29 planes had covered 40,000 square miles (200 miles squared) before locating the wreckage. The site of the crash was about 100 miles north of where Merickel's father, Maurice Sr., had died in a crash less than one-year earlier. As for Merickel's deceased pilot, Shorty Langford, his brother was killed in a small plane crash in 1954. Two terrible outcomes in less than twelve months. No family should have to endure such heartbreak.

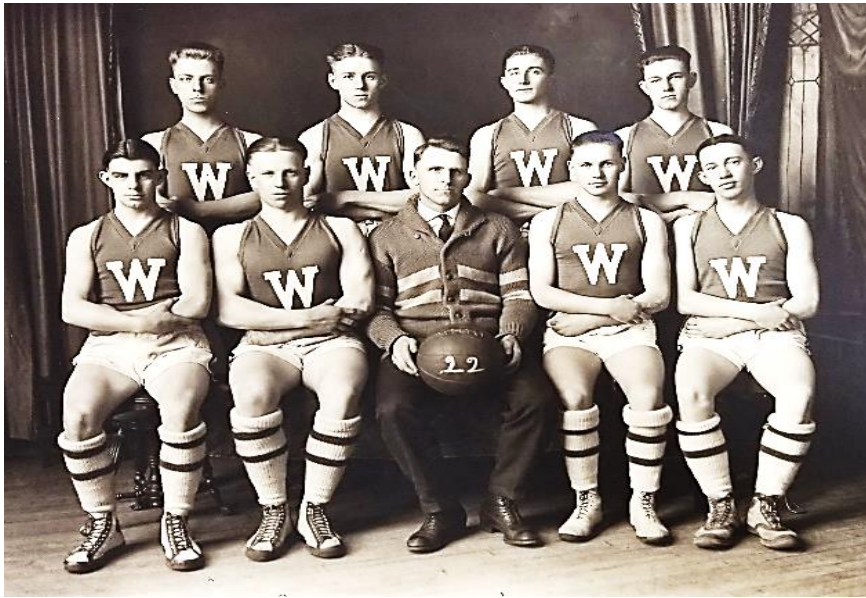
Before I end this article, I would like to revisit some WHS basketball history. Earlier I listed the Merickels that had played basketball for WHS. Ted in the 1950's, Pat in the 1940's and 50's, Franklin in the 1930's, and Maurice Sr. in the 1920's. As you may recall, I became aware of each Merickel in reverse chronological order as I started my research in the 1950's and worked backwards. I "met" Maurice Merickel Sr., last. After learning he had gone on to the U of M and played basketball for the Gophers, I remembered my friend, Tommy Merickel, telling me of a relative that played college hoops. It took a while for me to sort it all out but here is what I learned over time.

Arthur Jesse Merickel lived from 1853-1946. He was involved with farming, lumber, real estate, and banking. His first wife was Pauline 1860-1905. They had four children including Harry (grandfather of my friend Tommy Merickel) and Maurice (WHS early 1920's). Some years after the death of Pauline, Arthur married Nellie (1878-1934). From this marriage there were three children, including Franklin (WHS mid 1930's) who was half brother to Harry and Maurice Sr.

Maurice Sr. (1902-1959) married Louise (1907-2000) and they had three children, including Maurice Jr. and Ted (WHS mid 1950's).

For a long time, I was unable to figure out where Pat Merickel (WHS 1947-50) fit into the Merickel family tree. Eventually, and accidentally, I came across the information I needed. Pat Merickel's real name was Maurice Merickel Jr. Most people were unaware of that fact.

Maurice Merickel Jr. is buried in the Wadena Cemetery very near a marker for his dad, Maurice Sr.



Back: Bill Stevens, Vern Wright, Maurice Merickel, Carol Parker
 Front: Donald McKinnon, Clair Walker, Coach Kuefler, Marion Blaha, Joe Rice



Maurice Merickel, Sr.

Pat Merickel



#36 back row



"A" SQUAD, KNEELING: Marquardt, Garr, Jordahl, Sweere, Peckham, Boyer.
 STANDING: Coach Held, Nyberg, Merickel, Hedstrom, Gaslin, Erickson,
 Imgrund.