



Robin Hamilton and her son Kyle have spent countless hours working to produce the 1990 edition of their distinctive blue maps of the Iowa Great Lakes. Robin and a friend of hers produced the first edition of the West Lake Okoboji map in 1960. (Photo by Dave Schwarz)

By Larry Keltto

Kyle Hamilton didn't want to see a family tradition and a lakes tradition disappear. But little did he know how much work it would take to keep the tradition going.

The result of Kyle's determination is the 1990 edition of the "big, blue" maps of the lakes region.

"The 1990 edition of the map was Kyle's idea," says Kyle's mother, Robin Hamilton, who published the first edition of the famous maps in 1960. "He didn't want to see the project die an early death. He did some sales in 1980 (when the maps were last published), and he felt he wanted to carry on the tradition."

Kyle's decision to publish the maps in 1990 came two summers ago. Last summer he spent all of his time, seven days a week, compiling information for the maps, which document who lives where on the area lakes.

Compiling that data didn't mean a few simple trips to the county recorder's office. Kyle, a student at the University of Nebraska, went door-to-door trying to get the residence information. There's a good reason for doing it that way.

"The public records will show who owns the house, but they don't always tell you who's living in it," Kyle says.

"Some people we never do find," Robin says. When they've exhausted all attempts to locate the occupant, they will use the public records as a last resort.

Robin says most of the people are very cordial and helpful when they're asked for the information.

"I can call people and they will even return the call, long distance," Robin says. "They all have been extremely helpful."

MAPPING *their way to* SUCCESS

"They're eager to say they have a house on Okoboji," says Kyle. "They're proud to be on the lake with their home."

Back in the summer of 1960, it's doubtful Robin Hamilton ever thought the maps would become such a special part of lakes living.

Robin was a high school student from Orange City, spending the summer at her family's home on West Lake Okoboji. Robin and a friend of hers were looking for something to do with their time when Robin's father, Robert Rieckhoff, suggested that they make a map of West Lake Okoboji.

"We worked on it on the floor of the cottage on our hands and knees," Robin says, pointing to the very spot where she worked. The map's size was determined early, because that was the largest piece of tagboard she could find.

"It took all summer and we just did West Lake Okoboji. There were no wives or street addresses or zip codes (listed in the accompanying directory). That made it a lot easier."

Hamilton followed that project with maps in 1975 and 1980, adding maps of East Lake Okoboji and Big Spirit Lake in the process. The size of the maps has remained identical, allowing owners to use their old frames and place the new map on top of the old ones.

The phenomenal growth of the area is evident when one compares the 1990 map to the 1960 map. "The 1960 map is bare by comparison," Robin says. In fact, in the current edition of the maps, printed numbers were used to mark residences, in order to fit all of the numbers on the maps.

They also noticed a tremendous amount of ownership change from the 1980 map.

Kyle estimates that one-third of the West Okoboji property has changed hands in the past ten years.

One obvious change, from a production standpoint, is that a computer was used to help compile information for the 1990 map. But even with the computer, the work remains extremely time-consuming and exacting, Kyle says. "If you get anybody's name wrong, it's nobody's fault but you own," he says.

Another unique aspect of the maps is the marketing system that's used for selling them: Kyle and Robin are the only people who can fill an order for the maps. They've used other vendors in the past, but this year they're available only from the Hamiltons. (To place an order, call 337-3466.)

There are three reasons behind this simple distribution system: the maps don't get damaged; they can keep an accurate record of who owns the maps and they build a mystique around the maps.

"I never placed them in stores," Robin says. "After the first month (following publication) they become very hard to get. People don't know where to get them. Finally, they find the right person."

She says she's never reduced the price of the maps. "We never wanted to cheapen the product."

To further enhance the value of the special 30-year edition of the maps, all of them are registered and numbered.

The only question that remains now is whether the 1990 edition will be the last edition of the maps.

"It all depends on what Kyle is doing in 10 years," Robin says. "I don't know why I do these, because they're so much work. I wouldn't do them if people didn't love them."