

big & blue

Popular Iowa Great Lakes maps undergo a digital facelift

The Iowa Great Lakes have plenty of little quirks about them, but Kyle Hamilton can't seem to get away from his.

After 50 years in the making, the task of compiling the famous "big, blue" residential maps of the region at the start of each new decade ought to be second nature for the 42-year-old, Minneapolis, MN, resident, who has been personally involved for 30 of those years.

Perhaps he can blame it on his mother, Robin Hamilton, who was the one who got it all started back in 1960. She has since moved away from the Lakes and now resides in Scottsdale, AZ.

"She was in college, and I guess she was kind of bored over the summer," said Hamilton, of his mother. "And my grandfather, Bob Rieckhoff, asked her kind of jokingly, 'Why don't you make a map of the lake?'"

So began the tradition, that has since been handed down to Hamilton.

He still goes around, personally, from door-to-door, collecting the names and addresses of the residents. It is hard,

and sometimes frustrating work, he said. "I make two trips, if I don't get contact the first time around."

To fill in the holes, he relies on public records and various other sources to fill the gap. "A lot of times there are multiple owners, or sometimes there is a family of four kids who own it – it gets difficult because I want to include everyone who lives at the cottage – not necessarily the property owner."

There are some 5,600 people who get listed between the three maps — Spirit Lake, East Okoboji and West Okoboji.

He has spent the last winter refining the maps, visually speaking.

"When I was in college, I was joking around about doing one and somewhere it became a reality," he said.

"Back then it was easier because I was a college student and I had the time."

"It is such a time commitment," he said. "And I wonder why — nobody else has been crazy enough to do it."

TEXT BY BETHANY BASHIOM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYLAN HOWE



Kyle Hamilton, the force behind the popular "big blue maps" has brought his project to a new level in 2010 by going digital. The maps that his mother started mark their 50th anniversary this year.

Hamilton, while attending the University of Nebraska, even chose to take a fall semester off school in order to complete the 1990 map of the lake after

working all summer long. In 2000, there was additional pressure for him to do the maps again. "I wasn't sure job-wise if I could pull it off, but it was the key people who practically push me into doing them."

And residents are glad he did.

"People asking me about the maps is what motivates me. I make some money, but it is more about the tradition," he said. "When I go door-to-door,

people are so excited to see me. They welcome me in, and take me through their house to show me how the maps are the prominent piece of art in their homes. That makes it all worth it."

"It's fun to get phone calls from all over the United States to have maps sent all over the country — even in California, New York — it is just a fun Okoboji thing — all about the people."

But 2010 is bringing about change

— both for Hamilton and the maps. He's going digital, and promises the accuracy of the maps to be much better than before. While he hopes the transition and use of technology will make things simpler in the future, Hamilton said he has gone back to the beginning. "I had to start new," he said.

"The changes are more prolific than ever before, they are much more accurate — and they look great," he said.

"People asking me about the maps is what motivates me."

"I make some money, but it is more about the tradition."

"Before, I didn't have all the equipment and skills to do it and there were some inaccuracies out of my control."

Folks living on Okoboji can still get the maps they've come to count on, but now there's an opportunity for a personal touch.

Hamilton, who works as a real estate agent in Minneapolis during the winter and lives at a cottage on Sunset Beach where he grew up as a child during the summer, still went door-to-door last summer collecting names and addresses of all the residents on the shorelines of the Lakes. But as he has learned to do everything digital, it has opened up the opportunity to add personalization to the maps. With that capability, families can submit a favorite photograph to be printed onto their map.

"We couldn't ever do this before because we mass printed the maps," he said. Now that each of the maps are printed specifically for each person, he can customize the maps to a person's liking.

Until this year, the maps have also included a listing of 120 advertisers, but in order to help clean up the physical appearance of the maps, he has reduced that number to 20 elite sponsors. "It is a very nice gesture for them, and I don't get to thank them enough," Hamilton said. "They are really what jump start this project to get it done."

The individualized printing has presented Hamilton with a challenge in how to market future maps. "They need to get outdated enough to make it profitable enough, and through that, it naturally created the time line for every 10 years," he said. "A major revision will happen, but only time will tell."

Hamilton is hoping his 6-year-old son will uphold the map tradition once he is old enough.

Appropriately enough, his name is Lake Hamilton. □



GET YOUR MAP:

Shaw Paint and Glass & Locksmithing, 1651 Exchange St., Okoboji, serves as the exclusive retailer of the maps.

Orders can be placed at the store, or by calling Kyle Hamilton at (612) 720-811. More information can also be found at www.bluelakemaps.com. Maps can be picked up at Shaw Paint once completed. Each map also includes a complimentary 120-page residence directory to correspond with the map. Hamilton said while compiling the directory, he discovered a representation of people permanently living in 38 states who have property at the Iowa Lakes.

CUSTOMIZING:

Kyle Hamilton can now add a personal touch to your blue lake map through incorporating a favorite family photo, perhaps one taken at the lake. "I wanted to clean up the maps, and be more artistic," he said. "This project is just more focused on the residents. It adds a nice touch we haven't been able to do before — it has revived the project."

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