

Blue Lake's lore includes paddle wheel boat, moonshine still

Scuba diver's discovery of paddle wheel on bottom of lake stirs interest in lake's history

(Story written by Joel Stottrup)

Long gone are the sounds floating across the surface of Blue Lake southeast of Princeton of people laughing and dancing on a boat as it was lazily pulled by a steam engine-powered paddle wheel boat.

But after talking for a while with 86-year old Hugo "Ole" Griep of Crown, and Blue Lake residents Bud Netka and Pat French, one can get to thinking about those happenings on that lake occurring again.

The imagination continues to stir as one finds out that Netka, a scuba diver, has gone down to the bottom of Blue Lake next to Lundeen's Point and examined the paddle wheel of a boat that is so much a part of Blue Lake's lore.

Then to spice things up a bit, you can sit for a while in French's house that she and her husband Wes have that overlooks the lake and hear her stories that add to the lake's history. One intriguing tale she tells is about her father and his moonshine business and how it was visited one day by the "feds". But more about that later.

The paddle wheel boat

"Everybody all the time has talked about it, the parties on the boat," said French, referring to the paddle wheel boat and how there were dances and parties on it when it was on the lake many decades ago.

Now the paddle wheel sits by itself below the surface of Blue Lake, down about 13 feet, according to scuba diver Netka, though Clayton Edling, who runs a seasonal trailer campground at the lake, estimates it to be in shallower water.

Netka, who is a custodian by night and often enjoys spending time during the day going back and forth over the lake in his pontoon boat and scuba diving, first saw the paddle wheel in July 1996.

"The only reason I found it was because the lady I was diving with wanted to show me a big bass underwater," Netka said. "I was on my way over to look at the fish when I saw this big wheel."

At first Netka thought the wheel, with a diameter of about six feet, was from a wagon. But when he saw its width was five to six feet and saw the remains of the paddles that had been attached to it, he realized it was a paddle wheel. That revelation was reinforced by the stories people had told him about the paddle wheel boat when he first moved to Blue Lake.

Actually, going below the surface of Blue Lake and exploring with scuba gear is much like "going up into grandma's attic," he said. "There's a lot of treasure."

Some of that is in the form of antique bottles from the 1920's, many anchors and sometimes old fishing lures, he said.

He found two old lures attached to the paddle wheel. One lure was an antique wooden type and the other was a metal one from France that could be adjusted to cause different actions in the water.

Griep's knowledge

Griep perhaps knows about as much as anyone about the paddle wheel boat. He says three people built the boat – his father Herman, his uncle Leonard (who was married to Herman's sister), and a blacksmith from Spencer Brook named Andrew Lundeen. Lundeen built the wheel and was considered the owner of the boat.

While some inquires last week about the paddle wheel brought responses that gave the impression there was on boat with a paddle wheel, Griep had a more complex explanation.

There was a pontoon boat much like a raft, he said, where the party-goers would be, and then there was the paddle wheel boat that towed the party boat, Griep said.

Besides the paddle wheel below the surface of the lake, the wood that the paddle wheel boat was made of still exists. When the boat was dismantled it was used to build a house owned by W.R. Hurtt, who managed a lumberyard in Zimmerman. The house sits on Fremont Avenue.

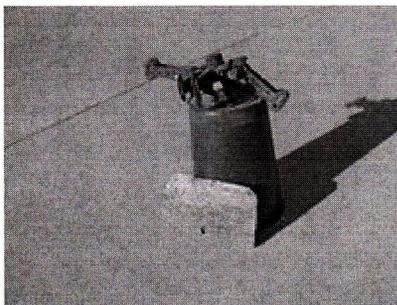
Griep said he thinks the paddle wheel boat existed sometime before 1906 and that perhaps it was operated on a couple seasons.

One story about the boat that Griep's father told him was of a Fourth of July celebration when revelers on the pontoon boat crowded too much to one side to watch the fireworks display and the boat started to tip.

When the decision was made to no longer use the boat, the wood-fired steam engine was used to run a threshing machine. "My dad and his brother bought the threshing machine and Andrew supplied the engine," Griep said.

One other story Griep remembers was how difficult it was for the Ford Model T's to get up one of the hills in the vicinity of where the boat was docked. Because the gas tank was under the seat, the Model T's had to be backed up one of the hills, he said.

The moonshine story



Section of Paddlewheel Blade Pat French's ties to Blue Lake go back to when she was a child living in north Minneapolis and her father, Roy Donahue, had a 40-acre farm on the east side of Blue Lake that the family would visit in the summer.

Her father pursued a hobby at the place that was a sort of mystery for a while to the children in the family but eventually made the newspapers.

What Donahue had was a still that could turn yeasty mash into an alcoholic drink, also known as moonshine.

When we would ask him what he was making, French recalled last week, her father would always answer that it was orange soda.

French has an undated newspaper clipping that tells about federal agents raiding her father's still. She figures it was either 1962 or '63.

Her father had a German shepherd he locked up in the house the night before the still was raided. In darkness the agents drove up to the end of the driveway, left the car and walked to a tree in the yard. The agents then climbed the tree to spend the night to wait until daylight to carry out the raid, according to French.

In the morning when Donahue let his dog out, it went over to the tree and soon Donahue could hear someone yelling for Donahue to call off his dog. Donahue went over to the tree and did so. When he asked what the men were doing there, they said they had come to arrest him.

The story in the news clipping said he had been cooking 25 gallons of mash in a 40-gallon still.

The federal agents took Donahue's still and moonshine and Donahue ended up being put on probation for five years. His bail to get out of jail was \$1000.

"It was very embarrassing," she said. "My dad was 65 years old and arrested for moonshining."

She figures someone who knew her dad turned him in to collect a reward.

One of the twists of the raid, she said, was that the federal agents commented that Donahue's moonshine was the best they had ever sampled. French noted that the agents didn't dump the moonshine but took it with them.

She added that her father didn't make the moonshine to sell but just did it as a hobby, just as some brew beer or make wine at home.

Used to be two lakes

While the two bodies of water that are joined by a channel are called Blue Lake collectively, there were once two separate lakes when the channel didn't exist, according to French. The part that is to the north was called Walker Lake and the part to the south was called Big Blue Lake, she said.

French believes the channel was dredged out sometime before 1948.

Netka goes back and forth through the channel a lot and when he is done moving his pontoon boat about Blue Lake, he steers it back through a small lagoon to dock in his yard, which is in a secluded spot on the east side of Blue Lake.

"People call me Tom Sawyer," he said about folks at Blue Lake who have seen him sometimes using a set of poles to move his boat.

"It's so nice out here," Netka said. "Yesterday I wanted to come out with the pontoon. It was so calm, glass-like. I used to live in Coon Rapids and would come out to my wife's aunt and uncle's place on Blue Lake and help maintain their place."

There were only a few cabins on the lake at one time but it also once had a place that served sandwiches and there was a bait shop, according to French. She figures now there are about 150 residences on the lake.

French gauges the relatively narrow Blue Lake to be about three miles long and Netka says the lake is only about 30 feet at the deepest.

Edling, at his seasonal trailer campground on the east side of the lake, notes that the lake is spring fed and has no inlets.

Edling saw the paddle wheel through the water this past spring, which is when the water is most clear. Edling thinks the wheel was made by fitting the wheels of a horse-drawn mower onto a shaft and then extending spokes with bracings out from the wheels. Then paddles were fixed at the end of the spokes, he said.

"A lot of people have asked me if I would pull it up," Netka said. "I would like to but at the same time I would like to leave it down there for other scuba divers to see."

But as Netka talked more about the paddle wheel, he decided it would be enjoyed by the most people if it was pulled up and donated to a museum. "I would like to take it up to let people know the heritage," he said. "I don't hear a lot about heritage."

Would Netka ever want to see a scene again on Blue Lake reminiscent of the days when people gathered together in large groups to socialize on the lake?

Netka, who does yearn to leave his job as custodian one day and just live off his sideline of oil painting at Blue Lake, contemplated the idea of such a boat lazily moving back and forth across the lake.

"I'd like to see one out here," he said. "I think it would bring people more closer together socially."

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