

Demeules

This I Remember Steve Demeules 2012

by Kenzie Phelps

Imagine: It's 1954, your mom, dad and family are living in north Minneapolis, and your dad receives a letter inviting him to "Come up to Briggs Lake and check out your *free* lake property!" Chuck Demeules responded to the letter, arriving at what is now known as Cedar Point to a shack advertising this great deal. He was not, however, interested in interior "free" lots and instead bought 2 lake lots on the point between Briggs and Rush: \$1500 for both lots. Chuck Demeules had second thoughts, consulted an attorney, but his counsel said he couldn't get out of it. Steve and his family are thankful he couldn't.

Their property was very unique: 150 ft on Briggs and 160 ft on Rush. Some people could say that during the summer their family moved up to "the lake." The Demeules, however, now had the distinction of saying they were going up to "the lakes." Like so many others who bought undeveloped property, the first structure to go up was the biffy. Then Chuck and friends from the Cities built the first home in 1955, complete with basement. Chuck Demeules bought another lot in 1975, paying more for the one lot than the two original lots together. Steve's dad brought in 60 loads of fill for a significant hole just south of where the current home sits. When recent soil testing was done Steve knew before hand exactly what they would find: sand. In an attempt to widen their property, Steve's dad had a local contractor dump loads of small rock into the water on the Rush Lake side, then cover it with sand scooped up from the lake bottom.

High water has proven to be both a problem, and a motivator, for Steve. The problem: they had 2 ft of water in basement in 1965, then again in 1984. Then later, three high water events in 2 years. The motivation: High water. Steve and Virginia rebuilt in 2007, only this time the foundation was 5 feet higher. Despite the basement filling with lake water at times, it served as a safe gathering for them and some neighbors during the 1967 tornado that swept through the area. Steve's dad died in 1999, and several years later his mother, Anne, moved to St. Benedict's Center in St Cloud. Steve and Virginia had been taking care of the place for years, so it was natural for them to take over the property.

Steve's mother Anne, like many others, would come to "the lakes" with the kids [Steve is youngest of six siblings] for most of the summer, with dad coming up once during the week and then on weekends. Of the six children, four ended up marrying locals. Early on they closed the place in the winter mostly for lack of things to do. Their Cedar Point road wasn't even plowed in the winter because there were no year round residents. That changed around 1963 once snowmobiles were common and available.

Steve's early memories include opening the cabin on Memorial Day and closing Labor Day, and his mother walking every day to the mail box, then located on Co #16. As more people bought property and built cabins, their mail box moved closer and closer to their cabin. He also remembers bathing in the lake with Ivory soap, because Ivory floated: "You couldn't lose it, and it wouldn't end up on the bottom and full of sand."

There was not the recreational boating in those days as there is now: most of the boats were row boats with motors. Before the channel from Briggs to Rush was dredged the Demeules would have extra nails on hand to provide to boaters who would inevitably shear a pin as they tried to navigate the shallow channel. An early event of the lake association was the pancake breakfast at Stan Smiths on the north end of Lake Julia. As Steve remembers, "Julia was like another world." Prior to the Briggs/Julia channel being dredged, the Demeules would have to either get out of the boat and pull it, or paddle hard to get through the muck and lilly pads to get to Julia. The channel was dredged in the late 60's, as was the channel from Briggs to Rush [which was about 6 ft deep before it partially filled back in]. The BLCA got a quote for the dredging, but the final bill was much more than the quote. Because the BLCA was unable to pay the difference, Pete Iten and several others from Briggs stepped up and paid the difference.

Fishing was good, basically panfish, plus northern and bass. Crappie fishing provided "buckets full of crappies," not large but plentiful. Bass fishing was great, especially using frogs which they found in large numbers near the north end of Julia.

There was no air conditioning then, so cabin windows were kept open all the time, allowing the young Demeules family to listen to the Polka bands at night at Cottonwood Beach. Their family would go there often for things like burgers, french fries, candy and pop. At night the adults would take over with Cottonwood Beach selling 3.2 beer and set-ups.

Swimming was such a popular activity they would spend most of the day in the water. Although there were some weeds they managed them well by raking. There were occasional dog days in August, complete with algae outbreaks, although the algae would break up with a strong wind or boat activity, and the water would be clear enough again to see the bottom. Also one of their summer activities was hunting for bullhead minnows, finding the swarms and scooping them out with fish nets. Steve remembers the Hollander farm [known as the Lillie Creek Farm] with their cows wading in the bay just west of the Rush Lake dam. The dam had been built in the 30's, including an active carp trap, and the area around the dam and the small bay to west had Hollander's cows and weeds, but good weeds as Steve recalls.

"Copper sulfate days" were usually the weekend before the 4th of July with residents going to Cottonwood Beach to pick up their copper sulfate, paid for by the Lakes Chain Sportsmen's Club and BLCA. Some residents would put a ladder across the front of their pontoons, drape gunny sacks through the ladder holes, then go around to various spots on the lake and apply their copper sulfate, "usually with most of it ending up in front of the pontoon owner's cabin."

The biggest changes Steve has seen are the number of people using the lakes and the amount of boat traffic. According to Steve, more than anything affecting lake traffic are the three accesses on the upper lakes. The only public access Steve remembers earlier was the walk-in access on the west side of Briggs. Cottonwood Beach Resort also had a boat launch, but at that time was privately owned. "We used to do a lot of skiing; we sort of owned the lake. Now on busy weekends we don't go out."

Steve and family used to ski on the bayou [which had been dredged] from the first turn coming in from Briggs up to the bridge. That was before the new bridge when the water was 10 ft deep

at the bridge and no small island, which developed later after one high water event moved sand and muck from the shore and helped fill in the channel. Also on the Bayou was Stan and Ann's by the Co. # 16 bridge: Steve and family members would carry their gas can up the small path to the store for gas and other supplies.

What changes would Steve make if he had but one wish? “The ultimate answer to water quality is a sewer system. We're moving in the right direction, but at some point we can't get any cleaner water without a sewer system. With 60-70 years of private septic systems, we may get to the point of no return with ground contamination.”