

History of the French Club, per Vern De Roche, 1992

One morning in 1992, our neighbor gave us the news: the French club, a piece of local history was gone. Vern De Roche, our neighbor for many years, was raised in Duluth in a French-Canadian home and the French Club was part of his life. Born in 1913, Mr. De Roche knew the Club from its inception until it was destroyed by fire. He told us the story:



At the turn of the 20th century, there was a great influx of Quebecois to the Duluth area (I don't know the reason), and from 1920-1930 there were about two thousand French Canadians in the town. Many of them lived in West Duluth and were members of St. Jean-Baptiste Catholic Church (now called Holy Family) on the corner of 25th Avenue West and 3rd Street. All of the sermons and homilies were done in French and many of the children of these families attended St. Jean's parochial school.

The French Club was started in Duluth by St. Jean's congregants to assist them in learning English and to help people become American citizens. One member, Mr. Filiatrault, owned a large tract of land about 40 miles northwest of town, and donated some acreage near three little lakes for a retreat for members of the Club. He contributed more than land to the region: he had three daughters, Elora, Rose, and Dorothy (who was called Dodo), and he gave their names to the three little lakes.

There was only a path to get through the forest of young aspens, maples, and birch trees (the region had been clear cut at the end of the 19th century), and the county government did not want to build a new road. But 1500 people wrote and visited members of the council and the new road became a reality.

In 1923, members of St. Jean's started construction on the building that stood until the fire. Everything was donated by them, the labor, materials, etc. There were carpenters, painters, plasterers, masons, and they worked together to create a retreat. The Club was strictly for members and they could visit and stay there year round. In summer, they swam and picnicked, in winter they skated, skied, and sledged. With a charge of only \$2 or \$3 a year, there was a large membership. In 1948, while Mr. De Roche was president of the Club, the dues were raised to \$4 per year and the old guard were pretty upset about it.

The retreat was also used by the religious orders of the community and the workers constructed an outdoor altar where mass was said every Sunday in the summer. Many other groups had the advantage of the Club: boy scouts, girl scouts, and orphans of the area were always welcome and local peace officers frequently held their picnics there. It was a landmark. During the 30's and 40's, many anglophones joined the Club and it ceased to be strictly French.

Three Lakes is very popular with people from Duluth and the entire region. I remember how surprised I was, at first, at the many people who knew this area; people would often tell me they fished or hunted here or visited the French Club every summer.

Nothing lasts forever. The old club touched many lives and is no longer here, but we have our memories.



Photos courtesy of Roger LaFlamme of Lake Elora 2020