

BY BOB WATTS

The Legend of Three Lakes U.S.A.

Located three miles East of Highway 53, between Canyon and Cotton and half way between Duluth and the Iron Range, this unique, priceless piece of land, sometimes known as a SHANGRI-LA or more often referred to as "WHERE THE NORTH BEGINS" was owned by the Weyerhaeuser Lumber Company. In 1908 the company brought about 400 loggers into the area. They constructed a logging trail through woods and swamp off of Highway 53 into the Three Lakes area. Sources claim they hauled in their groceries and supplies through another trail leading from Alborn.

Previous to that a farmer by the name of John Swanson moved into the area through the woods from Payne, MN and settled on a piece of land approximately one mile off the highway and built himself a farm house and barn in the year 1902.

Having no roads, the lumber company made trails through the woods and winter came and the ground was frozen. They proceeded to build logging camps and started logging off the forest around the Three Lakes. After the land was logged off, the state required that the logging company pile all the branches and leftovers so that it could be burned. However, it was said that the loggers let the fire get away from them and it destroyed many acres north of the lakes. Some of those large white pines that escaped the fire are still growing throughout the area and have become landmarks, some still standing over 90 feet high.

While all of this was going on John Swanson built a corduroy road (logs over soft, murky swamp soil) from his farm out to the highway. From there anyone wanting to get into the lake area had to use the logging trails. The logging having been completed, the Weyerhaeuser Company decided to swap the land in the Three Lakes area with Ed Filiatrault, an Overland and Willy's car dealer from Duluth for some other property further down the road. Filiatrault then extended the logging trails around the lakes and then plotted the land for developing and selling off the lakes shore property. Before he passed away he renamed the three lakes after his three daughters, Lake Leora after Loretta, Lake Dodo after his daughter Doris, and Rose Lake after his daughter Rose. Rose Lake was earlier called Swartz Lake while the loggers were there and later on the map it was known as Clear Lake. Please note that the daughter of Rose Burke still resides with her family on Lake Dodo during the summer months.

When the news came out that trails had been made and lots were now for sale at Three Lakes, buyers mostly from the Duluth area ventured 35 miles north to stake their claim. Finally, in 1921, some the first families purchased lots. These were the Heimbachs, McGonagle's, Spencers, Watts, and the Barcards. The first cabin to be built on Rose Lake was the Wentworth place. John Swanson built it of logs, and it is still standing on the western end of the lake. A few years later the Royal Alworth family of Duluth built a large home on Lake Dodo. This too is still being occupied and it has been said some of this property contains some Indian burial grounds, another historical landmark.

A year or so later Agnes and Ole Roberg bought a lot on Rose Lake and also operated a store out on the highway known well at the "Three Lakes Inn." It wasn't long before the property on the lakes was selling like hot cakes. The St. Jeans Catholic Church in Duluth's West End got together and bought some property on Lake Leora, now called Elora). They started to build a large building high on a hill overlooking the lake and called it the French Club. It was finally completed in 1923. A large building with a wrap around glassed in sun porch, a beautiful fireplace and six or more rooms upstairs for their members to stay during the summer. Catholic Mass was held each Sunday morning. This influenced many others to buy places near the French Club so they could spend their weekends at the beach and still not miss church services. Recall having the Sunday papers available when church let out back in 1932 when they only cost 10¢?

After the fire north of the lakes, the young trees started growing again, mainly Birch, Poplar, Maple and Norway Pines. The area was flourishing with blueberries and even cranberries. There was abundance of wild life including deer, bear, partridge and other small game. Later the Boy Scouts used the French Club grounds where they were schooled to work on the possibility of becoming an Eagle Scout. They enjoyed the sandy beaches and camping in the woods.

Rose Lake, the smallest of the Three Lakes, was known for its white sandy beach and clear water. This lake had no inlet or outlet. It was totally spring fed and its elevation was about six feet above Lake Dodo some 400 yards away. It is known to drain slowly underground to the other two lakes.

Other property seekers wanted to be located close to the French Club for obvious reasons and for the past 80 years the area has fully developed into a recreational playground and retreat for as many as five generations. Up until the early 40's, families were without electricity and telephones. Sand points were driven into the soft sandy soil in most cases and pitcher pumps were used as the source for their water supply. These were the days of good old-fashioned iceboxes, kerosene lamps and outdoor biffies. Some even cut their own ice in the winter time out of the lake and then stored it in icehouses covered with sawdust to be used during the summer.

Residents started to blow out their kerosene lamps and finally electricity was introduced to the area in the year 1948. The Northern Electric Cooperative located in Virginia, MN supplied power. Preparing for this added luxury, property owners began clearing right-of-ways necessary to install power lines. This was a big step for many and slowly but surely, most disposed of their hand pumps and installed well pumps, which let for some to indoor plumbing and showers. Previous to that many used to take a dip in the lake every morning to keep clean.

Three different telephone companies have served the area over the years, another nice luxury that was greatly needed in case of fire or emergencies.

Early in 50, Doctor Magney, from Duluth, owned property on both Shissler and Strand Lakes and in order to reach his domain he came through Cotton over a small bridge and trail to get to his cabin on Shissler. In order to plot and open up the sale of lots on South Strand, he had three miles of road constructed through the sandy hills, which connected to Rose Lake Drive, and this allowed access to the south end of Strand. Over 30 desirable lots were sold and building started, adding two more lakes to the Three Lakes area. By this time, most of the property around the three lakes was selling so people wanting to get into this attractive location to get a summer place that was close to town and still have the solitude and the beauty of a place in the wild of the North Woods.

For years visitors and friends came to pick blueberries and to fish these beautiful waters. Deer and partridge hunting were also popular every fall.

Now, in June of 1971, with most of the property now developed, H.E. Westmoreland and Bob Watts, sometimes called Mayor Bob) both residents of Rose Lake decided it was time to organize what is now called the "Three Lakes Development Association." Token dues were collected and fire signs were designed, numbered, and then installed at the driveways of all dwellings in the area. This also included Little Elora or sometimes called Winkle Lake on the Three Lakes Road. Annual dues were decided based on the expense incurred in maintaining the local landfill site along the Strand Lake Road. It was decided that the association meetings would be held at the French Club. Our first organizational meeting brought some 140 members together to discuss our purpose for organizing. At first volunteers, who were also helpful in getting this organization off the ground, were asked to be officers. Then directors for each of the lakes were appointed. The first president of TLDA was Dr. Robert Kuth from Rose Lake. By-laws were drawn up and it was agreed that we would hold two association meetings each year, one in the spring and again in August. Officers and directors would be elected for a two-year term and could stay on again for another term if they so desired.

The Three Lakes Development Association is a non-profit group consisting of 209 dwellings covering about four square miles with 190 currently paid up members. We are now in our 31st year and Editor, Bob Watts, has written over 250 newsletters that have been mailed out or delivered about seven times annually, keeping the members informed on rule changes, safety laws, road improvements, etc. Local businesses have placed ads in the newsletter encouraging members to shop locally if at all possible. We also urge our members to attend the church of their choice; we have many right here in the area.

Our safety record is second to none, and although over the past 30 years we have lost five dwellings to fire plus the devastating loss of the historic French Club, which burnt to the ground during the winter of 1993, no lives were lost in these fires. However, and we continue to stress safety and to help prevent forest fires. Also, the Adopt-A-Highway Program has been in effect the past ten years and we are proud of the group who usually show up three times a year to pick up the litter along the roads. For the last 20 years the TLDA puts on a Family Picnic for our members. It is held at the French Club's Picnic Grounds for about 350 attending. Races for the kids, a horseshoe contest in the morning and lots of door prizes donated by our local businesses.

Over the years committees were formed and they scheduled canoe and sailboat races, dances, and bingo at the French Club. (Incidentally the French Club has been rebuilt and it is beautiful. Even though it lacks the historic beauty of the old building, it still is a nice place to hold our functions and ice cream socials.) The people at the French Club also serve two or three pancake breakfasts during the summer which draws a big attendance.

Over the years we have invited speakers to all of our organizational meetings. Some included state legislators, U.S. Game and Fish, the DNR, County Land Department, County Commissioner, First Responders from the Canyon and Cotton Volunteer Fire Departments, Lake County Power, the Sheriff's Department, Air Flight people and many other influential bodies have given our members important information pertaining to septic systems, clear cutting, water quality and security. We also have a very active Water Quality Committee and the lakes are checked for clarity and pollution annually and the water quality in our lakes is said to be of higher quality over most other lakes in Central St. Louis County.

The First Responders in our area are the "Best That They Can Be." You call 911; they are here within 15 to 20 minutes. They know their job and they do it well.

All of the roads in the area are dead end with the exception of the Three Lakes Road which goes on over to Highway 4 and comes out just north of Island Lake. The county garage employees in Cotton have done an excellent job of maintaining our roads, grading and snowplowing. The children in the area have door to door school bus service and that gets them to the Cotton School on time. We have excellent mail delivery including Strand Lake and the Duluth News Tribune is delivered usually between four and five in the morning.

Many of our members in their 80's and 90's. Must be the healthy environment we have here at Three Lakes. TLDA also holds a 12-mile long flea market every other year. This gives the members a chance to discard or clean up their garages and years of unwanted items.

Our members rely on our neighborhood watch program and our year round members keep an eye out for the homes in their backyards so to speak. We are close to entertainment, café's and service stations and we even have a car wash located in Canyon, six miles away.

In the last 40 years we have had over 150 property owner changes. Many of them have passed on or left for medical reasons but you can be assured most of these that have left us have turned their property over to the next generation and so on. Then again, some places were sold and a younger

group has been coming to the area, so that their children can enjoy the quality of living we afford them in this area. We encourage families to let their children enjoy the summers here and have a memorable time.

We boast of 45 to 50 year round residents. The property here seems to be at a premium and is shared with many active and retired school teachers, judges, attorneys, dentists, doctors, postal workers and many other dedicated people from all walks of life.

On Labor Day weekend the French Club sponsor's their annual Three-Mile Race. Very popular and many entrants.

We get many calls from people desiring a place in the sun here at Three Lakes. They want their name on the waiting list for just a cabin or looking for year round home. At the present time we only have one place up for sale. This is a year round home and in the hands of real estate people. There is no other place like this place in the world, so this must be the place.

Editor Bob, as he is referred to has spent most of his childhood life on Rose Lake and for the past almost 80 years has gathered many memories and historical matter and has also obtained some of the early information from one of the son's of John Swanson. Roy has reached the age of 91 and still lives with his wife of 61 years on Lake Dodo and remains very active.

Please note: The former Three Lakes Inn, now called "Almost Home" is back in business and many of our members depend on this convenience store for fuel, groceries and other necessary items such as Sunday papers, milk and bread, ice cream, and bait. This place is a legend in itself.

We have an excellent board of directors and our competent treasurer takes good care of our dues deposits very well. We also have a consultant who handles our mailing labels and updates the TLDA roster.

We offer our members and guests the greatest swimming, snowmobiling, four wheeling, jogging, and hiking on some the prettiest trails and Christmas tree roads in the country. Restoration of the forests continues to give us new growth and habitat. WELCOME TO GOD'S COUNTRY.

THE MINNESOTA LAND DEPT IS NOW IN THE AREA AGAIN- CLEAR CUTTING ALONG HWY #49.

PS: WE WANT TO THANK ALL OF THE DEDICATED MEMBERS & VOLUNTEERS OVER THE YEARS THAT HAVE HELPED MAKE THIS SPECIAL PLACE THE BEST IT CAN BE!!!



Three Lakes U.S.A.

