

Historical Clippings

Three Lakes Museum

April 2021

The Little Lake That Almost Did

Connecting Maple Lake to the *Greatest Chain of Lakes in the World*

Three Lakes was established in 1881 as a railroad stop, the name being based on the three closest lakes, Maple, Rangeline and Townline. Of those, only Rangeline and Townline were part of the chain of 28 connected lakes of the Eagle River. Maple Lake was a solitary body of water located closest to town.

The town of Three Lakes had been developed by the railroad to serve the logging industry but within a short period of time the railroad was bringing settlers to the area to reclaim the land and lakes the loggers had laid bare. They came for many reasons and moved out away from the town to populate and develop the land around the many lakes.

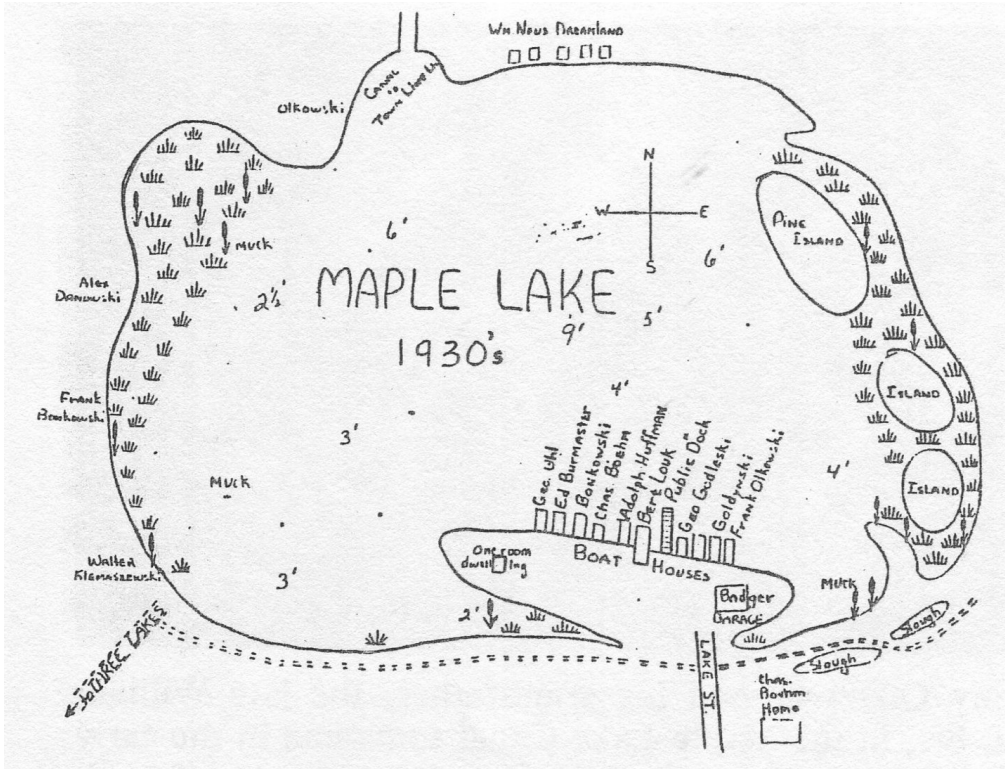
Early on they traveled and moved their supplies using the connected lakes for transportation as there was no established system of roads yet into the far reaches of the woods and along lake shores. Farmers and merchants and even the mailman set up water routes to move their wares.

The train coming through town twice a day brought the mail, supplies and people and dropped them off in town. The challenge then was to get everything and everybody to all of the destinations as resorts and cottages popped up along the miles of lakefront.



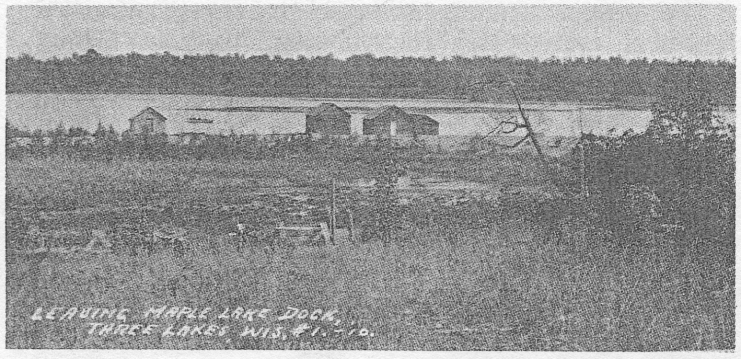
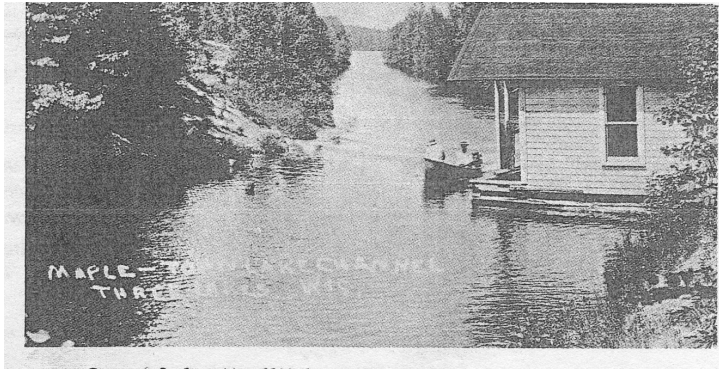
Sometime in 1903 or maybe earlier, the idea began floating around that it might make good business sense to connect Maple Lake to the Chain by digging a canal to Townline Lake.

The Three Lakes Canal and Transportation Company was established and sold shares for 25¢. They purchased an old dredge and dug the canal from Townline toward Maple Lake stopping just short of it. They blew out the last section of dirt with dynamite. What happened then was unexpected.



It was estimated that there was a two foot difference in lake levels, Maple being higher. But actually it was much more and the water level in Maple dropped eight feet. This resulted in vast swampy areas of muck and sinkholes and a giant sandbar. Some wells in town went dry. It made Maple part of the chain though and soon a transportation waterway. Initially a toll house collected fees to cover the cost of continued dredging but protests ended that.

As time and nature settled into the "new" Maple Lake, buildings and boathouses began to show up on the sandbar including Ed Epler's Badger Garage.

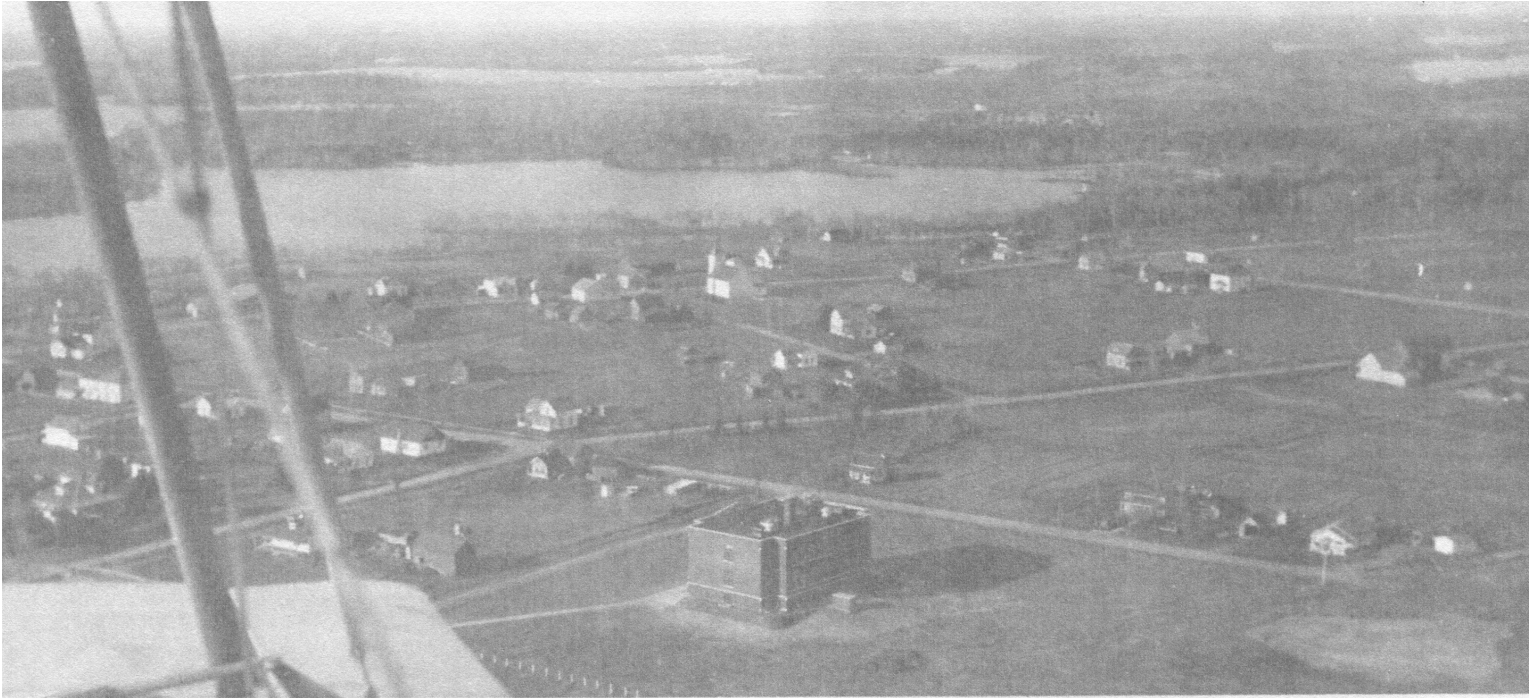


By 1939 with a network of roads servicing even the farthest reaches of the lakes, the town decided that it was time to install a dam and cut Maple Lake off of the Chain and restore it to its original level. Property owners signed off on riparian ownership and the fire department leveled the buildings on the sandbar with their new high power hoses. Ed Epler moved his Badger Garage to Superior Street across from the hardware store. Between October 1941 and December 1942, the water level in Maple Lake rose almost five feet. By 1972 nature had returned Maple to the lake we know today.

The canal still remains although nature will probably reclaim it eventually. You can still see it today running parallel to the road to the Townline boat landing. A reminder that Maple Lake made itself part of the greatest chain of lakes in the world at least for a little while.



From the Archives



Air view of Three Lakes taken in 1929-30 by Norman Brewster, looking northeast across Maple Lake before it was raised to its present level. Note churches (white) in center and high school (brick) in foreground.