

Historical Clippings

Three Lakes Museum

October 2025

This is Part 1 of a presentation given on the history of tourism in Three Lakes. Because of it's length it is the October 2025 Clipping but can only be found archived on the museum website

threelakesmuseum.org

Tourism. It's the People

By loose definition, the "Northwoods" is the large forested region surrounding the Great Lakes, stretching across northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Characterized by vast coniferous and hardwood forests, thousands of freshwater lakes and streams, it is a land shaped by long cold winters and short summers.



This area prior to European immigration was occupied by the Ojibwe, the people who refer to themselves as part of the larger group Anishinaabe, which means "original people".

The ancestors of the Ojibwe lived throughout the northeastern part of North America and along the Atlantic Coast. Around 1,500 years ago the Ojibwe people left their homes along the ocean and began a slow migration westward that lasted for many centuries, pushed out of their native lands by the early European settlers. They followed the path of the St. Lawrence River and made their way around the Great Lakes.

The Ojibwe hunted and fished, made maple sugar and syrup, and harvested wild rice, lived in wigwams and travelled the waterways of the region in birch bark canoes. They lived here.

The word tourist was first used in the late 18th century and described the circular nature of a tourist journey which involved traveling away from home and ultimately returning to one's starting point.

Prior to 1880 there were no real tourists in Three Lakes; only the Ojibwe people, lumbermen, surveyors, fur trappers and traders and those seeking adventure. That would change in 1881 when the federal government sold sections in this area to the Milwaukee Lakeshore and Western railroad as it did all along the line heading north, the intent here to develop a supply station for the loggers to the east in Hiles and the west in Robbins or Sugar Camp. These weren't tourists either, their only interest being the lumber they could take from the trees they logged to build the big cities to the south.

There are five components of tourism -

An Attraction, Access, Accommodations, Amenities and Activities
and without realizing it, Three Lakes was about to move with lightning speed right into it.

As fast as it came through was as fast as logging moved on and by 1905 the mill town of Buckwheat just north of town was dismantled, the saw mill moved out to the northwest coast and buildings moved and repurposed as a resort on Townline lake.

This whole area, having been surveyed as early as 1856, was already known to have a chain of lakes and abundant fish. This is what then became the *attraction*. Those basic amenities, *accommodations* and *access* in town that served the logging industry, now had another audience. Three Lakes was ready.

In those early years after logging ended, Three Lakes was still trying to find itself. Having been logged down to the water in many places, water front and property in general was available to buyers and cheap. Sporting groups like those that eventually became the Rod and Gun Club had been scouting out this area for a number of years. Advertisements in newspapers in Chicago, St Louis and Kansas City were already promoting this area for fishing. Buyers were looking.

The cleared land also provided the opportunity for agriculture and many immigrants from Europe were lured here by the potential of farming. For a while it seemed as if the area might support two industries, but eventually the sandy soil and short growing season ended those dreams.

A side note however, another story tells of the success of cranberries and potatoes so it was by no means a bust. But that developed later.

While this transition was working itself out, Three Lakes grew, and the resorts grew, and Three Lakes grew... you get the picture. The Chicago Northwestern railroad who now ran the line north had early on seen the potential the Northwoods tourism offered in increased rail traffic as logging was fading from the picture. They began extensive promotions offering services catering to both resort tourism and summer lake home owners.

Sylvester "Vet" Graves, a railroad conductor who eventually settled on Wheeler Island on Planting Ground Lake, was one of the first beloved promoters running the Fisherman Special where he guaranteed that if he had the engineer stop the train by a lake, he would get off and catch a fish. And he would, then offering his catch to a grateful passenger to take with them.

The train depot was the lifeline to the growing community both economically and socially. Located on the west end of the one block of Main Street that housed five mercantiles that supplied both locals and tourists, the trains delivered supplies and a glimpse at life from places beyond Three Lakes that most from here could only read about. The problem was that as more and more people were getting off the train, access beyond the town wasn't keeping up with the need to get people out on the lakes. There were no roads yet, only wagon trails that didn't go far.

In 1904, an enterprising group of businessmen decided that an answer was to connect Maple Lake here in town with Townline Lake just to the north by dredging a canal and ultimately accessing the entire chain of lakes. The plan proceeded and there was just a moment of concern as the dredge got closer to Maple Lake where it was discovered that what was anticipated to be just a slight difference in lake levels was more.

Maybe there should have been more concern but they were so close, and it was good for the town and the lake people, so they set off the dynamite and took out that last section that would now make Maple Lake part of the great chain!

Well the difference turned out to be about eight feet and the muddy Maple lake water immediately gushed down the canal and into Townline. Maple lakes surface area water size was reduced but shorelines increased.

The great sandbar that emerged became a place where many resorts set up boathouses to transport guests, the marine mail service moved mail, mercantiles moved goods out to lake residents and Ed Epler set up his mechanic garage to service boats. Access was improving.

This all lasted until 1944 when the town deemed that because of road and bridge development, the canal, that still remains today, and Maple lake would be separated by a dam. Over time Maple lake returned to its normal level.

The earliest automobiles in Three Lakes were novelties. Burt Louk, a diversified Three Lakes entrepreneur, used his to taxi tourists as far as the early roads would take them. Some tourists tested the endurance of theirs by attempting to drive up from the south. All were adventurers who needed to prepare for any mishap along the way. A ride from Three Lakes to Rhinelander could be six hours and a tire. Milwaukee was a two day trip with the need for a good knowledge of planned stops and repairs.

In 1917 Wisconsin was just beginning to develop a numbered road system. Some road trails headed to Three Lakes had used the painted marker system. The Red Circle and Yellow Diamond trails passed through here. Another painted road marker was a large white fish that no one could miss following it north.

In the 1920s, Wisconsin recognized the potential of tourism by automobile and began promoting their roads and highway systems with 10,000 miles of excellent roads and 10,000 miles of good roads, tempting road travelers with “ splendid lodging and resorts, appetizing food and picturesque places”.

Looking at a Rand McNally road map of the state from 1920 it’s easy to see the line that divided the two classes of roads - north and south. But Wisconsin made a commitment to improve the roads in the northern sections of the state.

In 1930 Three Lakes had two state highways that came into town. Both gravel. Highway 26 now 45, had a number of unimproved sections coming up from the south. In order to call attention to this, the Highway 26 Club created an event. A 10 day 215 mile Wheelbarrow push from Waupun to Eagle River.

It was claimed to be one of the top promotional events in Northern Wisconsin capturing the imagination of people coast to coast. Fourteen racers left Waupun August 28 and arrived in Eagle River September 6.

The third place winner was Paul Callum of Three Lakes who got \$50. Next time you are driving 45 south on one of those long straight stretches, picture that man pushing a wheelbarrow north so we could get a paved road.

Not only was access by road improving at this time, the need for bridges at strategic points on the chain was being addressed to alleviate long travel times to and from town going around lakes.

The Blue Ribbon bridge on X is a great example of where for years both tourists and locals getting to town and back meant keeping cars and boats on hand on both sides of the channel to shorten the travel time.

The town of Three Lakes grew where the founding rail company, the Milwaukee Lakeshore and Western, established it and today it thrives, unlike many other railway towns along the same line that were not as successful - Monico, Pelican Lake, Summit Lake which were all were thriving early on but somewhere in time lost it.

Three Lakes has a strong history and a strong line of people that contributed to its history, always moving on through adversity. Always working on an idea. It’s the people.

The follow up, Part 2, can be found in the November 2025 Clipping. This and many related stories can be found on the Museum website threelakesmuseum.org