

Quarry Threatens Devils Lake East Bluff

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

This summer we are celebrating 100 years of Devils Lake as a State Park. Without the intervention of public citizens, this beauty spot could have been ruined not only by the Palisades Development, mentioned in a previous article, but by another danger: quarrying.

Indeed, even six years after the park was formed, major quarrying was still threatening loss of the magnificent East Bluff. It took major legislation from the State, and the payment of \$75,000 of 1919 tax dollars to induce the company to leave. Then they only moved their activities around to the bluff to the East, but largely out of view.

The original location had been especially attractive, for the Northwestern tracks not only passed directly next to the quartzite bluff, but they had already removed a part of it so they could construct their roadbed in 1871.

Mining had begun before 1852 by a group called the Devils Lake Granite Company, a misnomer for quartzite. Fortunately the Claude family, living at the north end of the West Bluff, had refused to sell their property on that bluff, so the quarrying was limited to an area smack at the base of the middle of the East Bluff. Hidden now by trees and brush, it was near where the short East Bluff road makes a dead end U-turn by the railroad tracks.

As related by Lange and others, blasting the bluffs and crushing material became a big business at the lake. All of the area was still privately owned at the turn of the century, as the State Park did not exist then. In 1907 the American Refinery Company leased more land, but in 1912 Devils Lake State Park was formed, leasing a part of the land by the lake. This set up a conflict between the two entities that would last for years.

Efforts to buy the quarry for the park at a reasonable price failed, and blasting continued at the northeast corner of the lake. The company leased the Cliff House Annex for its employees until 1912, when a lease renewal was denied. News items at the time bore such 1909 headlines as "Devils Nose to be Worked", and in 1919 "Quarry people refuse to stop operations". This was in response to the passage of a legislative bill which appropriated \$30,000 for purchase of the property. American Refinery wanted more. By this time their operations was at the southern end of the East Bluff.

During much of this time the company had maintained officer in downtown Baraboo, so this was a Baraboo business employing local workers. It was in conflict with the State, and also with a local committee supporting the Park. Apparently a large portion of the population supported removing the quarry, and transferring the property to the park. A 1921 news item reported that a dozen new cottages had been built near the quarry at the northeast end of the lake. These were on a 50 year lease. A battle for renewal of the leases would ensue in the late 1950's—but that is another story.



Refractory?

The quarry after destruction

At least 29 men can be seen in this refractory photo

The Refinery obviously wanted more than \$30,000, and it is true that the moving of all of the blasting and crushing machines would be daunting. The proposal was to move the operation to a point on the east road leading away from the lake area.

Moreover, the site would be away from the railroad, and a spur would be required. There also would have to be a short gauge railroad. Taking a tough stand, the legislature prohibited blasting within the confines of the park. Penalties were small fines and perhaps a short jail time. A 1919 legislature empowered the Governor to oust the company completely.

The Company then prudently purchased land well to the East of the lake, the state upping its offer to \$75,000, and the move began in 1921. Blasting and shipping lasted for 40 years, until the property closed in 1967. The company employed up to 100 men at a one time, The crushed rock was shipped to Illinois. Pay was 78 cents per hour, not bad at that time.

There was no unemployment benefit or welfare program, and a severe injury meant the loss of a job. One can be thankful that the wise men of that day were able to compromise the mater in a non-partisan manner, an act seemingly lost today. Further information of the quarry may be obtained in my August, 2002 story. Books are available at the libraries and historical societies also.