

Some Legends of Devils Lake

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

(Prepared for the Devils Lake anniversary in 2011)

The Greeks had their Zeus, Apollo, Poseidon, and Aphrodit. The Romans had their Jupiter, Venus, Vesta, and Ceres. The Middle Age had their witches, demons, Inquisitions, and trial by water. Devils Lake had its Ke-she-ah-ben-o-qua, Thunderbird, Vulcan and Neptune legends.

The Legends

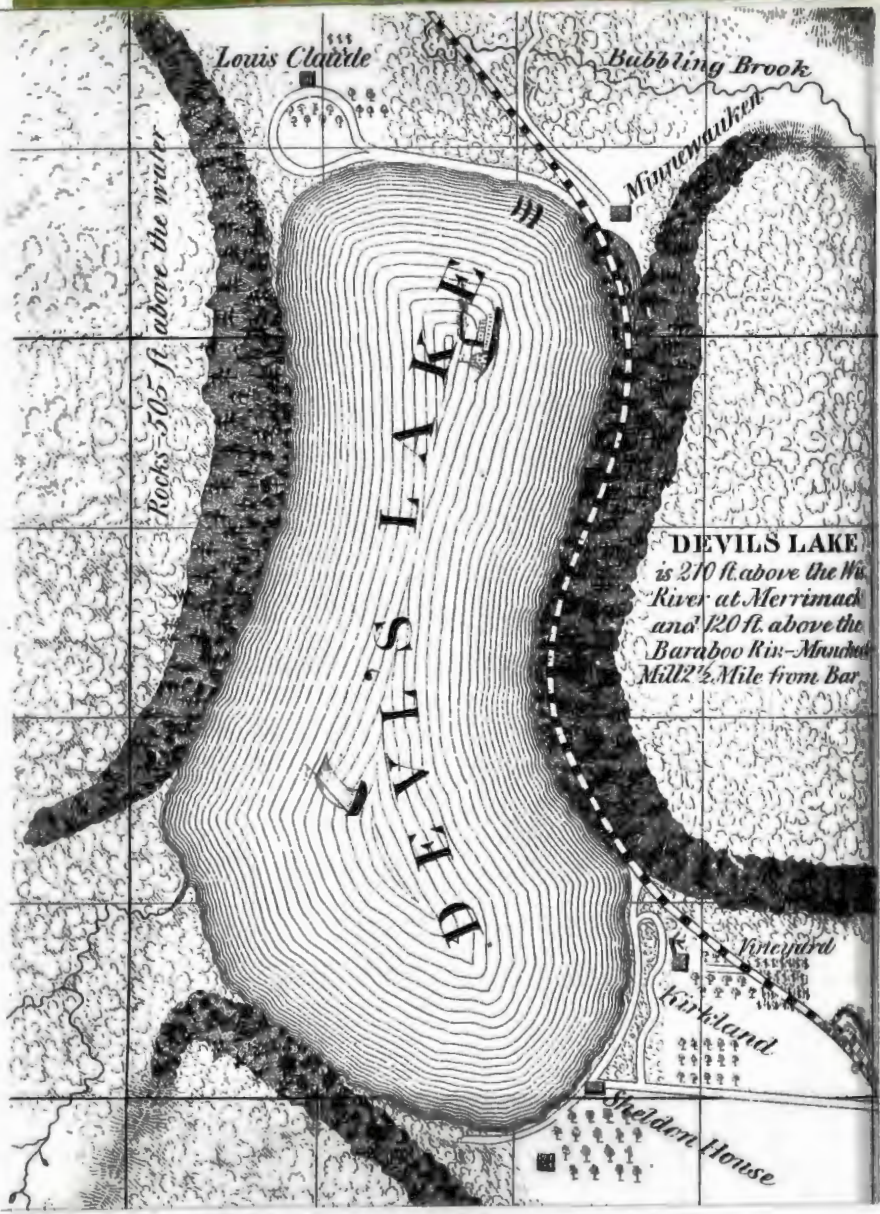
There are three major legends of Devils Lake, accounts which are described in this article. The original Native American name is said to be Spirit Lake—Ta-we-chuk-da, or Minnewaukan or Lake of the Hills. Visitors to North Dakota will recall that they have a Devils Lake too, and moreover there is a village on the west side of the lake named Minnewaukan, so we do not have total rights to that name. Kenneth Lange in his book “Ancient rocks and Vanish Glaciers” prefers other Native American Names, such as Mystery Lake or Lake of the Red Mountain Shadows. With regard to Minnewaukan, the Baraboo High School Annual bears that name, and one wonders if the Baraboo athletic teams’ name, Thunderbirds, came from one of the legends. Legends were dramatized in a part of the 1948 Centennial Pageant mentioned in another article and summarized as follows.

The Thunder Bird

Having been sent by the spirits to the Holy Lands (Devils Lake), the young Indian brave Blue Feather observed a dark serpentine fog lowering, followed by the voice of the powerful Water Spirit. She spoke her native Indian name in a feminine voice, and then the Thunder Bird spoke his name in a deep male voice. At this point “the Water Spirit shot up great spouts of water out of the lake. Taking his bow from his shoulder, Blue Feather shot Thunder Bird with a flaming arrow. Water Spirit pulled the wounded Thunder Bird into the water (after which) the world became black, the bluffs shook, and the heavens were rocked by thunder and lightning. Then the air was still.” In the 1948 pageant the narrator continued “Now we often hear thunder shake the bluffs and see the bolts of lightning which friends of the Thunder Bird aim at the Water Spirit. So we know that great struggle between the Water Spirit and Thunder Bird is still on deep below the surface of the lake.”

Ke-she-ah-ben-o-que

Another classic legend is recounted in the Southard Collection at the Sauk County Historical Society. It is found in an article about the Cliff House Hotel and its proprietor, W.B. Pearl regarding raising the body of Princess Ke-she-ah-ben-0-qua from the depth of the lake. According to legend, a French trader named Pierle (not Perl) arrived at a native tribe encamped



Tom Michele Photo

An Old Map of The Lake

at the lake. When he came upon the Princess in her sacred place by the lake the beautiful girl immediately retreated, but not without an admiring glance at the stranger. Pierle's reaction was similar and as the summer wore on they became lovers. For months the French hunter camped with the Indian braves, and when the corn was ripe and rustled in its stalks, and the moon hung full in the sky, Pierle went to the chieftain to ask of his daughter.

Windago, the young brave who had jealously watched Pierle and loved the princess also, went too. The old chief pointed to a pine tree high up in the crags of the opposite shore, on the topmost branch of which he had seen an eagle, and said that whomever brought him the a fledgling eagle from the nest would win the girl.

Both men swam the lake, Pierle a little faster, and he reached the tree and the eagle first. "But fierce Windago, seeing his adversary triumph, gave the branch of the tree on which Pierle was standing a wrench, that sent Pierle headlong, bleeding and lifeless on the rocks." The princess then threw herself, into the water and joined her lover's spirit. It is alleged that the shadow of the lovers can be seen floating on the waters on moonlit nights.

Here the legend gains new life, for the proprietor, Pearl, sometime in the 1880's advertised that he would bring up the body of the Princess to the surface of the lake. Nine thousand people are said to have gathered at the lake for this and other events, and a cannon first used in the Battle of New Orleans was brought in. At a given time, after three shots from the ancient piece, a body could be seen floating momentarily on the surface.

The audience, dumbstruck at first, dared Pearl to do it again, which he did. The body appeared again for a moment. Skeptics pointed out that a boat in the distance seemed to have something to do with it, and perhaps a man with wires in the boathouse did it also. Besides, it was alleged that the head of the apparition was probably grown the hotel garden, and that the floating hair was from the back of a buffalo. Nothing was ever proven, and an exciting day was had by all. Apparently no one was interested in raising the body of the French trader, the male lead of all of this drama.

Vulcan and Neptune

The third legend is said to have parallels in the wilds of Scotland and Wales. According to this tale, as recorded in the Southard collection at the historical society, "millions of years ago, when the earth was young, Vulcan forged a drill for Hercules, who then bored a hole through the mountains straight down to the rock formations of the globe, and placed therein a god-like charge of dynamite.

When all was ready, swift-winged Mercury flew to high Olympus bearing a message to Jove. With unerring accuracy the thunder hurled a bolt into the shaft, and cubic miles of primordial rock went whirling to the stars.

Aroused from his slumbers on the bed of the nether ocean by the shock, Neptune plunged upward through the aperture to learn the cause, bringing with him a section of his domain. Angered that such mighty deeds should be done without his council or consent, he set his watery seal on the mighty chasm, there to rest forever as evidence of his wrath".

This then is Devils Lake.

There is not room in this article to follow such noble tales with the true detailed story of the formation of Devil's Lake, told so well by Ken Lange and others, and in other stories this anniversary summer by other reporters. Suffice to say that layers of sandstone deep in a primordial sea were later subjected to intense pressure, resulting in the ultra-hard Baraboo quartzite of today.

Eons later two tongues of the Wisconsin glacier halted before meeting, blocking a river and depositing multi-tons of debris. This fortuitous halt left beautiful Devil's Lake in the middle. Lange's book tells this in scholarly detail, and the panorama at the Nature Center at the lake ought to be studied by every citizen of the city and state. Truth is indeed more amazing than fiction or legend.



Is that Pierle,
climbing the
steep bluffs to
the Eagle's nest?