

A History of Prior Lake

Covered by ancient seas, the area of what is now Minnesota emerged during a period of general uplifting nearly 100 million years ago. About 70 million years ago a deep valley started to be eroded into this emerged land. The valley gradually widened until it included the present upper and lower Prior Lake, Spring Lake, southwest to Lake Sutton and beyond. The sandstone was eroded to 350 feet beneath the present lake.

During the Ice Age, the glaciers filled in this ancient valley. Compaction left a long depression where the present lakes were formed. Much of the topography of the Prior Lake area was created by the most recent of the ice sheets. As this glacier melted, vast amounts of melt water and glacial deposits left behind formed the land forms we now see around us -- including Prior Lake. This glacial debris included many large rocks, called erratics, including the "Big Rock" called Tun-Can by the Indians, in the northwest part of Prior Lake as well as most of those decorative granite rocks that we see in many of our front yards.

The first people to occupy the Prior Lake area were American Indians. Signs of the early American Indians were in the form of five huge hawk effigies with a wing spread of 150 feet, low mounds of earth rising three or four feet in height. They dated back perhaps 1,200 years to the Effigy Mound Culture of the Late Woodland Period, but were eventually destroyed along with most other burial mounds scattered about MDE MA-YA-TON (Lake-of-the-Blue-Banks), now known as Prior Lake. Read more about the Five Hawks Effigy Mounds: (<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~dgarvey/Mounds/5hawks.html>). The high bluffs of Manitou Road contained a number of them. Others were near the lake on the Vierling property and on the steep banks of Red Oaks. Martinson's Island was the site of arrowhead and spearpoint manufacture as attested to by thousands of discarded chippings.

The huge glacial erratic mentioned earlier had great religious significance. This was the TUN-CAN, usually referred to as "Grandfather," the sacred stone, an object of veneration which they invoked to succeed in their enterprises. By it, they also made their oaths. It served as the great tribunal where an untruth of a perjurer was punished by the power of the rock. "Grandfather, I tell the truth," were the words they pronounced as they touched the stone.

There were no permanent village sites here, they were located in the Minnesota River Valley. However, two Dakota divisions, known as Santee, hunted and fished here during their summer. They were the WA-HPE-TON (Dwellers in the Leaves) with villages at Belle Plaine, Jordan, and the Little Rapids. The chief of the village was MA-ZA-O-MA-NI or Iron Walker. The other division was the MDE-WA-KANTON-WAN (People of the Spirit Lake) whose villages spread from Shakopee down river to Winona. The closest of these was Shakopee, interpreted as "The Six."

Indian trails are difficult to trace, though early maps show one branching off the old Medota or Sioux Trail at the mouth of Credit River (HE-HA-KA HNA-KA WA-KPA-DAN, the-creek-where-they-buried-the-elk, a prominent medicine man) running southwestward to Prior Lake. This route later became Hwy. 44. Another trail began at Shakopee and ran through the woods with its terminus at Spring Lake.

Fur trade with the Europeans was mutually profitable for more than 100 years. By 1800, twenty years before the establishment of Fort Snelling, the big game and fur bearing animals were disappearing resulting in Indian poverty and demoralization. Forced land cessions and removal to reservations erupted into the Sioux uprising. Following that event, the Indians were removed from the state, but the Sioux would slowly migrate back to ancestral lands in southern Minnesota.

Named after General Winfield Scott, Scott County was created in 1853. Some settlers had entered the county in the 1830s to trade with the Indians and to farm; however, the general settlement did not begin until the 1850s. Settlers came into the Prior Lake area following the Indian trails. From Fort Snelling they followed the Minnesota River trail through the Black Dog Indian Village to the trading post for Chief Eagle Head's village (called TE-WA-PA, Place of the Lily) at Hamilton (Savage). Here they took a branch of the trail south along the Credit River then southwest to Prior Lake. This is the route early settlers followed to get to the Credit River and Spring Lake areas.

Another route continued up the river, crossing at the Bloomington Ferry to Eagle Heads Village and then to Shakopee. A little east of Shakopee a branch in trail went south about five miles where it forked. One trail lead southeast between Spring Lake and Long Lake (earlier called Credit Lake and later renamed Prior Lake). The other branch continue south to the west end of Spring Lake.

William H. Calkins, a New York native, in 1852, made a claim between Spring Lake and Long Lake. There were prospects of a railroad being built through that section. John W. Turner acquired some land from Calkins in 1853 and in 1859 built a grist mill at the outlet of Spring Lake with a man named Griggs. In 1856 Calkins sold a large part of his claim to a company that wished to lay out a town in anticipation of that railroad. Spring Lake Village was surveyed in 1857, however, the railroad never came through that area.

Shortly after Griggs and Turner's grist mill was built, James H. Skinner and John McColl built a saw and grist mill. Not until 1865 did Joseph Thornton build Spring Lake's first store. Growth was slow because there was no railroad. The railroad did build a line in the northeast quarter of Section 2 on land owned by Charles H. Prior and others. C.H. Prior worked for the railroad and had the line of the Hastings and Dakota division of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad completed in 1872. With the railroad in this new area between Upper and Lower Prior Lake (formerly Long Lake, renamed in Prior's honor), Neil and Malcom McColl in 1871 erected the first building to serve as a store. The Prior Lake Post Office was established in 1872 with Malcom McColl as the first postmaster. The Village of Prior Lake was surveyed in 1875. In 1880 a flour and feed mill was built by Joseph Wankey. William B. Reed built a general store and wheat storehouse. Reed also was the publisher of Prior Lake's first newspaper The Prior Lake Times which lasted about three years. The town also had a blacksmith shop and two saloons. Maple Glen (formerly Spring Lake) and Mt. Pleasant (east of upper and lower lake narrows) were two attempts to establish neighboring towns.

Alexander Lyons, one of the first settlers to live in what is presently Prior Lake, lived here for a year and then moved to Mankato, leaving behind the grave of his four year old son (buried on his father's farm), the first European death in the area.

It was during this period that one of the most interesting of Prior Lake's early business developed: the Grainwood House opened on May 15, 1879, with a grand ball given for distinguished guests from all over the state of Minnesota. Mr. W.E. Hull offered rides on the lake in his 16-foot sailboat, the "Lulu," and maintained a fleet of fishing boats for the use of his guests. Music, dancing, and other entertainments were provided. It was, at first, a resort primarily for well to do Southerners who came by way of the Hastings and Dakota Railroad. The Grainwood had its own station and water tower. In those early years only a few of the local people were employed there and some of the farmers sold dairy products and other farm produce to the establishment. The townspeople used the ferry which ran across the narrows, or walked the railroad tracks to get there.

In 1883, the census revealed 237 Sioux Indians scattered around the state with one family living in Prior Lake. Within five years this number grew to 62 living in town.

The Village of Prior Lake was incorporated in May of 1891. In order for the town to incorporate, it needed to meet certain evaluation requirements. To meet these requirements, three farms, including the Lyons and Nauck (presently the Kop farm), were brought into the town boundaries. In 1894 the Grainwood House burned down, but was immediately rebuilt, bigger and better than the first one. In 1897, the Presbyterian Church was built at the present northwest corner of Hwy. 13 and Dakota Street. It was Prior Lake's first church. Previously, church services were held in the homes of the people. The following year College Hill School was built to the east of the church, a red brick building housing grades 1-10. In that same year the state population count of Sioux was 920, mostly concentrated in three places: Birch Coolie, Prairie Island and Prior Lake. It was also during this decade that baseball would become a favorite town sport and it would continue to be for the next century.

In 1900, the first telephone service came to Prior Lake. A single line connected Prior Lake with Jordan and another line with Grainwood. It was about this time also that the clientele of the Grainwood began to change. More patrons from the Minneapolis/St. Paul area began to arrive, as the Southerners gradually began to vacation farther

north. More local people were employed and later they were welcomed at the dinners and other places of entertainment.

In February, 1908, the white framed Catholic Church, St. Michael the Archangel, in Spring Lake, was brought across the lake ice and placed in Prior Lake to become the town's second church, St. Michael's. A high school was included in College Hill School about 1915 but it did not stay in operation very long. The following year, 1916, saw Prior Lake's first volunteer fire department organized. In 1917, electricity came to town.

In 1921, St. Michael's burned down and was replaced by a brick building in time for Thanksgiving that same year. (This building was torn down in 1985). 1925 saw the establishment of St. Paul's Lutheran Church (original building in the present Methodist Church). In 1926, Mr. Flint who published a newspaper, The Prior Lake News, obtained some books and established Prior Lake's first library in the newspaper office.

The 1920s also saw Prior Lake's first woman mayor, Cora McQuestion. Outside of occasional visits by Twin City gangsters and some bootlegging, the Roaring 20s were relatively quiet for Prior Lake.

On April 8, 1930, fire destroyed the second Grainwood Hotel, with little salvage and a loss of about \$10,000 dollars. The Prior Lake Volunteer Fire Department was able to save the cottages.

Before 1937, the people of Prior Lake obtained their water from wells on their property or from pumps strategically placed around the village. One such pump was on Fifth Street, another was located alongside the bank (Edina Realty Building) on Dakota Street and the other two were on Colorado and Pleasant Streets. On March 10, 1937, the Village Council, at a special session, decided to employ engineers to estimate the cost of a water works for the village. Cost of installation was estimated at \$12,000 dollars. Watermains were to extend to Dakota Street north on Fifth Street to Minnesota Street, east on Minnesota to St. Paul Avenue to Twin City Road. The water tank was built a half block north of Main and Dakota, a pump house was built beneath it. From then on the Village Council met in the pump house since it was cheaper to heat than the Village Hall. Payments for water works were completed in 1957.

Earlier in the decade (1930s) the children of Prior Lake went to high school in Farmington. They were boarded there each week. Later in the decade they were taken to Shakopee until Prior Lake built its own school nearly 20 years later. It was during this time also that a gradual movement of Sioux away from the area left only six families living here. It seems there was a considerable fluctuation at Prior Lake though, so eventually their holdings were increased to 252 acres held in trust by the early '30s was Jim Graham, whose Indian name was WA-SIN-TEDU-TA (Scarlet Canoe Steam), one of the last of the traditional Sioux who observed the old custom. His meager livelihood of hunting and trapping was augmented by selling toy bows and arrows, moccasins and bead work to the townspeople of Prior Lake. It was during this period also that two different segments of the community of Prior Lake emerged -- one was the summer cottage people around the lake, the other the permanent residents of the town.

In 1941, Westwood grade school was built in Prior Lake (School District #49). In 1951, the Prior Lake School (District #719) was built and opened in 1952 for grades 1-12 (present Junior High). Prior Lake's library needs were met with the use of a bookmobile from the Dakota-Scott Library System in 1958. In 1959, St. Michael's opened its grade school. In 1963, Westwood Elementary was built, followed in 1966 by the Senior High School and later Five Hawks.

The Prior Lake Library opened in 1969 – the same year the Scott County system was created – in the old City Hall building downtown. But within a year, it moved to the basement of the Scott-Rice Telephone Company. Two years later, the library moved back to City Hall, where it stayed until 1983. The library moved again, to a former bank at Main Ave. and County Rd. 21. In 1997, voters approved a parks and library referendum, and the new 11,250-square-foot library opened in 1999 downtown, near the current City Hall and the Police Station.

The Prior Lake City Hall and Police Station opened on Sept. 18, 2006 and Dec. 18, 2006, respectively. They incorporate the downtown look and are a thematic link between the lake, Lakefront Park and downtown. The city's second fire station opened in 2008 in the Jeffers Waterfront development in the northwest part of the city. In March 2009, the City opened its first Water Treatment Facility in the Brooksville Hills neighborhood of Prior Lake east of downtown.