



# DUCK LAKE

## WHITEHALL, MICHIGAN

There is more than one Duck Lake in Michigan, but the one on the west side of the state between Muskegon and Whitehall channeling into Lake Michigan is a very unique "Duck Lake". Not known for its size or heavy watercraft activity, it is a very well kept local secret for its spring-fed crystal clear waters, tranquility and award-winning Lake Michigan sunsets. Duck Creek feeds into the lake on the east, and at the west end of the lake Duck Lake channels into Lake Michigan. There is a small 20" dam or weir under the Duck Lake Bridge which was installed in the 1930's to limit boat access and to help maintain lake levels.

The "Channel", as locals affectionately refer to the area, has a backdrop of towering sand dunes and access to miles of pristine Lake Michigan beach. If one did not know the difference, you would think you were on an East Coast beach looking out on the Atlantic. Located on Scenic Drive, the beach has been a popular gathering place for swimming, sun bathing and spectacular sunsets for decades. On the south shore of the lake is a diverse cross section of both summer homes and year-round residences that total fewer than 50. On the north side of Duck Lake is the Duck Lake State Park that opened in 1988. The day use

*Duck Lake Channel into Lake Michigan  
Photo by John Penrod*

only park encompasses 728 acres and has parking for Lake Michigan visitors at Duck Lake Channel, a boat launch and a picnic pavilion. The entire area, once known for its virgin white pine that was lumbered off by the end of the 19th century, is still forested by majestic white pine, beach, oak and hemlock.

Duck Lake is rich in history that dates all the way back to the mid 1600's. It is really broken into five eras; Indians and Early Explorers, Lumbering, Fruit Farming and Resorts, Scout Camps, and Parks and Recreational.

## INDIANS & EARLY EXPLORERS

According to a publication in the Smithsonian Institute dated 1644 and titled "Jesuit Relations for the year 1644" a major Indian battle occurred just north of Duck Lake between 2,000 Iroquois who had been pushed to the west by Eastern settlers and 900 local Pottawatomes. The Pottawatome village was under siege for days and suffered a tragic defeat. The victorious Iroquois burned at the stake 70

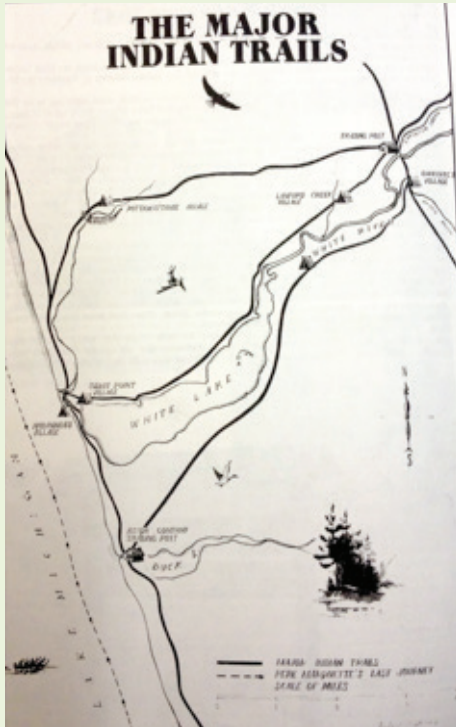
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*Sunset Duck Lake Channel & Lake Michigan Photo by John Penrod*

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of the best warriors from the defeated tribe. This battle was one of the most significant in the region during the early history of the country and shaped the Indian territories for decades to come. After this battle, often referred to as “Indian Point Massacre of 1642”, a vacuum occurred in the region and the Ottawa Indians became the dominate tribe in the 1700’s. Duck Lake grew as an important junction where the Indian Lake Shore trail from the south out of St Joseph branched into two trails, one heading north to the Straights of Mackinaw and the other northeast inland through what became the city Whitehall. The local Indians called Duck Lake “Jibski Sagagen”

The French Jesuits explored the region in the mid-1700’s and in 1760 the region became recognized as part of New France. It became part of the British possessions in 1763 after the French and Indian War and in 1796, as a result of the treaties growing out of the Revolutionary War, became part of the United States Territory.

The first white man in the region settled at the mouth of Duck Lake in 1790. His name was Joseph LaFramboisse, a Nova Scotian fur trader and an agent for the region for the famous John Jacob Astor Fur Company. Joseph was killed in an Indian battle in 1809, and his widow, Madame Lizette LaFramboisse carried on the fur trade business. She went on to expand the fur trading business from her Duck Lake trading post and became the largest and most successful fur trading operation in the great lakes region. Inducted in the Michigan’s Woman Hall of Fame in 1984, she was cited as “one of the most prominent of early businesswomen” in what was to become the state of Michigan. The trading post was built of logs and plastered with clay and moss and is thought to be the first building erected in the entire region. In 1821 she retired and sold the trading post to Rix Robertson and the location became known as the Robertson Trading Post.

## LUMBERING ERA

The first piece of Duck Lake property, 32 acres at the mouth of Duck Lake, was transferred to Orman Coe, of the Wisconsin Territory, on November 16, 1841. In 1844, Charles Mears, a businessman who had migrated from Massachusetts in 1837, had a sawmill in Whitehall and purchased the property at the mouth of Duck Lake. He built a dam at the site of the current Duck Lake Bridge, a water-powered sawmill, boarding house, store, blacksmith shop and stable. The lumber camp was known as “The Middle House”. Shortly thereafter, he added a steam-powered sawmill on the site as well. In 1856 a United States Post Office was opened in the Duck Lake store, and a three-story boarding house was erected. The small hamlet was called Cork Point. For a number of years, it was the center of activity for the whole surrounding territory. The Duck Lake store supplied the needs of settlers and Indians alike. The local Ottawa population number as many as 3,000.

For 25 years Charles Mears was the recognized leader and businessman in the

area. He purchased over 40,000 acres of prime timberlands, mostly from the U.S. Government Land Office for \$1.25/acre and included over 2,000 acres surrounding Duck Lake. He constructed and operated 15 sawmills and built five harbors to transport lumber. One of those harbors was the pier at the mouth of Duck Lake on Lake Michigan. It was serviced weekly by the schooner he built named Propeller that regularly transported lumber to Chicago and supplies back to west Michigan. Mr. Mears also served in the State Senate and was an early member of a newly founded political party, the Republicans. He was a personal friend of Abraham Lincoln. In November of 1858 the two sawmills were destroyed by fire, reportedly by a group of drunken disgruntled unpaid laborers. With over 10,000 logs in



the waters of Duck Lake, a new steam sawmill was shipped from Chicago and ready for production in late 1859. By the late 1800’s the vast forests of towering white pines had been completely stripped from the local landscape, and the lumber industry had moved inland and farther north. Aided by the introduction of railroad service in the state, the boom times of Charles Mears had moved on.



# FRUIT FARMS & RESORTS

Because of the lumbering era, regular ferry service was available between Chicago and several ports on the west coast of Michigan, including Whitehall. It was not long before businessmen and their families in hot, crowded Chicago found the inviting cool breezes, crystal clear lakes and beautiful sand dunes that the area provided. Lumber barons had cleared much of the land before the turn of the century, but it was quickly discovered that the soils and climate were very well-suited for fruit and berry farming. Fruit orchards and resorts began to appear in the entire region at the turn of the century.

Following the lumber era, one of Duck Lake's prominent founding families was that of Henrick (Henry) Schneider. Born in Germany in 1837, he first settled in Chicago working in the stockyards and at the age of 20 moved to Duck Lake to make his fortune as a lumber-jack working for Mears. He built a log cabin a few hundred yards south of Duck Lake and in 1870 took title, signed by President Ulysses S. Grant, to 154 acres of property south of Duck Lake channel and encompassing over one mile of Lake Michigan shoreline. He built a respectable farm that included several acres of raspberries and fruit trees and also a roofing shingle mill. Each summer his produce ended up in Chicago markets via

Goodrich Boat Company that docked at Michillinda Beach Lodge a half mile north of Duck Lake. The entire western region soon became known, and continues to be recognized today, as the Fruit Belt. In 1889 Henry purchased 56 acres on the south side of Duck Lake from the Mears family for \$258.00. Thirteen acres were directly on Duck Lake that he would subsequently subdivide into 44 lakefront lots. Henry's pioneering of the Duck Lake area helped make the early 20th century development possible.

Soon, over 15 resorts were operating in the Duck Lake-Whitehall area with four on Duck Lake itself. The majority of the early residents of Duck Lake were first-generation Germans or Swedes and often had connections to family or friends in Chicago. That was the case of the four resorts on the lake in 1920.



Lake View Farm, Duck Lake Inn and Duck Lake Park

All visible from Snyder barn silo

Note absence of all mature trees from lumber era

The **Lake View Farm** resort was typical. The proprietor, Christ Hinze, immigrated from Germany in the late 1800's and bought property on Duck Lake in 1898. He and his family cleared the land, established a berry farm and started taking in summer vacationers from Chicago. By 1920 he had expanded his farm house to 14 bedrooms and a dining hall that could seat 125 guests. He had a model-T Ford that would pick up guests at the Goodrich Boat dock in Whitehall. The resort operated until 1936 when the advent of the automobile detracted from destination vacation spots popular the first part of the century.

The **Duck Lake Inn** was operated by Harry Walters and his wife, who also came from Germany. They purchased property adjacent to the Hinze resort. By 1920 the resort included the main two-story house, guest cottage, kitchen and dining building,



Lakeview Farm 1930

ice house and a dance and pool hall on the lake. Many Saturdays, during prohibition, the dance hall had over a 100 vacationers from miles around enjoying their summer vacations. The Inn operated until Helen Walter died in 1955.



Walters Duck Lake Inn dance pavilion 1925

The **Duck Lake Resort** was started by another first generation German family led by Christ Hesse. The family had been stonemasons in Germany dating back to the 1600's. Christ and his brother Fred had worked in Chicago building cobblestone streets. By the late 1890's, they had saved enough money to come to Duck Lake and buy property on the east end of the lake. They built a home suitable for their family and summer guests and began advertising their summer resort in the 1902 Chicago Tribune. The resort was known for entertaining its summer guests with several Shakespearean plays put on by local actors over the summer season. Christ Hesse was responsible for building the first bridge over Duck Creek resulting in a direct route to White Lake and Whitehall. He later gifted the bridge and access property to the township and it is now known as Nestrom Road.



**White Lake**  
MICHIGAN

**DUCK LAKE RESORT**  
Resort, located on a beautiful peninsula, overlooking White Lake, Michigan. Accommodations for 100 guests. Rates from \$10.00 to \$20.00 per week. Phone 1316 to 1318. Good for children.

**MURRAY'S INN**  
Resort, located on a beautiful peninsula, overlooking White Lake, Michigan. Accommodations for 100 guests. Rates from \$10.00 to \$20.00 per week. Phone 1316 to 1318. Good for children.

**HOTEL MEARS**  
Resort, located on a beautiful peninsula, overlooking White Lake, Michigan. Accommodations for 100 guests. Rates from \$10.00 to \$20.00 per week. Phone 1316 to 1318. Good for children.

**DUCKWEATHER CLUB INN**  
Resort, located on a beautiful peninsula, overlooking White Lake, Michigan. Accommodations for 100 guests. Rates from \$10.00 to \$20.00 per week. Phone 1316 to 1318. Good for children.

**SYLVAN BEACH HOTEL**  
Resort, located on a beautiful peninsula, overlooking White Lake, Michigan. Accommodations for 100 guests. Rates from \$10.00 to \$20.00 per week. Phone 1316 to 1318. Good for children.

**GOODRICH WAY TO WHITE LAKE RESORTS**  
Resort, located on a beautiful peninsula, overlooking White Lake, Michigan. Accommodations for 100 guests. Rates from \$10.00 to \$20.00 per week. Phone 1316 to 1318. Good for children.

Chicago Daily Tribune  
July 24, 1914

**HOW TO REACH DUCK LAKE INN**  
By Train, Boat or Auto

**Pere Marquette Railroad**  
Three trains daily to Whitehall.

**Goodrich Boat**  
Direct to White Lake or by way of Munksgaard. Boat leaving Chicago in the evening, arrives at destination early in the following morning. Day boat leaving early in the morning arrives on White Lake about 6:00 p. m.

**A very interesting Twelve Hour Auto Trip**  
Trip from either Chicago or Detroit. Leaving Munksgaard on M-11 follow the Red Arrows.

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At Sylvan Beach \$5.00 a person  
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For further information address:  
**HARRY F. WALTERS, Prop.**  
**DUCK LAKE INN**  
Telephone 1316-6 WHITEHALL, MICHIGAN

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# DUCK LAKE



*Duck Lake Resort, Whitehall Michigan*



*Rubens Lake Park Resort 1915*

## LAKE PARK RESORT

In 1914 Rudolf Ruben and his brother Karin, Swedish immigrants, purchased four acres on Duck Lake for \$600. They built a two-story home and began advertising in the Chicago Daily Tribune for summer vacationers—"Bathing, boating and fishing \$8/week". Over time the Rubens expanded the resort and added seven small cottages and a dining hall. The resort operated until 1937.

## SCOUT CAMPS

In 1920 the Evanston Illinois Council of the Boy Scouts of America purchased 100 acres of land on the northwest side of Duck Lake (the old mill site) from Miss Carrie Mears, Charles Mears daughter. It included the channel and several hundred feet of Lake Michigan frontage. They named the camp "Wabaningo" after an Indian chief from the Ottawa tribe in the area in the mid 1800's. Thus began a 50-year era of Boy Scout camping on the north side of Duck Lake. A few years later the Evanston Council purchased the balance of the property on the north shore of approximately 500 acres from the Austin-Cooper family. In 1927 the Grand Valley Council of Boy Scouts located in Grand Rapids, purchased the eastern half of the north side of the lake



*Camp Shawondossee Parade Ground 1929*



*Camp Shawondossee dedication in 1928*

from Camp Wabaningo and named it Camp Shawondossee. The dedication of Camp Shawondossee in 1928 was attended by several dignitaries including two U.S. Senators, William A. Smith and Arthur Vandenberg.

In the 1930's Camp Shawondossee became well known for its annual Indian Pageant put on by scouts dressed in authentic Indian attire and tracing the early history of settlers and Indian lore of the area. The show was performed on two weekend nights and people from all around Western Michigan would make the trip. It was not uncommon for the event to have a 1,000 people attend each evening.

The second season of Camp Shawondossee had a camper and staff member who went on to become the 38th President of the



*Summer camp of the Grand Rapids Boy Scouts*

United States. President Gerald Ford was an Eagle Scout from the Grand Rapids Grand Valley Council.

Both Scout camps flourished for over 30 years but began to struggle in the 1960's with declining attendance and a slower economy. After the 1968 season, Camp Shawondossee closed and moved to another location in central Michigan. In 1969 Camp Wabaningo closed and moved to Camp Owasippe on Blue Lake.





# PARKS & RECREATION

## 30 Years of Lake Resident Stewardship State Park Expansion

Decades following the lumbering era, over 700 acres of prime forest, 3,500 feet of shore-line and more than 300 feet of Lake Michigan frontage were for sale to the public. For the first time in its history, the lake was vulnerable to major development.

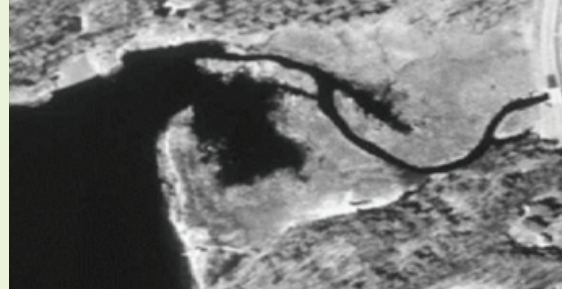
Fortunately the economic picture was weak in the late 60's and early 70's and both properties remained unsold for five years. In 1973 the Nature Conservancy, a land bank not-for-profit headquartered in Washington D.C., purchased both properties for \$714,000. The intent was to inventory the property until such time the State of Michigan could afford to purchase

the land for park purposes. In the spring of 1974, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources authorized the purchase of the property and took position that summer. The DNR announced the purchase and stated its anticipated use would be for "Rustic Campgrounds with limited motor vehicle access". A Duck Lake Home Owners Association was formed and began meeting every several weeks monitoring the potential development of the Scout property.

In early 1980, the DNR presented their master plan proposal for the new Duck Lake Park. The plan had somehow shifted from a limited use rustic campground concept to a full-blown family campground facility. The proposal included 200 campsites with toilet facilities, two parking lots-one to accommodate 400 cars and one for 100 cars, a three-acre picnic area and a concession stand. The facility was projected to have 250,000-300,000 visitors annually.

A park of this magnitude would put enormous stress on the lake and the public was outraged. The homeowners on Duck Lake became even more determined to fight the proposed project. The lake association helped form a new organization specifically to oppose the new park. The group was called C.A.L.M., Concerned About Land/Water Management. The group was made up of lake residents and concerned citizens in the township. In March, 1980, the DNR held a public hearing, and the lake association and the C.A.L.M. group organized nearly 300 people to go to the hearing and protest. For the remainder of the year, C.A.L.M. and the lake association met nearly every week and continued to organize opposition for the proposed park plan. In December, 1980, the group organized a car caravan and went to Lansing for three days to testify at DNR hearings in opposition of the plan. Finally before year end, the DNR formally withdrew the proposal.

Experiencing such strong opposition to their first proposal, in March, 1983, the DNR formed a Duck Lake State Park Advisory Committee consisting of lake residents, community representatives and park officials. The Committee met monthly for over a year, and a recommendation report was submitted to the DNR in June of 1983. The four-phase plan submitted by the Advisory Committee was accepted by the DNR. Phase One began the next summer and included removing the old scout buildings, building access roads, installing



*Duck Creek entering Duck Lake 1997*



*Duck Creek 2010*

a 100-car parking lot for the Duck Lake Channel/Lake Michigan access and a boat launch. The park was dedicated in 1988. Over a decade of organized, passionate objection by the lake residents paid off, and the development threat of a huge new park project was minimized.

## The Marcus Park Dock Dispute

In the early 1950's the Dake family owned a large parcel of property south of Duck Lake channel and on both sides of Scenic Drive, including frontage on Duck Lake. In 1961 the parcel without Duck Lake frontage was sold, and in the late 1990's was developed into six single-family home sites and called Winterwood Shores Association. In 1964 the other parcel that included Duck Lake frontage was purchased by prominent Muskegon labor attorney, Ben Marcus. In 1977 Marcus donated a small part of his total parcel, the narrow strip of land on Duck Lake, to Fruitland Township which became Marcus Park. In 1990 the remaining Marcus property was sold to a developer and the Marcus Dunes Condominium project developed with 13 home sites.

In the late 1990's, as homes were built in the two developments, residents began putting boat docks on the Marcus Park property to access Duck lake. A long-running dispute evolved between the Duck Lake Owners Riparian Association and the two developments about the validity of easement rights to the township property. By 2004 nearly a dozen boats were on the

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*President Gerald Ford standing  
with flag on right*





# DUCK LAKE

park property from the two developments with the potential of over twice that number when fully built. This would represent over 50% of additional boat traffic.

The lake association filed a lawsuit contesting easement and access rights in June, 2005, against the owners of both developments and Fruitland Township. The dispute has dragged on in the courts for eight years. In April, 2012, the township, in an unprecedented action, simply gave the Marcus Dunes Association 550' of Duck Lake frontage from Marcus Park in an unsuccessful attempt to extract them from the litigation. A second round of litigation was initiated in 2011 and 2012 and is currently headed to the Court of Appeals for the second time in six years. A ruling is expected in the next 6-12 months. The entire problem all results from ambiguous and very poorly executed land title work dating back over 50 years. As painful as the process has been for lake residents, both in time and financial commitment for legal expenses, it has drawn the members closer together in their efforts to protect the lake from overuse. Just as the lake residents pulled together in the 1980's to protect the lake-this generation has done the same.

The Duck Lake that channels into Lake Michigan just south of Whitehall is small by most metrics, but it has a long proud, interesting history. Its residents have strived to be good stewards of the lake for many decades and oftentimes it has been difficult, but the continued effort is necessary for the good of generations to come.



About the author, David W. Pequet

Dave has been a Board member of The Duck Lake Riparian Association for 12 years and is its current president. He lives in Chicago and owns an investment management firm. Dave and his wife have owned a home on Duck Lake for 28 years. His first year on Duck Lake was 1963 as a Boy Scout at Camp Shawondossee. He was a staff member at Shawondossee in 1968, the year the camp closed.

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If you are interested in following the efforts to protect this wonderful West Michigan asset, contact the Duck Lake Riparian Owners Association and we will add you to the mailing list. Our email is [ducklk@aol.com](mailto:ducklk@aol.com) or you can call Dave Pequet at 800-237-0930.



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