

# Our Times: Lake City in History

“Preserving Yesterday’s Memories for Tomorrow”

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## PRESIDENT’S CORNER

BY ELOISE BLATTNER

Don Schwartz has the official title of “Secretary” of the Lake City Historical Society, which implies that his principal assignment is to write up the minutes of our monthly meetings. Yes, he has done that for a dozen years now.

But for many people contacting us, especially from beyond our community, Don Schwartz is our “front door.” He handles all of the requests coming to us for archived material, frequently photographs or information relating to genealogy. Recently, for example, he supplied photographs and information to the CCC Legacy website of the Civilian Conservation Corps encampment that was located near Lake City in the 1930s and 40s. He is the resident authority on what’s in our archive because he has been the moving force behind its organization and maintenance.

Don also updates our website and works with Dean Kaartinen of Creative Minds if there are any technical problems. We invite readers to visit it at [www.lakecityhistoricalsociety.com](http://www.lakecityhistoricalsociety.com).

Here are some of the programs and projects we’ve been part of in the past months, and an update on future activities:

- ◆ On September 24, under LCHS auspices, author/historian Dean Urdahl spoke about Abraham Lincoln’s involvement with Minnesota in presentations at Bluff View Elementary, St. John’s School and City Hall.
- ◆ We maintain a mini-museum at the Pearl Button Company, 226 South Washington, and an attractive exterior sign was put in place in November.

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## Lake City’s Neighborhood Groceries: Staples, Penny Candy, and Trust

BY ELOISE BLATTNER

What began as research on what businesses were operating in Lake City some 50 years ago turned into a different project altogether. Scattered around town at the time were a number of neighborhood groceries. I know a lot about two of them because they were so near our home on North 7th. But what about the others?

To answer that question, I spoke to friends and relatives who added their memories and anecdotes to mine.

These small groceries, some going back to the early 1900s, began to decline in number in the late 1950s as automobiles proliferated and the neighborhood aspect began to fade in importance. But at one time, Lake City had eight such stores. Only one survives today: Marien’s is descended from the Lyon Avenue Grocery, whose lineage at 716 W Lyon goes back to 1936.

Of the remaining seven, three are currently occupied residences on their original sites, two were moved elsewhere in town but remain in use as homes, and two have disappeared.

My family, the Sanborns, lived just across the back alley from Lindeen’s Grocery Store at 513 N. 6th. My twin sister, Mary Ellen, and I remember going there, a nickel in hand, and peering into the wonderful large glass case, taking our time to decide on what sweets we could get for our money. Actually, the money flowed both ways. Proprietor Albert Lindeen bought asparagus and tomatoes that Dad grew in our garden.

Far up on Lakeshore Drive was a store run by Arthur Oelkers, near the present location of John Hall’s Alaska Lodge at 1127 N. Lakeshore. After Oelkers left the grocery business, Fred and Elenore Krohn purchased the building

and turned it into their home.

The authoritative historian on Lindeen’s is Wuanita Wallace. The store was built by her grandfather, Charles Lindeen, an immigrant from Sweden, who opened it in 1912 under the name Sixth Street Grocery. Her father, Albert, and mother, Emma were owners from 1945 to 1962. Wuanita recalls that period:

“That little store was packed with all sorts of products in shelves, racks, gondolas, meat case and freezers. . . . They had charge accounts for many people and they were given extra time to pay when times were hard. There was a swing-up door to the basement where vinegar was kept in barrels. I also remember the lutefisk barrel on the concrete slab outside in front of the door. . . . I also remember when my Mom, Emma, was in the store at closing time and was held up with a gun pointed at her.

“The hours were long, but they closed on Wednesday evenings and always on Sunday, although they were interrupted on many a Sunday with someone needing something. Lindeen’s Grocery was a nice, clean, happy store with many smiles and conversation.”

As Sanborn kids, we knew there had been another grocery store in the next block north of Lindeen’s where our folks’ nice old friend Gust Boberg was living. We could see that it looked like a grocery store by its shape and the front steps we sat on.

My brother, F. David Sanborn, 3-1/2 years older than my sister and me, remembers the old store as well. His paper route (early to mid -1940s) included North Sixth. He recalls that Don Roberson purchased the property and built a house around it while he and his wife were living in it. David was even given a tour of

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# The Era of Small Groceries

(Continued from Page 1)

the project and remembers it as a one-story home.

And the story continues. When I talked with the current owners, Jan and Lyle Peters, they said their abstract goes back to 1857, and confirms that Boberg lived there from 1930-1944. The address then was 609, but today it is 615. How and why did that happen? A mystery.

On the south side of town, there were three stores, two of them quite near the high school, which was convenient for students wanting a quick snack or an alternative to the school's hot lunch.

I remember in the 1940s that Bill and Arlene Lombard ran one of these stores at 515 South 6th., B&A Grocery. They lived in the home now occupied by Ted and Lois Kruempel at 517 W. Elm, right around the corner from their store.

I learned through friends that the store's first owners were a Mr. and Mrs. Schmauss (first names unknown) and it was called Schmauss Grocery. The store was handed down in the family to Vic and Harriet (Schmauss) Holter. Their son Bill recalled fondly to his wife Lois that when he was a boy he delivered groceries with his coaster wagon.

Garden Street Grocery at 602 S. Garden was also near the school. Although the area "next door" was actually under the same roof as 602, it bore the address of 600 S. Garden. The Warren and Gladys Schmauss family lived in that part. Gladys helped Epie (Mrs. Phil Baker) run the grocery and Warren ran W. F. Plumbing and Heating from the 600 address.

Judy Steffenhagen remembers when her mother, Agnes (Bremer) Knutson, ran Garden Street Grocery in the mid-50s into the early 60s. Before that, she had been a beauty operator in Lake City for about 23 years. Judy, her brother Roger, and sister Barb worked in the store part-time during their high school and college years. "Since it was next to the high school," Judy writes, "many students came over during lunch break. They bought long johns, rolls, etc. Maybe a banana or apple.

"Oh, and the penny candy. Could fill a little brown paper bag for a quarter or less. Licorice, Bazooka bubble gum, little wax Coke bottles, wax lips, little rolls of candy, lollipops, candy buttons. So many memories.

"We had a wood block with a spindle on it. When people were short of \$\$ or needed something extra, all they had to do was sign their name. Then they would come in later to pay their bill. Agnes would always be there to help people out."

## President's Corner (Continued from Page 1)

- ◆ We offer guided tours to the collection of artifacts that is maintained in the second floor ballroom of City Hall. Recent visiting groups included local home-schooled children and 35 members of the Lincoln High School class of 1955 who were having a reunion.
- ◆ The Goodhue County Historical Society features a monthly "History Break" program that is free and open to the public. Our members will make a presentation on local history at the GCHS Museum, 1166 Oak Street, Red Wing, on Wednesday, April 20, 12 to 1 p.m.

THURSDAY, MAY 21, 1936 WABASHA COUNTY LEADER, LAKE CITY, MINNESOTA PAGE THREE

# LOOK MOMMY!

LET'S TAKE THIS ORDER OVER TO  
**LEO'S NEW STORE**  
BET 'MOST EVERY KID IN TOWN  
WILL GET HIS MOTHER TO BRING  
HIM TO LYON AVENUE GROCERY

## OPEN HOUSE

All Day

# SAT., MAY 23



Better Service—Bigger Values—These are the things we offer upon the completion of our new store.

To celebrate its grand opening, we are setting aside next Saturday for an "Open House" day, when the public is invited to come in and inspect our new, modern and up-to-date food store.

Our new place of business is just a half a block from our old location—on Lyon Avenue, one block west of the Milwaukee depot.

Come in and get acquainted. You will find some of the biggest values we have ever offered.

Farmers, especially, will find it convenient to trade with us. We pay highest market prices for eggs.

**FOR THE KIDDIES!**

With every 50c order on Saturday we will give a free ice cream cone to the kiddies. Bring the youngsters and give them a treat.

**HERE ARE A FEW OF OUR TYPICAL VALUES**

VANILLA	8 ounce bottle	14c
SPICES	2-ounce boxes	2 for 15c
COFFEE	Leo's Special	pound 23c
COCOA—Ambrosia	2 pound package	15c
TABLE SALT	2 boxes	15c
SPINACH	20 ounce can	10c

## LYON AVENUE GROCERY

LEO HAGEMAN, Proprietor      PHONE 2593

*The address at 716 W. Lyon first bore the name Lyon Avenue Grocery in 1936. This advertisement appeared in the Wabasha County Leader on May 21, 1936, two days before the Open House. If a family spent 50 cents, the kids got free ice cream cones.*

Although I have lived here my whole life, until I started asking around about stores I never knew that Herman and Ida Fick operated one on the south side of town, at 818 S. Garden.

In the vicinity of 1300 N. Lakeshore was George Platte's Store and Gas Station on the lake side of the highway. The Plattes lived in a small house adjacent to the station/store. Across the highway was the home of Homer and Grace Reynolds, the grandparents of Audrey (Wise) Sass. Audrey recalls going to the store on errands for her grandmother. When the highway was widened in 1955, the home and store were moved across the highway to side streets and both were used as homes for years.

The business we know today as Marien's Deli: The Next Generation at 716 W. Lyon goes back to the mid-1930s and Florence Hageman Stiene. Many long-time residents like me can call up memories of one or more proprietors at that location. As a girl I can recall going there and, as a young mother in the 1960s, I sent my kids there to buy bread (three loaves for a dollar) and other items."

Shari (Wiebusch) Norberg's great-uncle, Martin Wiebusch, ran the store when she was in grade school. She confesses that when she and her best friend Mary (Oberg) Ehlers went in with a few pennies to buy candy, they occasionally would slip a few extra pieces into their pockets when Martin's back was turned. "Word got back to my Dad," Shari reports, "and he gently reminded me of the 8th Commandment. That ended my career in crime; Mary will have to speak for herself."

When his parents had the business, Tom Heimer, Jr., said grocery deliveries were left to him. "It was a fun thing to do as I met so many nice people. Some were elderly ladies who liked company, so often I was offered a cookie and would visit for a while." Deliveries were made in a Chevy station wagon with "Lyon Avenue Grocery" on the side.

The store has expanded in all directions over the years, both the main floor business space and the second floor living area. Customers today will see wood supporting columns on both sides that define the width, about 12 feet, of the original store.

The business has changed hands eight times over the years and has had a Marien associated with it for the past 30 years. The *Lake City Graphic* of January 2, 1986 reported as follows:

"Dave and Ginger Marien of Lake City have purchased Twomey's Market from Bill and Mary Twomey. The Mariens have lived in Lake City 24 years. Marien was employed by Imperial Clevite Inc., for 25 years. Mrs. Marien, who has worked at the market for 6-1/2 years, also was employed at the Blue Moon Café. In addition to their daughter, Jenny, the Mariens plan to continue with the same employees—Betty Miller, Shirley Beck, Arlene Grobe, Julie Olson, Julie Wiebusch, Kathy Menk and Helen Zillgitt." In 2005, the store was purchased by Jeri (Marien) Prigge and her husband Jeff.

## Our Neighborhood Stores And Their Proprietors

### 716 West Lyon Ave.

- Lyon Avenue Grocery, Florence Hageman Steine
- Lyon Avenue Grocery, Martin Wiebusch (probably ran the store, but did not own it.)
- Chink's Lyon Avenue Grocery, Chink Klindworth
- Lyon Avenue Grocery, W. J. Zweifel
- Lyon Avenue Grocery, Thomas Heimer., Sr., and Bobbie Heimer
- Lyon Avenue Grocery, Barbara Weber, Bonita Knutson
- Twomey's Market, Bill and Mary Twomey
- Marien's Market, Dave and Ginger Marien

- Currently: Marien's Deli, The Next Generation, Jeff and Jeri (Marien) Prigge

### 513 North 6<sup>th</sup> St.

- Sixth Street Grocery, Charles Lindeen
- Lindeen's Grocery, Albert & Emma Lindeen
- G & I Grocery, George & Iline Conway
- Fuhrman's Antique Store, Les & Dorothy Fuhrman
- Currently: Residence.

### 609 North 6th St.

- F. H. McGuigan Grocer, F. H. McGuigan
- C. J. Hendriksen Staples & Fancy Groceries, C. J. Hendriksen
- Currently: Renumbered as 615. Residence occupied by Lyle and Jan Peters.

### 1127 North Lakeshore Dr.

- Lakeshore Grocery, Arthur Oelkers
- Currently: John Hall's Alaska Lodge.

### 1300 Block, N. Lakeshore Dr.

- Platte's Store & Service Station, George Platte
- Currently: A small, widened park area on Riverwalk.

### 515 South 6th St.

- Schmauss Grocery, Schmauss (First name unavailable, father of Harriet Holter)
- Schmauss Grocery, Vic & Harriet Holter
- B & A Grocery, Bill & Arlene Lombard
- Currently: Non-existent.

### 602 South Garden St.

- Garden Street Grocery, Gladys Schmauss
- Garden Street Grocery, Agnes Knutson
- Currently: Two Residences

### 818 South Garden St.

- Fick's Store, Herman and Ida Fick
- Purchased and turned into a home by Leona Kujath
- Currently: Residence



*Charles Lindeen, his home (left) and the store he opened in 1912 at 513 N. 6th under the name Sixth Street Grocery. Customers had a delivery option. The horse and wagon gave way in time to a panel truck. His son Albert and daughter-in-law Emma took over the business in 1945, renaming it Lindeen's Grocery.*

## The Pink Tape Bandit Strikes in Lake City

LAKE CITY—A young bandit with a flair for the unusual held up a grocery store here Saturday night [Dec. 1, 1956] and escaped with \$45 in cash.

Mrs. Albert Lindeen, the holdup victim, said the stranger wore “strips of pink adhesive tape” across his face. He entered the neighborhood grocery, operated by Mrs. Lindeen’s husband, about 9:30 a.m. carrying a revolver.

Mrs. Lindeen said the man remarked: “This is a stickup. I don’t want to hurt you.” He demanded money and she turned the cash from the till over to him.

The bandit left on foot and Mrs. Lindeen notified the police. She identified the intruder as between 25 and 30 years old, about 5-7 and 140 pounds. “One of the most memorable things about the bandit was his long, light brown hair,” said Mrs. Lindeen. “He needed a haircut.”

*[Editor’s Note: The preceding is from a newspaper account, but it was not the Graphic and the source is not identified. The robber turned out to be Carl Wilwerding, a 21-year-old Lake City man who fled to Oregon, where he was arrested. Local authorities arranged for his extradition through Minnesota Gov. Orville Freeman. Wilwerding was sentenced to an indeterminate term in the St. Cloud reformatory.]*

## Denver Robbers Less Colorful

Wearing ordinary black ski masks, two youths robbed Elmer (Chink) Klindworth and his father John in a Denver grocery store where Chink was employed.

Klindworth, former owner of the Lyon Avenue Grocery, moved to Denver after selling the property to Tom and Bobby Heimer in 1962. A *Lake City Graphic* news report in 1965 reported the encounter:

“[He] arrived at the store about 6 a.m. to open up for the day. He was accompanied by his father [John A.], who is a guest at his home, and who decided to accompany his son to the store. Just as Chink inserted a key in the door, he felt a gun at his back.

“Two young men wearing ski masks forced the Klindworths to enter the store, where the older man was tied up with black masking tape. Chink was instructed to open the safe at the rear of the office and empty all the money into a cardboard box. Then he, too, was taped up, and the robbers departed taking wallets, watches and a ring from their victims.

“A Denver newspaper listed the firm’s loss at \$8,000. Chink’s cash loss was \$22 and John’s \$26. The two managed to free themselves in about 15 minutes and they called police.”

### Please Join Us ...

... in our mission to preserve yesterday’s memories for today. We meet the fourth Tuesday of each month, 2 p.m., second floor conference room of City Hall. Your input is always welcome.

## Why Is It ‘Lyon’ Avenue? Just Follow the Money

Who was William H. Lyon? His name marks a major Lake City thoroughfare. Jeff Aitken, Wabasha county recorder, found a drawing made in 1907 of land in Lyon’s estate—a wide swath mostly on upper Lyon Avenue on both sides of the railroad tracks and a commercial block downtown between Lakeshore (Main Street at the time) and Washington.

When Lyon died in March, 1890, the *Lake City Republican* quoted entirely from the *New York Daily Tribune* on Lyon’s life, an indication that despite his large local property holdings he spent very little time in our town.

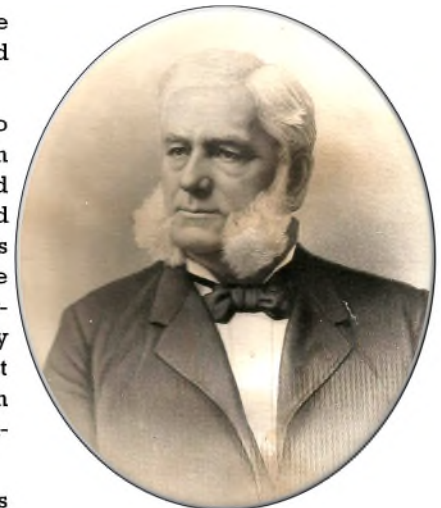
The first of his family line arrived in America from England in the 1640s, about a decade after the Mayflower weighed anchor at Plymouth Rock. He was born in Holland, Massachusetts, on Oct. 18, 1819, so would have been in his early 50s when he acquired Lake City property. He intended at first to study for the law, but switched to teaching. While still in his 20s and serving as a high school principal, he became fascinated with the newly-invented telegraph and “devoted some time to adapt it to writing and printing.”

His next move, into the mercantile business in New York City, produced the great wealth that led to his land investments here and elsewhere. He traveled abroad to arrange the import of “fancy goods,” and was the first American to visit Paris in 1848 as the French revolution came to an end.

In addition to his property interests in Brooklyn and New York, the *New York* newspaper referred to Mr. Lyon’s development enterprises in Lake City, “where the principal street is called Lyon Avenue,” and elsewhere in Minnesota.

[At his death, Lyon’s estate included 24 lots bounded by Chestnut, Center, Seventh and Eighth Streets, and—west across the tracks—an area equal in size on both sides of Lyon Avenue. Downtown, he owned a square block, the area now bounded by the former Galley Restaurant, used as a post office in the early days, and today’s Old Bank Bar, a bank without a bar in its first incarnation. Five or six lots on Park Street were part of the holdings. In all, the tracts are estimated to have comprised 20 acres.]

“In personal appearance,” the paper continued, “he is commanding, being tall, portly and dignified. In spite of his three score years [he was 71 at his death], he walks erectly and sturdily and, save for his whitened hair, he shows no sign of age. His manner is frank and candid and he has many friends.”



# My Father and the Scourge of TB

By Deirdre Flesche

*[Editor's Note: Our last newsletter quoted from a report given by Dr. E. C. Bayley to the Wabasha County Medical Society in 1911. He devoted a third of his presentation to the "scourge of tuberculosis," which at the time was killing 50% of its victims. Minnesota's death rate from TB was one of the nation's highest. The article elicited a response from Deirdre Flesche of Lake City, whose father had told her how TB had devastated his family and left him and his siblings as orphans. We asked if she would write about that family history.]*

For 3000 years, tuberculosis, or consumption, plagued mankind. Hippocrates suffered from it, as did three members of the famous literary family the Brontes. By the dawn of the 19th century it was striking down one in seven people. Victims suffered with racking coughs, bloody phlegm, extreme fatigue, and eventually wasted away, their bodies "consumed" by the disease. Because death was so common an outcome, parents often prepared their children to behave well in the event they would be orphaned and left to others to raise.

Little was understood about how the disease spread. It was widely assumed that it was inherited, so no one was afraid to be around someone with an active case. Developers in Los Angeles, Tucson and Colorado Springs invited those sick with TB to come West to take in the healing qualities of the fresh air.

By the turn of the century however, the tuberculosis bacillus had been identified. People began to understand that the disease was "contagious," and could be spread by airborne germs that left an infected person when they coughed or sneezed. However, while they now understood the cause of the dreaded disease, they still had no way to cure it.

So grave were the consequences of the disease that many things taken for granted today were introduced at that time to help control the spread of TB and other diseases. Anti-spitting laws were passed and public parks and porches were built to encourage spending time in the fresh air. Cleanliness was promoted, Kleenex was invented, beards were shaved, and skirts shortened to keep them out of the dirt.

Into this time frame, my father Bernard Flesche was born. The oldest child of Ole and Nora Flesche, the family lived above the hardware store they owned in Walnut Grove, MN.



Bernard was born in 1904, followed in quick succession by Alice, Oliver, Merle, and Louise.

Then tragedy began to strike this family. In 1909, Bernard's brother Merle died of TB. In March 1911, his father began to show signs of the disease. Later that same year, Bernard's sister Louise died.

In 1912, Ole and Nora took their family to Colorado Springs where they lived in one of the many tent cities set up for tubercular patients who were hoping for a cure in the fresh mountain air. [See photo below.] Sadly, there was no cure, and they returned to Minnesota, where Ole died in 1913.

Nora and her young family moved in with Ole's parents, to nurse them, and the following year, they both died. Nora, now sick herself with TB, returned to Colorado for the mountain air. Too fatigued from years of caring for others, she succumbed to the disease in 1915.

The children, ages 11, 10 and 8, were left orphans. In a span of six years they had lost a brother, a sister, their father, two grandparents and finally their mother. It was an overwhelming sense of loss.

Nora's sister Anna volunteered to take on the two boys, but didn't feel she could take on all three children, given the size of her own family. So Alice suffered an additional loss when she was separated from her brothers and sent to live with her Aunt Ida. At age 84, when she recounted that period of her life, she did so with tears in her eyes.

My father went on to study medicine. My mother Kathleen used to say he became a physician to "cure his own mother." In 1934 he moved to Lake City and opened his own medical practice. During WWII he was stationed in Texas and England, but after the war he returned to Lake City and went into business with Dr. Bayley. Along with doctors Gjerde and Bowers they had a very busy time serving the medical needs of this community.

*At left: Dr. Bernard Flesche with Dr. Covill Bayley, circa 1950; below: 1912, Colorado Springs, Bernard between his father Ole and mother Nora, with brother Oliver and sister Alice in foreground. The three children were orphaned in 1915, having lost both parents and two siblings to tuberculosis in the previous six years.*



# Revisiting a Time Capsule from 1880

A “time capsule” set inside the cornerstone of the Congregational Church in Lake City rests today in a display cabinet in the foyer of the present church. It is 126 years old this year, and the discolored and beat-up little box looks every bit of it.

The tin container is only four by four by eight inches, but it was crammed to capacity with an amazing quantity of material that the congregation of 1890 wanted to pass on to coming generations. Contents included a small Bible, lists of church officers and city officials, a letter from the serving pastor, F.B. Fisk, a history of Lake City, a copy of the city charter, a list of ordinances in effect in 1873, specimens of coinage, a picture of the church in its decorations for Easter Sunday, 1879, and various documents relating to church affairs.

And there was a letter of advice that originated with the Rev. J. W. Whitney, a missionary residing on a remote island outpost near New Zealand. He had read that the original 1857 church had been destroyed by fire and another would be built in its place. He warned against incurring debt. “A church with a debt is like a ship with an anchor and long cable out. The ship cannot sail and is sure to fetch up when she comes to shoal water, when without the anchor dragging, she would have sailed right over the shoals to deep water.”

The account of the city’s history was written by D. G. Estes, who found seven buildings in the downtown area when he arrived in 1857, including a restaurant, various stores and two hotels (The City and the American). A steamboat office operated on the Point. Stage coaches delivered a steady stream of passengers into Lake City, mid-point of the route between LaCrosse and St. Paul, particularly in the inclement months when river traffic was shut down because of ice. While horses were being changed, the passengers would rest, eat and look around.

This “tourist” traffic was a windfall for local merchants. “Sadly,” writes Estes, “these prosperous days passed away with the arrival of the first railroad train—an engine and one car—which ran into Lake City July 10, 1871.”

The first post office, located in a local store, was a case “not quite three feet square with 20 small pigeon holes,” adequate for the population at the time. There were no saloons in town in 1857 and no liquor could be sold—at least in the open—except for medicinal purposes.

Game and fish were plentiful, but fresh vegetables and bread were not. To put meat on the table, even professional men were forced to hunt. Estes records a sumptuous feast he enjoyed for his first New Year’s dinner in Minnesota: broiled walleyed pike with drawn butter sauce, roast rib of black bear and loin of venison with currant jelly, broiled elk steak, fried pheasant and squirrel, pot pie, potatoes and English plum pudding.

The original Congregational Church, a wood-frame structure built on the corner of Dwelle and South High Streets burned to the ground. Its successors were both erected at the corner of Oak Street and Lyon Avenue. The current church was built in 1965.—Based on a 1965 Lake City Graphic article.



## Report Tells How Harbor Developed Since 1882

*Editor's Note: City Council member Andru Peters recently came upon a U.S Corps of Engineers manual that adds detail to the history of the harbor area going back to 1882. Although undated, it is likely the document was issued in 1985 or 1986. A copy has been provided to the Lake City Marina office and another resides in the Lake City Historical Society archive. This article is drawn from the 35-page manual. Local citizens and harbormasters whose efforts led to the facility we see today are cited in "Lake City, Minnesota: Our Historical Journey," published in 2007 by the Lake City Historical Society.*

The Lake City harbor facilities are located 780 river miles upstream of the Ohio River on the right bank, or west side of the lake. Two small-boat harbors are located adjacent to the downtown. The older harbor, known as the inner harbor, was constructed by excavating a harbor basin into the Lake City Point. This harbor has about 9 acres of protected area and contains slips for about 400 boats. The newer harbor, also known as the

outer harbor, is enclosed by the federal concrete breakwater, the federal rockfill breakwater, and Lake City Point. This harbor also has an area of about 9 acres and provides protection for about 200 sailboats. The outer harbor was formerly a commercial harbor [which long-time residents recall as a receiving point for coal sold at retail by the Sprague Coal Company].

Marina facilities for both harbors are owned and operated by the city. Facilities and services include an office, yacht club, parking, slips, water, electricity, launching ramp, boat hoist, fuel sales, sanitary waste disposal, and police and fire protection. The manual observes that “the marina is a very attractive, well-run facility.”

In 1882, a report issued by “the Chief of Engineers, United States Army,” concluded that a safe harbor at Stockholm, Wisconsin, or Lake City, Minnesota, would facilitate the loading and unloading of freight and afford a place of refuge for steamboats and rafts of log and lumber. Lake City subsequently received federal funds amounting to \$32,000 for a breakwater made up of rockfill and timber cribwork. Over the years federal funds went into improving the breakwater with a concrete superstructure

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# Remembering the 1940 G&E Foundry Fire

*Editor's Note: Seventy-five years ago a devastating fire struck an industry vital to the economic vitality of Lake City. The Lake City Graphic rendition of the event in a 1965 article, 25 years after the event, describes the shock waves that ran through the community and recounts the rapid response of citizens and their elected officials. Although it is unclear what was added to the original 1940 newspaper report by the writer in 1965, the account will elicit emotions from the descendants of those impacted in 1940 and those many hundreds whose livelihoods were connected with the foundry of that era and its successors.*

Just a quarter century ago, on Nov. 2, 1940, with the terrifying suddenness of most disasters, fire destroyed the structure housing one of Lake City's oldest and largest industries, putting a tremendous strain on the finances of the management, and throwing at least 60 wage earners out of work.

At 1:48 a.m. that historic Saturday, Ralph Heins, who, with Russell Lark and Vern Larson, was working the night shift at the Gillett and Eaton foundry, spotted flames in the ceiling over the annealing oven in the main building. With spectacular speed, the licking red tongues of fire circled the 450' x 50' structure which had been erected in 1918.

Despite the heroic efforts of Lake City firemen, who were called to the scene immediately, the foundry was soon only a small, pathetic heap of steel, ashes and rubble. The hopes and dreams of many local families also appeared to lie there dead.

For Robert (Bob) Eaton, foundry president, it must have looked like the end of the line. Eaton, W. C. Cheney, and other members of the management staff sat in the executive office (housed in an old home nearby) and watched as high wind fanned the flames. In minutes Eaton saw his fifty years of hard work go up in smoke.

After a quick check, the loss was tentatively estimated at from \$75,000 to \$100,000 [\$1.2-million to \$1.7-million in today's dollars], with less than one-third covered by insurance.

While management struggled with the pressing question of what to do next, wage earners and their families, dependent on foundry checks for their livelihood, must also have been asking some searching questions: How can we meet the payments on the old car? What about Jimmy's operation? And even more urgent: How are we going to eat? A few former workers found temporary employment to tide them over until permanent jobs could be found.

Meanwhile, the townspeople, shocked by the ruinous event, which threatened to knock the props from under the local economy, rallied round with a vote of confidence in the firm. Sparked by Dr. Harry Bowers, mayor, and the city council, which at that time included Emery DeMarce, Roy Zillgitt, Clarence Coleman and Barney Thimijan, a special referendum was called. Thirty-two days after the fire, Dec. 4, 1940, Lake Citizens authorized the council to borrow up to \$20,000 for the construction of a "city" building to provide space for the burned-out business at its former site. The vote was 1,110-63.

The new structure was completed in May, 1941, and Gillett and Eaton, the firm founded three years after the Civil War, was soon back in operation at its old stand.

## Research Contributors

We wish to thank the following for their help with researching the article on Lake City's neighborhood groceries:

**Ficks:** Toni Anderson, Bette Soderstrom, Kaye Thiele; **Garden Street:** Dori Schmauss, Judy Steffenhagen; **Hendriksen:** Jan Peters, F. David Sanborn, Mary Ellen Miller; **Lakeshore:** Carol Dollar; **Lindeen's:** Wuanita Wallace; **Lyon Avenue/Marien's:** Thomas Heimer, Jr., Ginger Marien, Jeri (Marien) Prigge, Shari Norberg; **Platte's:** Audrey Sass; **Schmauss/B&A:** Lois Kruempel, Lois Holter. All the information that was gathered is available in the Society's archive.

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## HARBOR

(Continued from Page 6)

and raising its height. (Today, most long-time residents refer to the breakwater as "the government pier," which projects into the lake from the foot of Elm Street at its intersection with Lakeshore Drive.)

The breakwater is owned by the U.S. Government, with the Corps of Engineers responsible for its structural stability and maintenance of the handrail, and the Coast Guard responsible for the navigation light at its furthestmost point. Lake City's role has been to pick up litter and perform minor maintenance. The Corps of Engineers is responsible for the harbor's entry channel.

Other historical notes:

**IN 1902**, the federal government studied a request from Lake City for funds to improve the harbor. Its examination found that "excavation of a harbor from a swamp located in Lake City Point and construction of an access channel to the harbor would benefit primarily local pleasure craft." Because "sufficient harbor facilities were present to meet the needs of through navigation, harbor of refuge and commercial navigation ... no federal involvement was recommended." [The term for the tiny body of water enclosed in Lake City Point varied. Local folks preferred

"the pond," but "swamp" and "lagoon" were also in play.]

**HOWEVER, IN 1933** when the city sought funds to improve the harbor entrance, Washington appropriated \$20,000. The funding was not part of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, which President Franklin Roosevelt's administration introduced in 1935, but Roosevelt himself showed up for the dedication on Aug. 8, 1934. Over the next few years the city did benefit from New Deal money for various improvements that came to \$43,000 in total, with the city picking up 70 percent of the tab.

**IN 1967**, Lake City, with a loan from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, invested about \$500,000 for docks, slips and a marina building. The project increased the physical size of the original harbor by more than a third and, using material from excavation and dredging, the Point was raised about 6 feet. The small-boat harbor was soon used to capacity, and a wooden barge was moored in the outer harbor to provide wave protection for additional boats. The barge was heavily used for fishing.

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