

Cannon and Racing Skulls at Devils Lake

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Adapted from an earlier story for the 2011 Park Anniversary

Devils Lake today is a tranquil refuge from the noise and summer commercialization of our local tourist area. Its waters are gently rippled only by the sailboats and slow-moving motor boats. Sometime the shrill cry of a seagull or turkey vulture is the only sound that skirls the sky.

It was not so tranquil for our fore-bearers, however especially in the summer of 1877. Note the crowd in the attached picture, and also the cannon. Its boom will reverberate from cliff to bluff. What is going on?

The Lake in 1877

Let's set the scene. There is no state park in 1877 and no rangers or campgrounds. All land is privately owned, down to the water's edge. Well over a dozen trains a day, in each direction, huff and puffed their way on the Northwestern tracks, fouling the air with soot and the stench of smoke. Some trains stop and disgorge as many as 1500 passengers for the day, or sometimes for the week. A steamboat churns and whistles its way along the shoreline.

The lake was not exactly the ecological and geological paradise we enjoy today. Fortunately the forested areas away from the water remained pretty well undisturbed. The threat of the permanent destruction of the East Bluff loomed as quarry work began. It would be thirty years before a determined legislature forced removal of the quarry operation around the bend to the Southeast, away from the majestic East Bluff.

Plans for a two Day event

The event featuring cannon was indeed an unusual time for Baraboo and Devils Lake. A regatta was planned for June 20 and 21, with entries from St. Paul, Chicago and Milwaukee. Some entries were single and some were two-man skulls. There would be eleven different races, a mile in each direction for most. There was considerable interest throughout the Midwest, with reporters from Chicago and Minneapolis and other areas arriving. The Northwestern Railroad announced special fares, some 60% off the normal fare for the event. The LaCross Sun opined that "there is more interest in a race of rowboats manned by stalwart men than in a horse race or a church raffle." The St. Paul Pioneer Press said the St. Paul oarsmen had their boat constructed in New York and it was "the finest and handsomest four-oared paper shell, forty one feet in length and eighteen inches in width, and is supplied with sliding seats."

Accommodations

Travelers were assured that the three Devils Lake Hotels augmented by those in Baraboo, could supply ample accommodations. The old Taylor Hall on the Southeast corner of Broadway



This cannon, said to be from the Battle of New Orleans, was used to start each race. Its boom must have echoed from East to West bluff and back.

and Third was converted for dormitory use, with an ample supply of cots and “shakedown”, this type of accommodation left unexplained.

Both the Western Hotel and the Wisconsin House in Baraboo were arranging “extra accommodations “with good stabling attached, and have filled their bins and lofts with food.” At the lake the Kirkland Hotel planned to feature wines from its own vineyards, and all Devils Lake Hotels promised to “make prices as moderate as the service rendered will admit”. The La Crosse paper stated that meals by law could cost no more than three shillings at the event.

The Minneapolis rowing crew arrived a week early “to familiarize themselves with the water”. The Chicago rowers arrived the next day “in order that others shall not gain too much advantage over them from familiarity with the water.” Chicago jeweler Mayo wrote that “the medals are now completed and are better than originally contemplated, heavier in solid gold and silver.” How funds for the medals and for cash prizes were raised is not mentioned.

In Baraboo the Republic reported that “2400 tickets were sold at the railroad office, and it is estimated that half that number also went out by private conveyance.” This in those days meant riding a horse or riding in a carriage or wagon. The Republic also reported that visitors were surprised that Baraboo had two bands playing at the event, the Spirit Lake Band and the Bon Ton Band.

One of the participants was Tom Thomas of the Minnewaukan Club of Baraboo. The Republic reported that Thompson “rowed in a butternut boat weighing thirty –five pounds, made by himself. He took up rowing recently...lacks experience and the advantage of seeing skulling in the hands of experts.” His boat was described as “very handsome piece of work...he uses a stationary seat, which diminishes the freedom of his stroke.”

We have used an entire article to set the scene for this event, due to the great scope of the planning in relation to the times, and the relatively small size of the Baraboo at the time. Could Devils Lake as a park handle an event like this today? Trains were able to discharge some 1500 persons without the present day crush of automobiles—the parking alone would be a nightmare.

We are pretty impressed with the organizational skills of the folks of that time. The next article will tell of the events associated with the occasion, including the influence of Chicago gamblers in our fair city.