

By **Jef Rietsma**
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DELTON

Its name may not be unique, but Long Lake in Barry County's Hope Township has a long list of appealing features that make it anything but unoriginal.

For starters, towering hills graced with hearty oak trees surround most of the 292-acre lake. The topography provides hilltop homeowners with spectacular views of the water.

A shallow spot and jutting points of land opposite each other, near the center of the

narrow lake, suggest perhaps hundreds of years ago – back when a heavy population of Pottawattamie Indians lived on its shores – two separate bodies of water existed but eventually connected to form a single, three-mile-long lake.

The majority of Long Lake's 225 residences two years ago approved a plan to hook up to a sewer system. The residents joined a system already in place a few miles south at Wall Lake. Despite the \$14,000-per-residence assessment and \$1,500 hookup fee, proponents of the concept say the sewage system ensures the health of

the lake for generations and is well worth the cost.

It's been decades since the last train passed, hugging its south shoreline. But long-time residents enjoy sharing stories told by their parents of the old CK&S Railroad – the first and last letters of its acronym standing for points of origin: Chicago and Saginaw, with Kalamazoo represented by the K. In the late 1800s and a few decades into the 1900s, CK&S box cars were loaded with ice chunks cut from the lake and shipped west to Chicago.

Then there's the story of John Acker and the paddleboat

ferry he intentionally sank in Long Lake. Acker built a lodge toward the middle of the south shore of the lake – the Point Resort lodge, which is still in use today. Current owner and operator John Smith has spent 52 of his 74 years on Long Lake.

"John Acker used to give rides on the paddleboat from one end of the lake to the other, but over time the boat became very unreliable and it was constantly breaking down," Smith said. "The story goes he got so tired of it not working that one day he took it out to the center of the lake with nobody else aboard, got

out a double-barrel shot gun and blasted a number of holes through the bottom of it ... the thing broke into pieces."

Not far from a swim area at Acker's Point Lodge is evidence of the paddleboat's hull and captain's seat.

Long Lake has a lake association, which operates in a laissez-faire manner, according to Long Lake Association President David Messelink, who is also a Hope Township Board trustee. The association formed in 2005 to rally support for weed-control measures, especially the awesome overgrowth of Eurasian milfoil, and

stayed intact when the issue of a sewer system arose.

"Membership is \$20 a year," Messelink said. "We place buoys in shallow spots, we have a food drive at Christmastime. It's a quiet association that does a lot of little things to help keep a sense of unity among the homeowners."

Long Lake was treated last year for its excessive milfoil growth. Messelink said the highly effective chemical Sonar was applied and all but wiped out the pesky invader. Unfortunately, the absence of the milfoil allowed other forms of weeds to grow and as a result, some homeowners have more upkeep

than others to keep their swimming area free of weeds.

There is currently no commercial development along the lake, though Smith said he has toyed with the idea of exercising a restaurant permit he still holds at his 14-cabin Acker's Point Lodge. Messelink, meanwhile, said Long Lake benefits from having Christian-based Camp Mishawana on its north shoreline.

"They are very good to the association and allow us to use their dining hall for meetings of any type whenever we want," the 43-year-old Grand Rapids native said. "They introduce a lot of kids to Long Lake and I

like that some great summertime memories many of these kids will have years from now will be from their time here at Long Lake."

The west end of the lake has a few spots that reach 60 feet, the deepest points in the lake. Though not much of a fisherman, Messelink said he's aware the lake yields a nice quantity of bluegill and bass. Fishermen also snag pike, perch and crappies on occasion. A public access at the lake's southwest corner - accessible from a street off M-43 - draws a fair share of fishermen, water skiers and personal watercraft operators. Messelink said the length of the lake has great appeal to the skiers and PWC operators, who can travel a straight line for a great distance.

Messelink, who's lived on the lake six years, said he and other homeowners cross their fingers that guests continue to exercise care not to introduce zebra mussels into the water.

On a weekday afternoon in late July, the lake was quiet and a heavy blanket of humidity hung in the still air. Messelink and Smith talked about Long Lake and agreed that despite its relatively short distance from Hastings, its off-the-beaten-path location is an asset. Messelink even joked that he had reservations about being interviewed for this piece because he wants

to keep it a well-kept secret.

But, good things don't stay unnoticed for long. Messelink said the installation of the sewer system – a process officially complete at the end of August – will potentially go down as a turning point in Long Lake's history. Development limitations previously imposed by the Barry/Eaton Counties Health Department are more relaxed now, allowing for larger houses on bigger lots. People are starting to take advantage of that, and Messelink said that's the tradeoff for having a sewer system and healthy lake.

"Like many of the other lakes in this area, you get your Detroit-area and Chicago-area people who somehow stumble across Long Lake, fall in love with it and before long they're putting up a house," he said. "There are probably more cottages, though, on this lake still than just about any other lake around, but I think we'll be seeing a lot of changes around here in the next 10 years."

It will never be like its neighbor to the west, Gun Lake, nor its cousin to the south, Gull Lake. But, for what its name lacks in originality, Long Lake more than makes up for in its majestic, one-of-a-kind presence.