

In Old Grinnell - Dorothy Kinder (1995)

Chapter 9: Arbor and Nyanza Lakes

Lake Nyanza and Arbor Lake, the two lakes that complement the original part of Grinnell, its southern portion, were developed for utilitarian purposes, yet today are known for their attractive settings and recreational advantages.

Mystery surrounds the exotic name of Lake Nyanza, with at least two sources pointing to the continent of Africa as the source of its name. Arbor Lake's naming is not documented but was arrived at after a massive tree-planting program was undertaken at its site, subscribed to by hundreds of local citizens at 75 cents a tree, and creating an arbor-like setting. Each person who contributed money for a tree was entitled to suggest a name for the park but the person whose suggested name was chosen was not recorded for posterity.

The purpose of the lakes was not to provide drinking water but rather, in the case of Arbor Lake, to provide soft water for industrial use including water for the city's waterworks boiler, for fire protection, for manufacturing plants, and for the future development of the town. Although developed privately, it was expected that, at some time, ownership and management of the lake would be taken over by the city.

Lake Nyanza was developed originally as a supply of water to be used by coal-powered railroad steam engines.

Women responsible?

Impetus for Arbor Lake may have come from women.

The Grinnell City Council had been seeking for several years a solution to the need for city soft water when women of the Ladies Cemetery Association, always practical in their plans, proposed in 1900 that the city enlarge a lake at the cemetery by building a better and larger dam which could be paid for by proceeds from sale of the water to prospective users, according to the Aug. 21, 1900, issue of *The Grinnell Herald*.

But in 1902 a private company purchased the property in southwest Grinnell including the small lake adjacent to the cemetery. The Grinnell Soft Water Company was owned by local firms and citizens including the Spaulding Manufacturing Company; Paul Meyer, long-time manager of Iowa Southern Utilities Company, other stockholders

including heirs of the Grinnell family and individuals by the names of Frisbie, Marvin and Price, whom the Spauldings and Meyer later bought out.

A small creek was dammed to expand the soft-water lake. Water was to be pumped from the lake to a standpipe on city land or land owned by the electric company and furnished through pipes for boilers in all manufacturing plants in the city, for railroad engines, the Monroe Hotel and several other establishments.

Purchase land for park

With the successful establishment of the lake, enthusiasm grew for its development for recreational purposes; land was purchased on its east side and the idea of a park on the shore of the lake began to develop. Plans were made for beautifying the area through the planting of trees and the area was made available for public recreation.

"A charming spot just east of the lake has been purchased for this purpose. Go and see it, everybody, with your wife and children," exhorted *The Grinnell Herald* April 14, 1903. "You can enter the park from West Street south of Washington Avenue. You will be delighted with the place. It will require but little imagination to see it covered with beautiful shade trees and groups of young people and of older ones gathering there in the daytime and in the shadows of the evening when the trees about to cover the place are grown a little larger. The park and lake will be the most popular spot about Grinnell."

A plat of the property was prepared and Grinnellians were invited to sign up for trees to be planted in various locations at a cost of 75 cents apiece. People from as far away as Denver and Chicago subscribed to the tree-planting project.

An organization called the Outing Club was formed and a pavilion was built.

"All roads led to Arbor Lake last Friday night when for two solid hours a steady stream of carriages and pedestrians thronged the approaches leading into the new park and sent up clouds of dust which seemed like incense as an offering to the weather gods to delay the threatening rain until the new Outing Clubhouse was pronounced well opened," *The Grinnell Herald* reported on Aug. 4, 1903. "The porches of the club house were jammed to overflowing with spectators, the shores of the lake were packed with loungers and every boat

on the lake was filled with happy couples so that it is probably no exaggeration to say that fully 2,000 people joined in making the occasion more successful than the most sanguine had ever dreamed it could be."

The lake was enjoyed by swimmers, boaters, skaters and fishermen. A toboggan slide was built which extended a quarter of a mile out into the frozen lake.

"At the present time there are 15 or more rowboats on the lake and many more have been ordered. There is one sailboat and rumors of other sailboats to be put on the lake in the near future. In a short time there will be at least one and probably more launches puffing over the water. In the Outing Clubhouse is a lunch stand where cold drinks and the usual store of summer resort commodities may be purchased," The Grinnell Herald reported in 1903.

Area also popular in winter

"But unless we are mistaken, the lake will not be more popular as a summer than a winter resort. For generations, the young people of this city have been forced to do their skating within the narrow confines of Sanders' Pond with nothing between them and the bleak blizzards of North Dakota but wind, and that all coming their way. But frozen ears and frosted fingers will cease to be the penalty for an afternoon or evening on the ice when skaters can gather around a roaring fire in the clubhouse and be served hot lunches while they wait," it adds.

The needs of anglers were not ignored.

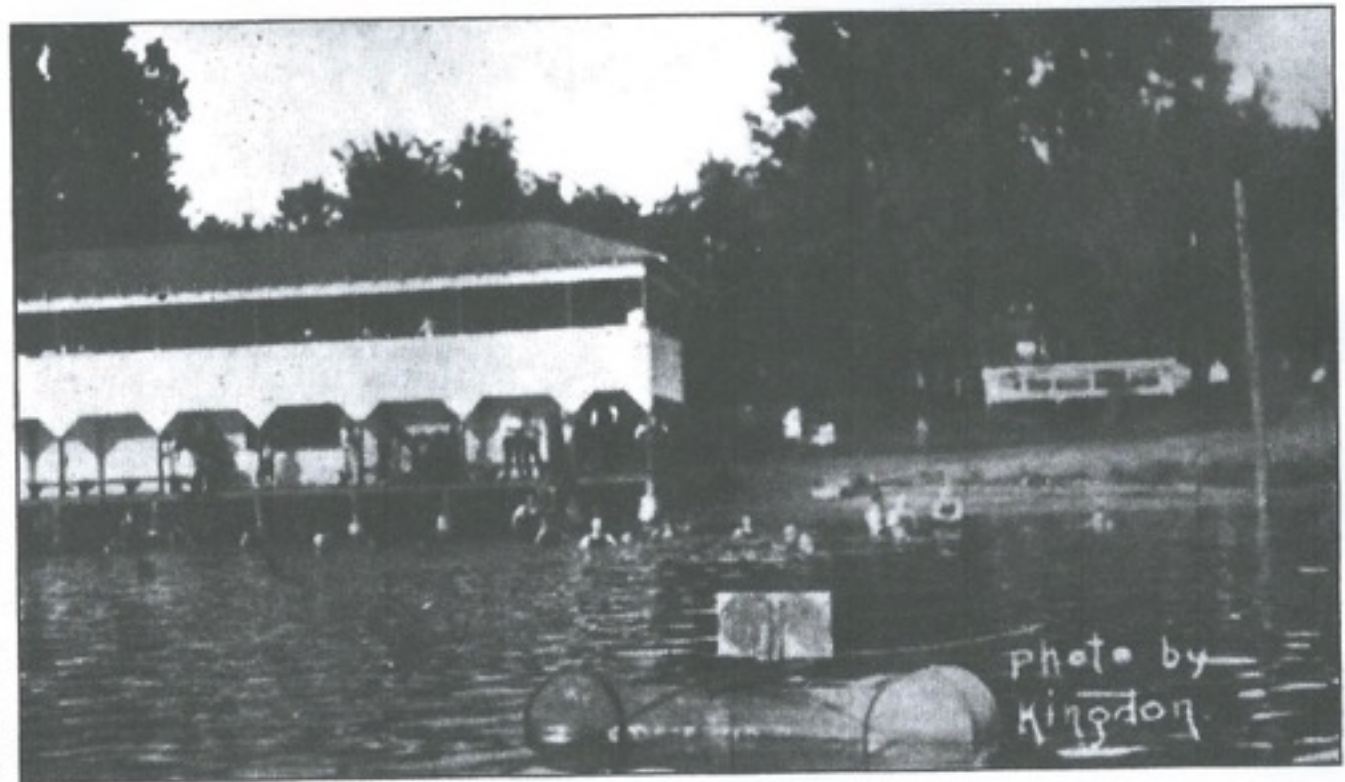
"20,000 Fish in Arbor Lake," read a headline in the Oct. 18, 1904, issue of the newspaper. "Last Saturday Game Warden and Fish Commissioner George A. Lincoln brought to the city a carload of fish consisting of 20,000 fish in ten huge

tanks which were hauled to Arbor Lake and placed therein. These fish were of many varieties, all well adapted to Iowa climate and varied in length from a few inches to fully two feet, some of them weighing as much as five or six pounds. No fishing will be permitted this year and anyone caught fishing in the lake will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Perhaps within a year or two fishing will be permitted at certain seasons of the year and possibly a day or two may be open to anglers next year."

The lake was not without its problems, however.

"Directors of the Outing Club have requested that we announce that the curfew law is going to be enforced at the Outing Club in the future," The Grinnell Herald reported in August, 1903.

"This has been occasioned by the fact that certain young boys who



A clubhouse erected by the Outing Club was a feature of early days at Arbor Lake on Grinnell's southwest side.

ought to be at home or at Eldora have come to make the clubhouse and grounds a nightly loafing place where they can gather to smoke, gamble and commit petty thefts. It is time wasted to attempt to reprove them for you can't get ahead of an impudent kid. They imagine that the clubhouse is a public place and that they are free to do whatever they choose without restraint. Mayor Jenkins and Marshal Pigman would perform a good deed, good for the youngsters and good for the public, if they would see to the strict enforcement of the curfew at Arbor Lake. Perhaps some of the thieving which has been going on would cease and young boys of criminal tendencies would learn to take some other place for a loafing place."

In 1913 the lake and park were purchased by the city of Grinnell, as had been expected when the Grinnell Soft Water Company developed the property. The city maintained it as part of the its park system.

In 1974, in a proposal from the Poweshiek County Conservation Commission to share responsibility for contiguous city and county park land, an agreement was reached between the city and Poweshiek County to develop the area as a city-county park. That agreement expired July 1, 1994, and the city resumed responsibility for the area as a city park with a shelter house, playground equipment, a nature trail and a fitness trail, a popular spot for gatherings of all kinds.

East side has lake, too

On the east side of town, Lake Nyanza was formed when the Iowa Central Railroad Company delved a very large piece of ground to a depth of 10 to 15 feet in order to gather surface water to pump water for its engines, probably in 1880 or 1881 in an area west of the present East Street. The railroad embankment helped hold the water and a dam also was constructed at the south end to help hold waters from a spring. During hard rains, the lake was said to overflow.

Although never officially a lake, it probably received the name of Lake Nyanza in 1887 or 1889.

Two different sources, Howard Macy of Lynnville, owner of the former Macy Bros. Concrete plant which at one time was located on the west side of the lake, and a letter from the late W.G. Ray, former editor of The Grinnell Herald, loaned by Ben Graham, Grinnell College emeritus professor of biology, both refer to the name as it appears in early world atlases in connection with towns and lakes in central Africa.

In some atlases, Nyanza is on the southern border of Rwanda although a 1931 atlas identifies two well-known African lakes as Lake Victoria-Nyanza and Lake Albert-Nyanza in the area where Sir Henry

Stanley, the journalist, and David Livingstone, the missionary and explorer, were destined to meet ("Dr. Livingstone, I presume!"), according to Macy, who speculates that the entire area of Rwanda may at one time have been Nyanza. The name still exists in locations in a province in Kenya on the shores of Lake Victoria and a town in Zaire.

How the name was transferred to Grinnell is unknown but Ray suggests that an itinerant binder at The Herald with "more names than one man ought to have at the same time," calling into question his reliability, referred to it by that name, which may have stuck.

Railroad served Lynnville

The north-south Iowa Central Railroad, which intersected in Grinnell with the Rock Island Railroad at the Union Depot at Third Avenue and State Street, fulfilled the expectations of the town's founder, J.B. Grinnell, that the site at the highest point between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers which bordered the state would be ideal for the development of rail traffic and thus the development of the town. Both rail lines provided easy access to shipping by freight which aided the industrial development of thriving Grinnell industries, and both were busy sources of commerce in the developing community.

The railroad at one time served the town of Lynnville, and Macy recalls occasions when, as a child of seven or so, he accompanied his father or uncle to Grinnell on the train in the days of coal-burning locomotives when Grinnell was a division point on the railroad, probably between 1910 and 1920. He remembers water-storage tanks for locomotive boilers and coal storage bins for chuting coal into locomotive tenders for firing steam boilers.

There was a circular turntable there for turning locomotives around for return trips to shorter destinations such as Oskaloosa or Albia.

Macy plant established in 1953

The Macy Bros. plant was established in 1953 when the railroad was called the Minneapolis and St. Louis, before it was purchased by the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad, its current owner.

When the Macy Bros. ready-mixed plant was established, Macy says, they came across evidence of the circular turntable buried slightly under the surface of the ground.

Coal ashes were scattered on the surface of the ground as well as slightly underground, signifying the cleaning out of fireboxes of the locomotives.

The Macy plant operated on that site until it moved to a location on West Street at Third Avenue in the 1960s and in recent years was sold to Manatt's Inc., and incorporated into their concrete and road-build-

ing operation.

In the late 1950s, a representative of the M & St. L, successor to the Iowa Central Railroad, appeared in the office of The Grinnell Herald-Register with the news that the railroad planned to sell the lake property or, failing that, to drain it because it had no further use for it and because of its concerns about its legal liability.

When informed of this possibility, members of the Grinnell Jaycees, wishing to save a recreational resource for the southeast portion of Grinnell, arranged to purchase the property for a nominal sum, cleaned it up and began to develop it with plantings and playground equipment.

The Jaycees later offered to turn the property over to the city of Grinnell as part of its park system and after extended discussion about the economics of care and upkeep of an additional park, the city accepted and took possession of the park in July, 1960.

The lovely park which developed along the shores of Lake Nyanza in recent years was named James H. Miller Park in honor of the long-time city council member. It includes playground equipment and a shelter house. The lake now is enjoyed primarily for its scenic beauty, for fishing and for ice skating and as a setting for family reunions, class reunions and picnics.

Arbor Lake and Lake Nyanza actually are connected by a small stream which runs partly underground from an outlet in the southwest

corner of Nyanza and enters Arbor Lake on its east end.

A low place at the bottom of a pasture where the stream flows several hundred feet west of the Lake Nyanza outlet was the site of a small body of water called the "frog pond" in which neighborhood children played, probably in the 1950s. The stream roughly follows the Garfield Avenue right-of-way west and seems to disappear as it approaches Highway 146, reappearing on the west side of the highway north of the Don and Mona Van Wechel home before entering Arbor Lake.

The stream flows downhill as Nyanza is at the top of the watershed, according to Ted Clausen, city engineer. Before man-made construction entered the scene, it probably was a small valley, he believes.

Although Grinnell's resident lakes grew from humble beginnings, "it serves to illustrate once more the fact that when a few progressive men take the lead in improving this city, there are many who are ready to fall in and help to make a good cause a great success," opined the Herald in 1903—in its reference to "progressive men" gliding over the notion that the town should thank the ladies of the cemetery association for one of its lakes.

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