



Over 100 Years of Boating on Bald Eagle Lake

Having written a number of articles about the history and events of Bald Eagle Lake, I thought it would be interesting to write about the history of its watercraft. My friend, Eldon Coller, has been a guest at our lake over the years and has enjoyed fishing, being on my pontoon boat and just observing the view from the shore. He agreed to do drawings of the various watercraft evolutions that have taken place over the years on our lake.

Until the 1970s and 1980s, Bald Eagle Lake could best be described as a "seasonal cottage lake." Then, with the building of I-75 and the population shift northward from the cities, Bald Eagle Lake transformed into a predominately a "residence lake." I wanted Eldon to only include boats that were of original use and exclude others that appeared on the lake that were merely transient.

I remember a beautiful wood boat that spent a few years here in the 1980s. As a matter of fact, when I purchased my cottage in 1982, a friend and I were to share a boat. Well, he "got us" a 1957 Arabian with a 400hp engine. It spent the summer and participated in the boat parade. When it came to the end of the season and I found out that it required 13 coats of varnish, I ended our arrangement. I have also spoken to "old timers" who said that such wooden boats may have been common on Lake Angelus or Orchard Lake but they were a rare exception on Bald Eagle Lake. The cost and upkeep of these boats were not necessarily in the budget of our lake residents at the time the boats were being built.

There was once a Donzi boat that required 30 seconds to go across the lake. You seemed to have had more time to get in position to view this boat once you heard the engine start up than you did the actual boating. I even remember one summer day when Barry Young drove his car into the lake and then it converted into a boat. As a matter of fact Ken Bush of the Ortonville Historical Society told me that he was a passenger in it on that same exact day. I was called an Amphicar. They were built in Germany from 1961 until 1968. A little more than 3,000 of them were imported into the United States between 1961 and 1967. His Model 770 did 7 MPH in the water and 70 MPH on land. I only saw it that one Fourth of July about 20 years ago. So now you have a feel as to how I approached this article.

Roger Duval



The canoe was the first watercraft on the lake. Native Americans crafted the original canoes from birch. Over the years, canoes were crafted from wood and, later, light aluminum was the most adapted. Canoes can tip if the paddlers are not careful. This type of watercraft has been on the lake over 100 years and is still found being used when the water is calm.

“wind up victrola” on their rowboat to a raft and play music for the lake residents during the Great Depression in the 1930s.



In the late 1920s simple crude motors were being used on the lake. The small motors required a rope pull start and were used as a rudder to steer the boat.

The 1940s brought the first motor boats to the lake. The motors could be adaptable for fishing and even had enough power to raise up a light person on water skis. The motorboats kept improving allowing the driver to use a steering wheel and improve maneuverability. Many boats from the 1950s were still on the lake into the late 1960s.



The wooden rowboat first made its appearance on Bald Eagle Lake in the 1920s. Eventually the original wood was later replaced by metal, and then aluminum. It was the most economical watercraft at the time up to the current times as the only fuel needed was the effort of the rower. The rowboat was a mainstay on the lake for many years and was the boat of choice during the war years as it did not require gasoline that was in short supply. Today you will see some people using them for fishing. The rowboat seems to be the first boat “captained” by many children. Many of the rowboats remain on shore as a back-up for a fishing boat since they are of very low maintenance. Jane McKee, who spent her summers on the lake, told me that her brother would take a



Wally Martin remembers how, during the early 1950s, his father had a canvas stretched over a frame, similarly to how birch bark was stretched over a canoe by Native Americans, on his row boat since plywood was a relatively new boat construction material. His family canoe leaked every year so his dad would add another layer to the canvas, using paint and an old bed sheet. Wally also told me that it was during this time that metal boats were becoming popular on Bald Eagle Lake. Many were pram type boats with square fronts and backs. Most of the boats on the lake were able to maneuver through the canal bridges. When the canals were dug in the 1930s they did not envision larger boats would be used for pleasure on Bald Eagle Lake.

Furthermore, Wally related how during the 1950s, Ernest and Carrie Hetzel, on the west side of the northwest bay, across the canal from their cottage, and had about 10 rowboats for rent. You had to bring your own motor if you did not want to row. They also had rental cabins for \$40-\$60/week and sold bait. Wally and his brother would dip minnows and help gather night crawlers for them.

Sailboats are part of every lake's history and ours is no exception. The challenge has always been going from the southern end to the northern end because the island can block the winds needed for navigation. Over the years there have been

catamarans and larger sailboats but the most practical has been the Sunfish style. These single or two person sailboats have been the boat of choice for our lake. The nice feature of the Sunfish is if you "turtle" all you have to do is just hang on the centerboard and it will become upright. I still remember doing this one Memorial Day weekend and I am still amazed at this maneuver.



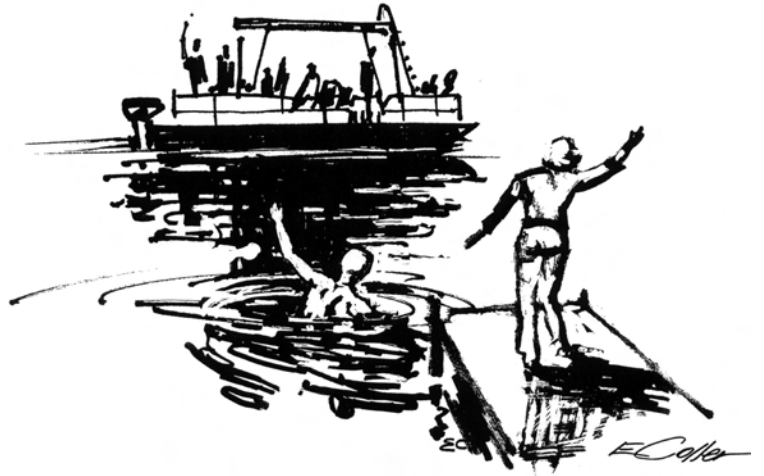
The pontoon boat became the boat of choice beginning in the mid 1970s until the mid 1980s. This watercraft is perfect for our 125-acre lake. It is very adaptable as it can be used for fishing, swimming, or just watching the sun set. Its open design is also very accommodating of children. My first impression of Bald Eagle Lake was over 25 years ago when I met the previous owners of my home to make an offer. I still remember it was a weekday and there was a pontoon boat going around the lake in a very peaceful setting.



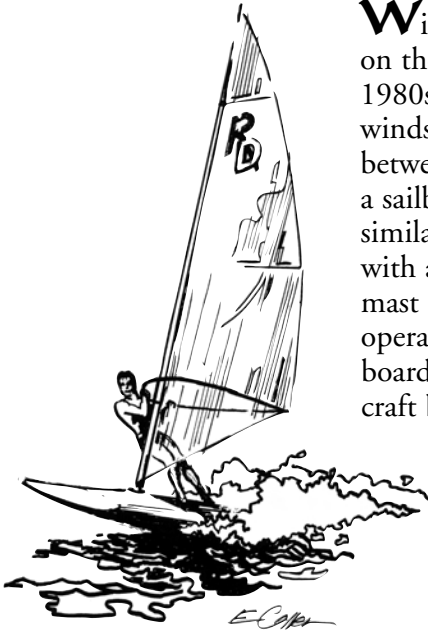
Around the mid 1980s, many pontoon boats were replaced by motorboats, ski boats and powerboats. I even replaced my pontoon and purchased an inboard. My relatives always



seemed to say “I miss the comfort of your old pontoon boat.” The boats seemed to get larger and the roars of the big motors echoed across the lake. The sheriff was always being called to check the decibel level of the boats, but they seemed to be absent or ran much quieter when he arrived. All of this power seemed to occur at the same time as summer cottages became year round residences. This was also a tough time for “fisherpeople” to find calm water for their small quiet outboard.



practicality. Although many residents still have a powerboat, they seem to enjoy cruising in their pontoons. Even with the renewed interest in pontoon boats, there are more wave runners and jet skis in sheer numbers.



Windsurfing arrived on the lake in the late 1980s. A sailboard or windsurfer is a cross between a surfboard and a sailboat. The hull is similar to a surfboard with a freely swiveling mast attached. The operator stands on the board and controls the craft by manually positioning the sail. In the early 1980s windsurfing was the faster growing sport in the country. The manufacturers

kept creating sleeker crafts to satisfy the California and Hawaii enthusiasts that were not suited to the less windy lakes such as ours. It is probably the most difficult watercraft to operate on our lake as some training is required to fully enjoy it. Aggie Frick and Sandy Gunow were the first windsurfers on the lake. To my knowledge Sandy is the only person still participating when the winds are favorable. It was not an easy watercraft to master and it has always been a favorite pastime for people on shore to watch for a tumble. It seemed that conversations stopped when it was announced “here she goes.”

Around the mid 1990s, pontoons seemed to make a comeback. The new watercraft has more comfortable seating, retractable sun shields and wells for storing fish. Families with children seemed to enjoy the benefits of this new found



The latest type of watercraft to appear is the kayak. These sleek vessels move faster than a canoe. And unlike a canoe, a kayak functions very well with one person. There are some two person vessels on the lake however. Proper paddling technique reduces fatigue and allows for a longer journey. This low maintenance, low impact, and no-noise watercraft has added to the serenity of the lake.

Can you see the circle this article has revealed? The Potawatomi Native Americans started with a canoe and with a little change in shape we have gone back to the history of the lake with the popularity of the kayak.