

## The Lake District of Northeastern Illinois and Southeastern Wisconsin

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The lake district of northeastern Illinois and southeastern Wisconsin is about 12 to 30 miles wide and 70 miles long and trends roughly north and south about 20 miles inland from the Lake Michigan shoreline. Despite the advanced stage of the agricultural occupation of this area, it is one of the most important recreational districts in the Middle West, for within it there are over 150 lakes, the primary focal points for a great number and a great variety of recreational forms and activities. This district may be said to exhibit a "mature" recreational landscape. This maturity is expressed by (1) a complete utilization of the most desirable shore sites, (2) the over-crowding of cottages in less desirable sites, (3) the comparatively small number of hotels and resorts, (4) the growing permanency of land ownership of lakeshore sites, and (5) the growing tendency toward all-year occupation of lakeshore homes.

The lakes of the district are largely of glacial origin occupying drift-blocked, preglacial valleys, valleys lying between marginal moraine ridges, former glacial drainage channels, simple or complex ice-blocked depressions, and depressions in the ground moraine surface. However, the original character of many of the lake basins has been changed by much damming and dredging activity, brought about primarily by the present great demand for more and better cottage sites.

The most valuable type of shoreline is one which rises rather steeply from the water level, thus allowing for a better view, insuring fairly deep water close to shore, and affording better drainage. The character of the offshore bottom, as an adjunct to bathing, is another significant site factor and has determined quite frequently the locations of the larger resorts. The vegetation of the shoreline might also be considered amongst the criteria determining site attractiveness. Certainly a wooded plot, especially if it contains indigenous oak and hickory trees, is most desirable, while an area of coarse marsh grass is least desirable. All of the lakes were naturally stocked with a great variety of fish and although the supply has been greatly depleted, extensive planting has prevented complete fish depopulation. By and large, however, fishing is at present only a minor attraction of the district.

Several situational factors also help determine land values. Among these are (1) ease of access, at one time determined by distance from a railroad and now by distance from a concrete highway, and (2) the proximity of such recreational facilities as golf courses, amusement parks, resorts, riding stables, or scenic areas such as are found in the nearby rough marginal moraines.

This lake district has long been a center of attraction, and as early as 1856 fishermen from Chicago were journeying to Lake Geneva. Since that time there has been a steady growth in the utilization of the area for recreation. This growth was greatly accelerated in the post war period with the common use of the automobile and the improvement of highway facilities. In this latest period nearly every lake, including some only 10 acres in size, was made the scene of active subdividing schemes. These schemes, because of the earlier utilization of the best sites and because of rising land values, have led to the use and overcrowding of fair and poor sites. As a result,

many lakes exploited during the past 20 years are actually surrounded by villages of rather poor summer homes, some of which might actually be considered rural slums.

The summer home or summer cottage is, by all odds, the most important and conspicuous cultural feature of the landscape of the lake district. There are approximately 15,000 of these structures in the region and they vary considerably in their appearance, running the gamut from stately mansions to flimsy four-walled shacks. The most common type of summer home is a rectangular, one-storied, frame building with two or three rooms, partially surrounded by a wide porch. Usually such an average cottage occupies a wooded 60 to 80 foot lot with exclusive lakeshore frontage, has a garage and a short private pier, and is supplied with electricity. Boathouses are generally found associated with the larger and more pretentious summer homes.

In addition to the summer cottage, there are numerous other features and forms which attest to the recreational use of the lake district. Usually the larger lakes have one or two hotel resorts, each with its battery of cottages. At present, the number of resorts is comparatively small (*ca* 72), emphasizing the fact that this is a mature recreational area—an area with a semi-permanent or summer population, too over-crowded and too accessible to the larger cities to attract visitors from a great distance. Most of the resorts now function by maintaining public bathing beaches and renting boats to week-end visitors. In addition to the resorts, the highways of the area are everywhere with roadside eating houses, taverns, barbecue stands, and dancing pavilions, while every city and village in the region offers many forms of entertainment to visitors and lakeshore residents. Indeed, most of the settlements in the district function chiefly as recreational centers, a fact more easily understood when one realizes that on a summer weekend there are approximately 150,000 outsiders utilizing the area.

Certainly this lake district constitutes one of the most important and valuable recreational assets of the states of Illinois and Wisconsin, and despite the haphazard and sometimes disastrous way in which it has been exploited, still lends itself to further scientific development. Much of the submarginal land in areas of marginal moraines should be restored to woodland. A zoning plan to insure larger lots, better cottages, and more esthetic laying out of subdivisions should be enacted. More scenic drives, river and lake parkways, and public bathing beaches and camping grounds should be planned. And perhaps some thought should be given to controlled suburbanization of the whole district.