

## Thanksgiving Week, 2012 at Mille Lacs Lake, Onamia, Minnesota

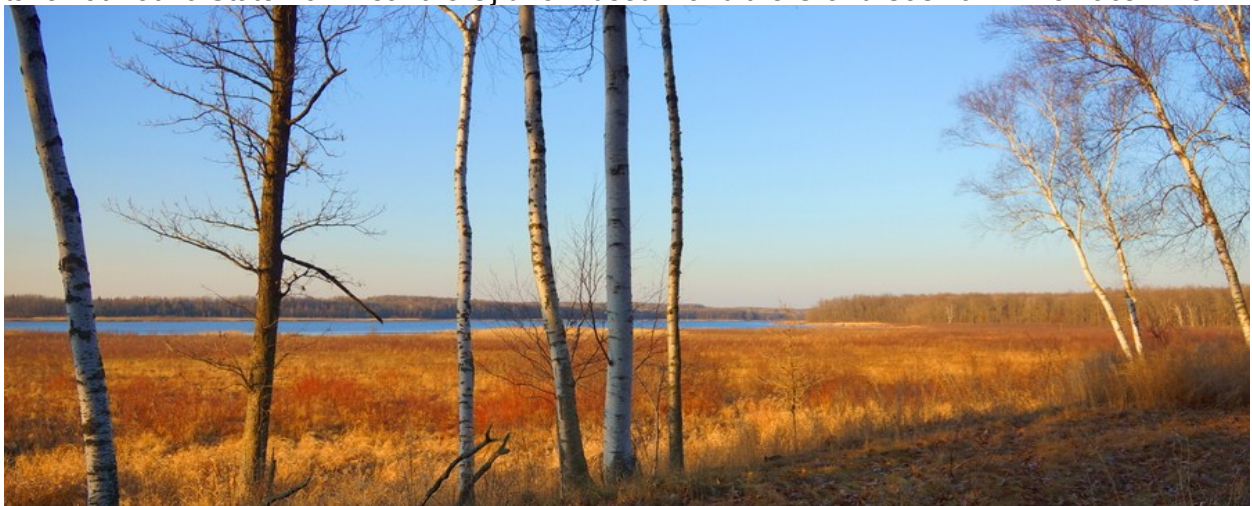
Nancy and I spent most of Thanksgiving week this year near Mille Lacs Lake because we had a timeshare week that needed to be used before December. We exchanged a Cabo week for Izaty's in Onamia, which is 100 miles from home and our condo was a half mile from the south end of the Lake. The weather has really been great, ranging from 20 at night to 50 in the day, but as a bit of snow is predicted, we are planning to head home a couple days early. Here is the view from our condo:



We had not lived on a marsh before. We discovered that it is similar to a lake in that it is very quiet and it always shows if the wind is blowing. The waving reeds and other dried plants move in concert in proportion to the speed of the wind, much like waves on the water.

The rural and lake resort atmosphere has been fun to experience. To our surprise, we saw almost no wildlife. We encountered some frogs in the ponds and a few geese and ducks in the lake. As it is about 10 degrees colder here than at home, most of the birds have gone south already.

A major attraction of the Lake is the State parks at the south end of the Lake. This photo was taken at Kathio State Park near the Ojibwa Museum and the Grand Casino – Mille Lacs. The



Water you see in the photo is a lagoon at the headwaters of the Rum River, which runs into the Mississippi close to Minneapolis.

Mille Lacs Lake has 80 miles of shoreline and is the second largest lake in Minnesota. It is so wide that you cannot see land on the other side of the lake. Despite that, the Lake usually has several months of at least 12" of ice and supports 5,000 ice fishing houses. Many fishing contests bring huge numbers of tourists in both summer and winter, but we only saw 3 fishing boats, as we are between the popular times for fishing. Here is a picture of the fishing boat from our resort that takes up to 10 fishermen out per trip.



Our main ways to pass the time have been to work, to walk in the empty golf courses or in the state parks, and to visit each of the little towns surrounding the lake. All of the bigger towns, with 700-900 population each, rim the southern end of the lake. We did a little shopping and walking in each town.

First, there is Onamia, which is the best known because it is a crossroads town and even has a few small factories. It has a small hospital and elder care facility. Next most visible is Garrison, which is on the West side of the lake and not far from Brainerd. Garrison is not so much a town as a mile-long strip of fishing resorts where one can rent boats and secure guides for fishing. People also know the town for its statue of a giant 15-foot Walleye, supposedly caught by Paul Bunyan. Actually, Garrison is officially the "Walleye Capitol of the World," and boasts being the smallest town (population 300) with a McDonald's restaurant. The next photo shows Nancy standing under the giant Walleye with the lake in the background.





Paul Bunyan's 15-Foot Walleye at Garrison, Minnesota

One night we went to the Casino out in the middle of nowhere, but actually is half way between Onamia and Garrison. There must have been a thousand people at the Casino and most were playing the slots and chain smoking. The non-smoking area was about 2% of the floor space. We ate at the buffet, and managed to get out of the place without being tempted to sink even a quarter into a slot machine.

Wahkon, only 4 miles from Izaty's, used to be the biggest of the Lakes small towns. Now it has a population of only 250 but it has the best restaurant in the area, Spirit Lake Steakhouse. They have a real Italian chef, great service and excellent fish dishes.

Another 5 miles north is the larger town of Isle. With a population of less than 800, they support about 4 antique stores and the best grocery store on the Lake. Next to the town is Father Hennepin State Park, which is a long strip of forest and sandy beach along the lake.

All these little towns were the product of the boom in logging in the late 1890s. Settlers felled trees and floated them from various points on the lake to Wahkon or Isle, where they could be transported by the Soo Line to other parts of the country. When that industry folded, the population dwindled but in the past 50 years, tourism has become the principal industry. Agriculture is big here too, but mostly south of the lake. Farmers markets are popular in the summer and early Fall in each little town. Ironically, no one here seems to be wealthy except the Indians who own the Casino. We leave here a little wealthier because we have seen how rural America struggles along by making do with what little they have.