

The Little Trout Lake Canals

One of the most remarkable but barely known quirks in the history of Manitowish Waters and Lac Du Flambeau was the series of canals that seemed to wander purposelessly amid the marsh and lakes between the two communities. They had a real explanation, however, and we have to be almost awestruck at their boldness and ingenuity.

There were a pair of canals, one beginning at Lac Du Flambeau and extending to Little Trout Lake and one connecting that lake with Alder Lake of the Manitowish chain. That stretch, like bigger canals elsewhere had locks.

The reason for the canals was that two wealthy businessmen from Chicago wanted an isolated but sophisticated retreat, and they acquired their ideal if puzzling destination: property on the slightly elevated rim of the lake. They had the wealthy audacity and connections to provide access to their property.

One man was Richard H. Southgate, a prosperous hotel man who was owner of the Auditorium Hotel which would become the famous Congress Hotel and also had hotel interests in New York City. The other was Marvin Hughitt, Junior a member of an exceptionally talented family that included two railroad vice presidents and two highly respected architects. The father was president of the Chicago & North Western Railway. Marvin Hughitt, junior was or would be a vice president of the railway, which gave him access to some of the resources and creativity of the railroad. In fact, the railroad was a key to the whole project. Its main line passed very close to Lac Du Flambeau on the route between Chicago and Ashland and overnight trains with sleeping cars already made that trip. The Flambeau Lumber Company had a mill on the shore in the village at Flambeau and the traffic of logs being hauled to the mill and then lumber outbound gave it status as an important station.

Travelers to resorts at Flambeau could leave their Pullmans there.

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Passengers heading to resorts on the Manitowish chain could ride as far as Powell and ride a surrey or buckboard to a landing on Little Star to be met by their hosts' launches or could ride on as far as Manitowish station and there transfer to horse and wagon to Rest Lake dam and a landing there. Their hosts would be waiting there with their boats.

None of these places had a road to Little Trout Lake, however, and there was no prospect of one.

Railroad officials like vice presidents were able to travel on their own private business cars with a kitchen and lounge, berths and servants and could reach Flambeau in complete comfort and have their car set about by the overnight train on a sidetrack near the depot, but there was still a long soggy distance between there and Little Trout Lake. Loggers of the time did a lot of their logging in winter when they could safely haul their sledloads of logs over the frozen wetlands and presumably many of the building supplies for the buildings on the lake were brought in that way.

The ingenious solution was to have a water route instead of a road, namely the canals. These began at the lake nearest to the station, Headflyer, and then wound between lakes on the way, to minimize the length of canals that would have to be excavated, although that meant a longer trip to the lake than if the canals made a straight shot to the lake. Workmen and horses must have provided much of the physical digging. I have heard a rumor that railroad employees did the digging but am very skeptical of that. However there is no doubt that Hughitt's connection to the railroad gave him access to many of the railroad's resources and technical help, and for his part, Southgate's hotel connections were also important.

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We have little description of the nature and arrangement of the buildings set along the elevated rim of the lake but we know that they included a main house, housing for the help and caretaker, boat facilities and ice-houses; there was one metal lined room that I saw when there were still remnants as the mid-1940s cranberry project moved in that direction.

Stretches of the canals, if not all, were lined with boards and posts (easily available from the mill at Flambeau) and the canals were wide enough for a launch or outboard craft. When forest fires reached the marsh and spread to the flammable peat, the fires made quick work of the boards after maintenance of the canals had ceased.

When the cranberry companies began developing the waterways that they would use in common, they used some of the smaller canals as the stretches that they improved for their purposes, so that few direct traces remained other than, at first, the wooded stretch from the main road down to Alder Lake, where one white frame structure had remained in the Forties.

The downslide of the properties came with the departure of Hughitt and the death of Southgate, who died March 3, 1912.

Hughitt took a new tack. With an even more prominent Chicagoan he established a new estate on the Cisco chain of lakes near Watersmeet. It was so lavish that it had a glassed-in building for exotic birds and had a school for the children of the employees. A well known Manitowish chain cottage resort owner was a young teacher there, Phyllis Andrews who also was the final postmistress at Manitowish.

(There too Hughitt exercised his railroad connections. The North Western had laid a log spur down to the shore of Cisco Lake, and until the years of World War I and the government austeritiy measures imposed on the railroads, the overnight passenger train between Chicago, Monico and Watersmeet continued on, complete with Pullman sleeper, to the shore of Cisco Lake in summer.

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Southgate had married a socialite from New York State and after his death she married again, to a man named Himes. He was especially interested in developing some new scientific project or invention and his efforts drained the couple's finances so much that they lost the property. The mortgage holder of the property took it over and the canals silted up and buildings deteriorated till the cranberry people gave the land, if not the leisure facilities, a new life.

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