NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE WEEK

MICHAEL SEARS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lower Phantom Lake in Mukwonago is a great place to go fishing or relax on the shoreline. The area was home to Mukwonago's first white settler.

GHOST STORY

Indian legend haunts the waters of a Mukwonago lake

By KAY NOLAN
Special to the Journal Sentinel

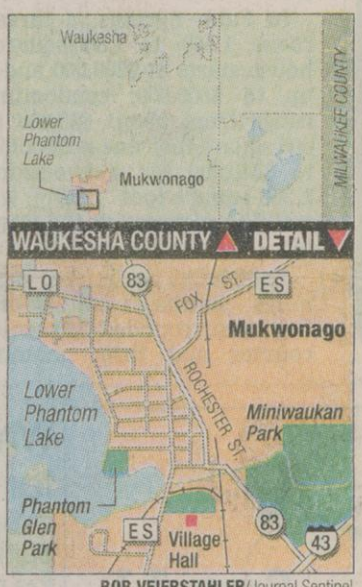
Mukwonago — Some residents of the neighborhood near Lower Phantom Lake appear to have extrasensory perception. Others simply sensed that this would be an extraordinary place to live.

The quiet, shady neighborhood is a rare find in Waukesha County — homes in the $120,000-to-$150,000 range that have access to a sparkling lake. Large homes, too. Not cottages or tiny summer homes crowded on scraps of lakeshore, but sprawling ranches or split-level houses on wide lots with room for gardens, mature trees and dog kennels.

For their money, residents also get a private park, guaranteed luck in fishing, wildlife, and an intriguing ghost story involving Indian tribes, love and a mysterious, dangerous water creature.

The area was home to Mukwonago's first white settler, Sewall Andrews, who arrived in 1836 and built the area's first brick house in 1842. His house is now a small museum. He and other pioneers are the reason for the names of the neighborhood's main streets leading to the lake: Andrews St., Blood St. (for Ira Blood), Meacham St. (for Maj. Jesse Meacham), and Henry St. (for Henry Camp).

NEIGHBORHOOD
MUKWONAGO



BOB VEIERSTAHLER/Journal Sentinel

In those days, according to local history books, only Upper Phantom Lake existed, fed by the Mukwonago River. Eventually, dams built by settlers caused flooding and the creation of the wide but shallow lake known as Lower Phantom Lake.

In the pioneer days, the main lake was called Spirit Lake by the American Indians in the area, and it was already the site of an eerie ghost story. The legend is that a lovely Indian maiden was desired by a member of her own tribe as well as by a young man of a different tribe that was distrusted by her own.

Sue Smith takes an evening walk on Shore Drive. Most of the homes in the neighborhood were built in the late 1960s and early '70s.

The local Indian brave set about courting the young woman while the youth from the rival tribe decided instead to win over her father first. One September night, the two young suitors dueled to the death on Spirit Lake. Neither won the maid, for she was pulled screaming from her canoe under the waves by a third suitor: the ruler of the water kingdom.

Every Sept. 2, it is said that the duel is re-enacted and there have been reports of ghostly lights and unearthly sounds. Occasionally, someone will claim to actually see two canoes, a man jumping from one to the other to fight, and a dark hand rising from the water to grab a third figure shrieking into the water.

Early residents embraced the paranormal. According to local author Kathryn Bergmann, Sewall Andrews' second wife, Sarah Jane, held seances and believed in spiritualism. Another pioneer resident, Cal Agnew, was a freed black slave who was widely believed to have extrasensory perception. For example, he was said to have described the exact location of a key that was hidden in a house he had never visited. He also saved two men from drowning in the lake and was

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considered a hero.

Modern residents who have experienced ghostly sightings or clairvoyance are rare. All they know is that they correctly predicted the neighborhood's lasting value when they built or purchased homes in the area.

The majority of homes were built in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many are spacious ranches or split-level designs characteristic of the era. Lots are wide enough to accommodate the homes without crowding. The homes have risen dramatically in value. "I built my home in 1974 for $35,000 and now the lot and house are easily worth $150,000," said Ron Smith of Shore Drive.

To the residents' further good fortune, one landowner deeded a double-sized empty lot on Shore Drive to the subdivision to be used as a park and boat launch. This means even homes that don't actually border the lake still enjoy semiprivate lake access.

"It was an excellent value at the time, and it still is," said Bob Pakulski, who built a home on Shore Drive in 1974. The neighborhood was originally called the Mukwonago Shore subdivision, he said, although few use the name today.

According to John Hogan of First Realty in Mukwonago, "It's a very stable area, very much in demand but with very little turnover. We Realtors look constantly for something to come up for sale in that neighborhood. When they do, they sell within two or three days."

To residents' delight, Lower Phantom Lake is teeming with fish, water fowl and other wildlife.

MICHAEL SEARS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Clarice and Gary Nance share the swing in the back yard of their Shore Drive home on Lower Phantom Lake. Daughter Jamie is sitting with her dog Goober, while son Gary Jr. is on right.

"We have ducks and geese that are almost tame," said Clarice Nance, an 18-year resident of Shore Drive. "I saw a deer swimming across the lake recently. Its brown ears were sticking out of the water and it looked like a funny brown swan. It came out of the water right in our back yard.

"I wouldn't move from here even if you offered me a bigger house on a bigger lake," said Nance. "Everyone looks out for one another here. It's the kind of neighborhood where everyone is always outside: walking, fishing, boating, or working in their yards."

Nance is one resident who doesn't necessarily dismiss the legend of the Lake Spirit or the neighborhood's out-of-the-ordinary character. "I've never seen (the Indian ghost duel) but I find it interesting — you never know," she said.

"I've always been interested in dream interpretation and similar subjects. I have a bit of extrasensory perception, and since moving here, it seems to have increased," she said. "One day, I told my teenage son not to drive on a nearby road because I suddenly had a strong feeling he would collide with a bus. He picked up my daughter from school and his car did get hit by a bus at the exact spot I had envisioned it. Thank goodness nobody was hurt."

Vegetarian wildlife has flourished in the lake, requiring the regular use of weed cutting equipment. Property owners along both Upper and Lower Phantom Lakes pay slightly higher taxes than other Mukwonago residents — about $100 a year — as part of the Phantom Lake Management District, which has the authority to assess taxes based on property value to pay for lake upkeep.

The management district is run by a board of directors composed of lake residents, a representative of the Mukwonago Town Board and a representative of the Waukesha County Board. One of its primary functions is to manage ongoing weed cleanup in the lakes.

Other than the modest fees and occasionally tangling with weeds, residents see few drawbacks to the area.

"We love it here," said Pat Fiene of Wahl Ave. She and her husband Jack Fiene have lived in the neighborhood 22 years and use the lake extensively for boating, fishing and swimming. "I'm one of the few people who actually swims in Lower Phantom Lake," said Fiene. "It's shallow and weedy but I don't mind if the weeds tickle my tummy."

In addition to the residents' private lake access area, there is a public park with a boat launch and fishing pier located off Andrews Street. It's a busy place at times. The lake has a reputation for great fishing and, because the river still runs through it, it is a good choice for canoeing. Local taverns sponsor fishing competitions in summer. In winter, the lake looks like a mini-village of ice fishing shanties, Nance said.

Sarah Hawks, who grew up in the neighborhood in the 1980s, said she often heard the Phantom Lake Indian legend story while growing up, but said she and her classmates considered the story more fun than scary.

"I used to attend Phantom Lake YMCA Camp as a child," she said. "They taught us the lake was friendly."