

# Utica Lake

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Utica Lake, quite small at 14 acres, is one of many lakes in western Waukesha County. Located just outside of Dousman, Utica's clear, spring-fed waters hold a special place in my heart. My mom's family has owned frontage on the lake for over a hundred years, and we go there to camp, swim, and relax with family and friends. After spending countless hours there over the years, I have come to recognize signs of the landscape's rich history. Observing the property owned by my family, one notices that the wide grassy areas and sandy beach do not agree with the marshy, overgrown environment that lines the rest of the lake. A small white shack and a pair of wooden outhouses gesture at the place's intriguing history. Across the lake, wooden poles poke out from the surface, overgrown by reeds and lily pads: ruins of a structure that has otherwise vanished from the lake, remnants of an industry long forgotten. A few hundred yards beyond the southern shore runs the Glacial Drumlin State Trail, whose shallow grade and straight course follow a deserted railroad. This railroad is a good place to start the story of Utica Lake.

The Milwaukee and Madison Air Line, whose route the Glacial Drumlin State Trail follows today, was opened in 1882 by the Chicago and North Western Railroad. Rumored to have been built to transport politicians between the cities and thus influence them to favor the railroad in their legislation, the Milwaukee and Madison Air Line ran across the wetlands south of Utica Lake, coming within a quarter mile of the shore.<sup>1,2</sup>

At the same time that this rail line was being built, Milwaukee was becoming famous for its beer and Chicago was home to a growing meat packing industry. In the days before electric refrigeration, brewing beer and preserving meat relied heavily on natural ice. With the growth of these industries, and rising urban populations in the region, the demand for natural ice increased rapidly. Large ice houses, used to harvest and store ice, lined the Milwaukee River and waterways in Chicago. But as populations continued to grow, urban water became contaminated by sewage and

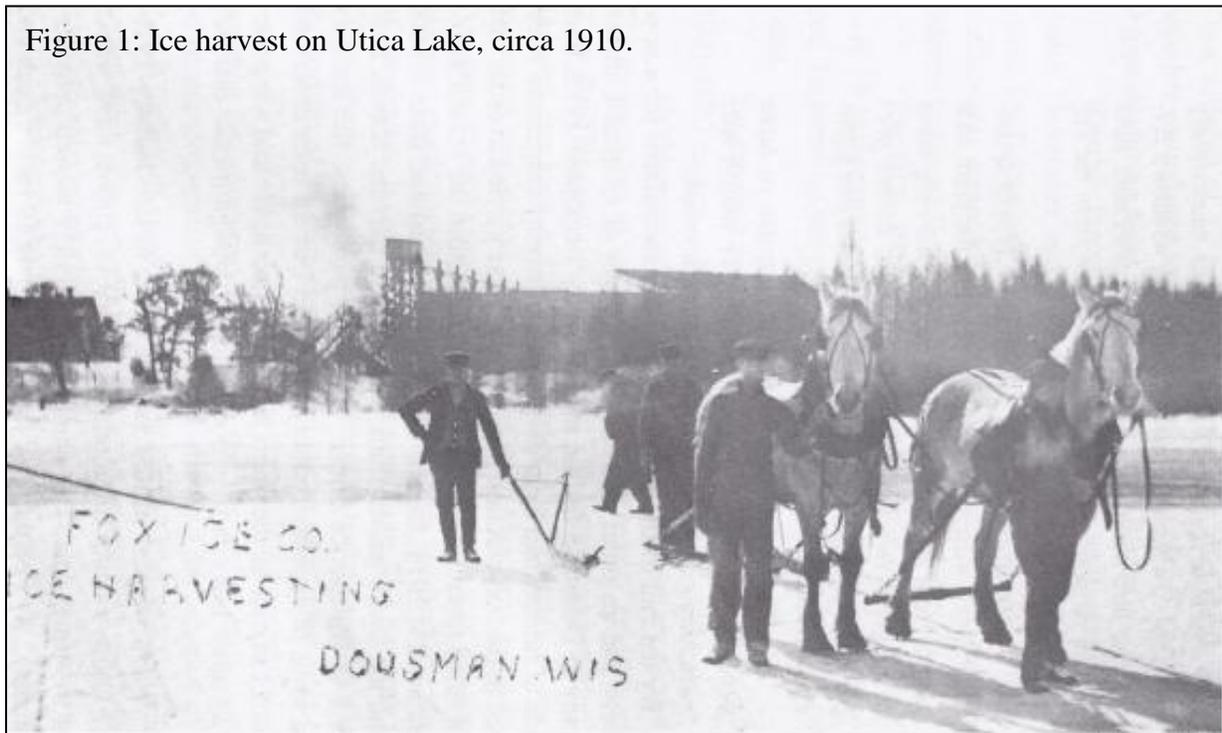
decay<sup>3</sup>. By 1902, Illinois's State Pure Food Commission had discovered "flagrant breaking of the law forbidding the sale of impure ice for domestic use," and blamed such ice for unusually high rates of typhoid.<sup>4</sup> The *Illinois Medical Journal* published a story headlined "Frozen Animal in Ice," reporting that decayed remains were found inside ice sold to a family by a major ice company.<sup>5</sup> At the turn of the century, cities were quickly running out of safe and legally marketable ice, and therefore turned to the countryside to meet their refrigeration needs. The lakes of rural Wisconsin were looked to for dependable supplies of natural ice.

In 1909, Conrad Fox travelled to Utica Lake to assess its value as a source of ice. Fox, owner of the Racine-based Fox Ice Company, was impressed by the quality of Utica Lake's spring water and the lake's proximity to the Madison and Milwaukee Air Line. He decided to expand his business accordingly. That summer, Fox purchased the land necessary to give him access to both Utica Lake and the railroad, and by November the Fox Ice Company had started to build on the land. One hundred men, housed in boarding cars at the railroad station in Dousman, completed a railway spur to the lake in less than a month. The new rails stretched 546.75 feet from the Milwaukee and Madison Air Line to the spot where construction was underway on the ice house. Construction crews used machinery and materials delivered on the railroad to complete the ice house, which stood 126 feet wide, 180 feet long and 45 feet tall.<sup>6</sup>

The Fox Ice Company began its first winter's harvest on Utica Lake on February 1, 1910, by which time construction had been completed and the lake's ice was 10 inches thick. First, a team of horses cleared snow off the surface, exposing the ice. Then, an ice plow (like the one held by the leftmost man in Figure 1) was used to mark off cakes of ice by cutting down about two-thirds of the way through the frozen surface. Workers chiseled these ice cakes loose and floated them down a channel towards the ice house, where a steam-powered conveyor lifted the ice up into the ice house

through a series of windlasses. Men then guided the cakes down chutes, stacking them in between layers of marsh hay and sawdust. The ice was stored in the ice house until it was either sold to locals or loaded onto railcars and shipped to Racine and Chicago. The essentials of this harvesting process remained constant until the Fox Ice Company stopped operation on Utica Lake in 1940, the proliferation of electric refrigeration having turned the natural ice harvest into a relic of the past.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1: Ice harvest on Utica Lake, circa 1910.



Conrad Fox was more than pleased with the ice harvested off of Utica Lake, once telling a reporter it was the best ice he had ever seen. As justification, he claimed that the ice “is so clear you can read a newspaper through a cake two feet thick.”<sup>8</sup> The local economy enjoyed the opening of the ice house as well, as the Fox Ice Company employed over 40 men at the ice house and paid farmers high prices for marsh hay, which was used as insulation.<sup>9</sup> The purity of its waters, through their use by the Fox Ice Company, gave Utica Lake economic value.

Disaster struck the Utica Lake ice house on November 6, 1913. A spark from a railcar ignited the wooden structure, and it went up in flames. “Hundreds of farmers and villagers,” the Milwaukee Sentinel reported, “rushed to the scene ready to help fight the blaze, but upon their arrival the fire had gained such headway that the building was doomed.” Damage to the ice house was estimated at \$35,000.<sup>10</sup>

Sparks and embers from the fire were carried across the lake by a strong wind out of the south. Fred Buth, my great-great grandfather, was out in his fields when he saw sparks falling on his buildings and straw stacks. His farm started to burn. Rushing back home, he hastened to get his livestock to safety. He was successful, except in the case of one horse which was trapped in the basement of the burning barn. Although his farm buildings were lost, it was not too late to save his house. The volunteers who had hoped to save the ice house hurried to Fred’s aid and turned their attention to the Buth residence. The local fire department organized their efforts, and the “heroic work of the bucket brigade” saved the Buth house, as well as neighboring houses and the nearby villages of Dousman and Utica.<sup>11</sup>

The Fox Ice Company rushed to rebuild their ice house, and was ready to harvest ice later that winter. Fred Buth also recovered from the property loss, and continued to farm his land on Utica Lake. In the farmhouse saved by the bucket brigade, Fred and his wife Katherine raised eight children. One of their sons, Lester, would go on to take over the farm. After his marriage to Adela Zastrow in October 1930, Lester made a deal to rent the farm from his father, assuming control of the farm just as the Great Depression set in.

At that time, Utica Lake's boggy shoreline allowed little direct access to the water. In one spot, some sand had been taken from a nearby ridge and spread along the shore to allow cows to walk up and drink out of the lake. The Buths also had a small pier, on which Lester and a neighbor, Elmer Gaul, each kept a rowboat.



The Buths were very poor during the depression. When one of Elmer Gaul's friends said he was willing to rent Lester's rowboat one Sunday for 25 cents, the Buths readily accepted. Drawn back to Utica Lake each weekend, Gaul's friend began to bring his family and friends to the lake. Word slowly got out about the crystal-clear water and good fishing at Utica Lake. As more and more people came to the lake, Lester decided to buy more rowboats, and a small business slowly started.

In the winter of 1936, Fred Buth and a hired man started a project to support the rowboat business by making the land more accessible and useable for visitors. Needing something to keep them busy during the winter months, this project seemed like a worthwhile endeavor. First, they built a fence to keep the cows away from the lake. That completed, they began digging sand from a surrounding ridge, hauling it towards the lake, and dumping it on the boggy shoreline. A team of horses pulled wagons full of sand across the frozen ground, helping to spread tons of sand along the shore. The work transformed the waterfront; the marshy shore was replaced by a beach, and the boggy cow pasture became an attractive park.

With the shoreline now more enjoyable for the visiting fishermen and their families, the Sunday crowds started to grow larger and larger. Lester and Adela provided picnic tables for their visitors, and started charging 25 cents per car for parking. Without truly planning for it, they had started a business running a private park on Utica Lake.<sup>12</sup>

When Adela Buth was asked how the park on Utica Lake was started, she said, “It just sort of happened.”<sup>13</sup> Such an explanation encourages us to look at the social circumstances in which a park of this nature could develop.

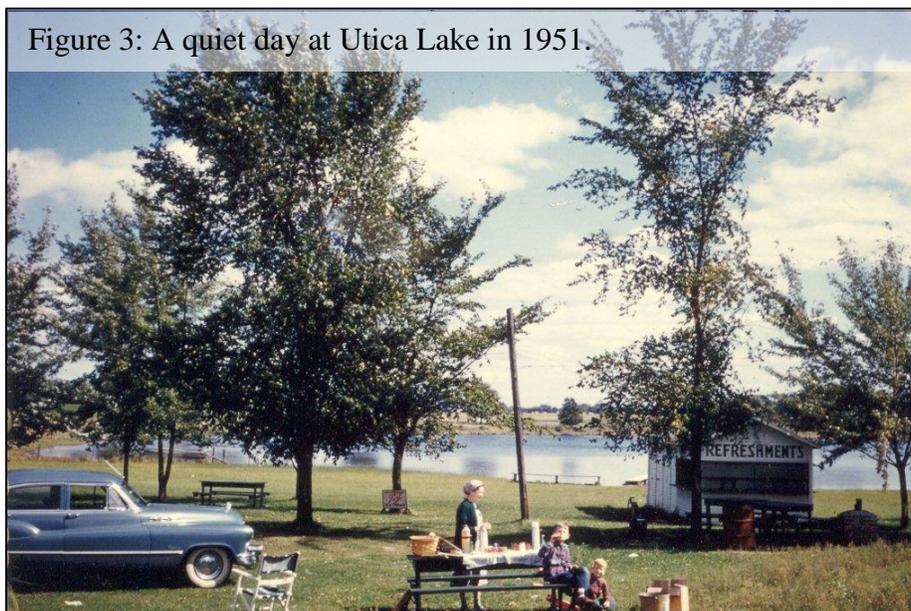
Utica Lake is, geologically, a feature of the Kettle Moraine. Interestingly, the growth of the park on Utica Lake can be looked at in the context of the formation of the Kettle Moraine State Forest. In 1936, the State of Wisconsin made its first purchase of land towards the beginning of a state forest, the same year that Fred Buth spread sand along the shore of Utica Lake. C. L. Harrington, the first superintendent of Wisconsin’s state parks and forests, wrote that during the mid-30s “there was a growing appreciation for the need for a forest type recreation area to serve the heavily populated parts of Southeastern Wisconsin.”<sup>14</sup> This motivated the state legislature to create a forestry program and purchase broad areas of land in the Kettle Moraine in 1937. While forestry

and conservation were the basic ideas behind the program, Harrington related that its “primary impulse arises from a broad concept of outdoor and wildwood type recreation.”<sup>15</sup> Utica Lake offered that kind of recreation to the public, more and more of whom were seeking leisure in the countryside made accessible by the automobile. Social desire for outdoor recreation during the mid-1930s both motivated the government’s creation of the Kettle Moraine State Forest and led growing numbers of people to rent Lester Buth’s rowboats.

Other government programs set a precedent for the type of work the Buths did to transform their property into a park. Around the same time the Buths were creating their park, New Deal programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps were undertaking projects to alter the landscape and environment of public places. During 1935, eight CCC camps were opened at Wisconsin state parks. The CCC worked to improve these parks for its visitors by landscaping, creating networks of trails, installing stone steps, building shelters, and constructing benches and tables.<sup>16</sup> When the Buths transplanted sand to transform their shoreline, bought more rowboats, and put in picnic tables, they were improving their land in a way similar to what the CCC was doing in Wisconsin’s state parks. The New Deal did not have a direct effect on the landscape of Utica Lake, but its programs would have provided inspiration for the work that the Buths did in changing their shoreline.

As the years passed, the Buth family continued to make their park on Utica Lake more inviting to visitors. In 1942, Fred planted a large number of soft maples which have provided shade to visitors ever since. Lester started to cut a larger and larger grass lawn to fit the growing crowds, and planted grass seed in any bare spots. He also kept the shoreline clear, removing reeds and brush that sprang up along the shore. The job of hauling sand to dry up the boggy land continued for years. After a neighbor complained to the state that sand was being dumped in the lake, an inspector

told the Buths they could dump sand on the shore, but not in the water or on the ice. With crowds of swimmers tracking sand from the beach into the lake, this change made little difference to the lake. In 1945, Lester purchased two outhouses, twelve picnic tables, electric poles and wire, a change house, and a refreshment stand from a picnic ground on nearby Golden Lake that was closing. After wiring electricity to the refreshment stand to power refrigeration, the Buths started selling soda and ice cream, as well as candy, cigars, and cigarettes. A larger refreshment stand was built in 1957, and still stands today. The marshy shore of Utica Lake was transformed into a thriving park.



With the exception of the war years, the crowds at Utica Lake grew each summer. The Buths attempted to enforce a 200-car limit and charged per car, so people packed as many as they could fit in car. Church groups organized outings to the lake, as did companies. Visitors came to fish, swim, picnic, shoot fireworks, and hold dog retrieval trials. At the peak, crowds often exceeded 1000 people. It was not easy for the Buth family to keep up with the crowds during the summer while also taking care of chores at home and maintaining the farm. They tried to close on Mondays, but people came anyway. Hiring a few people to help deal with the throngs helped a little, but by

1964 they were tired of running the business, and posted signs saying that it was the park's last summer.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 4: Sunday afternoon at Utica Lake in 1961.

The park was closed at the end of 1964. Since then, the shoreline kept clear by the Buths' hard work and the trampling feet of thousands of visitors has been mostly grown over, and is now home to invasive species like purple loosestrife and white cattail. The beach, which once reached around a whole side of the lake, is now only a few yards wide. After the closing of the park, a screen porch was added to the front of the refreshment stand, and the building now serves as place to cook, eat, and play cards. Although my life is decades removed from the building's origin, I have had many snacks and meals served to me out of this small white shack. Similarly, outhouses linger in a corner of the property, their continued use a symbol of the land's ties to the past. The wide lawn of grass near the lake is often moist underfoot, a reminder that the land would still be a bog if it were not for the Buth family's hard work.

The Fox Ice Company saw Utica Lake's value in the purity of its ice, and the wooden posts which mark the former base of the ice house remind us of the lake's former usefulness. Similarly, a bike ride down the Glacial Drumlin State Trail can stir visions of Utica Lake's ice being distributed to a public eager to consume what the lake had to offer. Visitors to the Buths' park also found value in Utica's crystal-clear water, and were drawn back to the lake to fish, swim, and picnic. My visits to the lake, on the surface, are not so different from theirs. For them, the lake could be valued by the few cents that bought their right to park their car and enjoy the lake for a day. For my family, however, Utica Lake is a priceless landscape, whose clear water reflects its deep history, rekindles our love for the people who dominate our memories of the lake, and replenishes our thankfulness for the times spent there together.

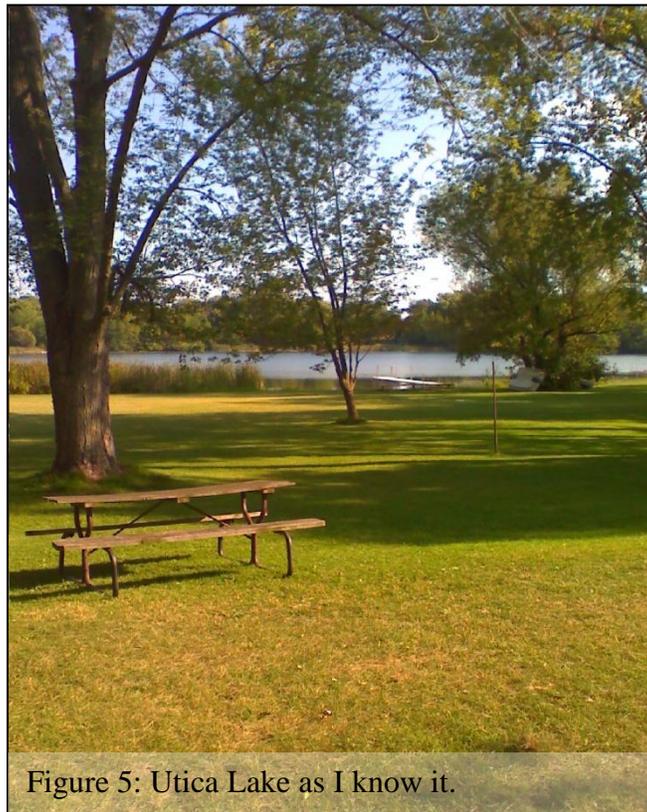


Figure 5: Utica Lake as I know it.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Jim White, "History of the Glacial Drumlin State Trail." Chicago & North Western Historical Society. Accessed November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012. [www.chwhs.org/articles/1345236510.pdf](http://www.chwhs.org/articles/1345236510.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> U. S. Geological Survey, "Wisconsin, Oconomowoc Sheet" Edition of 1892, reprinted 1907.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph C. Jones, *America's Icemen: An Illustrative History of the United States Natural Ice Industry 1665-1925*. (Humble, Texas: Jobeco Books, 1984), 116-121.

<sup>4</sup> "State Pure Food Commission Thinks Prevalence of Typhoid Due to Ice, not to Lake." *The Illinois Medical Journal*. (Springfield: Illinois State Medical Society, 1902), 183.

<sup>5</sup> "Frozen Animal In Ice." *The Illinois Medical Journal*. (Springfield: Illinois State Medical Society, 1902), 183.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Duerwachter, "The Fox Ice Company, Dousman, Wisconsin." *Landmark*. Winter 1993. Vol 36, No. 4 (Waukesha Historical Society), 2-4.

<sup>7</sup> Duerwachter, "The Fox Ice Company, Dousman, Wisconsin." 5.

<sup>8</sup> Duerwachter, "The Fox Ice Company, Dousman, Wisconsin." 10.

<sup>9</sup> Duerwachter, "The Fox Ice Company, Dousman, Wisconsin." 5.

<sup>10</sup> "Large Icehouse Guttled by Blaze." *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 7 1913, pg 6.

<sup>11</sup> *The Weekly Index*, November 7, 1913. As cited in Duerwachter, "The Fox Ice Company, Dousman, Wisconsin," 6-10.

<sup>12</sup> Jo Buth, "The History of Utica Lake Park." 1993. This is my grandma's account of the history of Utica Lake. She based her writing on interviews with family members, personal memories, pictures and some newspaper articles.

<sup>13</sup> Jo Buth, "Introduction" 1993. The introduction to "The History of Utica Lake Park."

<sup>14</sup> C. L. Harrington, "The Story of the Kettle Moraine State Forest." *Wisconsin Magazine of History*. Spring 1954. pgs. 143-145.

<sup>15</sup> Carol Ahlgren, "The Civilian Conservation Corps and Wisconsin State Park Development." *Wisconsin Magazine of History*. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Spring 1988, pgs. 184-204.

<sup>16</sup> Jo Buth, "The History of Utica Lake Park."

## Figures:

1: Ice harvest on Utica Lake from sometime between 1910 and 1913. Appeared in Duerwachter, "The Fox Ice Company, Dousman, Wisconsin."

2: The Buth's lake frontage in 1931 or 1932. Lester Buth's rowboat appears in the background, and the shoreline is mostly overgrown and boggy. Provided by Jo Buth.

3: Utica Lake in 1951. The shoreline is clear of reeds and brush, and the first refreshment stand is visible. Provided by Jo Buth.

4: Utica Lake on a busy Sunday, probably in the early 1960s. Provided by Jo Buth

5: Utica Lake in 2009. Taken by author. The pier in this photo is in the same spot as the one in the photo on page 5.