

**From Commercialization to Conservation:  
The Story of Devil's Lake State Park**

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Standing on the West Bluff of Devil's Lake State Park, in south-central Wisconsin, staring out onto the vast expanse below, I find it easy to momentarily forget the humanized world and lose myself in the spectacular beauty of the lake and its surrounding land. Even more so, I easily forget that even this place, though seemingly representative of all that conservationism served to protect, has a complex history deeply connected to American civilization. Little now exists to remind us of the processes which led to the over-commercialization, and subsequent preservation, of this area. From atop the bluff, a lone set of railroad tracks can be seen on the east side of the lake. These tracks, though of little use anymore, are essential to comprehending the ways in which the Devil's Lake landscape was altered in the mid-1800s and early 1900s. The railroad provides a basis for understanding the ways in which advances in technology, evolving notions of leisure, and new outlooks on the importance of conserving nature combined to create what we know today as Devil's Lake State Park.

Devil's Lake, located near Baraboo in Sauk County, had long been regarded as a "special, even sacred"<sup>1</sup> place to Indian tribes and early white settlers, but it was not until the mid-1800s with the coming of the Chicago & North West (C&NW) railway line, that the area became a well known vacation destination in the Midwest. Though the Wisconsin Legislature had been trying to bring railroad companies to the state since the 1850s, it was not until 1872 before a line was built to connect Devil's Lake to the rest of society. Richard Current, in writing *The History of Wisconsin*, noted that there were "tracks passing right along the lakeshore with utter (but unnoticed) disregard for scenic and ecological damage"<sup>2</sup>. This new railway played a vital role in the commercialization of the lake. For the first time, people from large urban centers,

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<sup>1</sup> Dean O'Brien, *Looking Into History, The Sauk County Area* (Baraboo, WI: Sauk County Historical Society, 2001), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Richard N. Current, *The History of Wisconsin Volume II* (Steven's Point, WI: Worzalla Publishing Co., 1976), 36.

specifically Chicago, had the opportunity to travel to the area for vacation. Additionally, railroad executives began heavily promoting trains as a means of enjoying scenic getaways, which “spread an interest in tourism to working-class and lower-class people”<sup>3</sup>. Certain train rates were even low enough so that low income families, as well as to the more affluent members of society, would be able to visit the lake<sup>4</sup>. Unquestionably, without this technological advance, Devil’s Lake would not have become the tourist attraction it did.

Coinciding with the coming of the railroad to Devil’s Lake was a newly realized perception of leisure time amongst many Americans. Hotel proprietors utilized this as means of promoting the lake as a destination for pleasure seekers. The hotel era in the Devil’s Lake region, as this period is often referred, “was comparable to the resort development in such places as the Adirondacks”<sup>5</sup>. Four large hotels were erected along the lake’s shoreline at various times during the 1860s and 1870s<sup>6</sup>. The most well known of these hotels, the Cliff House, was situated on the northern shore of the lake, and advertised itself in tourist pamphlets as being the only Devil’s Lake hotel located directly on the C&NW railroad<sup>7</sup>. Hotels could be reached from Chicago in only six hours, making them a desirable destination for anything from a weekend getaway – with specials on trains leaving Chicago Friday and returning Sunday<sup>8</sup> – to a complete summer stay. Palisade Park, built by A.R. Ziemer, was an example of a full summer cottage. Mr. Ziemer believed the top of the West Bluff to be an ideal location for a summer city, and in 1893 he set about creating a small village of cottages there. His plan was fairly successful, but it

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<sup>3</sup> David E. Nye, *Consuming Power* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001), 74.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth I. Lange, *A County Called Sauk: A Human History of Sauk County, Wisconsin* (Baraboo, WI: Sauk County Historical Society, 1976), 97.

<sup>5</sup> Lange, 97.

<sup>6</sup> O’Brien, 39.

<sup>7</sup> W.B. Pearl, *The Cliff House* (pamphlet) (Baraboo, WI: Democrat Print, no year given—19--), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Pearl, 5.

was largely abandoned after his death two years after the creation of Palisade Park<sup>9</sup>. In addition to the hotels, many people owned private cottages in the forests surrounding the lake (a few of which still remain, though they have been modernized), which could be rented out to guests or used for personal pleasure.

The tourism industry at Devil's Lake thrived in large part because of the methods employed by proprietors to attract visitors. One such technique was the way in which nature, and the positive influence nature can have on one's well being, was featured in promotional brochures. Descriptions ranged from broad accounts of healthy recreational activities available at the lake to claims that visiting the south-central Wisconsin region, specifically Devil's Lake, would allow one to envelop themselves in a region which was "especially healthy and absolutely free from all malarial influences"<sup>10</sup>. Clearly, the hotel proprietors realized that along with a new appreciation for recreation, the public was also gaining a new understanding of the importance of occupying their new leisure time with healthy activities. Even the wording of these brochures and of newspaper articles describing the area attempted to promote the pleasurable aspects of Devil's Lake, in an effort to overcome the connotations that are inherent to a place with 'devil' in its name. H.S. Orton wrote that "it is not gloomy and horrible...it is bold, picturesque, grand, beautiful"<sup>11</sup>, and the Cliff House's proprietor, W.B. Pearl, described his hotel and the lake as "the most wonderful and scenic of the many charming summer resorts in Wisconsin, [with] magnificent scenery, beautiful drives, fishing and boating...Devil's Lake deserves to be much better known to lovers of picturesque nature"<sup>12</sup>. These many advertising strategies helped

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<sup>9</sup> H.E. Cole, *Baraboo, Dells, and Devil's Lake Region: Scenery, Archeology, Geology, Indian Legends, and Local History Briefly Treated* (Baraboo, WI: Sauk County Publishing Company, 1921), 47-49.

<sup>10</sup> Pearl, 7.

<sup>11</sup> H.S. Orton, "Devil's Lake," *Whitewater Register*, 5 July 1872, no page number provided.

<sup>12</sup> Pearl, 1.

Devil's Lake to quickly become a tourist mecca. However, it would be only a few short years before the ecological effects of this consumerist ideology would be fully realized.

Around the turn of the century, as the rest of the nation was becoming aware of the idea of conservation, residents of the towns surrounding Devil's Lake were beginning their quest to protect the area from future harm. Though the lake was at the pinnacle of its success commercially, many people started to understand the negative environmental impact that overusing the land could have. Before people such as John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and George Perkins Marsh emerged to bring conservation and preservation to the fore of the American psyche, people failed to realize the effect that bringing almost 2000 people to Devil's Lake on any given weekend was bound to have on the land<sup>13</sup>. In 1902, the first step toward preserving Devil's Lake was made when a commission reported to Governor Robert LaFollette that it would be favorable to make the lake into a park. By 1903, with the creation of the Wisconsin Board of Forestry, the state was well on its way to preserving Devil's Lake<sup>14</sup>. It took until 1906, though, when a group of local townspeople formed a committee, before any concrete analysis of the ecological effects of humanizing the Devil's Lake landscape began. The committee, led by Baraboo's primary employer, W.H. McFetridge, released an illustrated pamphlet "pointing out the advantages of state ownership and development of the area"<sup>15</sup>. The booklet, entitled *An Appeal for the Preservation of the Devil's Lake Region*, discussed the issues facing the people of Sauk County in the fight to reestablish the lake as a natural, uncommercialized wonder. As noted in the title, the most pressing concern was to not simply correct the physical mistakes made on the land, but also to introduce preservative measures so these mistakes would not be

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<sup>13</sup> Lange, 97.

<sup>14</sup> W.H. McFetridge et al, eds., *An Appeal for the Preservation of the Devil's Lake Region* (Baraboo, WI: no publisher given, 1906), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Bob Dewel, *Yesteryear Revisited – Devil's Lake, Palisades, and Shadow Town* (Baraboo, WI: Baraboo Sun/News-Republic, 2007), 46.

repeated<sup>16</sup>. The language of this pamphlet had a much harsher tone than that of the hotel tourist guides, as the committee was trying to convey the seriousness of the issue. It called for a need to “conserve the forces that make for the growth of our nation—[and] stamp out those which threaten its decay”<sup>17</sup>. Gone were words like *pleasure* and *beauty*, and in their place were terms such as *harm* and *decay*, which aided in demonstrating the gravity of the situation and the need to work “with nature, not regardless of her”<sup>18</sup>. Undoubtedly, the creators of this booklet could see where America’s consumerist principles were leading and understood the necessity of reverting to an environmentally conscious approach to nature before it was too late.

The committee’s plan was aimed at the removal of the hotels, as well as the timber and quartzite industries, in order to create a park at Devil’s Lake which could promote the area’s natural beauty. Since the arrival of white settlers, the trees surrounding the lake were logged extensively, an act which noticeably changed the makeup of the forests. Tall oaks were replaced by smaller red maples<sup>19</sup>. The preservation pamphlet recommended that all of the lands which drained into the lake be designated as part of the park, so that the springs which flow into the lake would not be slowed. This would ensure that the lake would not gradually disappear due to lack of replenishment. Additionally, it was argued that the protection of the land would allow for hiking paths to be laid out and might permit Devil’s Lake to “become the most wild and romantic, the most beautiful and interesting of any equal area on this continent”<sup>20</sup>. Only in this what-if scenario did the committee choose to use more light-hearted terminology, as if to demonstrate that there is still time to correct the damages that have been wrought against the land, but only through a concerted, large-scale undertaking of preservation. In 1907, the

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<sup>16</sup> McFetridge, 10.

<sup>17</sup> McFetridge, 8.

<sup>18</sup> McFetridge, 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ancient Rocks and Vanished Glaciers: A Natural History of Devil’s Lake State Park, Wisconsin* (Stevens Point, WI: Worzalla Publishing Company, 1989), 31.

<sup>20</sup> McFetridge, 15.

Wisconsin Legislature failed, by one vote, to pass a proposal to create a state park near Baraboo<sup>21</sup>, but in 1911, the Devil's Lake conservationists finally won and the area became Wisconsin's third state park<sup>22</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the path leading to Devil's Lake becoming a state park had many detours. In the end, nature and a newly realized conservationist spirit triumphed over technological advances and a consumerist, leisure-minded ideology. However, this is not where the history of the lake ends. Since becoming a state park, the land directly surrounding Devil's Lake has been largely reverted back to its natural state. Save for a few small buildings, visitors to the park would be hard pressed to find any evidence relating to the hotel era, as "all that remains of the Cliff House... [is] a stone or two in the grass"<sup>23</sup>. Though the resorts persisted for a few seasons after the park was created, the onset of the automobile effectively ended the era, since the hotels relied primarily on mass groups of visitors coming by train. Tent camping has since become a popular activity, and the lake has been utilized by groups ranging from college field trips to Boy Scout excursions<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, my original impetus for studying Devil's Lake stemmed from having once visited the park on a hiking trip with my Boy Scout troop. I cannot say that I knew then of the history that preceded my being there, nor did I really care. I was simply content in being able to find solitude in a seemingly untouched piece of nature. Now, after having gained an understanding of the natural and human history of the lake, I will cherish my time there that much more, forever grateful to those who persevered in their fight to save Devil's Lake so that future generations could experience the place they held so dear.

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<sup>21</sup> O'Brien, 43.

<sup>22</sup> Michael J. Goc, *Many a Fine Harvest* (Baraboo, WI: Sauk County Historical Society, 1990), 69.

<sup>23</sup> O'Brien, 43.

<sup>24</sup> O'Brien, 43.