

# **Bills Lake Association**



## **Stuff about the lake**

**Revised as of April 29, 2008**

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# Where did the name for Bills Lake come from?

According to research submitted by resident Craig Kidder, Nelson Bills, born in Owego, New York, moved west after fighting for the Union in the Civil War. His name appears in the 1870 census of Croton, Michigan, but he evidently moved on and ended up in Waverly, Iowa.

However, Nelson apparently left several members of the Bills clan back in Croton. In Oak Grove cemetery, located one half mile down Elm St. from the Ferguson's Corner (Elm and M 82), there is a monument to several of the Bills family that includes Abel and three wives of James Bills. Along with Nelson, both Abel and James are listed in that same 1870 census as farmers from New York state. Abel died in 1885 at age 77 and is buried at Oak Grove. His wife Elmira (spelled Almira at Oak Grove) is also buried there, having died at age 72 in 1882.



In addition, three wives of James are interred in the same area, one having died at age 33 in 1883, another at age 33 in 1884, and a third at age 20 in 1885. James is not buried there. Perhaps after suffering three tragedies in three years, he “lit out for the

territory” with Nelson. Moreover, given the order of the listing in the 1870 census, Abel, who appears on top, is presumably the local patriarch of the clan.

None of this, of course, precisely answers the question of whom Bills Lake is named after, but the 1870 census offers a clue. Perhaps it was the custom of the time to name area lakes after a primary farmer who owned land near the body of water in question. After all, in that same

1870 Croton census — just below the listing of Abel, Elmira, and James Bills — is the name of Henry Pettit.

Precisely where was the Bills farm located? Did they once own the Tannewitz barn? To whom did they sell their land? How was it decided that they were the ones that the lake should be named after? Did they actually, at one time, own the lake?

Perhaps the above inconclusive discussion will bring forth a current Bills Lake resident who can shed more light on a question that is often asked.



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# Not Slightly Elsewhere

## Appreciating Bills Lake

In John Updike's short story "How was it, really?" the main character is a 60-year-old who has been invited to a 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party of one of his daughter's yuppie friends. As a result, Don finds himself aboard a sunset cruise, outnumbered amidst a narcissistic bunch of young boozers who are more interested in canned music and dealing each other than in what turns out to be a spectacular natural scene that unfolds in front of them all as the sun celebrates Nature's Happy Hour. It seems as if, although the view is nothing short of splendid, most of the folks aboard ship are oblivious.

As Updike describes it, "The thrust of most of these observers was inward, not outward. The stunning sunset was a living moment, awash in beauty but ignored in that quest for a better moment, slightly elsewhere."

Those who live on Bills Lake – especially those with a few years on them — know that there *is* no better moment and certainly not slightly elsewhere. Furthermore these moments don't just occur at sunset. The sunrise is also awash in beauty, a time to bask in anticipation of a good day, awash in potential. These are uncluttered moments where the to-do list is set aside for a few minutes and there is focus on something besides self.

This appreciation applies especially to those who toil somewhere beyond Newaygo County during the week in anticipation of a Friday night at the lake. These are folks

who leave home in order to arrive home. When they arrive, the lake is not only awash in beauty but there are the much-anticipated sounds and smells: the putter of pontoons making their ritual circles around the lake and the scent of charcoal and campfire wood.

Why is it so? The obvious answer is relief from responsibility, the sense that the to-do list has been left behind, however temporarily. Part of it is the sense of entitlement. They have earned a respite, however short.

But there is more to it. A good portion has to do with the fact that in spending time outdoors we are awash in nature. When we look out onto the lake, there is less self-absorption (me, me, me, and my needs) and more appreciation of something larger. It has been said that when your world gets small (confinement in a nursing home, for instance), you play too large a part in it and become selfish. At Bills Lake, your world gets a bit bigger.

More to the point, there is a glass-more-than-half-full appreciation. There is a sense that it doesn't get any better than this. There is a mindfulness that is not mechanical. To use both coca-cola and computer terminology, it is a pause that refreshes.

There is no slightly elsewhere. There are no better moments.



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# Welcome to the Lake

This information is not intended to deliver a “This is the way we do things around here” message, nor is it to be a mandatory-type “We’ve always done it this way” manual. Instead, its purpose is to provide a helpful guide to traditions and services in the Bills Lake area that hopefully make your adjustment to Bills Lake living easier. In the past few years, we have encountered a certain bafflement on the part of new residents who listen to old timers blithely blither on about events such as the Circle of Fire or Lakefest but don’t know what they’re talking about.

**Fourth of July:** This is the Big One, an event not to be missed if at all possible. Given that the weather is almost always ideal, water events are sponsored by the Bills Lake Association and trophies are awarded. During a designated day (almost never on the actual Fourth), we sponsor kayak and canoe races, sailboat races, and paddleboat races. At 7:30 p.m., we have a boat parade wherein pontoons are decorated and onlookers are asked to vote for winners (one vote per dock to be recorded by a jet skier who brings up the rear – you must arrive at a consensus of your family and guests).

At precisely 10:00 p.m. on that designated night (anxious and excited folks sometimes jump the gun), residents light flares that they have placed along the lakefront of their properties, thus creating a “circle of fire” that is quite impressive. Your zone representative sells the flares for \$2 apiece, and uses this contact opportunity to update directory information and collect annual dues.

**Lakefest:** This is a lake-wide get-together which is annually held on the association grounds sometime in August in order to get residents out of their provincial cliques and enable them to meet the people whose houses they have been staring at when they make their nightly pontoon tours around the lake. For a few hours, folks enjoy food and drink, much of which is donated. There are kids games and entertainment, and adult games such as horse shoes and a Euchre tournament. In addition, there are several raffles. Sometimes there is adult entertainment, a disk jockey playing oldies, or a karaoke opportunity. Lakefest can be a significant fundraiser for the Bills Lake Association. In other words, if you want to support what we do, come and spend some money

## Joining the association

It is not mandatory. After all, everyone on the lake gets a newsletter whether or not they pay the (gasp!) \$15 annual dues. Indeed, we have a low budget operation that covers the costs of the Fourth of July trophies, the publication of the newsletter, the printing of the directory, and the establishment of the Web site domain name. About \$125 per year goes for lab fees with regard to lake testing. In addition we support the Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC) and Michigan Lake and Stream Associations, Inc (ML&SA). We also, of course, pay the light bill, the Croton Township taxes, and the insurance on the Pear St. property. Dues (checks made out to Bills Lake Association) can be paid to your zone representative, to Treasurer Jim Tower at any association meeting, or mailed to Jim’s house using the envelope that accompanies the Memorial Day newsletter.

## Garage Sale

Once a year — usually two weekends after Memorial Day weekend (this year June 9-10) — the Bills Lake Association sponsors a lake-wide garage sale. This simply means that the association places advertisements in local newspapers while you set up a garage sale the way you normally do. An association representative, usually Ed Schroeder, comes around to collect \$2 per garage sale to pay for the advertising. In the meantime you sit back and watch what you perceive as trash get converted into monetary treasure as visitors peruse what you thought what was worthless and deem it worthy enough to purchase. Depending on the weather, this can be a very successful venture, given that Bills Lake is situated in an area where recycle-type shops (Love in the Name of Christ, a store located on M 37 just south of Newaygo being a prime example) are quite popular. Two years ago, a Bills Lake family sold \$1,100 of their treasures.

## **Lake Testing**

Our association conducts testing of the Bills Lake waters throughout each summer season as part of the ML&SA's Co-operative Lakes Monitoring Program (CLMP). Each week, a Secchi disk reading is taken to determine lake clarity and transparency. Twice a year — once in the early spring and once in the early fall (approximately April 15 and Sept. 15) — a sample of water is taken and transported to the DEQ office in Grand Rapids where it is sent for analysis to determine the phosphorous content. Five times a year – on or about May 15, June 15, July 15, Aug. 15, and Sept. 15 – a sample of water is taken, strained through a filter, and then the filter is frozen for transport, again to a lab which analyzes it for chlorophyll.

The goal of the program is not only to establish a sense of our water quality but also to determine trends. A discussion of the previous year's water testing can be found in each year's Memorial Day issue of the newsletter. A more complete discussion of the results can be found on the association's Web site.

## **Directory**

The Bills Lake Association provides an annual directory containing lake addresses and phone numbers, mailing addresses and phone numbers (if you reside somewhere else in the winter), and e-mail addresses. Updated versions are available to anyone who pays dues and then requests one (ask your zone representative). The directory is printed sometime after the Fourth of July to enable zone reps the time to gather updated information. However, anyone with e-mail capacity can obtain a Word version of this document at any time by contacting Ed Waits at 652-2629 or edwaits@charter.net

## **Web site: [www.billslake.net](http://www.billslake.net)**

It contains pictures of lake events, and beautiful moments amidst the Bills Lake version of nature's splendor. In addition, the site gives you more information than you want to know about our ongoing water testing program. There is a page of Houses for Sale for those who may want to advertise on the World Wide Web (we don't charge anything but we don't guarantee the results, either). There is a page announcing cottages for rent, again provided free of charge. There is a page of pictures of Bills Lake in the glory days of yesteryear before inevitable development changed things. The site provides statistics (how large the lake is, how many residents, etc), the yearly calendar of events, and updated information with regard to stuff such as hazardous waste disposal opportunities. Minutes of the most recent association meeting are posted. So is a copy of the most recent newsletter.

## **Waste Disposal**

Yes, we have garbage collection service here in the hinterlands, but service has changed over the past several years: These days, the only company to service Newaygo County is Allied Waste/Sunset Waste Services (877 698-7274)

Croton Township also offers a transfer station — a.k.a dump, — located on Elm Street one half mile before you reach Croton-Hardy Drive. This service affords you the opportunity to dispose of – for a fee — articles that regular garbage service will not pick up. The Transfer Station hours are variable; they are posted on a sign at the dump's entrance and on the Croton Township Web site ([www.crotontownship.org](http://www.crotontownship.org)). The cost of getting rid of certain types of stuff is listed on the Web site.

Some years (not 2007, as it turns out) Croton Township offers Croton Cleanup Days, a Friday and Saturday in early August where you can take large items which normal garbage pickup service rejects. The location for disposal is Conklin Park, at the end of Elm St. just before you meet Croton/Hardy Drive. You should call the township office (652-4301) for the date and times, and a list of what they will take. This opportunity is free of charge although, of course, your taxes pay for it.

Finally, Newaygo County offers a hazardous waste disposal service once a year, usually on the second Saturday after Memorial Day weekend. You can take old paint, used oil, household chemicals, etc. to a location just north of White Cloud for proper disposal but you have to call for an appointment time (689-7213 or 689-7225). A list of what they do and do not take is posted on the Bills Lake Association's Web site in April.

## **Keeping contamination out of the lake**

A lake is similar to a human body, a complicated living organism which reacts to outside forces beyond its control. Although there are several other factors, the three main sources of lake contamination are (1) impervious surfaces (paved roads, rooftops, driveways, etc.) which facilitate runoff of chemicals into the lake when it rains, (2) use of phosphorous fertilizers to promote the classic suburban close-cropped turf on lawns next to the lake but also get into the lake bottom to encourage growth of weeds there, and (3) outdated or poorly maintained septic systems which ultimately leak into the lake. In that development of property — i.e. building big houses on lakefront property — is as inevitable as Americans taking the wilderness from the Indians, we can't do much about the first. However, we can use phosphorous-free fertilizers on our lawns — such as Milorganite or other organic specially blended fertilizers — to minimize runoff of weed-fostering chemicals into the lake. We can also make sure that our septic systems are pumped out on a regular basis. The latter is provided by, among others, Schultz Septic Tank Service – 652-6141. It is, of course, unconscionable to litter in and around the lake. Indeed, we enjoy such a beautiful area that many residents pick up after the litterers as diligently as they pick up stray cans and bottles for monetary return.

## **Swans**

They are objects of admiration on our lake, especially at quiet times of the year and tranquil times of the day. On the other hand, they are sources of contention, the objects of considerable anger and debate over the past several years. The problem involves a handful of jet skiers who harass them for sport to the point that Papa Swan retaliates, often against innocent jet skiers who quickly turn into swan haters. But the problem is also exacerbated by boaters who insist on getting too close and feeding them. It would be helpful for all concerned if you admired them from afar.

## **Fishing on Bills Lake**

From the activity that one sees from residences, it must be quite good. There are boats on the lake all spring, summer, and fall, and shanties on the ice in the wintertime. Some fishermen, of course, lie about their luck but many are reluctant to talk about how good things are because they don't want people to know. The lake was stocked with walleye by the DNR several years ago and reports indicate that many of them got big. In addition, Bills Lake hosts blue gill, bass (both small and largemouth), rock bass (crappie), sunfish, Northern pike, perch and an occasional splake (hybrid of brook and rainbow trout) Enough said?

## **Newsletter**

It comes out four times a summer: Memorial Day, a week before the Fourth of July weekend, at the end of July, and on Labor Day weekend. The Memorial Day newsletter is mailed to you unless you are already at the lake on a full-time basis. The last three are hand-delivered by your zone representative, regardless of dues payment or the lack thereof. If you want the newsletter mailed to your primary residence, add two dollars to your dues and then remind someone (preferably Ed Waits) that this is your desire. A better idea, however, is to access it online at [www.billslake.net](http://www.billslake.net)

## **Burn Permits**

In rural Newaygo County, as opposed to the city, you can burn outdoors, but you have to call 231 745-3111 for a burn permit. In actuality, the permit is simply a verification number that you receive over the phone that allows you, “for today only,” to burn leaves, brush, grass, and stumps. At times when conditions are dangerous (excessively dry and windy, for instance), the recording will tell you that burning is prohibited. In that we had an actual forest fire in the woods across Pear St several years ago because someone burned leaves on a dangerous day, it would be foolish to ignore this requirement.

## **Golf carts:**

In certain zones, they abound. However, in contrast to Sun City, the drivers are often children who received permission from their parents to motor on our private roads. Given that caution is not in the basic nature of most kids, drivers should be extra vigilant when entering roads that lead to lake residences, especially since there are certain intersections and hilly roadways where you can't see everything. In addition, parents should stress to their kids that they are operating a potentially dangerous vehicle both to themselves and to others. At the recent ML&SA convention, it was reported that a grandmother was killed by a nine-year-old driving a golf cart.

# Safety on the waters of Bills Lake

## Introduction: No illusions

True story: The wife of a Grant physician was swimming in an area well inside of a raft on Hess Lake last summer when she looked up in alarm. A female water skier, who obviously didn't see the swimmer, was rounding a curve and bearing down on her. Only at the last moment did the skier recognize what was about to happen and dropped her tow rope, but she came up from the wipeout spluttering and swearing. The skier was so emotionally out-of-control that the swimmer was at a loss as to how to respond. The almost-victim, knowing a no-win situation when she saw one, simply swam away, but she was shaken on two levels.

Was the skier unaware that by law *she* was the one who was at fault? Was she so embarrassed by the impending accident that she went on the attack rather than apologize? Or was there a third reason why she reacted so angrily?

The above would seem like an open-and-shut case but these days, we can't be so sure. It was philosopher Bart Simpson who once declared: "My bubble, my rules." Indeed, for certain people, their personal bubble gets larger and larger, in this case encompassing the entire lake.

For some of them, the concept of personal space, it seems, is a matter of entitlement, whether they are loudly talking on a cell phone while in a restaurant, listening to music while riding a bus, carrying on a conversation in a theatre in the midst of a performance, or water-skiing or jet-skiing around a lake. Their response to any protest with regard to infringement of other people's bubbles is an oral and/or manual flip-off. Sadly, for an increasing

number of people, empathy — the ability to imagine the impact of one's own actions on others — has been replaced by a culture of self-absorption.

But this doesn't work in shared-space situations such as in a restaurant, on a bus, in a movie theatre, or on a lake. Although riparians own the bottomland of Bills Lake, they don't own the area from the bottom of the lake to the top of the water. Therefore we abide by commonly accepted rules, some of which hold the force of law and some of which are a matter of good manners. When you get on the lake — our shared water park — you are not operating in your own exclusive, personal bubble.

But what are the rules?

Those who attend Bills Lake Association meetings can testify that some of the most adamant folks — many of whom start their statements with the words: "I've been here at Bills Lake for fill-in-the-blank years" — are often the most wrong in their ensuing pronouncements regarding the law. This is one of several reasons why it has been suggested that the Bills Lake Association publish a manual of things every riparian should know.

As a result, some things have been put in writing and offered to you for your perusal. A shortened hard-copy form has been offered to residents who hopefully will display it for the benefit of family members and guests.

However, there are no illusions. We are very aware the residents who will actually read this stuff are too often those who don't need to, i.e. "preaching to the choir." Characteristically, those who most need to be reminded of the law are those who won't take the time because they are too busy breaking it, all the while asserting, sometimes using offensive language, "My bubble, my rules."

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# Safety on the waters of Bills Lake

“We try not to be negative against people having fun,” said Sheriff Fran Staley of Roscommon County at the 2006 Michigan Lake and Stream Associations (ML&SA) convention. Indeed, with regard to boaters, exhibiting a long list of “don’ts” and then telling them to have fun is a bit like bundling up a child in winter garb to the point where he can’t move and then sending him out to play in the snow.

Furthermore, Staley cited statistics leading to the conclusion that boating in Michigan has actually become considerably safer over the years. In 1968, Michigan had 437,000 registered boats (2<sup>nd</sup> only to Florida). In that year, there were 77 fatal accidents. In 2005, there were 948,000 boats registered in our state. Last year, we had 27 fatal accidents. In other words, there were twice as many boats on our state waters last year than 40 years ago, but considerably fewer fatalities.

Staley credits safety courses and educational programs for the improvement. Nevertheless, he asserts that “some people make our job necessary. If people used common sense, I would be unemployed.” He states the obvious: (1) most accidents occur in July and August on weekend afternoons and (2) 50% of accidents involve PWCs.

## What are his biggest gripes?

- **Bow-riding.** Staley recalled a typical story of several 40-50 year-old adults riding beyond the front rail of a pontoon boat when the wind blew off the hat of one of them. He fell off trying to grab it and, sure enough, the propeller ran over him. They recovered the body.
- **Belligerence.** If Staley’s marine patrol officers feel that a verbal warning will educate as well as a citation, they don’t write a ticket. The exception is if the wrong-doers are drunk. “The Implied Consent law applies to boat drivers,” he says. This means that if you refuse to take a blood alcohol test, you, in effect, lose your boat driving license.

Bills Lake residents, especially the onshore spectators can add to the list of complaints. Some of them report that they have to go inside rather than stay outdoors to watch foolish and dangerous behavior. What most bothers them?

- **PWCs which tow water skiers across shallow areas.** Certainly there are plenty of these shallow spots on Bills Lake, especially in front of Shear Pin Point. People onshore who are watching have their fingers crossed that there won’t be a wipe-out which could create a quadriplegic result.
- **High speeds around tubers.** The kids are squealing in delight, but when they fall off a tube, onshore observers, from excellent vantage points, start looking around for the jet skis and wave runners, hoping that they see the tiny speck of a kid in the water. In addition, there are the reckless drivers. One resident reported that a jet skier once cut between his boat and the tube of kids that he was pulling, and showed no indication of apology.
- **High speeds around swimmers:** There is a 100-foot rule regarding how close you can go – at high speed – to a swimming raft. The bottom line: swimmers rule, just as pedestrians rule (or should) at certain crosswalks in town. The 100-foot rule also serves to protect both the boaters and the skiers from a possible collision with the raft.
- **Ziping in and out of the paths of sailboats.** Bills Lake sailboaters afford onshore spectators a visually-beautiful and quiet recreational activity, in direct contrast to their powerboat counterparts. Sailors have enough to worry about in coping with natural elements without having to deal with the increase in wave action from, say, jet skiers who dart in and out of their paths. Spectators, who point with pride to the splendor of the sails, don’t much like seeing this type of activity either. It generates the perception that powerboaters are thoughtless, aggressive, and arrogant. Onlookers know that powerboaters should not only exercise caution around sailboats but give them the right of way because speedboats and jet skis have more maneuverability.

## Other situations that annoy on-shore folks:

- **Folks who don't observe the No-Wake times.** This is a DNR ordinance (WC-62-91-001) with the force of law. You cannot operate a boat beyond no-wake speed after 7:30 p.m. or before 11:00 a.m. This limitation allows for some daily peace and quiet in contrast to the angry growls of boat motors that permeate the tranquil atmosphere of Bills Lake during much of the day. It has served as an excellent compromise between those who want to zip around the lake and those who want to bask in the quiet of nature. More to the point, the ordinance is observed so well (you can tell who is aware of it by the increase in boat speed at precisely 11:00 a.m.) that anyone who violates it gets the immediate attention of scores of people who quickly form angry stereotyped opinions. There is an allowance on the part of most people who look out on the lake at 7:31 p.m. to see jet skis going fast because it is assumed that these folks don't realize the time or are going back to their docks. In addition, sometimes people forgive those fishermen who zip out to the far reaches of the lake at dawn, only to stop and troll (the ultimate no-wake speed) for long periods of time. After all, these fishermen are not repeatedly speeding around and around the lake. The bottom line: the fact that this ordinance has been so well-observed over the years makes any violation of it stand out. In contrast to the horror stories that come from other lakes, we are spoiled. We want to keep it that way.
- **Going the wrong way around the lake.** Believe it or not, the requirement to go counter-clockwise around the perimeter of the lake can be found in the Marine Safety Act. This isn't much of a problem on Bills Lake which has only three miles of perimeter (as opposed to, say, Houghton Lake which has 40 perimeter miles and 20,000 acres), but residents sometimes observe in horror the violation of this state law on occasions such as the Fourth of July weekend when lots of "outsiders" — who may not know what they're doing — visit our waters under a festive (read: thoughtless or reckless) atmosphere.
- **Loud, usually profane, language late at night.** As the saying goes: "Tequila makes your clothes fall off." In addition, it loosens inhibitions and, as a by-product, tongues. Most people know that sound travels more readily over water but some of those who are "up for the weekend" (literally and figuratively) don't care how loud, obscene, or late they are. When confronted the next day (after they recover from the hangover), many of them apologize. Those who don't may regard Bills Lake as their own personal bubble (see Memorial Day 2006 newsletter). A corollary to this annoyance is the playing of radios on boats, especially in an era of headphones.
- **Reckless Driving:** The list of descriptions provided by the DNR is long and varied — subject to interpretation and therefore subject to argument. Suffice to say, many residents assert that you know it when you see it. Weaving through congested traffic at high speeds is an obvious example. Purposely waiting until the last moment to avoid a collision is another.
- **Going too close to rafts.** You must stay 100 feet from them at high speed for everyone's safety: both yours and the safety of nearby swimmers. This distance applies even at No-Wake speed (less than 5 mph) when swimmers are present. In other words, swimmers (the aquatic counterpart of pedestrians) rule, or should. Of course, determining the distance margin when you are moving rapidly isn't very easy.
- **Operating at excessive (read: dangerous) speeds** is also difficult to determine. Believe it or not, the speed limit on the water is 55 mph statewide, a speed which is, in reality, much too fast for a lake as small as ours. "Even 30 mph is sometimes not safe," said Sheriff Staley. But measuring actual speed requires a device that is on land (not subject to bobbing up and down in the water). "There are laws that cover some of these things," he said, "but they usually come after an accident."

- **Boating too close to fishermen:** Common sense dictates that boaters give wide berth to fishermen, even during the high speed hours of the day. The fishermen are allowed to fish anytime, not just at No-Wake hours. They sometimes have long tackle lines out. They can also be capsized or put in danger by the wakes of high speed boats.

### Things we do right:

- **Kill switch.** There have been no reported stories of jet skiers who were so stupid or unaware that they failed to attach a lanyard-type engine cutoff switch to their clothing or life jacket before proceeding.
- **Life jacket:** Observers almost never see water skiers or jet skiers riding around the lake without a life jacket on. Even folks who might otherwise behave idiotically realize that failure to wear a personal flotation device is stupid. Inflatable life jackets, of course, don't count. Occasionally, of course (especially on busy holiday weekends), onlookers see an adult — without a life jacket on — being pulled by a speedboat, a violation of Michigan Boating Laws. Sometimes, an adult is seen going around the lake on a jet ski with a small child on board: the child has a life jacket on but the adult doesn't.
- **A look-out when water-skiing.** Occasionally, some residents report seeing a driver and a water skier without a third person aboard, but on Bills Lake, this doesn't happen very often. By law, a good rear-view mirror isn't enough. Besides, employment of a look-out is an acceptable child-labor practice.

It is disconcerting to watch violations of Michigan Boating Laws on Bills Lake for two reasons. (1) Onshore observers fear for the safety of those in the water. Their vantage point is so good that they can see imminent danger clearly but are reduced to crossing fingers and hoping that reckless behavior won't result in injury or death before their very eyes. (2) Disregard for safe boating is seen by some spectators as a blatant in-your-face taunting. When boaters break the law and therefore endanger others, they too often do so repeatedly as they go around and around the lake. They therefore (probably unintentionally) pose a mocking of sorts of those onshore who want to see the law obeyed. The longer the onshore spectator watches as the wrongdoer continues to pass by, the angrier he gets.

Is this stuff, in effect, “preaching to the choir?” Do you already know all of the above? Perhaps your visitors and guests and renters don't.

# About our resident swans

In Lakeland, Florida — spring training home of the Detroit Tigers – the silhouette of a swan is affixed to the city’s official logo. The Parks and Recreation Department oversees the care of Lakeland’s English swan population which consists of direct descendants of those birds which once belonged to King Richard I. Queen Elizabeth II donated two of them to the city after a Lakeland resident petitioned her for a pair of mating English Mute Swans. Over the years, they have flourished, affording admiring pleasure to those who walk the sidewalks surrounding the lakes. In fact, the city holds a festival each year, aptly termed Swansation, which mirrors the concept of Chicago’s Cows on Parade. It features artistically decorated swan sculptures which grace several areas throughout the city.

Bills Lake residents don’t embrace our resident swans to this extent but an informal survey taken by zone representatives last summer made it clear that an overwhelming majority like the swans and want them to remain on our waters. However this approval is not universal. Every year, horror stories emerge as residents report swan harassment by jet skiers and swan attacks in return. Papa Swan, who doesn’t seem to discriminate very well, ends up pursuing innocent jet skiers, thus turning swan proponents into swan opponents.

Residents on shore with binoculars get furious when they see jet skiers go straight from their docks toward the swans to have their version of fun. In return, innocent jet skiers get equally furious when they can’t even leave from or return to their docks because Papa Swan lurks and hisses. Employing questionable logic, some jet skiers have decided that the only way to get safely away from their docks is to have someone first harass the swans as a decoy. Last summer was a particularly bad season, which prompted the survey.

But almost all residents are in agreement that the swans are not the bad guys. If left alone (no charging them, circling them, taunting them), they might not see jet skis as a threat. The same applies to feeding them, a bad idea in that they are then encouraged to approach boats, some of which may not be so friendly. Admiring them from afar is good policy, but one which isn’t always communicated, especially to visitors.



To be sure, the DNR takes a dim view of the harassment of our swans, even though they are no longer federally protected (they make Bills Lake their home and therefore don’t cross state lines). “We prosecute on the basis of verbal complaint,” says conservation officer Mike Wells.

However, Wells stresses that he needs specifics, and that a picture is worth a thousand words. He advises people to get out the video camera, preferably one with a zoom lens, if they witness swan harassment. A videotape is the kind of evidence that prompts a prosecutor to pursue a complaint.

Keeping a pair of binoculars handy is another good idea. What you are looking for is the Motor Craft (MC) number on the side of the offending watercraft. A description – the more detailed the better – of the watercraft and of the driver is also very helpful. “Keeping pen and paper nearby to write stuff down is very important,” says Wells. Even better is the use of a still camera with a telephoto lenses which can record the appearance of the driver, the jet ski, and perhaps even the MC number.

Once you have accumulated evidence, a call to Mike or Ryan Rademacher is the next step. They can be reached at the RAP (Report All Poaching) hotline which is 1 800 292-7800. According to Wells, this phone line, which is used to receive a variety of complaints, is the most timely means to contact the two conservation officers who are assigned to this area. Armed with sufficient information, Wells and Rademacher will, at the least, pay the harassers a visit. The officers can also be reached via Newaygo County Central Dispatch at 231 689-5288.

If you feel compelled to personally confront harassers, don’t do it by yourself. Not only are some of them experts at hurling jet skis at swans but also at hurling insults at what they perceive to be adult authority. If the harassers are young people, they may have parents who will interpret any verbal rebuke of their little darlings as simply adults picking on kids.

But taking a boat out to get a better look (preferably with a camera or binoculars plus pad and pen) might be a good idea. It could send a message.

# Bills Lake and Mexico City

*The following column appeared in a May 2001 issue of Newaygo County TODAY, a newspaper that ceased publication in May 2003. It has been reprinted here with permission of the author.*

No, this isn't a piece about migrant workers coming to Newaygo County. Instead, it is about a portion of Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine* wherein Colonel Freeleigh, an elderly, frail gentleman who is confined to both his nursing home and the bed within it, adopts an unusual vehicle to keep his "little gray toad of a heart" going. Since Mexico City was a favorite place in his life and since the story takes place before the advent of television and videotape, he makes long, expensive phone calls to a friend who still lives there. He asks his friend to merely place the phone on the window ledge so that the colonel can listen to the sounds coming from the plaza. He wants to hear common, daily, ordinary moments from a particular location where he had spent countless wonderful hours in his youth. He thinks: "When you are away from a [place], it becomes fantasy.....It is good to hear the sounds, and know that Mexico City is still there and the people moving and living...."

As a high school English teacher in Detroit who was very aware that the minds of most of my students were "out the window" (somewhere beyond the confines of the walls of my classroom), I often tried to use this vignette as a springboard to tap into their fantasies. Where, I used to ask them, would you make the phone call if you were in Colonel Freeleigh's situation? If you were bedridden and elderly and had no prospect of ever

traveling again, from where would you want to hear the sounds of a cherished place?

Some students chose places that they wish they had visited but never had the chance. It was a kind of "Things I Wish I Could Do Before I Die" response. But not surprisingly, most kids, like Colonel Freeleigh, went back to the past. Some described school dances. Some portrayed slumber parties. Some remembered the sounds of the playground. And many remembered summer camp, not only for the sounds of the kids laughing and playing, but for the sounds of nature.

Of course, I was doing the assignment for me, not just for them. Because for me, the place where I would place the phone was invariably Bills Lake in Newaygo County. This is the place where my grandfather had built a summer cottage on Vanderstel Point sometime in the 1930s. This is where I first came in June, 1945 when I was but three months old. This is where I spent virtually all summer between 1945 and 1958.

A phone on the ledge of the cottage would have captured for me the sounds of waves lapping on shore, the quacking of the ducks, the murmur of fishermen late at night, and the rustle of the wind through the trees. I would close my eyes and see Deer Point, blood-red sunrises, and fishing boats dotting the landscape. It was serene and heavenly and more importantly, a place I couldn't immediately get to because I was stuck in a high school classroom in the Big City, just as my students were.....and just as Chris Taylor, who lives in Los Angeles, was.

In slightly altered form, the Col. Freeleigh-thing happened this past summer to her. Having spent several summers at Bills Lake in the late '50s and undoubtedly enraptured with the same fond memories, she yielded to an impulse and made a wacky request to the long distance operator, pleading: "Let me talk to someone who lives on Bills Lake." The operator put her in touch with Rev. Jerry Sewell of Bills Lake Baptist Church who in turn put her in contact with my neighbor, Pat Ericksen. After figuring out what Chris really needed, Pat told her: "I know just who you should talk to," and gave me, hours later, her phone number.

Although Chris is young and effervescent, I immediately recognized a Col. Freeleigh opportunity. I called her back on a perfect summer's evening in July,

introduced myself, and then began my conversation with the words: "Let me make your day."

I then proceeded to describe what I was surveying from my deck overlooking the lake. I was very specific, in part, to paint the picture and in part to reassure her that this was not a crank phone call. I described the play of the sunset on Deer Point, the fact that Tannewitz's Barn was still there, how the area once known as Swift's Landing had changed, and the scene where they were taking down the flag at that very moment at VFW Camp Trotter. I included a description of the "diamonds" of sunshine on the water, the smell of campfires, the sounds of laughter that carry so far across a lake, and the putter of pontoon boats as they made their ritual circle in the evening.

Chris was beside herself with excitement. Like the Col. Freeleigh episode, the vehicle to get her here was the phone but the more important elements were her memory coupled with her imagination. She and her husband Randy, an assistant football coach at UCLA who played for both former Detroit Lion head coach Gary Mohler and present University of Michigan head coach Lloyd Carr when all of them were at the University of Illinois, slightly altered a family vacation in Muskegon to spend a classically beautiful July afternoon with us at the lake. It was a sensory-filled time, one of

which she couldn't stop gushing. There is little doubt that she spent a winter in Los Angeles often thinking about an afternoon last summer in Newaygo County.

The point of all of this is not to merely evoke your own personal images, although such an endeavor might serve to create for you a relaxing period of meditation or an interesting topic for Saturday night party conversation.

**A phone on the ledge of the cottage would have captured for me the sounds of waves lapping on shore, the quacking of the ducks, the murmur of fishermen late at night, and the rustle of the wind through the trees. I would close my eyes and see Deer Point, blood-red sunrises, and fishing boats dotting the landscape. It was serene and heavenly and more importantly, a place I couldn't immediately get to because I was stuck in a high school classroom in the Big City,**

Instead, perhaps we should recognize that "Mexico City," for some people, is our own backyard and that what we have in the palms of our hands is heaven on earth for some people. We become so complacent about what we have, so preoccupied with busyness, or so distracted with petty worry that we don't see the beauty of the forest surrounding us but instead dwell too much on the trees that we think need to be cut down.

In contrast, Col Freeleigh took "the long view," both literally and figuratively. Most importantly, he did it because he didn't have much time left. After all, the story ends when Col Freeleigh dies while listening to the sounds of Mexico City and someone on the other end takes the phone off the ledge and hangs it up.

If the definition of good health is doing the right things *before* we actually get sick, we would do well to employ the Colonel's vehicle long before the "dead line."

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# Springtime at Bills Lake

*The following consists of messages to be found at the beginnings of past Memorial Day newsletters. They celebrate the end of winter and welcome the prospect of another blissful summer at Bills Lake.*

## The Swallows of Summer

It was Don Quixote de la Mancha who said, "One swallow does not make a summer."

But indeed it is safe to say that more than one swallow has returned to Capistrano by now. It's been awhile since any of us shoveled snow, chipped ice, or put on a ski jacket. We are no longer tracking in so much mud or wet stuff. After an interminable winter, (especially the months of March and April), perhaps summer is here after all.

Just as the park offers an oasis for those who live in the elbow-to-elbow housing of the city, so does the lake represent some of the best of what we endured a long winter to get to. Those of us who live on Bills Lake live on the perimeter of a water park. In that sound carries so well over water, we are faced with some of the same potential irritations as our city cousins who happen to live across the street from a park. We hope that residents and their guests keep this in mind.

Certainly, most of the sounds of summer on Bills Lakes are pleasant ones. It's about the chopping of wood and the murmur of campfire talk, children's gleeful shouts and squeals, the excited cheering of Fourth of July races, and the putter of pontoon boats making their ritual trips around the perimeter after dinner

At the beginning of yet another well-deserved warm season, we are grateful that more than one swallow of summer has already returned. We fully expect that in the next several months, we will swallow many more.

## God's blessings are everywhere but ....

Some believe that the quiet of a cold snowy landscape puts one in touch with the cosmos. According to these people, frigid weather invigorates. A blast of brisk makes you feel fresh and young. It gives you a combination of peaceful reflection and childlike play. As you traverse the scene during the day, your cross-country skis literally take the season in stride, gliding through it. The long dark nights give a sense of being in touch with the creator. It is a time for sharpening the axe of your soul.

However, there are others who believe that although God's blessings are everywhere, they prefer the ones in Hawaii. Or Florida. Or Arizona. Or Texas. Or Bills Lake in the summertime.

These are the folks who would rather sweat than shiver. They would rather mow the lawn than shovel the driveway. And having been trapped indoors all winter long, they refuse to be trapped indoors during the summer. Instead, when it gets sufficiently warm, they'll throw open windows, turn on the ceiling fans, and go jump in the lake if they get too hot.

Therefore the brisk months of winter have only one real purpose: to deprive them of the pleasures afforded by warm temperatures to the point where they certainly won't take warm weather days for granted once they at long last arrive.

There are those who spend those interminable winter months dreaming of the days when they can water the flowers, dressed in shorts and t-shirt. They long for porches and grills, for boat rides and campfires, for evenings out on the deck seated in a patio chair.

They want to be able to swim in the lake, not walk on top of it. They want to be able to sit in a glider swing and watch the water skiers, not the snowmobilers, zip by. They're into soft nights spent on the end of the dock. They're into picnic tables and gazebos and hammocks. They want to be able to put on a swimsuit first thing in the morning and not have to take it off until they go to bed.

At long last, those days are here.

# Focus on Fish

## What Jeff Alexander's book can teach us about Bills Lake

Although Bills Lake is located in the Rogue River watershed (not part of the Muskegon River watershed as some believe), there is much to learn from Jeff Alexander's book published in 2006. At the least, it is fascinating to note his numerous references to the familiar 14 mile stretch of the river from Croton Dam to Newaygo. Indeed, the cover of the book contains a splendid overhead photo of the dam looking upriver into Croton Pond and the causeway. A world-class fishery, one which has been visited by such celebrities as Tom Brokaw and Jack Nicholas, is in our neighborhood.

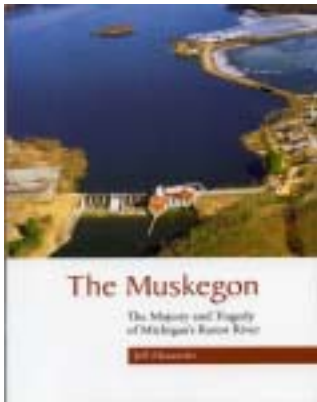
- To be sure, our lake was never used as a conveyor belt to float thousands of logs to saw mills in Muskegon — although boat traffic on holiday weekends sometimes makes Bills Lake look like a clogged river, one that could be walked across.
- Logs weren't rolled down the hills of the Blackhawk, Cherokee, and Dakota zones, thus scouring the bottom and destroying incubating fish beds — although the wakes of jet skis and high speed power boats dislodge some of our fish beds.
- We haven't dredged our lake in order to deepen it — although the Deer Point Lane and 92<sup>nd</sup> St. channels could be viewed as small versions of man's attempt to alter the face of the lake.
- We haven't raised the water temperature of Bills Lake by stripping the shoreline of the canopy of pine trees that kept the Muskegon River cool or by building dams that trap and then warm water that eventually gets released back into the stream — although global warming may be impacting Bills Lake, if anecdotal evidence is to be believed.
- We haven't dumped waste directly into the lake, i.e. raw sewage, leaves, or campfire ashes, although more of this has been accidentally blown into the lake in the fall than we realize. Also, some may argue (especially those who pick it up), that the debris that rains down on the lake from the Fourth of July fireworks is, to a degree, "dumping waste." Regardless, with only these few notable exceptions, we don't egregiously litter into the lake. Moreover, we are fortunate to have a few residents who have taken it upon themselves to assist Mother Nature with the cleanup. One longtime resident has not only picked up all the nonbiodegradable trash out of the lake that he can find over the past 40 years but has even counted the stuff in order to keep track of the volume and trends. He reports that there has been a continuous decrease in the numbers in recent years which is an encouraging sign but is, by no means, an indication that the problem has been licked.

There is little doubt that some of our residents have been guilty — back in the old days — of promoting the erosion of soil into the lake by building new homes and lakeside sheds too close to the water's edge, at least until setback and silt fence requirements were put in place. Most residents recognize that outdated and poorly maintained septic systems have leaked a certain amount sewage into our lake over the years. Increased housing development has had an inevitable impact leading to, among other things, increased runoff as rainwater picks up pollutants (grit from the shingles, fertilizer from the ground, and motor oil from the driveway, for instance) and transports them into Bills Lake. And we have recently experienced the invasion of an exotic species (a species not native to our region) in the form of zebra mussels which have filtered the water and thereby increased light penetration causing a proliferation of aquatic plants that can change species dominance and alter the ecosystem.

But when Mr. Alexander presents detailed chapters about the effects of logging, dams, pollution (from factories, farmland, and residential development), invasive species (zebra mussels), and the "mining" of water for profit (the Nestle-Perrier issue in Mecosta County), his primary focus with regard to evaluating the water quality of the Muskegon River doesn't involve Secchi Disk readings, phosphorous testing, or chlorophyll quantities. He doesn't concern himself much with scientific designations such as oligotrophic, mesotrophic, or eutrophic.

Instead, virtually everything Alexander discusses is viewed through the lens of its impact on fish. He writes at length about the extermination of native species such as Arctic grayling and the almost-extermination of sturgeon. He measures the impact of, say, factory dumping of waste or dumping of raw municipal sewage into the Muskegon River in terms of what it has done to salmon and steelhead fisheries. He considers how the increased temperature of the water has impacted trout which need colder temperatures to survive and reproduce. In summary, his definition of a healthy river is one which supports an abundant fish population.

This leads us to consider what changes in fishing on Bills Lake tell about the health of our water. For instance, if you look on our Web site (“Fishing on Bills Lake” page), you will see that the DNR stopped stocking our lake with brook trout back in 1984 and went to walleye from then on. Why? “We checked the files and found the reason for the switch from trout to walleye. . . northern



pike!”, said Lynne Thomas of the DNR.

“The lake actually has an interesting stocking history of switching back and forth from walleye to rainbows and back to walleye,” she continues. “Most of the stocking, however was rainbow trout. But many times, the stocking was discontinued because of poor trout survival. In the mid 70s, residents thought that the department had not been stocking trout because they hadn’t been catching any. But they had been catching northern pike that ‘rivaled the size of muskies’.



**These walleye, measuring 25 and 21 inches, were pulled out of Bills Lake two years ago.**

“Trout stocking was discontinued after a few years of no results and then started again from 1981 to 1984. It was then discontinued again because of the ‘presence and abundance of northern pike,’ says Thomas. “Walleye stocking was initiated in 1984 in order to provide another fishing opportunity since trout were not able survive with the existing pike population. It appears that walleye

appear to be our best option for this lake, since it historically has enough spikes in the pike population to destroy the trout fishery after a few years. Walleye seem to be proving to be a more stable fishery for this lake.”

One fisherman describes current Bills Lake fishing as being good but not as excellent as was portrayed in the early 1900s photos that used to be displayed on the wall of Swift’s Resort 40 years ago. A fair amount of 15-18” large and small mouth bass can still be caught. So can walleye (see photos), although he blames the ubiquitous northern pike for walleye fishing not being even better. Some nice “messes” of bluegills, sunfish, rock bass and perch have been caught in recent years. It would seem, therefore, that according to some folks, fishing on Bills Lake is not particularly worse than the good ‘ol days, but simply different.

But there are those who would disagree with that assessment. One long-time resident says that it is worse and blames it on increased boat traffic. “The lake isn’t able to settle down,” he says. Indeed, a standard joke among fishermen over recent years is that the only good fishing on Bills Lake during the summer months occurs on Wednesdays and Thursdays, the time it takes for the lake to recover from the effects of the hotrodders and yahoos of the previous weekend before the next weekend’s onslaught.

Specifically, some fishermen lament the decline in perch and bluegill as contrasted to previous decades. They would like to see steps taken such as placing buoy markers over potential bluegill bedding areas in the spring, implementing a catch and release policy for these species for a year or two, and temporarily reducing the size of pike that can be taken. Bottom line: things are not as good as they used to be.

Ralph Bednarz, the DEQ official who trains lake testers as part of the Coperative Lakes Monitoring Program, is fond of saying that “lake quality is a moving target.” Indeed, as with any living organism, things change. More to the point, what fishermen consider to be good lake water (a few living organisms) is not necessarily what swimmers might consider to be good lake water (fewer lake organisms, more like a swimming pool).

Thus, given the relativity of the issue, the best answer to the question: how good is the water in Bills Lake might be “Better than some, worse than others (see chart of comparable Seechi Disk readings on the. Indeed, there are those who will endlessly parrot: “It (fishing, water clarity, etc) ain’t what it used to be.” But then, even though the lake isn’t what it used to be, neither are we.