

Drought

The 1930s changed the face of many area lakes, shrinking them into ponds almost unrecognizable by lakeshore owners who settled Big Sugarbush beginning mostly in the late 1960s. In Big Sugarbush, the channel of water between the big island and shoreline of the Second Subdivision, roughly the southeast end of the lake, did not exist. Loggers sometimes crossed this dry channel to harvest wood on the area now known as the island. This separated Big Sugarbush into two parts, the smaller, where the Public Access now lies, forming a separate lake. Local residents called this little lake McGee Lake, named after the owner of a log cabin by the shore.

Access to Big Sugarbush then might be made through McGee Lake, but a thin strip of land from the mainland to the island blocked fisherman, according to George. He said the Latvola brothers, one of many Finnish immigrant families which settled the area early in the century, dug and blasted a channel, carving the peninsula into an island.

George added that at that time Big Sugarbush was home for huge fish. "We never kept a bass that was under four pounds." But the lake had few walleye until around 1938, when George and the Latvolas stocked it with walleyes from a hatchery.

In 1941, George remembered, it started to rain, and rain, throughout the 40s, and McGee lake joined Big Sugarbush to reach the familiar shape we know it today. Because the lake apparently has no inlet or outlet, it is thought to be spring fed, and finds its level primarily based on rainfall and evaporation. In summer 1995 it stood at its highest level in at least 20 years.

Resorts

Two resorts have welcomed anglers and tourists to the lake over the years. The first, Fish Bowl Resort, was established at the southeast end. Reuben Brewer of Minneapolis, a bee inspector, operated the resort, offering the only easy direct access to Big Sugarbush during the drought. George said the resort owner tried to fence off the small opening through McGee Lake dug by the Latvalas, but the brothers persistently removed the fence until the resort gave up. Reuben Brewer sold the property to Kermit and Joy Jordet in 1965, who operated it as a resort until 1969, when they closed the business and removed the cabins.

A second resort, Big Sugarbush Resort, was established on old McGee Lake by Fren and Ima Dresback, a mother and daughter, who sold it to Ted and Gwen Dubois in 1970. That resort was closed in 1986, and its property sold as lots in Tageto Subdivision. The curious name of the lake's newest subdivision is based on the first two letters of the names of the three Dubois children, Tad, Gena and Tom.

Most of the rest of the lakefront property was owned by the Schmidt family, according to George. The family offered to sell to George's father in 1965, \$10 an acre, \$7,000 total. "I told Dad, who would ever want to buy anything out here?"

Hilding Hagen, a Moorhead insurance salesman, thought someone might, and bought the property the next year. First to be developed was the southwest shore, the First Subdivision, and in the early 1970s, the Second Subdivision was developed.

More recently, 34 lakeshore owners gathered donations to buy the 17.8-acre island property (government lot 32/84; officially still a peninsula), and in 1994 it was given to the [Minnesota Department of Natural Resources](#) to manage as a wildlife sanctuary.

Big Sugarbush lake offers fishermen walleyes, northern pike, bullheads, yellow perch, bass and sunfish. Some record catches include: 17 lb. 2 oz. northern, 1972; 10 lb. 4 oz. walleye, 1973; 1 lb. 6 oz. sunfish, 1972; 5 lb. 8 oz. bass, 1974. A test conducted by the Limnological Research Center of the University of Minnesota in 1977 indicated that Sugarbush was the third clearest lake in the test, at the same level of clarity as nearby Bad Medicine. Subsequent tests have continued to rate Big Sugarbush as one of Minnesota's clearest.