

## *Lumber*

Lumber was the big industry in the sparsely settled Sugarbush Township from about 1915 until 1936, when a great fire burned from White Earth Village down and through the area. Much of the area timber was destroyed, although according to George Rousu, a lifelong area resident who remembers the fire, the flames did not reach the lake shore area itself. By that time, however, the huge ancient pine forests which had covered most of Sugarbush Township were gone to the sawmills. George said most of the pine was gone from the lakeshore by the early 1930s, although few loggers reached the island, so some stands of pine still survive there.

Big Sugarbush Lake itself supported a sawmill, build in the mid-1920s at the the south end of the lake. The pond just south of the lake was named, appropriately, Mill Lake, or less politely, Dead Man's Lake. Legend has it the lake's nickname dates from the old mill days. "One of the fellows who was working in the mill, he was doing some repair on the roof," said George. "And somehow or another it caved in. He fell in on top of the saw. And they threw his legs in the lake."

Bill Cogger, who worked at the mill in 1926, said the Felix Nevala Sawmill ran at Sugarbush until 1931, when the buildings were torn down and the operation was moved farther north to the [Strawberry Lake](#) area. The sawmill workers lived in huts around the mill---the first permanent residents on Big Sugarbush Lake. Today nothing is left of the operation except a clearing in the woods.

Becker County was named in 1858, although it was not organized and settled until 13 years later. A Minnesota lawyer, railroad land commissioner, and St. Paul mayor lent his name to the then obscure, unexplored land in northwestern Minnesota. [George Loomis Becker](#) was so honored, as described in the Becker County *Record* centennial edition of 1971:

It was assumed that the state would be entitled to three representatives, but it was learned after the election that it could send only two. Officials decided that the fair way to decide which two men would go to Washington as congressmen would be to draw lots, and the loser (or "odd man") would be the one to stay in Minnesota.

Becker lost, but "in order to honor him in some way, authorities promised him that they would name the next county after him." Becker visited "his" county once, in 1896.

## *Maple and Rice*

Sugarbush was one of the later townships to petition for organization, on May 7, 1919. Its name and the lake name come from the [Ojibway](#). It of course refers to the [maple syrup industry](#) around the lake and in the area, still a March and April tradition. According to George, until the 1930s, Indians every spring made camp by the lake to tap trees. The 40 gallons or so of sap needed to make one gallon of syrup was boiled down over campfires at the camps. Walking through the woods around the lake today, you can still see the bulges around old maple trunks, evidence of many taps, and rusty pails around the ground, used to catch the sap.

Most lake [wild rice](#) today is gathered in Minnesota by Indians, but permits can be issued to other residents. The rice is found along marshy shorelines, and can be seen in August on the north and south ends of Big Sugarbush, depending on the water level. George said during the dry years, the 1930s, the entire northwest end of the lake was carpeted in wild rice.

Wild rice gatherers in canoes or similar watercraft hang the rice heads over the boat and knock the seeds into the bottom. Traditionally the rice is then dried in the sun, roasted or "parched," and threshed, leaving about one pound of wild rice for every two pounds gathered. Wild rice must be harvested quickly when ripe before a strong wind knocks the rice into the water.