

Weise

THIS I REMEMBER: Howard Weise

by Kenzie Phelps

There are not many lakes in Central Minnesota with a mile of mostly undeveloped shoreline owned by one person. But that is part of Howard Weise's story and legacy. Howard has only owned this property since 1987, which at 24 years seems like a short time to own lake property compared to some other people who have been in **This We Remember**. Howard's property is the north end and half of the west side of Big Elk Lake.

Originally there were four land grants involved in Howard's property. He is not sure who put them together, or when, but the University of Minnesota held one of the land grants. The shoreline of the property includes the inlets of the Elk River and Lillie Creek. July 1987 is when the deal came together for Howard, resulting in his ownership of 424 acres and about a mile of shore line on Big Elk Lake.

John Morehouse had owned the land prior to Howard, which was the location of his turkey egg business. After his egg business hit a snag the land eventually ended up with Farm Credit, who held the property for two and a half years. Howard and two other parties put in bids for the property, and after some legal complications, including a moratorium, Howard took possession a year and a half later. Howard had been teaching industrial arts at St Cloud State University at the time. He remembers the water being so "nice." His wife wanted a bigger home, his girls wanted a place for their activities, including swimming and tennis [the property came with a tennis court]. Howard grew up on a farm and taught industrial arts: owning and living on another farm was just the right thing for him and his family.

After leaving SCSU and coming to the farm, he described it as "living out his dream." For over a year he researched what his new property might be good for, involving various agencies doing assessments and giving him recommendations. All three recommendations came back with virtually the same ideas: 1] golf course; 2] horse farm; 3] hunting preserve.

Howard chose the third option and developed a hunting preserve, raising about 4000 pheasants a year. For four years he managed the hunting preserve, providing local hunting experiences for his customers. His pheasants, however, were a little different than wild birds: his roosters weighed 4 - 4.5 pounds, about double the weight of a wild rooster. "I was over feeding them!"

he laughed as he told this story. “They were big birds.” Thinking back on that experience, he added: “That was the joy: taking hunters out and seeing the birds fly out over the grasses and fields.”

When Howard finally bought the farm in 1987 it came with quite an interesting array of structures, charm and characteristics: 30 outbuildings, including structures for the previous turkey operation, 7 houses [6 rentals, two of which were in poor condition], approximately 1 mile of undeveloped shoreline, and 26 Indian mounds along the upper bluff and down onto the low land. Of the Indian mounds, one was the burial site of an Ojibway Chief, others were allegedly 1000 years old, mostly from unidentified tribes. Howard said that while he owns the land, the Native American tribes own any artifacts from the sites.

Howard has a great deal of knowledge about Big Elk Lake, its tributaries and the ecology of the area. One of many examples, he pointed out that the wetlands surrounding Lillie Creek between Rush and Big Elk Lake were once a wild rice lake, speculating as well that there were other areas close by that qualified as wild rice lakes. The soil beneath the water, according to Howard, is perfect for wild rice.

He admitted to only being “on the lake” three times in the last 25 years, the last time about 2 months ago when Ken Gosset took him fishing. Being **in** the lake was a different matter. Howard swam often in Big Elk after working all day. He could walk out about 50 feet and the water would still be only up to his waste. One of Howard's many observations is the large amount of sand accumulating on the north shore of the lake. Howard also observed how the flow of the Elk River through the lake changed its path from straight across from inlet to outlet, to something more parallel to his shoreline meeting up with the Lillie Creek outflow. Recently he noticed that somebody, or several people, were trying to make their own fish habitat at the inlet of Lillie Creek by modifying the bank and substructures.

Another more recent piece of history is associated with the property. Dr. Claude Lewis, originally from Sauk Centre, owned the farm, and the cabins, in the early 20's until about 1950. Claude's younger brother, Sinclair, did not follow his father's wishes to become a doctor, was somewhat estranged from his father and traveled often to New York and Europe. When Sinclair returned home to Sauk Centre he could stay only a short while before his relationship with his father became intolerable. Sinclair Lewis then ended up in one of his brother's cabins along the shore of Big Elk Lake to write.

When asked about his fondest memory of living on the lake, he gave me a puzzling look and said he would have to show me. I followed as he weaved his way through the hallway and into the kitchen, through the sliding door to his deck. “There. That is my fondest memory,” he said as we looked out through the trees and over the grasses and across the lake. Indeed, something very inspiring, and something to be fond of.

Although he has been on the lake only 25 years, he was quick to identify the biggest change he has seen since coming to the lake in 1987: “Water.....poison water. The green slime wasn't here then. If it had been I would never have bought the land.” He added that the changes that have resulted in the heavy green and blue green algae have been slow and incremental, not quick changes. If he had one wish for the lakes: Clean water. “We're killing ourselves on land, in the air and in the water because we are so damned greedy.”

Howard realizes that owning this property with a mile of shoreline comes with responsibility and stewardship. Now living alone, he has been more visionary about his property, thinking it would make an interesting park of some sort. As we talked, he pictured various scenarios for a park, clearly something he has been thinking about for quite some time.

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