

## The Big Dock: Swimsuits for rent

Written By: Lynn Hummel, columnist | Jun 27th 2019



There has always been a 'big dock' on Little Detroit Lake at the south end of Washington Avenue, though it has gone through several name and ownership changes since the days when it was used as a steam boat landing. (Photo courtesy of Becker County Museum)

From the beginning, there was a big dock on Detroit Lake. It's still there, on the south end of Washington Avenue.

On May 12, 1911, the Detroit Record recorded that "F. M. Weiss has decided to operate a boat livery in connection with the Park Hotel which his father has opened on the lake shore at the foot of Washington Avenue. Mr. Weiss has purchased an outfit consisting of nine launches and fifteen row boats and will also keep bait and fishing tackle in abundance at all times. A small stock of confectionery and tobacco will be kept at the hotel and fishermen and campers will be catered to in an up-to-date manner... His dock, which is now under construction, will be 16 x 100, a large portion of it undercover."

Weiss named his new business The Detroit Lakes Boat Livery. Over the ensuing 108 years it has been known as the Big Dock, Clem's Marina, Mike's Marina and J & K Marina.

Weiss ran the business for 44 years, adding water toys for children like a tilt-a-whirl, trapeze swings, teeter-totter and a rolling log. He also built a three story tall "toboggan slide" for carts on wheels (with no side rails, but nobody ever fell off and was injured). He developed a swimming beach and provided rental swimsuits (wool of course) because very few people had their own personal swimsuits at that time. The swimsuits were laundered daily by Weiss' daughter, Lois Weiss (later Floan).

Other public docks existed before 1911, but none lasted. There was, for example, a Lakeside Dock, but in 1923 Weiss "consolidated" with Lakeside and only Weiss' Detroit Lakes Boat Livery survived.

High powered speedboat rides were available at the Livery and Weiss also operated an excursion boat called the Miss Detroit.

Weiss purchased the Lakeside Lodge in 1928 and the Lodge and Livery worked hand in hand.

There is a security risk in owning expensive marina equipment and storing boats for private owners. For this reason, Weiss had a watchman who slept in the boathouse overnight. In June of 1940, the Detroit Lakes Tribune reported that Adolph Haefner, the overnight watchman, was awakened at 2:30 a.m. by three thieves who entered the boathouse and stole an outboard motor. Haefner was unable to stop them, but he reported that one was wearing a green sweater and "had a German haircut." The motor was later found abandoned.

In the mid 1930's, a red headed 10 year old kid was seen hanging around the dock almost daily. Clem TeVogt came and fished through the boards. When he got to be a teenager he got a part time job there tying up wooden rowboats behind power launches. There were very few outboards at that time. As he got older, he pestered Weiss about buying the dock. Weiss liked the kid and told him that when he got ready to sell, he'd call him.

Clem grew up and when he was in his early 20's, working in a dime store on Washington Avenue, Fred Weiss called and said he'd decided to sell. Clem scrambled and shuffled his finances, and in October 1945, after Weiss had operated the dock for 34 years, Clem and a partner, Charles Goss, bought the business. Fred Weiss and his wife continued to operate the Lakeside Lodge across the street, West Lake Drive.

TeVogt and Goss launched their dock business in the spring of 1946. After one year, TeVogt bought Goss' interest in the business, which consisted of the pier, six speedboats and 18 rowboats and became the sole owner of Clem's Dock, sometimes called The Big Dock.

Clem closed the swimming beach and the city of Detroit Lakes established a city swimming beach just south of the pavilion with swings, slide, a teeter totter and a kiddies log donated by Fred Weiss at the Lakeside Lodge.

At that time, most people didn't own boats. They couldn't afford them. It was cheaper to rent than to own. Clem soon had seven inboard speed boats with a driver for each and was promoting speed boat rides on his loudspeaker system for 50 cents. The rides were 3-4 miles long and the boats were running constantly. Folks would stroll along the street, stop at the tavern, dance at the pavilion for 10 cents, then go for a boat ride. After dark they were called "moonlight rides." They were so busy, many Saturday nights Clem never went to bed. About the time dawn rolled around on Sunday, he would bathe and shave in the lake and get ready for his fishing customers.

Until the condition of the boat declined, Clem and his wife had a floating supper club, the Aqua Belle, where set-ups and meals were catered by the Park Hotel were served.

The dock also had fishing boats for rent, mostly rowboats in the early years. When more affordable boats came on the market and people started buying their own and the business shifted from owning and renting slips to having them for owners who didn't have access to the lake and Clem's Dock became Clem's Marina.

For several years, Clem operated a 30 passenger excursion boat, the 32 foot long Miss Detroit for 90 minute cruises around the lake. When a cruise was scheduled, Clem would call the Long Bridge Resort and tell them how many customers were on board. By the time the Miss Detroit arrived, fresh baked pies and coffee would be waiting. People eventually referred to it as the "coffee boat."

TeVogt's family was also involved in support of the business. In addition to her role on the Aqua Belle, Clem's wife, Yvonne, made and delivered sandwiches to the speed boat drivers during the heavy Sunday rush of traffic. Son Mark worked on the dock during summers when he was a student. And daughter, Linda, who was a lifeguard at the city swimming beach, would join her dad for a snack together noons at the snack bar in the pavilion.

Just as Fred Weiss had done, Clem slept every night at the dock, guarding the boats there. But the practice ruined the family's social life in the summer, so eventually he hired somebody else to do the night watch.

The dock was a perfect place for spectators to station themselves to watch the 4th of July fireworks managed by the D.L. Jaycees in the 1950s. The most memorable of those displays was in the mid-50's, when there was a misfire on the Jaycees raft at the beginning of the display and the entire boatload of fireworks blew up in a few seconds. The trigger men survived by jumping into the lake, but nobody was hurt in the abbreviated display.

TeVogt sold the Dock in 1977, but after a few years, the buyers defaulted and he was forced to go back into business. But that was alright because he admitted that he had missed being there.

In the years he operated the business, Clem watched the city change, boating change, family recreation practice change and he even saw swimsuit fashions change. Gone were the wool suits, but not yet to arrive were bikinis. Clem once bragged in an interview that the dock provided prime girl watching for employees. "I've had guys practically pay me to work here." Even Clem's ownership of the dock property changed.

In the beginning, Clem owned the waterfront strip where the dock was located. But when the city developed the public beach west of Clem's property in the mid 1960's, it became necessary for Clem to deed his property to the city in exchange for a permanent lease for the property.

He stayed at it until 1985, when he sold it for good. All in all, he had operated the dock for over 35 years, his lifetime career on the edge of the lake.

Clem was called back three years later to be one of four captains of the Island Girl, a 40 ton cruiser measuring 65 feet long and 16 feet wide with room for up to 100 passengers. The boat was beautiful - decorated on the interior with mirrors and stainless steel and sailed from the Holiday Inn around Detroit daily from noon to 2 p.m. on a sightseeing cruise, at 4 p.m. on a cocktail cruise and between 6 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. on an all-you-can eat dinner cruise. Also, on Saturdays there was a midnight cruise.

In 1985 it was time for Clem to step aside. Fortunately, a buyer familiar with the dock stepped up. Mike Moher had grown up and gone to school in Fargo during the school year, but he had spent his summers in Detroit Lakes hanging around the dock and working at such places as the Kissin Cousin Candy Store, later purchased by the Zorbaz founders and reprogrammed as a pizza

restaurant, the Edgewater Beach restaurant and the Pavilion. When the dock became available, Moher, now an adult, was available and eager.

So Moher bought Clem's easement and business. For him it was a dream business. The business name was Mike's Marina. The first thing he did was to convert the wooden docks and boat slips to steel. He built a new "shack" as well. It was a lengthy process and he started early in his first year.

"Most people have no idea how much work is involved," said Moher.

The ice was off Little Detroit Lake, but still on Big Detroit when he started the conversion. Then the winds shifted and ice from Big Detroit blew over to the dock and wiped out the early installation, efforts and the process had to be started all over again from scratch.

While installing the new docks, Moher discovered all varieties of tools and hardware on the lake bottom. At one point he found a big maul that had the name Weiss etched in the metal. That instrument had to have been on the bottom of the lake for over 35 years, possibly as many as 74 years. Moher delivered that tool to Fred Floan, grandson of F.M. Weiss.

One regular visitor, several times a week, to Mike's Marina was none other than Clem TeVogt, the previous owner. Clem freely expressed his opinion on Moher's management of the business, not always agreeing on what Mike was doing.

Every year the city building inspector visited the dock at the beginning of the season to make sure that Moher's seasonal installation fit within the easement boundaries, both along the beach and into the lake.

It was still necessary during the Mike's Marina era to have an overnight security person bunking on the dock every night. In addition to the after-dark security needs, Moher came to the dock during storms to secure all boats to make sure none drifted away or banged into one another causing damage.

The business changed during the 10 years of Mike's Marina. Mike started out with six or seven fishing boats for rent. At the end, fishing had diminished and people had their own boats. Sail boats had essentially disappeared. Pontoons became larger, furnished for comfort and luxury and much more powerful. Inboard-outboard engines were almost totally replaced by huge outboards.

It was the era of the jet ski with all their thrills and problems. Life on the beach was quite unruly during those years, especially around the 4th of July.

All in all, operating the dock was like living an enjoyable boyhood dream. But the season was short, basically from June 15 through Aug. 15, and as a means of making a living, the business was marginal.

Then along came Buzz. Dave "Buzz" Rodseth grew up in Detroit Lakes then moved away. When he was six or seven years old, he and his pals hung around Clem's Dock eating ice cream and having fun. Rodseth moved away and had a motor works business in Spokane, Washington until 1995 when he decided to retire and move back to his hometown, Detroit Lakes, to show his wife Bernie where he grew up.

Then, in 1998, Rodseth purchased the dock from Mike Moher. He started his operation in 1999, but renamed it Clem's Dock because of the nostalgic pull of that historic name from his boyhood. He advertised "top of the line" rental equipment: fishing boats, pontoons, kayaks, paddleboats, canoes together with gas, bait, ice and snacks. He allowed kids to fish from the docks, offering a "catch and release" program so there were always plenty of fish available. People were encouraged to come and feed the fish as well.

Rodseth claimed in 2001 that the business was 125 years old. "It's the second oldest ongoing business in the county," he said, adding, "Actually, it's one of the oldest businesses in the State of Minnesota."

He was probably going back to the origin of the Lakeside Hotel, but that was before Fred Weiss put in his first dock in 1911.

The Rodseth era was short. He worked hard and the business was brisk, but in the fall of 2000, he was diagnosed with a heart problem, cardiomyopathy and told by doctors to get out of the business. His plans to enlarge the marina became impossible for him. But he had to operate the dock for one more season before a qualified buyer came along.

At the end of the 2001 season, J & K Marina, a well established boat dealer in Detroit Lakes, signed a purchase agreement with Rodseth and began dock operations in the 2002 season under the name J & K Marina.

J & K Marina was owned by Detroit Lakes natives Jason McPherson and Kevin Tinjum, who started operating a boat storage and dock lift removal service called J & K Shoreline Service during their summers off from college. When they graduated, the business evolved into a full-service marine shop. J & K Marine opened its doors on Highway 10 just west of Detroit Lakes on Wine Lake. Starting with just five employees and one office, J & K had established an outlet on the Cormorant Village and a large showroom in the original location and employed 50 people.

Although Jason McPherson has passed away, the business continues and has lengthened the dock season from Memorial Day to Labor Day to start on May 15 and end Sept. 15, added boat slips (now 92), replaced wooden docks with aluminum, added rental pontoons with 50 HP engines, added 50 HP waverunners and 150 HP ski boats, kayaks, canoes and paddle boats. All pontoons and rental boats are less than five years old.

Nobody sleeps on the dock anymore for security, because the dock is now equipped with a locked gate and security cameras. Mischief now is minimal.

Kevin Tinjum, speaking for J & K, remembers hanging around the dock as a kid and putting boats in the water in connection with a business operated by his parents. Like Mike Moher and Buzz Rodseth, he has nostalgic feelings about the dock and its history in Detroit Lakes and is proud to be associated with this historical business.

The marina is still in the same spot selected by Fred Weiss in 1911, solidified by Clem TeVogt from 1948 until 1985 and carried on, bigger and better, as an essential part of the community culture ever since.

*This is one of a series of articles about the culture and various features of Detroit Lake. Lynn Hummel is a retired Detroit Lakes attorney who pens the weekly "Pony Express" column for the Tribune's opinion page.*





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The Detroit Boat Livery was built in 1911 by Fred Weiss Jr. It included one big dock next to a private swimming beach and bathhouse. Weiss rented bathing suits (made of wool) and offered Red Cross swimming lessons. (Photo courtesy of Becker County Museum)

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