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COMMENTARY BY ELIZABETH DAHL

Ancient lake rediscovered in Duluth Heights offers glimpse of glacial past

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Several years ago, while researching the history of an area of Duluth Heights, I discovered a gem of information in a booklet, "History of Duluth Heights," by John Fritzen. He was 4 years old when his family moved to the neighborhood in 1901. He wrote: "Old timers described the level section of the Heights as a small grassy lake, back in the wilderness days and prior to development." The lake became a swamp, and after being drained in 1891 by the Highland Improvement Company, in preparation for development, peat deposits were left behind. A considerable amount of crushed rock had to be used to stabilize the land for construction. A full-page ad in the Duluth Daily Tribune on Sept. 28, 1892, listed lots at \$250 to \$300. A rock crusher is still in the area. A couple of years ago, I interviewed elder residents of Duluth Heights who said their families had been told by early settlers that the old lake extended from behind Orange Street to Locust Avenue or Mulberry Street and from near Arlington Avenue to near the old Lowell School. They further indicated that American Indians lived all around the lake and tapped the maple trees for sap to make sugar. They recalled that later families picked blueberries, gathered mushrooms, wild leeks, and 'shaggy mare,' a furry white plant some used for food. Some even remembered the fun of sliding down "Grasshopper Hill," from the top of Basswood Avenue. The hill was named for an Ojibwe family which lived there. The lake had two outlets, according to Fritzen, with "Brewery Creek flowing eastward, paralleling the present Central Entrance and emptying into Lake Superior near Sixth Avenue East; Buckingham Creek flows in a southerly direction, through the stone quarry, into the Twin Ponds on the Skyline Parkway and then down the west hillside to the St. Louis Bay. "There is plenty of evidence of the old lake bed," Fritzen wrote.

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"When my father built his store at the corner of Highland Avenue (now Basswood Avenue) and the Central Entrance, it was necessary to drive pilings in the peat and muck in order to obtain footings. There are numerous places nearby where the same condition existed. The building soon heaved and was torn down." "Old timers" told Fritzen that pickerel were caught in the lake and Brewery Creek was a good trout stream before drainage of the swamp. That an early Duluth lake became a swamp and left a peat deposit after drainage is intriguing. A peat deposit accumulates over thousands of years. So did this "small grassy lake" date from the post-glacial period when waters of Glacial Lake Duluth splashed into the area? I read the original survey maps and notes and talked with employees of the St. Louis County surveyor's office. They were unaware of the lake or of the peat deposit. So were members of the geology department at the University of Minnesota Duluth, water-quality people, and officials at Minnesota Sea Grant. All were interested, though, and perhaps efforts can be made to determine if the lake indeed was glacial. Northeastern Minnesota has been inhabited for at least 10,000 years, ever since the last glacial period. Early cultures and, later, American Indian Tribes lived in the area before the Dakota. The Ojibwe arrived in the mid-1700s. A number of old trails crossed the area of Duluth Heights where the lake had been, indicating the area may have been a center of early human activity. The location would have made it possible to view activity on Lake Superior. An Archaic spear point, dating to 4,000 B.C., was unearthed in 1997 by a Duluth Heights resident digging a garden on his property on Baylis Street above Central Entrance. Statewide, of more than 10,000 burial, effigy and other Indian mounds that were once present, fewer than 1,000 remain. It's important we know the history of where we live so we can help preserve what is left of our cultural resources, both for ourselves and the generations that follow. Our heritage is at stake.

ELIZABETH DAHL of Duluth has a background in archaeology/cultural resources and history research. She was manager of the Minnesota State Archaeologist's Office for about seven years, between 1987 and 1994, when the office moved from Duluth to St. Paul.