

# The *Magic* That Is *White Lake!*

By Deb Hays  
White Lake Association Board Member



Photo Credit: Deb Hays

## THE ORIGINS OF WHITE LAKE

Some 10,000 years ago, the massive glaciers formed our Great Lakes. And along with them, White Lake was born in the heart of Western Michigan. This lake is part of the White River Watershed, which begins in Newago County and runs through Oceana County and into Muskegon County. And there it enters White Lake and exits into Lake Michigan. White Lake covers 2,571 acres, is some 5 1/2 miles long, averages a mile in width, and has a mean depth of 23 feet and a maximum depth of 70 feet.



To the American Indians who first inhabited the area, the waterfront location, abundant forests, good climate and excellent fishing and hunting were ideal. The name “White Lake” was interpreted in the 1600s from the Indian name of “Wabish-Sippe,” meaning the river with white clay, which made the water look white and cloudy. Even today, mari-clay lies in the bed of the river and the lake. Over the years, the American tribes were followed by fur trappers, traders and then settlers.

Today, many years and many settlers later, the two quaint historic towns of Whitehall and Montague are nestled among the shoreline sand dunes of Lake Michigan and lie near the north end of White Lake at the mouth of the White River. The two towns were platted in the 1860s as more and more settlers were attracted to this beautiful area.

The White Lake communities enjoyed much prosperity from the abundant white pine forests during the lumbering hey-day in the mid-to-late 1800s, when the majority of giant white pines were felled to provide lumber to build other Lake Michigan communities. After the great Chicago fire of 1871, much of the wood used to rebuild that city was hauled across Lake Michigan by ship from White Lake’s 16 sawmills. It was said that at the height of the lumbering era, White Lake saw more lumber baron millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the U.S.

The lumbering era also was the impetus behind moving the original channel into Lake Michigan approximately one-half mile south to its

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Photo Credit: White Lake Chamber

“ It's the trifecta of enjoyment on the water ”

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current location. Lumber from the sawmills was rafted through the original, narrow channel between the two lakes before being loaded aboard ships. The local lumbermen asked for an alternative to this time-consuming process.

In 1866, an improvement program was funded by Congress, and by late 1868, the new channel was cut and revetments were in place on both sides. Piers extending out into Lake Michigan were gradually extended over the next few years.

In 1875, the lighthouse was built along the channel, and it was sold and converted into a local museum some 100 years later.

By the end of the 19th century, the white pine forests had nearly been depleted, and residents turned their efforts toward the coming industrial era and farming.

## INDUSTRY AND TOURISM BEGIN

Industry developed slowly in the twin cities of Whitehall and Montague. In 1865, the Eagle Tannery Works was opened in Whitehall. Then in 1868, a large iron foundry was opened in Montague to build steam marine engines and machinery for the many lumber mills.

At around this same time, the Goodrich Steamship Line brought Chicago-area families to White Lake to “camp” and enjoy the natural beauty of West Michigan. Residents took advantage of the arrival of these visitors to usher in the tourism business that still thrives today. Soon, resorts dotted the lakeshores, beaches and millponds. Visitors also used the Pere Marquette Line to reach White Lake by train to experience all that the area had to offer. Through the early 20th century, the shoreline resort area grew in popularity as thousands of Chicagoans and others spent their summers on White Lake.



Photo Credit: White Lake Chamber

Industry made a comeback following World War II. The tannery in Whitehall and the foundry in Montague were later followed by Misco (now Arconic), Hooker Chemical, DuPont and Union Carbide, among others.

It was largely the tannery and the chemical companies that were responsible for the resulting pollution, contaminated surface water and groundwater, wastewater and sewage on White Lake. In 1987, White Lake was declared an Area of Concern on the Great Lakes under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, and the first remedial action plan was completed.

There were restrictions on consumption of drinking water and on eating fish and wildlife. There was eutrophication, or an excessive richness of nutrients due primarily to the runoff from the area farmlands which caused a dense growth of plant life and death of aquatic life from lack of oxygen. Further, there was a decline in the flora and fauna found on the lake bottom, as well as a decline in the fish and wildlife populations.

A gargantuan effort by government agencies, local organizations and area residents to restore the lake back to its pristine past evolved over decades, and restriction by restriction went by the wayside.

The targets and measures approved in May 2009 for White Lake's eight Beneficial Use Impairments identified specific priority areas for estuation.

In 2011, restrictions on dredging activities were removed. The following year, the Beneficial

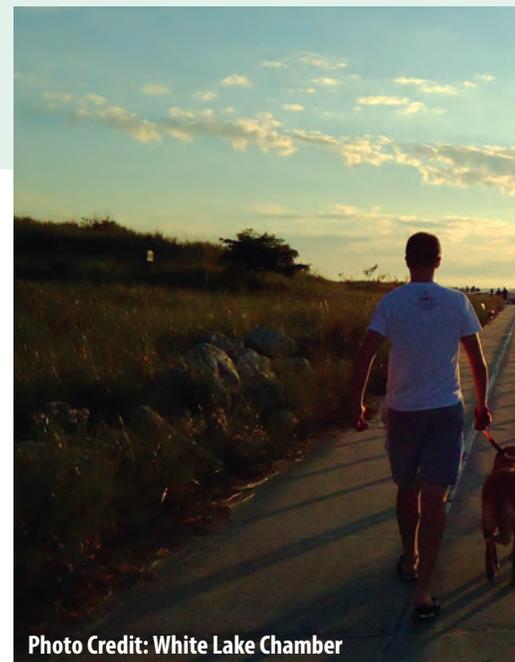


Photo Credit: White Lake Chamber

Use Impairment (BUI) for eutrophication, or undesirable algae, was removed. Restrictions on fish and wildlife consumption were done away with in 2013, and the BUI on loss of fish and wildlife consumption followed a year later. The year 2014 saw the removal of the degradation of fish and wildlife populations; the removal of restrictions on drinking water consumption and taste or odor problems, and the removal of the degradation of aesthetics.

On October 30, 2014, the Environmental Protection Agency announced that the White Lake Area of Concern had been removed from the list of the bi-national list of toxic hotspots that were targeted for clean-up in the U.S.-Canada Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. The White Lake Area of Concern was the first U.S. site in the Lake Michigan basin to be delisted. Much celebration followed that historic announcement!

But just because the lake was declared delisted doesn't mean that it will be a "clean" lake forever. Efforts must continue to ensure a clean lake for today and for future generations.

The companies that caused most of the pollution issues were gone by this time. The area now has evolved to include a wide variety of smaller manufacturing and light industrial businesses that produce products ranging from weathervanes to plastic plant tags.



Photo Credit: White Lake Chamber



The resorts and recreational businesses continue to draw visitors to this vacation destination. But the small town charm, quaint streets and friendly residents remain unchanged. And that is the magic that is White Lake.

For many visitors, their first encounter with White Lake is by boat. Entering the deep channel to White Lake from Lake Michigan, boaters are greeted by the 144-year-old White River Light Station and Museum. As the channel opens into White Lake, the scenery is eye-opening! The tree-lined landscape is dotted with charming cottages and an historic family resort. A bit further up the lake stands the century-old White Lake Yacht Club, a landmark and second home to generations of area

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Photo Credit: White Lake Chamber



Folks can also canoe, dinghy or fish up the 24-mile-long White River, boat or fish on White Lake or, weather permitting, do the same on Lake Michigan. It's the trifecta of enjoyment on the water!

A number of marinas hug the shoreline, offering a variety of amenities to slip holders and transients alike. The marinas range from small, family owned docks to large, bustling facilities to the dockaminiums located near the mouth of the White River. Nearby parks welcome families and boaters as they relax, picnic, enjoy playgrounds and attend frequent community events.

It's an easy stroll to either Whitehall or Montague, where visitors can enjoy the small-town, friendly atmosphere and browse the many charming gift shops and antique stores. Restaurants cater to all appetites, from breakfast to lunch in an outdoor garden or an authentic Dog 'n Suds drive-in to dinner overlooking the lake.



Photo Credit: White Lake Chamber

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families whose children learned to swim, sail and congregate there.

As you cruise along the nearly six-mile-long lake, you will see all types of homes, from quaint to majestic with boats swaying in front of many of them. The lake's size offers year-round recreational opportunities from kayaking to sailing to ice fishing. Another plus of White Lake is its sheltered shoreline that affords safe and enjoyable boating when "the big lake is acting up."

The White Lake Area Chamber of Commerce and Visitor's Bureau is located on the causeway between Whitehall and Montague and is housed in a renovated C&O train depot. Open year 'round, the Chamber's friendly and knowledgeable staff is happy to assist visitors with the variety of destinations and activities that await them in the White Lake area.

Bicyclers, walkers and hikers can enjoy the 32-mile rail trail that takes them on a journey of incredible scenery. This paved recreation trail is a favorite of locals and visitors and is totally handicapped accessible.

A variety of events are held each year in White Lake including arts and crafts fairs, fishing contests and festivals with food, music and entertainment. A 4th of July parade, the much-anticipated Cruz'n parade of 400-plus classic autos, antique wooden boat show, Taste of White Lake, local brewer's Fetch Fest and the White Lake Chamber Music Festival and a series of summer performances at the historic Howmet Theater all add to the summer fun. In Montague,

a weekly, free outdoor concert draws many to hear music of all types. A Saturday morning farmers market is a must to visit in the summer months for the freshest, locally grown produce, flowers and other goodies.

In October, Pumpkinfest headlines the event list. The infamous pumpkin roll down steep Dowling Street is followed by a giant pumpkin contest, bake sale and best pie contest, face painting, a craft fair and more to complete the day.

Across the way from the farmers market at the corner of Dowling and Water Streets in Montague stands the “World’s Tallest Weathervane.” It towers 48 feet tall and is topped with a 14-foot replica of the lumber schooner, the Ella Ellenwood, whose sails rotate with the wind. The 4,300 pound structure was built locally by Whitehall Products and is made of hand-formed aluminum.

According to historical accounts, the lumber schooner was sailing out of White Lake on October 1, 1901 and was headed to Milwaukee with a load of maple edgings and shingles. The Ellenwood ran aground some eight miles from the Milwaukee Harbor. It didn’t take long for the strong winds and waves to break the vessel apart, causing the captain and crew to abandon ship. The following spring, a portion of the nameplate, ELLENWOOD, was found inside the White Lake Channel. Somehow, the nameplate had found its way across Lake Michigan and into the narrow channel leading into White Lake. It had returned home. The nameplate and a scale model of the schooner can be found in the downstairs lobby of Montague City Hall.

## THEATER, MUSIC AND FINE ARTS

The 103-year-old Howmet Playhouse resides in Whitehall. The 400-seat theater was built in 1916 and was acquired and renovated by the Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in 1973 with the help of a local fund drive and participation of Whitehall’s largest employer, Howmet Castings (now Arconic). In 2006, the theater was transferred to the city. A massive fundraising effort about a decade later resulted in an overwhelming response from the community, and subsequent updates to the historic property included a new roof, handicapped-accessible restrooms, a large and enclosed foyer, newly paved parking lots and more. The renovated theater is slated to re-open in the summer of 2019.



Photo Credit: White Lake Chamber

For the past 30 plus years, The Arts Council of White Lake (ACWL) has provided numerous opportunities for area communities to view, listen to, create and learn from the arts. Their programs, scholarships, and grants reach thousands of people. The ACWL sponsors free, weekly, outdoor concerts throughout the summer at the Montague Bandshell, along with the popular Artisan Market the first Saturday of each month when the nearby Farmers Market is open.

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*Before*



*After*



The  
*Magic*  
That Is  
*White Lake!*

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## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

White Lake, flanked by its charming sister cities of Montague and Whitehall, remains a magical locale with a rich history, enviable lakeshore lifestyle, small-town friendliness and values, with something for everyone.

Through Native American Indians to fur traders to settlers, they left their mark in creating a picturesque and vibrant Michigan sanctuary for generations to come.

## WHAT WLA MEANS TO WHITE LAKE

The White Lake Association (WLA) was founded in 1988 in response to a proposed development on the northern end of White Lake, where it joins the White River. At the time, residents feared that the development would encroach on their Riparian rights.

As it turned out, according to one of WLA's founding members, the developer was, in fact, encroaching on riparian property and was tasked with removing two or three proposed docks for the marina that was being planned.

The founding members also were among the many White Lakers who were very concerned over the lake's deteriorating condition, causing it to be declared an Area of Concern on the Great Lakes under the Great Lakes Water



Photo Credit: White Lake Chamber

Quality Agreement in 1987. It was for this reason that WLA members began to regularly test the lake for contaminants.

Today, WLA continues to attract hundreds of concerned riparians and citizens who care deeply about White Lake. They actively support the various endeavors of the WLA to preserve the natural amenities of the lake, as well as the public trust.

WLA volunteers regularly perform tests for dissolved oxygen temperature and Secchi disk transparency through the CLMP program. They take water samples for chlorophyll and total phosphorus determinations, as do volunteers at some 300 other lakes across the state.

This monumental effort requires the commitment and dedication of hundreds of volunteers who regularly monitor indicators of water quality on their lakes, along with the professionals who interpret the data and make the results available to all of us.



## MORE WLA ACTIVITIES

In addition to water testing, Muskegon Community College faculty, interns and WLA members rake the lake bottom to assess the health of the aquatic plant community and to look for invasive species. As with water quality results, the data are archived in the MiCorps Data Exchange.

WLA maintains the weather station and the webcam at the historic White River Light Station, which can be viewed “live” on WLA’s website. Volunteers also work with local Steelheaders to install and maintain the “no wake” buoys on the east and west ends of White Lake. Additionally, volunteers work to make boat launching convenient and safe at several locations.

In 2018, WLA partnered with the Sea Tow Foundation to introduce the first life jacket loaner station at a launch ramp in western Michigan. You can read more about this amazing

program in the summer issue of the Michigan Riparian magazine.

WLA also participates in the White Lake Area Chamber of Commerce’s annual Business Expo each March, which draws more than 1,000 people to view the dozens of exhibits featuring area and organizations and what they offer.

For more information on WLA, visit [whitelakeassociation.org](http://whitelakeassociation.org).

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