

# History of Land o' Lakes, WI

Land o' Lakes, WI is located just 8 miles south of Watersmeet down Hwy 45, formerly known as Stateline and Donaldson



The economic origins of the town of Land O'Lakes (originally Stateline) go back to the 1870's when the Rudolf Otto mill, one of the best single-rotary mills in Northern Wisconsin, was built. It was succeeded by the Mason-Donaldson Co. mill formed in 1905. The Mason-Donaldson Mill gave its name to the town of Donaldson, located along highway B just west of the town of Land O'Lakes. Donaldson boasted a school house, a community building which was used as a church and meeting hall and several homes. Many of the homes were later moved near the railroad tracks as the town of Stateline became more prosperous. When the Donaldson mill burned in 1908, it was decided not to rebuild, and the town moved east to its present site under the name Stateline, since it rested squarely on the line separating Wisconsin from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

In addition to the Donaldson school there was also another school known as the Michigan School just across the state line on Duck Lake Road. The children living just across the state line attended the Michigan school. It was eventually moved to Watersmeet, Michigan where it was first used as the Legion Hall, and then moved to the Lac Vieux Desert Native American settlement to be used as a school. Eventually it was moved back to Watersmeet where it became a part of a restaurant known as Minnie's Cafe (now the Peppermill.)

The next area school to be built was in the town of Land O'Lakes. It was built around the turn of the century and was a tar paper building. The first school teacher was Mr. Ebey. In 1931 a new, modern school was built on Highway B, next to the Land O'Lakes Town Hall.



The Town of Land O'Lakes was originally part of Lincoln County in 1882. In 1885, it became part of Oneida County, which had been set off from Lincoln County. In 1893, it was included in Vilas County, which had been set off from Oneida County. Initially, it was part of the Town of Eagle River in Vilas County. The Town of Stateline was officially set off from the Town of Eagle River on January 3, 1907. On April 1, 1907, the first town meeting was held in the office of the Mason-Donaldson lumber mill, two miles East of the railroad. In 1895 Peter LaChance came to Stateline and built a store located at the current Rusty Nail site. This building included a saloon, pool hall, telegraph office, the first gas pumps and a beauty parlor. Peter also served as town superintendent. In 1902-1903 the Dickman family established a farm between Donaldson and Stateline. They later moved the farmhouse to Stateline converting it to a boarding house and hotel. The first area post office was at Stateline located near Dickman Motors, now known as the Land O'Lakes Service center. The Post Office moved to Donaldson with the establishment of the Mason-Donaldson lumber mill.

The post office returned to Stateline when two brothers named Maas started a little store across from the railroad depot on what is now Duck Lake Road, across from the Land O'Lakes Library. Both brothers were called into service in WWI and Washburn Bates became postmaster.

Rumor says that the Stateline railroad depot, which was the receiving station for all mail, had been built half in Michigan and half in Wisconsin. In reality, the depot was built on the Wisconsin side and moved to the Michigan side when a law known as the Wisconsin 8-hour labor law came into effect. In 1928 the depot burned to the ground and was rebuilt on the Wisconsin site. In 1906 George St. Clair bought 92 acres on the East shore of Black Oak Lake and started a prize winning potato farm — later building a resort. He was clerk of the Town of Land O'Lakes for 14 years. He also served as town chairman and was instrumental in extending the railroad across the Wisconsin line.



In 1919 Peter LaChance's son, Oliver, and his wife Lulu took over the Peter LaChance establishment and added an ice cream parlor to the complex. In 1922 Peter built the first modern home in Land O'Lakes with electricity and plumbing, together with a dance hall and rooming house.

In 1926 George St. Clair, following an outdoor show in Chicago and a meeting of a number of summer home owners, requested that the post office designation be changed to Land O'Lakes. Actually, a name change had been requested by the U.S. Post Office, which had Stateline post offices in Minnesota and Mississippi, a confusing situation. Therefore to further enhance the tourist appeal of the town and to clarify its position, the official U.S. Post Office designation was changed to Land O'Lakes in 1926. Apparently, however, the name of the full township was not changed to Land O'Lakes until 1948. From 1894 through 1936, the business district of Land O'Lakes grew around LaChance's store and saloon, Benson's lumber yard, Dickman's Garage, the Hi Hat, Pitts grocery, Schrecks store, the post office and the Tackle Box - all established long before the Gateway Hotel was built. Early settlers in these times included the Mayos, the Grovenors, the Elys, the Warrens, the LaChances, the Millikens, the Carlsons, the Williams, the Britz's (he was postmaster at Donaldson) the Gudegasts, the Dickmans, the Heinigs, the Halverts, the Sparks, the Pitts, the Sensibas, the Caudills, the St. Clairs and the Flodins.

At one time it was said that Highway B went through timber so thick that one "40" (forty acre parcel) produced one million board feet of lumber. This rich resource led to the development of area logging camps, including Bent's Camp, located on Mamie Lake, established in 1893; the Presque Isle logging Camp located 15 miles North of Boulder Junction, Wisconsin, established in 1914; the Pine Camp near Tenderfoot Lake, about 20 miles West of Land O' Lakes, on what's now the deer farm; the Moccasin Pine Logging Camp, about 7 miles West of Land O' Lakes, established in the 1890s; the hardwood camp located on present day Notre Dame property about 17 miles West of Land O' Lakes, established in the early 1900s; and the Wisconsin River Pine Logging Camp, on the Wisconsin River 2 miles South of Land O' Lakes, established in the 1890s.

From the turn of the century, while timber and its regeneration and harvesting remained a strong influence, tourism began to make its presence felt. The tourism industry was not completely new to the area however. In addition to the 1884 Thomas Resort on Lac Vieux Desert, Bent's Camp began functioning as a tourist camp in 1896, eventually becoming one of the first resorts on the Cisco Chain.

Recognizing the need for a central edifice, the Community Building, now known as the Land O' Lakes Town Hall was built in 1927 on land donated by the Ferry-Surpless Families. The Land O' Lakes Community Association was formed July 26, 1927. All four of the Land O' Lakes current churches had their beginnings in the Land O' Lakes Town Hall, known then as "The Community Building". Ely Memorial Church, St. Albert Catholic Church, Hope Lutheran Church, and the Land O' Lakes Bible Church all held services in the Town Hall until the individual congregations raised enough money to build separate churches. Ely Memorial Church was built in 1939, St. Albert Catholic Church in 1949, Hope Lutheran Church in 1959, and the Land O' Lakes Bible Church in 1969-70. The King's Gateway Inn, the King's Gateway Hotel, the Gateway Golf Course, the Gateway Airport, Ski Chalet, and Riding Stables came into existence in the late 1930s. Built by Detroit theater magnate, J. H. King, and designed by Milwaukee architect, Henry Messmer, the Gateway Complex was built from 1937 to 1939, and accelerated the development of the present day business district of Land O' Lakes.

The Gateway Inn, located on the corners of Hwy 45 & B was the first of the Gateway buildings to be erected. It was actually pre-dated by a small gas station owned by Dale Hunter, who sold out to Gus Conradson. Conradson, in addition to selling gas, ran a small restaurant, selling hamburgers, and soda and other sundries. Conradson sold to a Mr. Harrington, who, in turn, in 1937 sold to John King, who began building the Gateway Inn. Builders were Carper-Turnquist Builders, a local firm. This was followed soon after

by the hotel itself on the southwest corner of Highways B & 45. Shortly thereafter, the Gateway airport was built. The airport was eventually turned over to the town of Land O'Lakes by King's widow, "Sug" (short for "Sugar"), King under the auspices of the King's Gateway Corp. The original airport building was then moved north, across Highway B, to become the King's Gateway Golf clubhouse. A new Airport building was erected. During the same period of time, The Gateway Ski Chalet, at the Gateway Ski Hill, was built about 3 miles south of Land O' Lakes just off of Hwy 45.

Mr. King died January 2, 1952, and Mrs. King continued to operate the complex until Feb. 17, 1961. The property was then sold to Mr. Walter Williamson, owner of the Wagon Wheel in Rockton, Illinois, who remodeled and added a second story to the Gateway.

The Gateway, along with other area resorts, suffered financial reverses in the 1960s. Reasons for the decline in resort properties included the easier accessibility to less rustic, more elegantly modern resort areas in the South and West as well as overseas, the gasoline shortages, and the inability of old resort owners to financially survive rising property values coupled with extremely high interest rates. When these resorts were developed, most of them grew cabin by cabin as the owners built them up. When these owners came to sell in the 60s and later, property taxes and interest rates had risen so high and resort accommodation rates were so low, that most prospective buyers could not, in the short resort season, come up with a large enough down payment, plus taxes, etc., to make the investment profitable. The older resorts by this time often needed substantial modernization. Many of them, as their owners reached retirement age, were difficult to sell as resorts, and the owners were forced to divide land and cabins. Those resorts which remained and succeeded, such as Sunrise Lodge, on the shores of Lac Vieux Desert, and others, did so by modernizing and marketing.

Originally the town of Land O' Lakes developed along a north/south line, following the railroad tracks which led from Eagle River, through Watersmeet, MI., and beyond. With the decline in the timber industry, followed by the decline in railroading, and with highways carrying more of the tourist traffic, the downtown area of Land O' Lakes began to grow in an east/west manner along Highway B.

In 1922, the assessed value of State Line was \$1,256,883.00. The 1997 valuation was \$145,662,500.00. The population of Land O' Lakes in 1920 was 75. Population in 1930 was 302, and population in 1950 was 548. The current population of Land O' Lakes is 862. In 1950 the Nagel Lumber Mill was formed, 3 miles west of Land O'Lakes along Highway B. Built by Alfred and Ed Nagel, and now operated by Ed Nagel and family, the

mill is unique, as it began as an 8-foot mill for aspen only. The mill is still family owned and now processes all species of wood. Medical services were available only at Phelps Hospital until 1949 when Dr. Everett Eickhoff, after serving in World War II, opened a medical clinic in Land O' Lakes. He delivered babies and did minor surgery at the Land O' Lakes Clinic, but he also served on staff at the Phelps Hospital. Later, Dr. Eickhoff served the Eagle River Hospital where he was in general practice, obstetrics, and orthopedic surgery. Dr. Eickhoff retired in 1985. A small clinic is in operation today with Dr. Punnoose Mackiel as the attending physician. Dental services in Land O' Lakes were provided first by Dr. Harold Johnson, then Ed Miner and then Dr. Harry Gremban. Today, Land O' Lakes is served by Dr. Pete Schindelholz in a new state-of-the-art dental clinic.

In the early 1960s, Land O' Lakes had the distinction of electing the first female town chairman, Vi Becker. She was honored as such in the Madison, Wisconsin Legislature. Under Becker's direction the second 'sod' runway was built at the Land O' Lakes Airport by "Euclid Earth Movers". Becker arranged for the runway to be constructed gratis as a demonstration of their equipment. John Garber, then manager of the Gateway Hotel, housed and fed the workers as a donation to the town. Land O' Lakes is looking toward a bright future. The consolidation of the Conover and Land O' Lakes schools took place in the fall of 1997 with the opening of the new Land O' Lakes grade school housing grades K through 5. The proposed development of a private school on the James Lowenstine property on Black Oak Lake, just west of Land O' Lakes, the continued selection of Land O' Lakes as second home site and retirement option all point to a slow, steady growth of the area. The completion of an expanded runway and improved facilities at the Land O' Lakes Airport and the planned development of a new north-south runway add to this energetic community's potential. Compared to its beginnings in modern history as a mill town, Land O' Lakes has diversified its industry. Services relating to schools certainly are due to grow. The development of a clearly identified area of land near the Land O' Lakes airport to be set aside for light, environmentally suitable industry, and the continued expansion and development of the airport itself, add a continuing area of diverse development.

With the environmental attractiveness of the surrounding area as a retirement community, Land O' Lakes will continue to lure a mature population as well as young families. The building of a community library in the early 1990s along with current enlargement of that facility, the establishment of a community museum, and the organization of a planning and beautification committee inspired by the late Leo Lang,

indicate the value the town places on itself and on its history. It is significant to note that, like the Community Building/Town Hall in the early days, both the library and the museum, have been built with locally donated moneys and services. This is a town that helps itself wherever possible. It seems at the present, that State and Federal money, with the possible exception of the development of the Land O' Lakes Airport, does not figure prominently in the town's development. It will be important for present and future generations to appreciate and collect the history and lore of the area, and critical for all who love this town to be vigilant in balancing growth with protection of the quietly beautiful natural environment that makes Land O' Lakes such an attractive place in which to visit, work, and live.

