



Lake Orono Improvement Association I N C.

Note: For the 1997 Elk River's Heritage Festival, our Association gave tours of the lake on a flotilla of pontoons. Since that time there have been no further Heritage Festivals, but we hope one day to give the tours to educate the public and give those who do not have boats a chance to see the lake in its entirety.

In the meantime, if you own a boat, you can take your own tour by using this script and [map](#).

Also, the lake was dredged in 1998, so some of the "new" islands are gone and it is a little deeper on the northwesternmost part, but unless you know the lake well it is probably not wise to proceed past this point.

Pontoon Tour Script

1997 Elk River Heritage Festival

Numbers are in reference to [attached map](#)

1. **Starting point: Public Access and Boat Dock**

Welcome to our Lake Orono. We hope you will enjoy the tour. It will last between 45 minutes and one hour. Your captain's name is _____ and I am _____.

During the rise in fur trading in the present Elk River area, the first trading post was built by David Faribault in 1846. It was located on a bluff just north of the mouth of the Elk River. The fort was sold shortly after to H. M. Rice and S.P. Folsom. Pierre Bottineau was the son of a French Canadian and a Chippewa woman, and was probably about 25 Or 26 years old when he acquired the property.

When Bottineau moved his original operation from the site near the Elk River to the Mississippi River location, Silas Lane opened up a farm near the old site, making his claim in Section 33, which included part of the area that is now Lake Orono. In 1850, the year of Lane's claim, there was no lake — only the Elk River winding its way through his farm. The river and its potential water power attracted the attention of Ard Godfrey, long identified with the lumber and milling industry in St. Anthony, and John C. Jamieson, a native of Orono, Maine. The purchased the claim from Lane in 1851. Thus Orono became named after a town of the same moniker in Maine.

- 2. Orono Beach and Park.** Site of the Elk River Area Chamber of Commerce 4th of July celebration and fireworks. Park shelters can be reserved through the City of Elk River. Swimming lessons were held here until the late 1970s when the VandenBerge Pool was opened. This beach was dug out when the dirt in the hill was removed and used for the Highway 10 bridge. This bridge sat unused during the war; it was finished afterwards.
- 3. Elk River City Fishing Pier.** Built in the early 1990s, it was moved to this location in 1996. Hiking and biking trails follow along the bank in this area.
- 4. Elk River City Hall.** Houses the city offices, staff, meeting rooms, police department, etc. It was built in 1994.

Lake Orono is a recreational and economic asset for the residents of the City of Elk River and Sherburne County. It is obviously imperative to protect this important resource. With the efforts that have been started, the Lake is headed in the right direction. Numerous parties are involved and committed to cleaning up the lake. Working together to solve lake water quality and silting problems are the City of Elk River, Sherburne County, MPCA, Dept. of Natural Resources, Army Corp of Engineers, Sherburne Water and Soil Conservation District, Elk River Lions, Elk River Watershed Board, Lake Orono Improvement Association, and other interested parties.

- 5. Old site of restaurant, general store and gas station.** *This is the house just past the Main Street wall. Point out Main Street.*

Nelsons owned a restaurant through the early 1930s, and it was a "Speak Easy". It also had a gas pump (a husky pump). Later Jack Fire Hammer owned the restaurant; during the war years, his wife Min ran it.

Two of the original log cabin walls and the fireplace are still inside this house.

- 6. One of the deepest places in Lake Orono — 15' deep.**

This spot is out at the point There is a storm drain by the Main Street area; you could do a 7.5 reading here.

- 7. Orono Cemetery.**

This is one of the oldest cemeteries in Sherburne County, founded around 1855. The 4th of July fireworks are shot off from here. You'll notice extreme erosion; a method to contain the erosion has been devised and was to be implemented this fall, however, we did not receive the funding to proceed, so alternate sources of funding are being pursued.

Testing is being done for water quality. Some of the collection spots will be pointed out. At some of the spots water samples have been collected monthly, and for a while weekly by volunteers all summer long. At other points, storm event samples are taken. These samples, which are tested at a laboratory, will tell us much about the quality of the water, and help determine the appropriate action to take with the lake.

Orono Cemetery is visible up on the bluff after getting round the point to the other side.

- 7.5 Storm drain.** Site of storm event testing. Will help determine the amount and nutrients of runoff from neighborhoods in Elk River. All of the city's street runoff drains into either the Elk or Mississippi Rivers. One of the major factors causing the lake to turn green is the amount of

algae growing in it. One pound of phosphorous (the “P” or middle number in commercial fertilizer) can produce 100 to 500 pounds of new algae or weeds. Tests have been done in Sherburne County and beyond that indicate our soil does not need phosphorous — therefore, it is an unnecessary nutrient that we are adding to our environment. A few retailers in our area are now stocking phosphorous-free fertilizer for those concerned about our environment. We ask that you please be aware of this when you purchase fertilizer and be friendly to our watershed. Thank you.

Town of Orono

We are now nearing the site of the original town of Orono. It was named after the town by the same name in Maine. Also, it was called “Upper Town” to Elk River’s “Lower Town”. It is believed that Zebulon Pike named Elk River. There was a battle between the Sioux and Chippewa near here over the elk hunting grounds.

- 8. First Public Access.** This was used to fill fire trucks into the 1960s. It was eventually vacated to the private residences on each side in the 1980s. This was a popular beach area for the town of Elk River and surrounding area. Before the first World War, Ernie King had 3 or 4 boats that he rented out at the public access.
- 9. First School House** in Orono was on a lakeshore lot donated by Ard Godfrey in 1852. It became the beach area at the original public access.
- 9.5 H.S. Heebner General Merchandise,** Tin and Hardware — marked on an 1879 map.
- 10. Site of the old Post Office.**
- 11. First Church in Orono** was located on the hill beyond Main Street (2nd Street).
- 11.5 Site of an old boarding house.**
- 12. Old wood barn.** This was Mrs. Humphrey’s carriage house.

End of Town of Orono

- 13. 1916 Concrete Dam and Generator House.** The foundation of the house is now the observation deck. The original dam was located 100 feet downstream from the concrete dam and was first built in 1851 by Ard Godfrey. The feed mill was located on the north side of the dam and the sawmill on the south side. Remnants of the dam still exist; wood pilings are visible above water, and the timber cribs and boulders are underwater. In 1978, the DNR ordered the lake level lowered because of the poor condition of the dam. In 1980, a contract was let out to rehabilitate the dam and add 3 new taintor gates. Most of the repair work was superficial; the original concrete core of 1916 was found sound enough to leave in place. The hydro generator house and generators were removed and a new observation deck was created.
- 14. Site of the Sawmill, built in 1851.**
- 15. Site of the Grist Mill,** built in 1861, Elk River Flouring Mills (both of these last two buildings are on the 1879 map as the Mills and Houlton, Elk River Flouring Mills and Sawmill).
- 16. The new bridge.** One of the first bridges was built near here in 1860.

17. Generator House and Observation Deck. Below the dam was the old Cabin camp. A great swimming area was located here, with a high diving board, a metal building used as a bath house and a picnic grounds.

18. Water sample site, 1997. Weekly and monthly samples are taken here.

19. Mill Pond, on 1851 map. The first lake was created in 1851 when the dam was built. The lake then was known as “The Mill Pond”, and it was only one tenth the size of the existing Lake Orono.

The first house after the dam is one of the oldest houses on the lake. It is the old Mansur house, one of the first residents of Orono.

19.5 Site of J.G. Jamison’s Wagon & Blacksmith Shop, located on the 1879 map.

20. Site of an Ice House. This ice cutting business was operated by the Vassar family between 1920 and 1940. The ice storage house was located on the point. The ice was cut out of the lake with special saws, preserved in sawdust, and delivered to local ice boxes.

There was a water ski club on the lake called the Surf Aces, which disbanded about the time Mr. VanPatten left his clothing store. Many of the local people participated in the club and put on shows.

Orono was surveyed and platted in 1855. It was the principal town in the county for a number of years and was incorporated with Elk River in 1880-1881.

Orono became the county seat in 1867. The meeting of March 12, 1867, the first held after the county seat was moved to Orono, was held at the home of J.Q.A. Nickerson, which was actually in Elk River, not Orono. The meetings were subsequently held at William Tubbs’ office, the auditor, in Orono.

These townhomes are one of the last areas to be developed around the lake. They were built in the last 2 to 3 years.

20.5 Storm drain. Area for storm event testing.

After the tests are completed and information compiled, if improvements to the lake are warranted, the study will determine the appropriate scope and extent of lake projects, as well as any future preventative measures.

The beige house with timbers on their lawn bank is believed to be the site of one of the original cabins.

21. Simonet Point was a cow pasture as late as 1940.

22. “Beaver chew” (Red wound paint on trees). This is one of the signs of our many forms of wildlife on the lake. We have a migratory pair or two of loons that visit us each spring for a few weeks. Many great blue herons and snowy egrets make their homes and eating forays here. We have a very big population of Canadian geese. This is a two-sided coin for us; the birds are beautiful and their broods are fun to watch grow each year, but the flip side is that on the average an adult goose produces 2 pounds of waste a day or about 25 pounds per week. The last sighting of one of our extended geese groups was 50 or so in the flock. We no longer encourage anyone to feed these beautiful birds.

Some of the fish that are caught here are bass, northern, walleyes, crappies, sunnies, and of course rough fish like bullhead and carp. These last two are not game fish, but the little kids still like to catch them. Through the years other species have been landed, but our resident anglers are a bit tight-lipped about where the best spots are!

23. Highway 10 bridge. Another of the deepest places in the lake.

Notice the swallow's nests under the bridge. Please look up with your mouth closed!

As you may have noticed, we have several areas of "no wake". Watercraft must travel the slowest speed necessary to steer the craft but no greater than 5 miles per hour, and this must be maintained in an area 100 feet from shore. Maximum speed on the lake is 40 miles per hour, and watercraft must travel in a counter clockwise direction. From sunset to sunrise the maximum speed is 15 miles per hour.

24. Water test site, storm tests, 1997 (in the bay area).

A shoreline ordinance was passed in 1992. Many things have been set in place by this law, although much of it is already being done on Lake Orono. All septic systems must be in compliance with the current standards. Nearly all of Elk River is on city sewer and water, so this affects only a few residents on the lake, but there have been no problems. Another item that lake homeowners are always concerned about is the erosion of their banks into the lake. As we have been traveling around the lake, you may have noticed the unique ways that have been used to keep the soil on the bank where it belongs.

(This next area is by the house with the red awning on the boat lift and red stairs.)

An issue that the task force is currently addressing is improving water quality and clarity, and they hope to have more plantings around the lake to provide filtering of runoff and fish habitat. In this area, the resident will be installing giant bur-reed. A natural area of bulrush is on the east side of Scout Island, and lily pads grow along the north shore and further up river, just past where we will be turning around.

Farther down this north shore, a resident had to clear barbed wire out of the lake; the area may have been a cow pasture in the 1950s.

25. County Ditch No. 28. Water tests are also taken here. Ben Roper used to have a trout pond in the protected area and feed geese. The road behind here is Island View Drive, sometimes called "Teacher's Row" for the number of education professionals who live or have lived here.

This ditch is one of the ways that water enters Lake Orono. The watershed for our lake is 70% of Sherburne County and 40% of Benton County; a ratio of 1260:1. In contrast, Big Lake's watershed is only 2:1, however, they are not on a stream. The water in Lake Orono turns over every four days; Big Lake about once every 24 years. What this means is that as soon as the river cleans up, so will the lake. That is why there is such a big education push in the counties at this time. All waterways are in the same danger.

(Change over to other shore to just past Scout Island)

26. Scout Island. Often-used camping island and canoe stop. Elk River Bowl is behind here.

We won't be pointing out much more or talking much during the rest of the tour—we would like you to enjoy this area that many people haven't seen. It is one of the most scenic areas of the lake.

27. Elk Motel.

27.5 Water tower. Behind here are the fairgrounds.

28. New Guardian Angels facility.

29. Storm drain. A resident and his wife was pontooning past here, and came upon a couple in a red pickup truck backed up to the lake. The lady within the truck bed sat up with just a towel around her, and was obviously quite embarrassed. Our resident reversed his pontoon, then called out to them, “Don’t stop on account of us”. Hence this storm drain is now called “Lover’s Drain” by the locals.

30. Turnaround spot.

Show new islands and water depth.

Other years we would have been able to go up river much further. This year with the flood waters, much sand, silt, etc. has flowed down and filled in the lake bed until the water is nearly unnavigable.

You can use this time on your way back to cruise slowly to take up to the full 45 minutes, or if needed to make up time, by cruising a little faster—be careful of underwater hazards.

At the end of the tour:

The information booth will have much of this information, as well as maps of the area from 1879 to the present, and information from the DNR. If you haven’t yet visited it, please do. It is in the Handke Gym with other displays of the Heritage Festival.

We hope you have enjoyed the tour and Lake Orono. Thank you.