

History of Murray Lake

By Bob Imhoff

Murray Lake is the largest of over 25 lakes in Grattan Township and is the third largest in Kent County. Its 320 acres consist of 30% shallows and the balance is considered steep drop off with the deepest area at over 70 feet. The lake is fed from springs and a stream at the north end of the lake that flows under 5 mile road. The springs contribute to open water conditions in several areas of the lake that sometimes never freeze throughout the entire winter. The lake bottom consists of fibrous peat, marl, muck and sand. The outlet at the southwest end of the lake was once called Lake Creek which is a tributary of the Flat River. The lake level is able to be controlled by a small dam in the creek by removable boards. The majority of the lake resides in Grattan Township except for the southern portion beginning at Four Mile Road that is in Vergennes Township. The entire area of the lake was once in Vergennes Township until 1846 when it was divided into two townships.

Our lake is well over a mile long and was given different names throughout its history. It was once named Nagel or Nagels Lake, Horseshoe Lake, Eagle Lake and finally Murray Lake after James Murray purchased a large tract of land alongside the lake. James Murray's Scottish descendents date to the thirteenth century Edwin Murray who fought with William Wallace and Bruce for their independence.

Around 1907, the Lally family purchased the land at the south end of the lake and the lane that crossed their property from east to west is our present day Lally Road (for a while the township spelled it Lalley). For many years the peninsula that juts into the lake was an uninhabited island. Eagle Lake was probably the most familiar name of the lake in early years after a bird of that species built its nest in a large oak tree on that island. Farmers took their cattle by barge to graze on the island in the summer. Later, by filling in the shallow area with rocks and other de-

bris, farmers were able to drive their livestock to the island, even though the path was sometimes covered with water. During the depression, one of the WPA (Works Progress Administration) projects was to build a road to the island and one history book indicates that Ionia prison inmates may have assisted in the road project, as well. Causeway Drive was created by filling in the lake between Lally Road and the island.

One of the oldest buildings on the lake is the big farm house on Lally Road. Thomas S. Lally traded a farm he owned in Bowne Township for the 255 acre farm at the south end of Murray Lake (including the island) where he raised 5 boys and 3 girls. In 1908 Thomas offered to sell the entire farm for 10,000 dollars, 1000 dollars down and the balance when he could get it, evidently no one had \$1,000. His last surviving son, George, collected more \$50,000 by selling off 150 lots and still had a large portion of the property left (The Grand Rapids Herald – 1950). The, still standing, big farm house frequently held 10,000 bushels of potatoes in the basement. The farm on the island was a well known landmark to generations of Vergennes and Grattan Township residents. Oats, rye, wheat, beans, hay and, of course, potatoes were grown by the Lally family along with livestock.

In the 1930's, a public access to the lake was created after a fisherman donated property to the DNR for boat launching and they were officially put into service in 1957. The remainder of Causeway Drive around the island was constructed at that time and the Murray Lake Association was formed by property owners in 1957.

In the 1970's, the DNR water quality tests showed high levels of phosphorous that were contributing to rapid growth of algae. The main source of the high levels was the excessive amount of septic systems around the lake. In 1982, Kent County and Grattan Township worked together to install the Grattan Sanitary Sewer System which serves Murray, Big Crooked, Ratigan and Big Pine Island Lakes. The system continues to be upgraded and in 2009 will undergo addi-

tional improvements to help keep our lakes protected against algae growth, sewage overflows and other contamination. In 2008 the introduction of beetles that consume the invasive purple loosestrife weed that has plagued our lake, appears to be proving effective. Continued monitoring and the addition of more beetles in 2009 will hopefully fully control or eliminate the weed.

In the winter of 1982, several snowmobiles went through an open water area of the lake in a blinding snowstorm resulting in loss of lives. The Murray Lake Association was prompted to donate \$500.00 towards the cost of a water/ice rescue sled for use on area lakes. The Grattan Township Fire Department continues to use the sled along with a hovercraft. To increase protection against fires, in 1989, the lake association purchased dry hydrants for the north and south ends of the lake. Fire apparatus are able to draw water through a pipe that extends underground into the lake.

In the 1990's, natural gas, cable television and internet became available around the lake and the association began a water testing program with the assistance of the Michigan Lakes and Streams Association. The Murray Lake Association became recognized as a non-profit organization in 1995. The public boat ramps and parking areas were restructured and improved, including bathrooms, by the DNR. Street signs at street entrances were purchased in 2003 and volunteer residents do upkeep and beautification projects of their own choice at those sites. In 2004, a low berm and landscaping was added along 5 Mile Road in an effort to improve the looks of that area and to discourage illegal watercraft launching at that site. Winter ice fishing and fishing from the north bank continues to be popular with visitors to our beautiful lake. The Murray Lake Association, Vergennes and Grattan Townships work together to have ordinances in place regarding riparian rights, keyholing, land usage, etc.