

American Canal Society Canal Index

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| CANAL | | STATUS | | | ACS |
| | | | | | HAER |
| STATE/PROVINCE | ENLARGEMENTS 1 2 3 4 | DATES IN USE | CANAL | LENGTH SLACKWATER | TOTAL |
| COUNTIES: | | | | | |
| LOCATION (Endpoints of Canal): | | | | | |
| TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS: | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: | | | | | |
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| NAMES & ADDRESSES OF GROUPS CONCERNED WITH CANAL'S PRESERVATION/RESTORATION: | | | | | |
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| BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: | | | | | |
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| UNPUBLISHED RECORDS, PHOTOS, DRAWINGS (CEHR, HAER, HABS. Local or Regional Historical Societies, Libraries, etc.): | | | | | |
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| EXISTING OR RECOMMENDED LANDMARK STATUS (CEHR, National Register, ETC.): | | | | | |
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| Investigation made by: | | | | | Date: |
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THE PELICAN VALLEY NAVIGATION COMPANY

by Aaron Isaacs

[This material first appeared in *Minnegazette* (the journal of the Minnesota Transportation Museum), Summer 1999, pp. 21-34. It is reprinted by permission of the publisher and the author. We are grateful to them and to A.C.S. member Eric L. Eaton, who called it to our attention.] This article was reprinted in *American Canals*, Vol. XXIX No. 1, Winter 2000.

At the Clay County Historical Society in Moorhead, I chanced upon three photos of small, launch-like steamboats, one of which was clearly negotiating a lock. I had stumbled onto the Pelican River Navigation Company, which served Detroit Lake and a chain of four adjacent lakes, all connected by the Pelican River. The river being quite inadequate for navigation, and the lakes being at different water levels, the company had dredged the river and built three sets of locks to reach its destination. There was no other operation in the state quite like it. The company survived under the same owner from 1889 to 1918. Now here was a story.

A visit to the Becker County Historical Society in Detroit Lakes uncovered a wealth of information and a large number of fine photos. I'm grateful to Director Becky Olerud for her help and generosity.

The Northern Pacific reached Detroit (as it was known then) from Duluth in 1871. However, it wasn't until the connecting line from Minneapolis to Sauk Rapids opened in 1884 that the tourist traffic took off. The Soo Line opened its line in 1903. The trains brought southerners, easterners and Twin Citians in search of a cool place to spend the summer. The lake region around Detroit soon became a favored destination.

Flowing out of Detroit Lake to the southwest, short pieces of the Pelican River connect a string of five large and two small lakes. It was only a matter of time before someone tried to turn it into a continuous waterway. The first abortive attempt was the Detroit Lake and Pelican River Slack Water Navigation Company, incorporated in 1881. Its stated goal was to run the length of the Pelican to the Red River at Breckenridge. It remained a paper company. However its president, John K. West, was not to be deterred. In 1886 he launched a barge that ran on Detroit Lake.

In 1888 West tried again, and this time was successful. Flowing out of Detroit Lake 1.5 mile southwest of the downtown dock, the Pelican River was shallow and choked with marsh grass. West temporarily drained it by damming the Detroit Lake outlet. Once the water was gone, he dredged a one mile channel along the river west toward Lake Sallie, passing through a wide marsh called Muskrat Lake. During 1889, at the east shore of Lake Sallie, he built a dam and a lock with a 5 foot 11 inch drop. The location became known as Dunton Locks, for the company's financier, Frederick W. Dunton. During the steamboat era, this was the location of the Dunton Locks resort, complete with hotel, cabins and a night club.

Once into Lake Sallie, it was a quick run across almost two miles of open water to Shoreham, a small resort community located at the lake's southern most point. The Shoreham Hotel and dining room sat right next to the boat dock. The maiden voyage by the *Lady of the Lake* took place on July 25, 1889. In 1891, the company carried 4,000 round trip passengers between Detroit Lakes and Shoreham. Although service continued beyond it, Shoreham was the company's primary destination over the years. Beyond Shoreham, boats negotiated the narrow, shallow S-curving channel of the Pelican River across a narrow isthmus into Lake Melissa, which was nine inches lower than Lake Sallie. The channel required frequent dredging to keep it open.

After steaming over Lake Melissa for 1.5 miles north to south, boats entered the next stretch of the Pelican River. After a short distance it widened into a mill pond (called Mill Pond on topos), backed up for about a mile behind the dam at Bucks Mill. The company's boats first reached the flour mill in June 1891. This remained the end of navigation until 1908, when a lock with a 12 foot drop was built. The river extends for over a mile below the dam before opening into Little Pelican Lake. (This is incorrect, the river first passes through Buck Lake before the channel to Little Pelican Lake). This stretch was also dredged, a difficult job through clay that required the use of dynamite. A half mile before reaching Little Pelican Lake, another lock was built with a three-foot drop, named Johnson Lock. The company's terminal on Little Pelican was the Pelican Inn, located on the southwest shore.

After crossing a mile of Little Pelican Lake, the boats negotiated yet another channel before reaching Big Pelican Lake. It is the largest in the chain, measuring 5 miles east to west by 1 mile north to south. It is unclear whether the boats traveled all the way to the lakes west end, but they apparently served multiple points on the shoreline. Old maps show landings on the north shore.

Here's a summary of the total mileage from Detroit to the entrance of Pelican Lake:

| <i>Segment</i> | <i>Miles</i> |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| On Detroit Lake | 1.42 |
| Pelican River to Lake Sallie | 1.04 |
| On Lake Sallie | 1.80 |
| Pelican River to Lake Melissa | 0.19 |
| On Lake Melissa | 1.70 |
| Pelican River to Little Pelican Lake | 3.03* |
| On Little Pelican Lake | 1.04 |
| Pelican River to Big Pelican Lake | 0.38 |
| On Big Pelican Lake-approx | 2.00 |
| Total | 12.59 |

* Editor's Note: This table does not give separate mileages for Mill Pond and Buck Lake which are in the distance between Lake Melissa and Little Pelican Lake. Hopefully, the mileage includes the three river segments and the two lakes.

The company carried both passengers and freight. Rail passengers debarked at either the NP or Soo Line depots and traveled by carriage the mile to the dock at the foot of Washington Avenue. Although the schedule changed somewhat through the years, the norm was three round trips from Detroit to Shoreham, and less service beyond. The running time to Shoreham was 60 minutes for 4.26 miles, or 4 mph.

After the 1908 extension beyond Bucks Mill to Big Pelican Lake, two boats were employed. The somewhat larger *Mayflower* shuttled between Detroit and Shoreham. The smaller *Dakota* left *Detroit* at 8 AM for Pelican Lake. From there it made a midday shuttle trip to Shoreham, where it met the *Mayflower's* second trip. Returning to Pelican Lake, its last trip of the day ran through to Detroit. The one way trip of about ten miles took three hours, or 3 mph.

The boats also hauled freight, primarily lumber for railroad ties and locomotive fuel. The NP established a siding on the northeast shore of Detroit Lake called West's Spur, for transloading onto rail cars. For freight, the line employed barges, which were either pushed or pulled by the steamboat. They had to be locked through separately. For at least several years they carried the U.S. Mail.

During its history the company employed a total of nine boats. All were small launches with canopies, constrained in size by the locks. They seated 35-40 passengers. Except for the *Robert Fulton* and *Dakota*, rather awkward looking stern wheelers, all were screw propelled. The *Mayflower* employed twin screws. In about 1912, the steamboats *Mayflower* and *Dakota* were replaced by the gasoline engined *Shoreham* and *Pelican*, which could be operated by a single crew member. It also appears that *Waterwitch* was converted from steam to internal combustion. Here is the boat roster, as far as we know it:

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Lady of the Lake</i> | 1889-1902 |
| <i>Robert Fulton</i> | 1895 -? |
| <i>Luzon</i> | 1901 |
| <i>Mayflower</i> | 1902 – 1912? |
| <i>Waterwitch</i> | 1908 – 1918 |
| <i>Dakota</i> | 1908 – 1912? |
| <i>Shoreham</i> | 1912? - 1918 |
| <i>Pelican</i> | 1912? - 1918 |

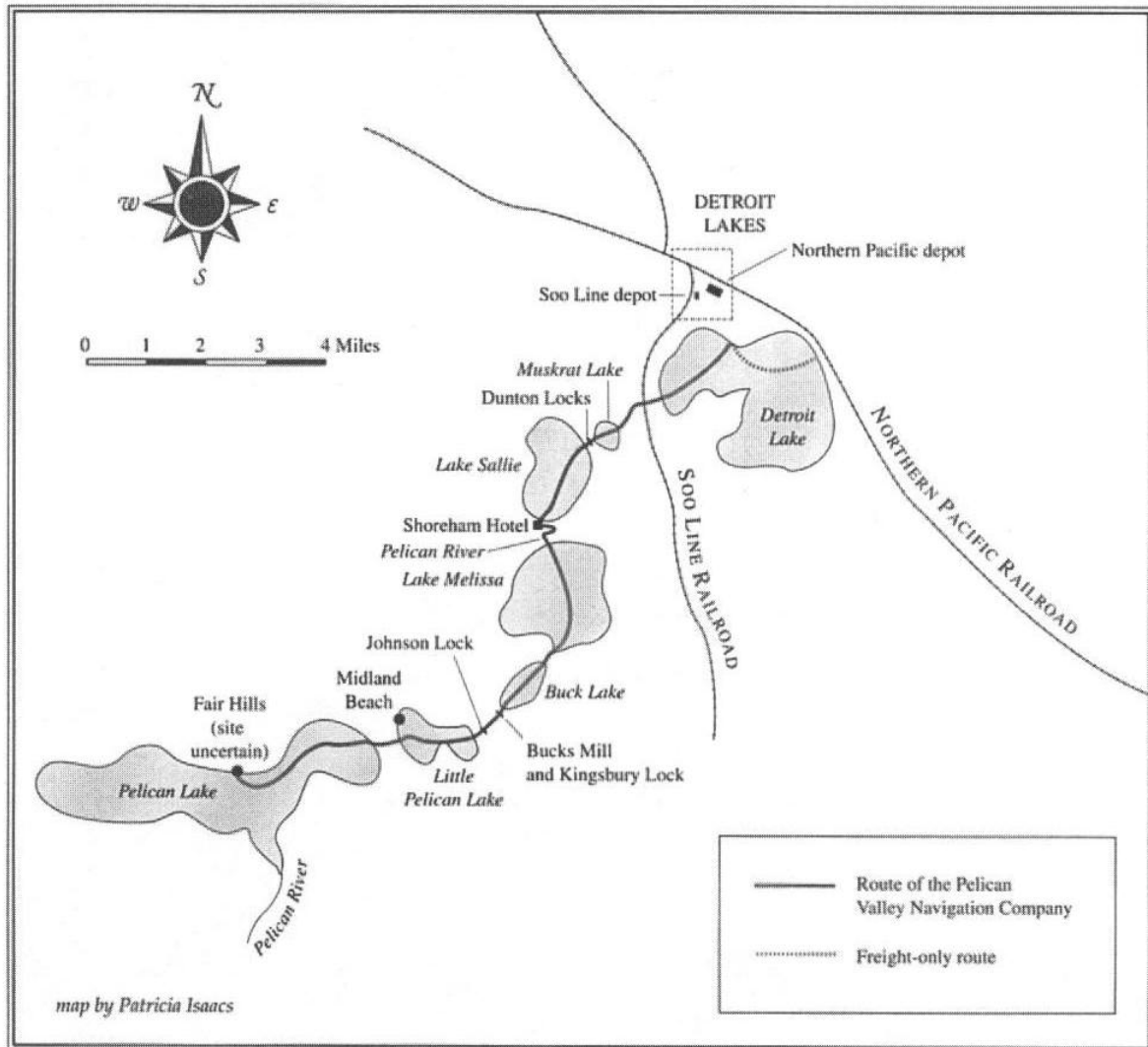
Predictably, the company's fortunes declined rapidly with the coming of roads and the automobile. Because of the locks, the boats were quite slow. Today, the three hour trip to Pelican Lake can be driven in 20-30 minutes. The company ceased operations in 1918. The boats were scuttled in Muskrat Lake and reportedly are still there today. During World War II, the sunken hulls were stripped of metal for the wartime scrap drives.

A visitor to the area today can still find traces of the steamboat line and its era. Detroit Lakes' two railroad depots are intact and in reasonable good condition. The NP depot hosts Amtrak, but in the middle of the night. Dunton Locks is the name of a well marked county park on the original site. The old wood lock was replaced in 1937 by a concrete lock and adjacent narrow spillway, constructed by the WPA. Although a text at the historical society says

that the lock can be used, that appeared impossible to me. Instead, a cable powered portage railroad, perhaps 100 feet long, has been constructed to lift boats between the river and Lake Sallie.

The village of Shoreham is largely intact. The main part of the hotel is gone, but its heavily modified dining room remains, along with the church, store and other vintage buildings. The twisting stream between Lakes Sallie and Melissa looks much the same. However, the original humpbacked wooden bridge was replaced in the 1930s by a flat span over a large culvert, restricting access to small boats only. There is a lock at the entrance to Lake Melissa that was installed after the steamboats quit.

Bucks Mill has been replaced by a tavern and restaurant. The dam is still there, and below it are the deteriorated concrete walls of the lock. Finally, there is a large collection of good vintage photos at the Becker County Historical Society.



Map of Pelican River included with article.

However, Bucks Mill and Kingsbury Lock are located at the NE side of Buck Lake, not as shown. Also, Mill Pond is between the dam at Bucks Mill and Lake Melissa.

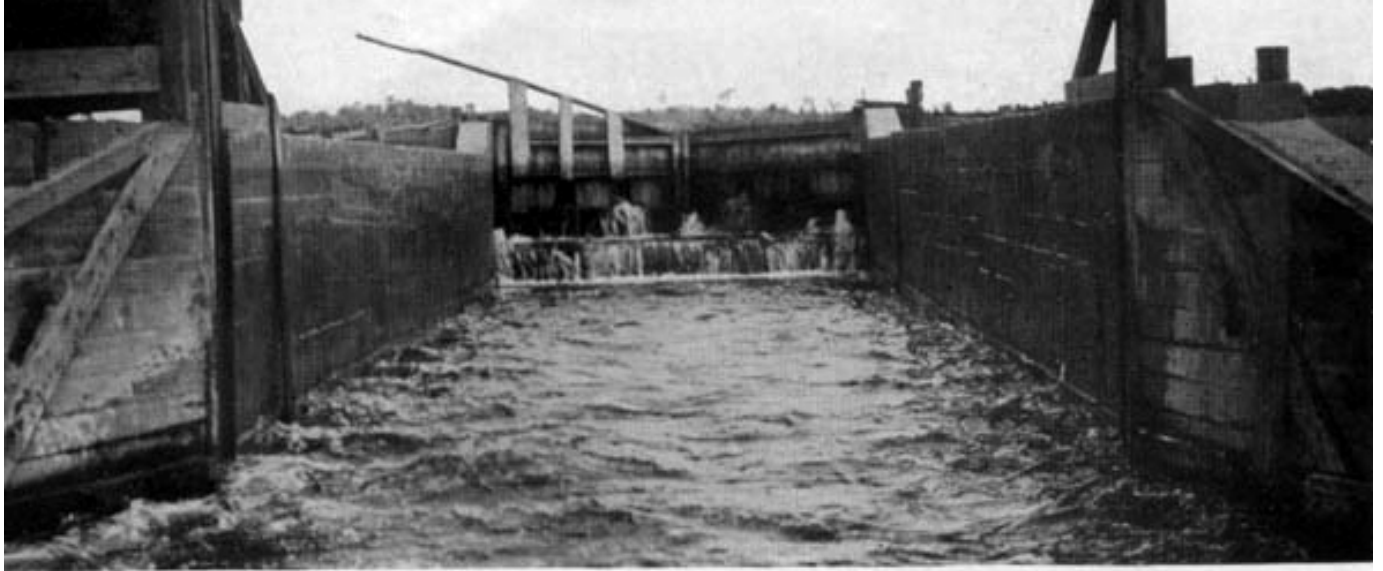


Mayflower being lowered at Dunton Locks. All locks on the waterway had guillotine gates.

(Photo from Becker County Historical Society)



This post card view looks the opposite way from that above

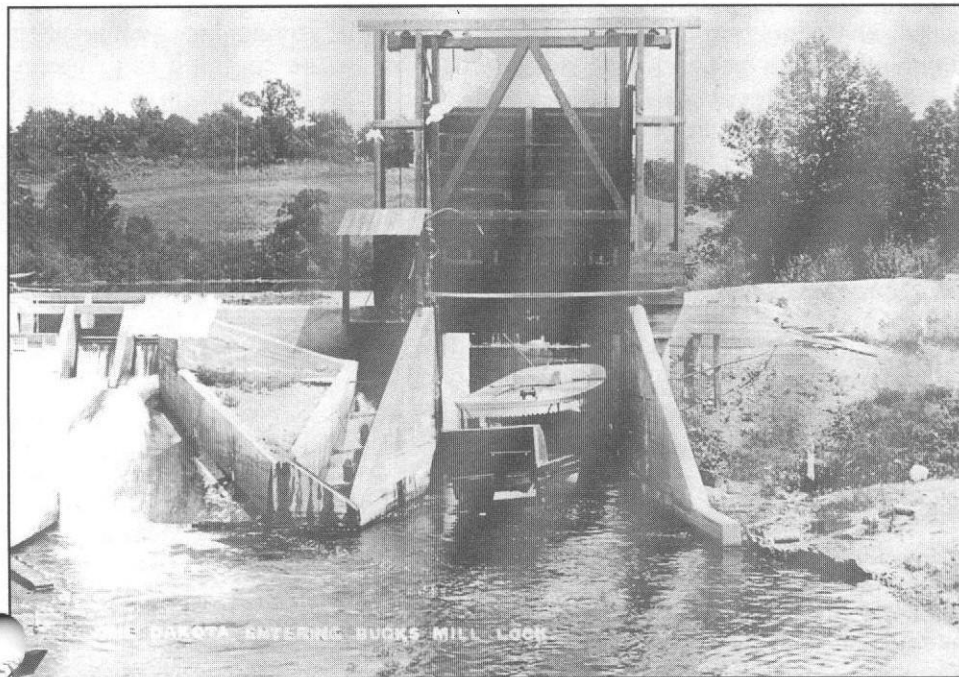


Interior View of Dunton Lock, drop of six feet

All of the above three photos are of the original Dunton Lock, which was wooden. The first and the third look towards Muskrat Lake, while the second looks toward Lake Sallie. In the first, a raised catwalk crosses the channel just downstream of the lock. This catwalk does not show in the second view which is most likely later. But, there is sign of a lower elevation catwalk beyond the lock in the second view. In both the first and second views, the lift mechanism for the guillotine downstream gate clearly shows. The third view looks into the lock from Lake Sallie with the guillotine gate open. It shows the wooden walls, the upper sill, and that the upper gates were miter gates with a balance beam for opening the left hand gate. The wing walls of the first view are shown on the edges of the third view. Being a close up, the guillotine gate, its operating mechanism, and the catwalk are all above the photo.



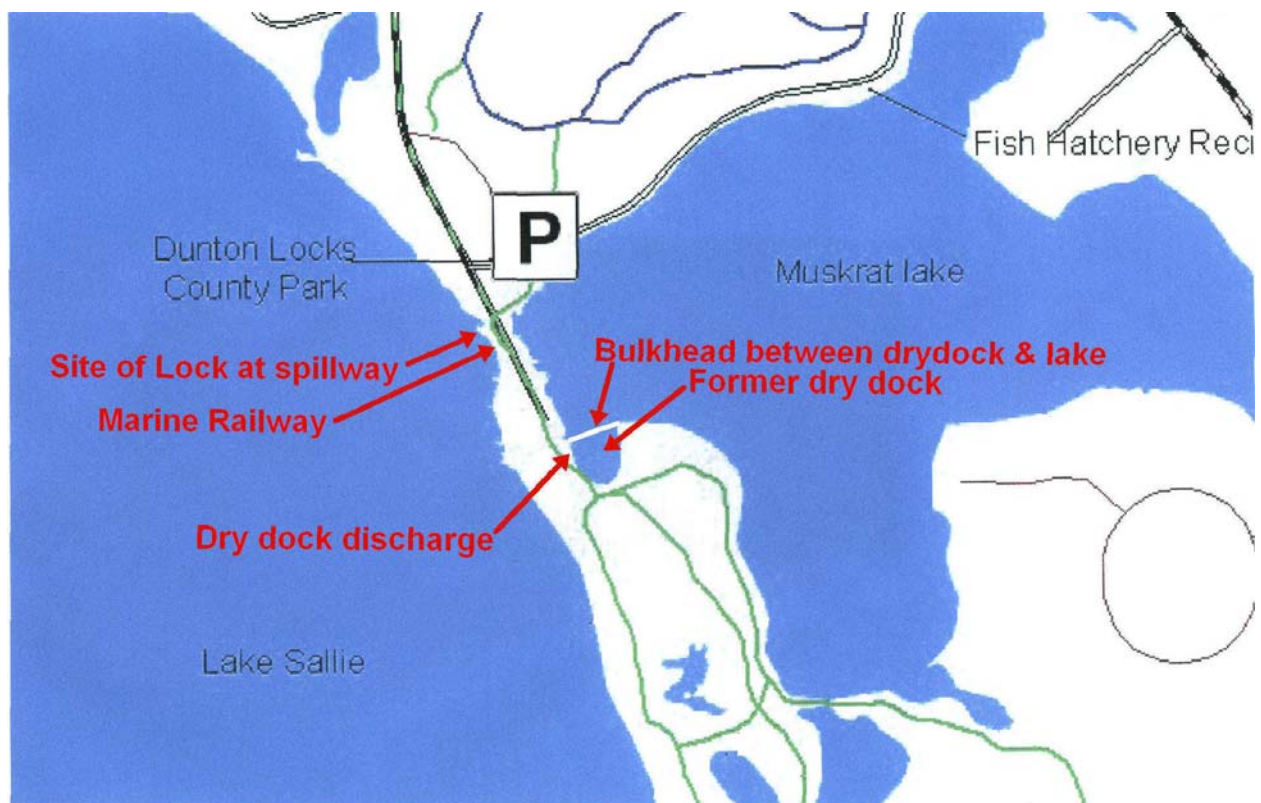
The bridge at Shoreham, possibly in the 1890s
 (Photo by R.D. Ryerson, from the Becker County Historical Society)



Dakota entering Bucks Mill Lock, headed upstream. Note mill dam at left, and locktender peering down from his control shed.
 (Photo from Becker County Historical Society)



**This post card view is not site specific, but appears to be a short channel between two lakes.
Maybe the entrance to Detroit Lake from Muskrat Lake from the local road bridge?**



Adapted from the Dunton Locks County Park trail map