

Evergreen Lake groundbreaking 50 years ago

Fifty years ago this week—April 27, 1968—Bloomington officials held a groundbreaking ceremony for the city’s second lake. On that day, Mayor Robert McGraw also announced the name of this new \$5 million, 700-acre, 4.2 billion gallon reservoir—it was to be called Evergreen Lake.

When completed in 1972, the lake, situated fifteen miles north of Bloomington, doubled the city’s available water supply. Evergreen serves as a younger “twin” to Lake Bloomington, which was built in 1929-1930 and is located five miles to the east. By the 1960s, the city’s continued growth made it increasingly difficult to meet long-term water needs, especially during drought years.

Both lakes, Bloomington and Evergreen, were formed by impounding tributaries of the Mackinaw River —Money Creek and Six Mile Creek respectively.

During its planning and early construction phase, Evergreen was first called Six Mile Lake, which made sense, geographically speaking. Nonetheless, and for reasons unknown, Mayor McGraw and the city council decided a new appellation was in order, and so they staged a name-the-lake contest in the spring of 1968.

Some 315 names were submitted to the city, including eventual winner Evergreen Lake, suggested independently by Bernice Beadles of Bloomington, and Carol Myers, an Illinois State University sophomore from Champaign. Beadles said the name made sense because Bloomington was long known as the “Evergreen City” (a nickname that in the ensuing half-century has fallen out of favor). The two women split the \$100 prize money.

In addition, there were, shall we say, more intriguing suggestions, including Stevenson Lake and Lake Adlai, both named for Bloomington’s favorite son, Adlai E. Stevenson II. Other names included Land of Lincoln Lake, David Davis Lake, Twin Lake, Lake Hudson and Lake Sesquicentennial (Illinois celebrated 150 years of statehood in 1968). Several of the more imaginative names included Asahikawa Lake (after Bloomington’s sister city in Japan), and Frank Breen Lake (a minister who helped establish Western Avenue Community Center and East Bay Camp at Lake Bloomington).

Some submissions were intentionally comic, such as Lake Necessity, Lake Bloomington Junior (or LBJ) and Ferguson’s Folly, after Donald Ferguson, Bloomington’s director of engineering and water. And some folks insisted on combining Bloomington with Normal, even though the

latter had nothing whatsoever to do with the lake—financially, statutorily, or otherwise. These proto-BloNo suggestions included Normington and the unwieldy McNorBloo.

Regardless, the city's second "soft water reservoir" ended up with the name Evergreen Lake, with "Evergreen" preceding "lake." On the other hand, it's Lake Bloomington, with "lake" preceding "Bloomington." The explanation for this oppositional nomenclature remains a mystery—at least to this writer!

Construction of Evergreen Lake was made possible through passage of a \$2 million general obligation bond, approved by city residents on April 4, 1967, by a vote of 3,508 to 2,533. Construction bids were opened the following spring. Land acquisition and engineering fees, among other additional costs, increased the lake's final price tag to a tad over \$5 million, or the equivalent of \$30 million in today's dollars, adjusted for inflation.

The earthen dam and spillway to impound Six Mile Creek and control the lake level were big ticket items, together costing nearly \$2 million. When first completed, the lake's dam featured a 60-foot spillway that required some 19,000 yards of poured concrete.

The new lake also included a \$343,000 pumping station and a \$571,000 water main of 30-inch ductile iron pipe running from Evergreen Lake to Lake Bloomington's water purification plant (the water main runs parallel to Lake Bloomington Road, which connects the two manmade bodies of water).

Some 70 folks attended the April 27, 1968 groundbreaking program on the floor of the future lakebed (see accompanying photograph). "The groundbreaking ceremony was simple, quick and to the point," noted Pantagraph reporter Bill Wills. "Most of the spectators were city officials and contractors."

The program was purely ceremonial, with work already well underway, as the speakers found themselves competing for the crowd's attention with earthmoving equipment busily at work in the background. By this time, a large-scale logging effort had already removed about one-third of the timber in the stretch of the Six Mile Creek floodplain slated for inundation.

Lake Evergreen impoundment began on Jan. 11, 1971, with officials estimating they'd reach "full pool," 715 feet above sea level, in two year's time. Yet the process went much quicker than anticipated, and the lake hit the 715-foot mark almost exactly one year later—Jan. 10, 1972.

Although Evergreen Lake is owned by the City of Bloomington, a long-term lease agreement gives the County of McLean the authority to plan, develop and operate the lake and surrounding shoreline, parkland and natural areas, including the section poking into Woodford County.

For more than four decades, Comlara Park (the unique name is an acronym for County of McLean Lake and Recreation Area), situated along the serpentine lake's northeastern shore, has remained the hub of Evergreen Lake activities. After a series of delays, the public beach at Comlara opened in August 1975.

A second beach, proposed for the lake's western shore, never got beyond the planning stages. Other hoped-for park, recreation and heritage plans for Evergreen Lake that remain on the drawing board include an observation tower, working farm museum, ecological research center and youth camp.

In the mid-1990s, officials raised the height of the dam to add some 225 additional acres of surface water. The increase in capacity was deemed necessary to ensure Bloomington's long-term access to a safe and dependable water supply.

Today, the now 925-acre Evergreen Lake offers some of the best fishing, boating and camping in Central Illinois. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources stocks the lake with muskie and saugeye, as good an indication as any as to the high-quality sporting experience awaiting anglers, amateur and expert alike. There are also 137 camping sites, from primitive to RV-ready, as well as two boat launches and a third one for canoes.

“Although the groundbreaking was a relatively quiet affair,” noted The Pantagraph's Bill Wills, back in April 1968, “it'll surely go down in the city's history as a major step toward progress.”