



The mystery of naming Lake Lida

Legend has it there was a farmer with seven daughters and he named Lida, Ida, Lizzie, Sallie, Melissa, Maud and Eunice after each one. It's a great legend, one that was picked up by the Seven Sisters Spirits south of Detroit Lakes, but likely not true. There are over 1,000 lakes in Otter Tail County. Many, such as Lida, Lizzie, Melissa, Sally and Rose are named after women. Others are named after birds like Pelican, Cormorant, and Loon. Otter Tail has lakes named after fish such as Pickerel and Bass. Others are named after trees like Tamarac and Pine. Only a few, like Paul Lake, have men's names. Our lakes likely had Indian names long before explorers and fur traders came to Otter Tail County. The first explorers about 1750 were a Frenchman and an Englishman. They met with a band of Indians on the shore of "Lac de la Queue de la Outer ", which roughly translates to "Lake of the Otters Tail ". Today we simply know it as Otter Tail Lake.

There isn't an official registry for naming a lake. In all likelihood Lake Lida was named by George Washington Cooley. Cooley was born in New York's Lower East Side January 17, 1845. His parents were both first generation immigrants from England who had met and married in the States. Not much is written on the early years of George Washington Cooley but at around the age of 16 he was accepted to the Cooper Institute in Manhattan. At Cooper he took courses in math, science, physics, and engineering all while working as a chainman on surveying crews. Since the Civil War (April 12, 1861-April 9, 1865) was raging on, many men of his age went to battle. Cooley however opted to head west after graduating from Cooper finding work as an assistant survey engineer for the St. Paul & Pacific Railroad. His work found him in the western and northern parts of Minnesota and the Dakotas until 1867. Cooley moved to Minneapolis where he established his own business. In 1870 Cooley returned to the Fergus Falls area working as a surveyor for Northern Pacific Railroad. The goal was to connect Minnesota rail to

the Pacific Northwest. Cooley eventually was appointed Surveyor General in our area by the Federal Government. In this role he was in charge of all subdivision of townships for land north of Fergus Falls. Cooley was the surveyor for all of Otter Tail and Becker Counties.

Cooley headed back to Minneapolis and in 1872 married Lida Grimshaw. Lida was the daughter of Minneapolis couple Robert Grimshaw and Mary Nicholson. George and his wife Lida raised six children; George Jr, Zoe, Sophie, Frank, Ralph and Lida Mae.

The Seven Sister legend is a great story but in all likelihood Lake Lida was named after Cooley's wife. The timetable is a little off, but naming of lakes may have come after surveying had been complete. It appears to be his wife and not the daughter that the lake is named since we have no records of any areas Cooley surveyed with the names George, Zoe, Sophie, Frank or Ralph Lake!

Cooley had an extensive task in surveying both Otter Tail and Becker Counties. After moving to Minneapolis, he worked as a civil engineer for the city of Minneapolis and the Lake Calhoun Railway. He also continued doing local surveying for the cities of Minneapolis and Lake Minnetonka. He was active in the politics of Minneapolis, an active member of fraternal organizations, a member of the Commercial and Automobile Clubs of Minneapolis, the Commercial Club of St. Paul and one of the founders of the Minnesota State Survey Association.

Cooley died at the age of 75 and his wife Lida would follow nine years later. They are both buried in a family plot at Lakeside Cemetery in Minneapolis. It seems only fitting for the man who plotted the county of Otter Tail with over 1,000 lakes to be buried in a cemetery called Lakeside.

(Credits to the Otter Tail County Historical Society)