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TRACKING DOWN SQUARE LAKE

Kodiak Active in Greenstone Region

by Edgar J. Lavoie

Was there ever a place in the Greenstone region called Square Lake?

Square Lake is not a unique name; Ontario has several Square Lakes. But was Wilkinson Lake, in Elmhirst Township, north of Jellicoe, ever called Square Lake?

First, the writer perused ancient maps. One photocopied map of the gold rush era showed Wilkinson Lake as an unnamed lake. So when was Wilkinson named? E-mail inquiries to the provincial and federal geographic names agencies yielded some information. Their records indicated that the name Wilkinson Lake was officially entered on June 2, 1950, and that the lake was possibly named after a Provincial Land Surveyor. Before that date, was Wilkinson known as Square Lake? As for the place name of Elmhirst, the township's name was officially recorded on August 12, 1935. There was no information on Elmhirst Lake.

An important clue was the reference to Nipigon Forest Reserve. Searches on Google produced allusions to such a reserve currently located on islands in Lake Nipigon. The Ministry of Natural Resources is the agency managing the forested public lands of Ontario. Initial inquiries at the Geraldton Area Office and Nipigon District Office, proved fruitless. Officially, the Ministry does not have a long memory.

Was there ever a Nipigon Forest Reserve? Yes. The writer recalled coming across historical references to it, including some dating back to 1910. It was an era when no one was concerned about setting aside forest reserves in the unpeopled wilderness east of Lake Nipigon. Logging was, in fact, the order of the day, the wood being rafted down Lake Nipigon. Besides, Nipigon Forest Reserve seemed historically to be confined to an area south of Lake Nipigon, bordering the Nipigon River, a prime brook trout fishery, and a world-class attraction.

Pawing through old books and documents, the writer came upon a reference to the creation of a Nipigon-Onaman Game Preserve in 1933. Local MNR offices had no official memory of it. It covered 835 square miles, including Onaman Lake, north of Jellicoe. The writer recalled that in the early '70's, he had come upon a related sign tacked to a tree on a creek north of Geraldton. So the search took a different direction.

Years ago the writer had bought from an antique shop a full-colour laminated map of the Greenstone area in the 1930's. A little rummaging produced it – "Longlac", issued in 1938, a topographic map by Canada's Department of Mines and Resources. There it was – the Nipigon-Onaman Crown Game Preserve – at least the southeast corner of it. The southern boundary followed the CNR tracks from Beardmore, east to the CNR tracks between Longlac and Nakina, and followed those tracks north. No help. Those boundaries came nowhere near Elmhirst Township.

But Wilkinson Lake was labeled, and so was Elmhirst Lake. No Square Lake. But there was another piece of interesting information. The east boundary of Nipigon Provincial Forest ran north-south through Wilkinson Lake. Still no reference to Nipigon Forest Reserve. But the distance from the southern end of the boundary to Wilkinson was 47 miles, the distance specified in the old newspaper report.

A telephone call to the curator of the Nipigon Museum. Could they help? Betty Brill said they had recently received a batch of area maps from someone's estate in B.C. So the writer scheduled a trip

to Nipigon. Dan, the summer student in charge, had received the heads-up. Judging from the stack of maps, it looked to be an all-day job, for there was no finding aid. Half an hour into the search, and bingo!

A beautiful colour map entitled “Sturgeon River Gold Area”, which had accompanied the Ontario Department of Mines Annual Report of 1936. Wilkinson Lake had a name – Wilkinson Lake. But Elmhirst Lake was still unnamed.

The Sturgeon River Gold Area map of 1936 is an extraordinary document. A miniscule area in the vast province of Ontario is drawn and labeled in painstaking detail, half a century before GPS and satellite photography were commonplace tools. The map measures .55 by 1.1 metres (21.5 by 43.5 inches).

The map confirmed that the east boundary of the Nipigon Provincial Forest (not the Nipigon Forest Reserve) lay only a mile east of the historic Wilkinson Lake showing. The writer was ninety percent certain that the old “Penelton gold find” and the Wilkinson Lake showing were one and the same. By the time Bill Garvey created his map, the name of Penelton had been reassigned to a location further west in Kodiak’s current Penelton Gold Zone.

Not entirely satisfied, the writer drove to Beardmore to attend the weekly prospectors’ meeting. He explained his problem, and asked if anyone had documents from that era. Robert Cote said he did. At his home, Robert produced a marvelous map, issued in 1926. It was obviously a much-loved map, for it was falling to pieces.

The “Tashota-Onaman River Area” map, which had accompanied the annual report of the Ontario Department of Mines, showed the “East Boundary of Reserve” line running through an unnamed lake easily identified as Wilkinson. It coincided with the eastern boundary of the later Nipigon Provincial Forest.

Better yet. In big bold caps, between Lake Nipigon and the east boundary line, were the words NIPIGON FOREST RESERVE. The last proof!

To be fair, it was the last documentary proof. Earlier in the day, the writer had dropped into the home of Amede Lafontaine, and in the course of conversation, Amede remarked, “Square Lake? Of course I know Square Lake. I spoke to Bill Garvey many times about it.” Square Lake was what the maps called Wilkinson Lake.

Who would have thought the name would persist in memory for decades after the lake had received its official name circa 1936? Even Garvey’s map called the lake Wilkinson.

And if one looks with a critical eye at the contours of Wilkinson on a map, one perceives that the upper pond of that complicated water body does resemble a square, especially on the earlier maps.

Here’s the epilogue. Dave Barker, MNR information management supervisor, working from the Geraldton office, had become intrigued by the writer’s quest. He personally searched the District office, and enlisted the help of the MNR archives in Peterborough. There is, apparently, no official memory of a Nipigon Forest Reserve.

Still, the above exercise demonstrated that for prospectors and volunteer curators and amateur historians and for at least some government officials, history is alive and well in the North.