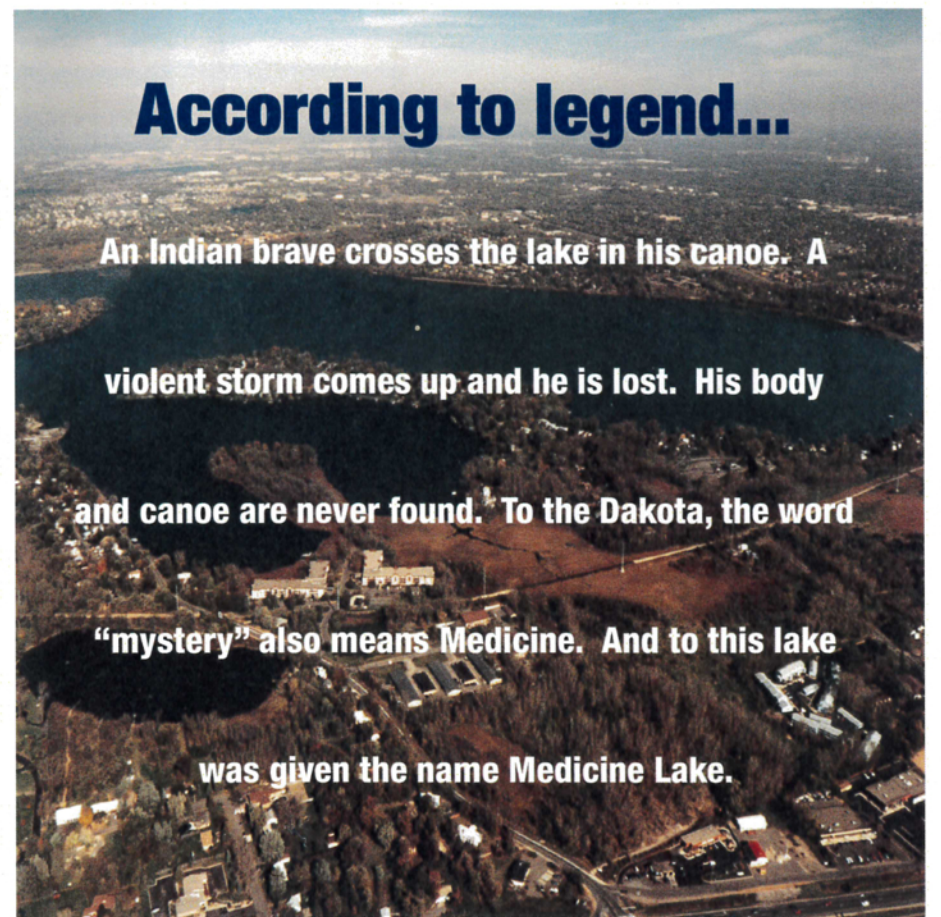


## A Brief History of How Medicine Lake Got Its Names



Medicine Lake, Hennepin County, Minnesota

Did Medicine Lake water once have medicinal qualities? There is evidence suggesting this was so. An 1890s chemical analysis found a “nutrient rich, healing water.” But that early water test has not yet resurfaced and may be lost to history. Medicine Lake was (and still is) a largely spring fed water body. Early accounts also note an unusual “bloom” in the lake in the summers. Perhaps this once held a medicinal quality. One early newspaper article of the Minneapolis Morning Tribune on July 14, 1914 mentions efforts to bottle spring water that bubbled from the ground near where the West Medicine Lake Park is today. No bottles of Medicine Lake Pure Spring Water are known to exist.



**According to legend...**  
 An Indian brave crosses the lake in his canoe. A violent storm comes up and he is lost. His body and canoe are never found. To the Dakota, the word “mystery” also means Medicine. And to this lake was given the name Medicine Lake.

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More than 175 years have passed since Joseph Nicollet first explored and mapped the Upper Mississippi River Valley. He, of course, was not the first. But he may have been the first to learn of the Mdewakanton Dakota Indian name of Medicine Lake. Since his time, you might be surprised to learn that our Medicine Lake has gone by no fewer than five (or six) other names. For you armchair historians out there, here are a few different how-Medicine-Lake-got-its-name stories you can drop in casual conversation to show you know a thing or two about the roots of our shores.

**Where-the-Beavers-Strike-Their-Mouths-in-the-Manner-of-an-Indian-Warcry [1830s; Joseph Nicollet]** Author Paul Durand’s life long study of Dakota Indian place names of Minnesota and parts of North and South Dakota, Wisconsin and Iowa is presented in his book, *Where the Waters Gather and the Rivers Meet*. His research notes the Mdewakanton Dakota translation for Medicine Lake:

“I CA-PA CA-GA-STA-KA MDE [Pronounced E SA-pa CHA-ha-SHTA-ka Bid] (1) mouth (2) beaver (3) free from ice: beaten, broken (4) lake. Present day Medicine Lake. This place name is not clearly understood, though perhaps it indicates the breaking or clearing of lake ice by the turbulence caused by these rodents. In contrast, Nicollet [1830s U.S. Government Explorer and Surveyor, Joseph N. Nicollet] translates it as “Where-the-Beavers-Strike-Their-Mouths-in-the-Manner-of-an-Indian-Warcry.”



**Crystal Lake [1861]** In her book, *Once Upon a Lake*, Lake Minnetonka historian Thelma Jones recounts the uprising of the Dakota Indians in Minnesota at the break of the Civil War. Fearful the Dakota were waiting to ambush local settlers, an exodus to St. Paul ensued.

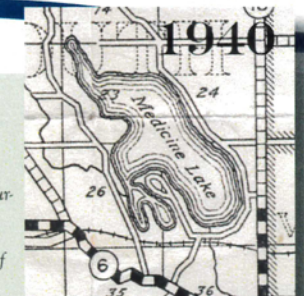
“The Holy Name Germans first fled to the small island in Holy Name Lake, thinking to fortify it. Then they changed their minds and made up a caravan of three oxen wagons to go to St. Paul. Trying to be quiet, they loaded all that they had of value and then the women and children climbed in. The cross-cut wooden wheels turned. Everyone froze with horror. With each roll of the wheels, the greaseless axles uttered protesting shrill cries that could be heard a mile through the still woods.

It was hot, terribly hot, up to one hundred degrees and the vicious deer-flies sat thick on the oxen. When the wagons had squealed their way up to Crystal Lake (now Medicine Lake), the lead oxen, wild from the deer flies, wheeled and plunged into the water. They refused to come out. The women wring their hands. The wagon-box started to float. None of the men could swim, but John Merz jumped into the water up to his ears. He coaxed, swore under his breath and half-drowned before he got the oxen turned on the right side and led them out of the water. The nerve-shattered caravan reached St. Paul the next day.”



**Lake Pezuta [1915; League of Catholic Women]** In a throwback to the Native American name for the word “Medicine,” the League of Catholic Women promoted a change of the name Medicine Lake to Lake Pezuta. At the time, the League was establishing an outing cottage at Medicine Lake that would later grow to be a home for single, but less fortunate, working women. In the first of several articles in which this “new” name is cited, the Minneapolis Morning Tribune of July 20, 1915 uses the name “Lake Pezihuto.” Later articles appear to correct the spelling to Lake Pezuta. Pezuta is the correct Dakota translation of “medicine.” Of interesting note, one of the articles refers to the Native Americans recognizing the lake’s medicinal qualities, something that is consistent with the naming of other Medicine Lakes across the US and Canada.

**Medicine Lake [1937-1940, Franklin Curtis-Wedge, PhD]** Franklin Curtis-Wedge, a Minnesota historian whose works included histories of a number of Minnesota counties, presents a glorified tale of how Medicine Lake came to be named Medicine Lake in *The Story of the Mission Farms on Medicine Lake*. This small historical essay recounts perhaps the most familiar telling of how Medicine Lake got its name.



**“The Lake of the Spirit,” Mde-Wakan**

“For countless centuries, many of [the Sioux] bands made their homes on the shores of the body of water that is now called Mille Lacs. Sudden storms, which often swept its surface, spoke to them of the mysterious working of the Great Spirit, and to His power they dedicated it. In time they proudly called themselves the Mdewakantons—the People of the Spirit Lake.

But about the middle of the eighteenth century, the Sioux villages at Mille Lacs were wiped out in a wild onslaught from the savage Chippewa who had obtained firearms from the French and had pushed their way westward from the Lake Superior country.

A few of the fleeing refugees established new villages along the lower Minnesota River. One of the largest of these was the one headed by Chief Shakopee, on the site of the modern city which bears his name. From this point, the villagers ranged far and wide, hunting and fishing.

One of their principal trails led to the site of Anoka, on the Mississippi River, at the mouth of the Rum River which flows from their ancient home at Mille Lacs. Midway, the trail skirted a beautiful lake, set amidst

heavy groves of trees which constituted a part of the “Big Woods,” a vast stretch of hardwood timber which occupied all this part of the present State, north and east of the

prairies and south of the pineries.

On the banks of this lake, the warriors established a stopping place near the mysterious sepulchers of earth which their far-distant ancestors had fashioned in the dim reaches of antiquity.

Brooding at this lake the homesick hearts of the Shakopee Sioux found in its waters a resemblance to the distant lake, from which their enemies had so ruthlessly expelled them.

Then, one sunny afternoon, one of their warriors launched his frail canoe upon its placid waters. A sudden storm hid him from his comrades’ sight. Neither his body nor the canoe were ever again seen by his comrades. To them it seemed that he had gone up as by a whirlwind to the skies (II Kings 2:11). Surely the Spirit had come with them to their new home. Surely it was now this lake that was their Lake of the Spirit, and thus they named it.

To a Sioux, anything that is spiritual, mysterious, or supernatural is “medicine,” and this was the word they imparted to the Whites as the equivalent for their ancient name. So to this day, the Lake is called Medicine.”



**Lake Willis [1852 expedition; Wilson, Murphy, Stevens, Ames et. al]** An article appearing in the Minneapolis Morning Tribune on December 21, 1913 recounts an expedition of early Minneapolis settlers on their quest to rediscover Lake Minnetonka in 1852. Several place names were noted but have since changed to the names they are known by today. Along the way, the journey-men passed by Cedar Lake, where they recite two prior names, Lake Monfort and Lake Gaines. They then slogged a trail to Medicine Lake, which they noted as Lake Willis, before finally reaching the Stevens claim at Minnetonka Mills. While the article does not go into detail about the early names, it is significant that they are mentioned to a certain date.

1861 1892 1915

**Barge’s Lake [1892]** Named for Jacob Barge, the land speculator who in June of 1887 purchased 450 acres and 3 1/2 miles of shoreline along Medicine Lake. He would plat this into three subdivisions called Medicine Lake Park, the first and third divisions of which he subdivided into affordable city-sized lots. Although there is no evidence that the lake was ever formally recognized by his name, a casual reference in a St. Paul Globe newspaper article of July 29, 1892 mentions the findings of a great Minneapolis flood along Bassett’s Creek. “Barge’s lake rose eight inches overnight,” stated the article. Days later, the Minneapolis City Engineer reported in the same paper that the lake had not risen eight inches, but 32 inches in a single night!