

Sacred Destinations: On the Road with Brad Olsen



Spirit of a Lake: Wisconsin's Devil's Lake and Effigy Mounds

A mere 15,000 years ago, near the end of the last Ice Age, most of Wisconsin lay under the grip of colossal ice sheets. The effects of those glaciers are the rolling hills and pristine lakes of Wisconsin. The region was carved by successive waves of ice sheets during a period known as the Wisconsin Glaciation, leaving behind dramatic moraines as far as the ice sheets advanced.

One spectacular formation is Devil's Lake. Towering astride the lake on three sides are spectacular quartzite bluffs formed during the last Ice Age. Originally an arm of the Wisconsin River that dried up after the last glaciers melted, the valley holding Devil's Lake was formed by the rushing water of a now extinct river. A glacier covering much of the area retreated and eventually diverted the river, pushing up two moraines of rocks and mud to contain the remaining water. The spring-fed body of water now called Devil's Lake is "trapped" between the quartzite bluffs and the two glacial "plugs." Today the spring-fed lake varies from 40-50 feet (12-15 m) in depth.

Native Americans roamed into what is today Wisconsin and developed a lifestyle of hunting and gathering unchanged for over 8,000 years. Exclusively in Wisconsin the Winnebago and other Indians erected thousands of conical and effigy mounds for religious purposes.

Native Americans in central Wisconsin revered Devil's Lake and related legends as to how the lake was created. The Winnebago believed water spirits who lived in the lake's depths battled with powerful thunderbirds in the sky, and in so doing threw up the boulders and cliffs. The lake is enclosed on the east, west and south by enormous fallen rock piles, the remains of these great battles.

The Winnebago were the most important tribe in the area, but it is believed the Sauk, Fox, and

Kickapoo people also made periodic visits to the lake. Whoever came on a sacred journey, presumably in the summer months, cautiously approached the lake making prayer offerings along the way. When native people gathered in large numbers their ceremonial activities centered around the effigy mounds on the north and southeastern shores.

Effigy Mounds

On the north shore of Devil's Lake are three types of mounds: those in the form of various animals, the "true" effigy mounds; those which look like ridges, the linear type; and those which look like giant chocolate drops, the round or conical types. In total on the north shore are four effigy mounds, two linear mounds, and two conical mounds, attesting to its esteemed value as a ritual site. On the south shore near the eastern cliffs is a lone bird-shaped mound, the only mound in the park discovered to contain a human skeleton. It is possible that this 150-foot-long "fork-tailed" bird effigy may also represent a "bird-man," combining the wing characteristics of a bird and the legs of a man.

The pristine lake has long been considered to contain supernatural spirits. The Winnebago called the lake *Tamahcunchukdah*, meaning "Sacred Lake," or "Spirit Lake." Early settlers mistranslated the name to "Devil's Lake," and unfortunately the name stuck.

Some sources contend that the effigy-building tradition lived on in the Siouan-speaking Winnebago tribe of southern Wisconsin, while others argue that the practice was lost at least 750 years ago and soon passed out of memory. Almost all researchers agree that around the time of contact with white settlers most Midwestern Indians had continued to excavate new graves for the recently deceased into previously existing mounds, similar to the way new graves are added to a family plot in cemeteries today. But as white settlers expanded westward, almost every tribe in the mound building regions of the Midwest were coerced or forced to vacate their land and all earthwork traditions were lost.

Relocated to Nebraska

The Winnebago were removed from their homeland by treaty in 1832 to live in Nebraska "Indian Country," and what little was recorded of their unique customs remains vague. By 1838 the Winnebago had relinquished all their lands east of the Mississippi River. Through neglect, prejudice, and contempt for Native American traditions, what may have survived of the mound building culture was finally eliminated and lost. Centuries of different Woodland Indians who left their mark on the land

would be forgotten and then rediscovered several hundred years later by explorers who were left with more questions than answers.


Effigy mound groupings show an uneven distribution throughout the effigy region, however some general patterns exist. Clusters of mounds in the lake region of Madison, Wisconsin, for example, once contained over 100 effigies among 1,000 various mound shapes, and several surrounding lakes confirm similar densities. Other areas of remarkable effigy group densities occur along the Fox River and the lower Wisconsin River, especially near the confluence of the Mississippi.

Water spirit effigies, mostly in the form of lizards, predominate in the eastern part of the state near Lake Michigan. Land animals, especially bears, represent the earth and cluster in western Wisconsin and astride the Mississippi valley. Bird mounds signify air and are most commonly found atop scenic valley bluffs or facing lakes. The Devil's Lake effigy mounds represent water spirits, earth animals and birds, congruent with the Winnebago legend of the lake's destructive creation stories.

Today records in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin indicate that as many as 4,000 mounds remain. This figure represents a mere 3% to 4% of the total mounds originally in the state. Devil's lake is the seeming center of effigy mound building activity in Wisconsin. The remaining mounds, now protected by the 1985 Burial Sites Preservation Law, are a small fraction of what was once a common characteristic of the Wisconsin landscape. Wanton destruction by the farmers' plow, ambitious developers, and souvenir seekers have decimated the once-dense concentration of these priceless artifacts. For over a hundred years the mounds were plowed down by farmers and regarded as obstacles to cultivation.

Getting to Devil's Lake

Devil's Lake State Park is located an hour north of Madison on State Highway 33. Effigy mounds are on both shores of the lake and there is a self-guided tour available in the Nature Center. There is a nominal fee for motorists entering the State Park. For more information see: devilslakewisconsin.com

The nearby city of Milwaukee hosts the annual Indian Summer Festival on the second weekend of September. America's largest American Indian cultural festival showcases the colorful diversity of traditional and contemporary Native American culture. See: www.indiansummer.org 

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