

IOWA HISTORY



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Khaki Suits, Gingham Dresses Replace Collars, Silk Stockings

For the grand price of \$1.50 the *St. Paul & Des Moines Railroad* took passengers from Union Depot in Des Moines to the “Best Place on Earth,” otherwise known as Clear Lake, Iowa, in 1910. Once there, the “only European” hotel in town offered rooms ranging from 75 cents to \$1.25. Vacationers could rent swimming suits at the Clear Lake Bath House and Toboggan Slide and enjoy a dip in the lake.

Des Moines Register reporter, Nellie E. Gardner, recommended the resort as a place to relax and forget day-to-day stresses. “If you hate the roses in your wallpaper and want to kick your office boy, swear at your stenographer or discharge your maid,” she suggested time off at Clear Lake. And plenty of people had discovered the Iowa resort community. The names of their cottages revealed their mindsets: Golden Moments, Bigenough, Lingerlonger and Cuddle Doon.

Nellie promised a place where “collars and cuffs, silk stockings and satin pumps” were nowhere to be seen. They were replaced with “khaki suits,” “gingham dresses” and “walking boots.”

The lake, seven miles long and three miles wide, promised white sand beaches and natural timber. The waters were seldom rough, making it easy to enjoy the lake in a sailboat or rowboat. It was restocked each year with bass, pike, trout, perch, sunfish and blue gills. There were no deep holes, making swimming safe.

Several hotels offered superb service. The Hotel Elk, the only “First class” hotel at the lake according to an ad in the *Des Moines Register*, offered daily rates from \$2 to \$2.50. Located directly across from the city park where band concerts were held every day, the hotel also served fresh fish three times a day.

And the Lake Shore Hotel, owned by the Cerro Gordo State Bank, offered guests newly furnished and “strictly modern” rooms on the north shore. However, it was also for sale at a “reasonable price.” The reason: “no officer in the bank has time to devote to hotel business.”

For those visitors who preferred a more rustic experience, tents could be rented and pitched on the beaches. Bayside was a popular free public park and bath house. The town of Clear Lake, population 2,000, was located at the east end of the lake. The commercial club sponsored concerts by the community band and games by the city baseball team.

By 1913 Dodge’s Point and Park Company was offering real estate on their 123-acre grounds. Their advertisement in the *Des Moines Register* boasted that automobile roads and over 2,000 feet of cement sidewalks had been laid out, as well as a telephone system of “copper metallic circuits”—all ensuring reliable local and long-distance service.

The company was selling furnished cottages ranging from \$750 to \$2,250. Eight terraced, shady shore lots, 50 by 150 feet in size, were available for \$800 each. Anyone with at least one-fourth of that amount in cash could buy. The balance was due in three years. Payments could be made annually or monthly, at six percent interest. However, there was this stipulation: “No sales will be made to undesirable persons.” No explanation was offered for who qualified as “undesirable.”

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Sources

- Advertisement in *Des Moines Register*, p 12, Aug. 12, 1913.
- “Clear Lake is the Logical Summer Resort of All Iowa and Each Season Its Throng of Vacationists and Cottagers is Increasing,” *Des Moines Register*, Aug. 6, 1910.
- Gardner, Nellie E. “They Are Having Real Pleasure at the Clear Lake Resort Now,” *Des Moines Register*, Sept. 1, 1912.