

History of Higgins Lake

Higgins Lake is a deep, clear, oligotrophic lake located in Roscommon County at the northern end of the Muskegon River Watershed. It is named after Sylvester Higgins, the first chief of the topographical department of the Michigan Geological Survey in 1852. It was previously named Forginson Lake during a prior survey in 1839, and for centuries before European settlers arrived, the Chippewa people called the lake Majinabeesh, which translates to "sparkling water."

The lake is categorized as oligotrophic meaning that it has low levels of nutrients to support algae and plant life, however it has high levels of oxygen to support cold water fish. It is also very clear with visibility of 20 feet measured by a sicchi disk. At its greatest distance it is 7 mile long and 4 miles wide with 21 miles of mostly sandy shoreline. The surface area measures approximately 10,000 acres and it has a maximum depth of 135 feet. The major source of water for the lake comes from deep submerged springs with the remainder primarily from rainfall and runoff, with less than 6% coming from small streams.

The Higgins Lake watershed covers an area of about 19,000 acres. Water from the lake drains through the Cut River to Marl Lake, to Houghton Lake and then to the Muskegon River on its way to Lake Michigan. Only one mile north of Higgins Lake, water is carried to the opposite side of the state through Beaver Creek and the Au Sable River to Lake Huron.

Higgins Lake was formed during the last Ice Age around 12,000 years ago by advancing and receding glaciers measuring over one mile deep. This glacier activity carved out the bedrock to create the basin of Higgins Lake while uncovering several areas of free flowing groundwater believed to be part of a large underground river extending across the state. There are numerous stories surrounding this massive underground water source. One Indian legend describes how a chief hauling a large load of fur on Lake Michigan was lost in a storm. Although his body was never recovered, identifiable parts of his canoe were found in Higgins Lake several weeks later. Other stories from the logging era from the 1870's to the early 1900's describe the operations of logging barges on Higgins Lake. While using large stone block anchors on ropes up to 1,500 feet long to hold the barge, on occasion they had to raise and move the anchor because they couldn't reach the bottom.

The lake consists of a larger North and smaller South basin separated by Detroit Point (formerly Chicago Point) on the West, and Flag Point (formerly Parker Point) on the East. The North basin has the lake's single island, Treasure Island, and is the part of the lake where the deepest water has been measured. The South basin contains a "sunken island" and the only outlet of the lake, the Cut River. This outlet, controlled by a dam, flows into Marl Lake and then to Houghton Lake. There is a North and South State park containing campgrounds and boat launches together with numerous road- end boat launch sites around the lake.

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Treasure Island is about 30 acres in size and remained undeveloped until 1963 when Gerrish Township sold the property to a private developer. The island now contains numerous private homes and a boat club. The island's prior name was Flynn's Island but was changed after the death of Ezra Pritchard, who lived there in isolation for many years and was known as "the Hermit of Higgins Lake." The legend is that he accumulated some wealth from being a "bounty jumper" during the Civil War and buried it on the island. He lived in a shack and dugout on the island for 20 years before his body was found in 1902. His hard life was evidenced by the description that due to the extreme cold and resulting frostbite, he "only had stubs for fingers." Ezra was buried in the Potters Field section of the Roscommon Cemetery.

Higgins Lake's clear water and pristine surroundings are being threatened by a growing local population and robust tourism industry that attracts over 100,000 visitors each summer. The water quality of the lake is being affected in a number of ways. Surface runoff from the large watershed plus the more than 70 road-end access sites add any existing pollutants from those areas to the lake. The increased use of fertilizers and the use of faulty or improperly placed septic systems add nutrients that contribute to excessive plant and algae growth in the lake. There have also been numerous aquatic invasive species introduced into the lake over recent decades. The HLPOA continues to provide a strong leadership role in countering these threats by working independently, and in collaboration with others, "to protect, preserve and enhance the quality of Higgins Lake and its surrounding watershed."

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