Saint Benedict’s Woods, Lodge and Lake Sarah

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Saint Ben’s Woods, Lodge and Lake Sarah
Some History to Explore!

Saint Ben’s Woods, Lodge and Lake Sarah: Some History to Explore!
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FB_IMG_1698008733129
Retrieved from Facebook 4/6/2024.
There are lots of things that have changed since this 1980 aerial photo was taken of CSB, but what I want to talk about today hasn't changed much: the Sisters' Woods and lake, on the far reaches of the campus.

CSB Archives, filename CSB 1980 AIR B-30000002-18
These woods don't get nearly as much attention as those in the Saint John's Arboretum, but I'd like to encourage you all to experience them.
Image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024. 15-PS Campus West-Prairie by Woods
Saint John's has Lake Sagatagan; Saint Ben's has Lake Sarah. OK, it's a little smaller... OK, it’s a LOT smaller...

Image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024. 12-PS Campus West-Lake Sarah
...but the paths in the Saint Ben's woods are beautiful, peaceful, and can be adventurous!
Image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.
02-PS Campus West-Trail in woods
I'll use these words from a 1992 *Record* columnist: "Although nature is readily at our disposal, it has been widely neglected...Too often we allow ourselves to be absorbed by our daily rituals." And we fail to observe nature. We should "observe the world and be always in awe of its wonder and beauty."

1992-10-01, *The Record* p.8
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/38017/rec/2
Maps of the Saint Ben's woods seem to be hard to come by, but I have this hand-drawn one in the Archives, showing the trails, and the freeway, and noting some of the distances. It is oriented toward the south, however, the opposite of most "global north" maps...
O:\Archives\csbarchives\Maps and aerial photos GIS
...so here, I've flipped it around so that north is at the top...
O:\Archives\csbarchives\Maps and aerial photos GIS
...which is the orientation of this map, which is newer...

O:\Archives\csbarchives\Maps and aerial photos GIS
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchives/id/8851/rec/6
...a bit more accurate, and...
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https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchives/id/8851/rec/6
...available on the CSB Archives' website.
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https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchives/id/8851/rec/6
Somewhere along the way, in the last ten years or so, students – both Bennies and Johnnies – became more aware that St. Ben’s had a woods, and trails for hiking...AND a lake.
Image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.
Left: 09-PS Campus West-Trail
Right: 11-PS Campus West-Trail in the Woods
This pensive senior in April 2015 noted that "I have eaten my weight in Gary's Pizza and I've even found the notoriously hidden Lake Sarah" - so she should therefore be ready to graduate...

2015-04-17 The Record p.9

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/42772/rec/10
...evidence that finding Lake Sarah had become something to accomplish. Here, it is on The Record's fall 2015 "Bucket list."
2015-10-23, The Record p.4
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/42872/rec/11
...and on its spring 2018 list of "100 things every Bennie and Johnnie should do," where it is ranked at Number 21.
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/43629/rec/12
When Kari-Shane Davis-Zimmerman and her class made lists of dating ideas that was published in *The Record* in 2019, “Go to Lake Sarah” shows up as number 9 on the list – though I'm not sure paddle boarding on the lake was ever really a "thing."

2019-03-22, *The Record* p. 5
In 2021, two of the CSB Senate board members identified Lake Sarah as their “favorite spot at CSB.”
2021-04-16, The Record, p.2
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/44288/rec/16
And finding Lake Sarah was on last year's list of “Fifty things to do before the end of spring semester.”
2023-01-26, The Record, p. 4
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/44860/rec/18
Sister Simona Nehl, 1883-1981

In 1958 [age 75] she came to the motherhouse and helped wherever and however she could...

... she took great interest in all that went on around her and was considered a sort of walking encyclopedia. She delighted in repeating her story of how she was one of a group of aspirants who in 1907 named the lake in the woods Lake Sarah.

So going there is definitely a "thing." I’m here to share some of its history! The lake's name dates back to Sister Simona Nehl, who "was considered a sort of walking encyclopedia. She delighted in repeating her story of how she was one of a group of aspirants who, in 1907, named the lake in the woods Lake Sarah."

Image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.

13-PS Campus West-Prairie by woods
Text from personal histories in the SBMA.
Sister Conilia Nesges: "We went to the woods always in summer, about twice, and stayed there all day and prayed there; that was a big treat."

Many of the sisters and alums recall spending time in the woods in their earlier years, sometimes playing – volleyball was popular – and sometimes praying. Image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024. 07-PS Campus West-Picnic in the Woods [unidentified participants] Text from personal histories in the SBMA.
Sister Janice Wedl: "I remember we picked gooseberries out in the woods... We picked up potatoes in the fall... we did a lot of praying while we were doing that. We prayed rosaries."

...sometimes picking berries and doing "a lot of praying..."
Image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.
07-PS Campus West-Picnic in the Woods [unidentified participants]
Text from personal histories in the SBMA.
...and also picnicing. This entry in the CSB publication *College Days* from 1925 describes students spending the day in the woods running, playing, and enjoying the colors of autumn, and having a picnic supper in the pavilion. Right image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.

08-PS Campus West-Picnic in the Woods [unidentified participants]
1925 v.5 n.2 *College Days* Winter

[https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchives/id/11561/rec/1](https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchives/id/11561/rec/1)
The pavilion was a structure built out in the woods – initially looking like this – and it was new in 1925. Roman Zwack worked for Saint Benedict’s Convent from 1936-1979, and he did ...

Left image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.

06-PS Campus West-First Lodge

Right image: https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/225/rec/1

SBMA on Vivarium: SBM.11e10 Installing the hanging lamps; Roman Zwack.

“Roman Zwack, on the right, was a faithful employee who served the sisters in many capacities (college bus driver, convent driver, maintenance) for 43 years (1936-1979).”
...an oral history that is in the Monastery Archives. Roman was asked about the Pavilion. "Ja, that was already there when I came... not as nice as it is now. There were no screens, it was just open, and the grounds were not kept up. "The sisters would go there and have their picnics and stuff." There was no place to cook, so they brought food out from the kitchen. The Men's picnic would also be out there, and Sister Alfreda had horses out there.


Image: https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/225/rec/1

SBMA on Vivarium: SBM.11e10 Installing the hanging lamps; Roman Zwack.

“Roman Zwack, on the right, was a faithful employee who served the sisters in many capacities (college bus driver, convent driver, maintenance) for 43 years (1936-1979).“
In May 1962, the Sisters' Chapter approved the renovation of the pavilion to make it more serviceable for recreational needs, winterizing it and including sleeping accommodations for 6-8 people.

Image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.
04-PS Campus West-Lodge

I'm willing to bet not many people know that there were once male "Bennies," back when the Sisters ran a school for boys here. After it closed, the Sisters kept in touch with them as alumni, as noted in this 1964 Benet magazine feature in which one of those boys came back for a homecoming and demonstrated his football stance. Sister Marie Hilger writes that "Out in the woods, the boys found a big change in progress.... a larger pavilion, with electricity, gas and water facilities."
Here's a photo I took myself in 2010. By this time, the Pavilion, also referred to as the Lodge, had undergone renovations in 1980, 2005 and 2006, to install electricity, a bathroom, insulation, kitchen cabinets, carpeting, and to create more rooms.

CSB Archives photo: Lodge 20101005 plr 02.jpg, October 5, 2010 by Peggy Roske.
For several decades, in the 1930s to the 1960s, the woods served another purpose for the Sisters and the students, when there was turkey farming on the campus. There is a long video about it in Vivarium. The operation was started by Sister Ruth Kann, both as a way to provide food for St. Ben's, but also as one way to repay the debt for the Saint Cloud Hospital’s construction the year before. <ENTER> Sister Ruth asked student Clara Loxtercamp, who grew up on a farm, if she would like to start raising turkeys in the spring. Later Clara's mother donated nine turkey eggs, and with 18 more from two other mothers, the flock was nurtured.

“As was the custom of Benedictine houses in the Old World, the sisters, from their beginnings in America, tried to be self-supporting.”
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/32/rec/1
Clara later became Sister Georgetta, whose obituary notes that she "started the turkey farm, a decided plus in her background of many achievements."

Georgetta (Clara) Loxtercamp. Photo from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.

Text image from RG-16-2-Sisters-Records-Transfers, Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives.
Sister Frances Kaproth, in her oral history, talked about leading the turkeys out to the woods and back with Sister Georgetta. And how they would tell Sister Ruth whenever a turkey sneezed, because they enjoyed watching her applying Vicks to the turkey's bill!

Kaproth Image from RG-16-1-Sisters-Records-Deceased, Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives

S. Frances Alphonse Kaproth (1910-2000): "On no-school days Sister Georgetta went ahead and led the turkeys to the woods. I was at the other end making sure that all was going along well. We led them home the same way. When a turkey sneezed, we told Sister Ruth. She would come to the turkey barn and rub the turkey's bill with Vicks. We enjoyed watching her. [Laughter] That's why we told her whenever a turkey sneezed."
When Sister Ruth left to minister to orphans in St. Paul, Sister Carolinda Medernach bore responsibility for the turkeys for many years. Sister Carolinda oversaw the industry evolve from a shed to turkey brooder houses and roosting barns on campus and in the woods.

SBM.24c02 St. Benedict's Monastery Farm: Turkey caretaker, Sister Carolinda Medernach

“While Sister Ruth Kann started the turkey industry at St. Benedict's Monastery, it was Sister Carolinda Medernach who bore the responsibility for the turkeys throughout the years. Beginning under Sister Ruth Kann's direction in 1932, Sister Carolinda assumed the leadership in this industry after Sister Ruth left to minister to the orphans in St. Joseph Orphange, St. Paul, MN. Sister Carolinda watched the industry grow from a shed, known as the ‘rag shed’ to turkey brooder houses and roosting barns on campus and in the woods while the flock grow from 52 to over 4,000 turkeys.”

SBMA on Vivarium: https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/1097/rec/1

The flock grew from 30 to 52 to over 4,000 turkeys. (In this photo of their winter home, you can see the Sacred Heart Chapel, the old water tower and the roof of the Main Building in the distance.)

SBM.24c04 St. Benedict's Monastery Farm: Turkey winter home

“As the flock of turkeys grew, brooder house and sheds were added to the farm to house the turkeys during the winter months. The winter offered many challenges: at first the turkeys preferred to roost on the roofs after their freedom in roaming the woods during the summer; the incubators, hoverers and other heaters (causing frequent electrical failures) demanded a private electrical line from the power house to the turkeys; the boys from St. Benedict's Bethlehem School for Boys had to be kept from feeding the young turkeys corn, which the Sisters discovered was a harmful diet for them.”

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/1099/rec/5
The caption for this photo says “the candidates who took care of the turkeys (the ‘turkey girls’) each had their pet turkeys, and the turkeys knew [them]. In the photo, Veronica Klein (later Sister Ruthelda) hugs her special turkey.”

SBM.24c03 St. Benedict's Monastery Farm: Turkey pets
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/1098/rec/4
This 20 x 80 foot wire-sided turkey pole barn was built in the woods in 1932, which “added to the rustic beauty of the woods and the comfort of the turkeys.” Details from SBM.24c01. Image from the Saint Benedict’s Monastery video, “The Turkey Story,” by Evin Rademacher, O.S.B. and John Parker (a video describing the work done by the Sisters to raise turkeys for profit from 1930 to 1962). https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/1110/rec/9.
“In spring, the Sisters and candidates rounded up the turkeys and led them to the woods. They then took turns staying with them to deter "run-aways," fed and watered them, and set up nests to encourage the turkeys to stay in the barn area rather than hide their eggs all over the woods.”

SBM.24c05 St. Benedict’s Monastery Farm: Turkey summer home in the woods

“To give the turkeys more space and freedom during the summer, a turkey pole barn was built in the woods. In spring, the Sisters and candidates rounded up the turkeys and led to the woods. They then took turns in staying with them to deter "run-aways," fed and watered them and set up nests to encourage the turkeys to stay in the barn area rather than hide their eggs all over the woods.”

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/1100/rec/6
“The round-up of turkeys for their return to their winter home after summer in the woods was always a challenge." Sometimes they had to be led back by Sisters holding bait to coax them.

SBM.24c06 St. Benedict's Monastery Farm: Turkey round-up for winter
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/1100/rec/6
After the novices plucked the turkeys for Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter sales, a retailer would come for the turkeys. Here’s a photo of Sister Ruth with turkeys ready for market, along with a document from the Saint Ben's Monastery Archives about the turkey industry effort. The turkey operation ended in 1962. At its peak it produced 4,000 turkeys a year.

SBMA on Vivarium: SBM.24c07 St. Benedict's Monastery Farm: Turkeys ready for marketing https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/1102/rec/2. 1930s. "Generally after the Sisters (chiefly the novices or new members of the community) had plucked the turkeys, the St. Cloud Poultry Company or Witt's Butcher Shop in St. Paul would send an agent to judge the turkeys for marketing. However, occasionally the task fell to Sister Ruth Kann.”

And one last photo of the turkeys, in all their glory – because it leads us into another feature of the Sisters’ woods...the statue of Our Lady of Grace that is near the lodge.

Left image: Turkey image PS Enterp-Agr10-16.jpg.
Right image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.
Its plaque says that it was "presented by the college students of 1932-33"; it was "paid for by donations received by the novices." Nowadays it is showing its age and could use some repair.

Our Lady of Grace Statue in the woods
Color photo by Thomasette Scheeler OSB
Left and right images from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.
Plaque photo 2013 0422 by Peggy Roske
And speaking of statues, one of my favorite stories about Sister Colman O’Connell is the rumor that she and "other faculty who hated the statues" in the Main Building loaded them up in the dead of night and "drowned the saintly company" in Lake Sarah! There may be a grain of truth here somewhere...

_Saint Benedict's Today_ Fall 1988 p. 3


Photo 3-Lake Sarah-July 1998-front, by Sister Vernice Ramler, SBMA
...because, returning to Roman Zwach’s oral history, there was a problem with quicksand by Lake Sarah. The workers had to walk on planks by the lake. It was "a really dangerous place to be near if you got to the wrong place." But there were no warning signs because, when the Sisters went walking there, they didn't get that close to the lake, and "Well, there was never any reason for going to the lake...the only time we went there was when we brought the flax out there." “When the men took the flax straw out there, they used planks.”


Image: https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/225/rec/1

SBMA on Vivarium: SBM.11e10 Installing the hanging lamps; Roman Zwack.
Flax was another industry the Sisters tried, making linens from home-grown flax, such as the altar cloth here, used on the occasion of the dedication of the new Sacred Heart altar in 1983. The sisters had found a plot of land in the woods near St. Benedict's Monastery that was compatible to the planting of flax.

DEDICATION OF THE NEW ALTAR OF SACRED HEART CHAPEL  October 24, 1983

SBM.12c09 Clothing the altar - St. Benedict's Monastery - St. Joseph Minn - Vivarium (oclc.org) – a photo – the caption of which says: “The homespun linen altar cloth used on this occasion was made in 1920 by Sisters Albina Hoeft, spinner, and Patricia Hoeft, weaver. They had learned their craft as girls in Bavaria. The sisters found a plot of land in the woods near St. Benedict’s Monastery that was compatible to the planting of flax. They followed the whole process of harvesting it, thrashing it, retting* it in Lake Sarah, and drying it in the sun. Then after breaking it, they spun and wove it into the linen.”
Here's a formidable photo! Flax spinning was introduced at St. Benedict's Monastery in the 1890s by two blood sisters, Sisters Albina and Petrina Hoeft, who had learned that craft as girls in Bavaria. "They followed the whole process of harvesting it, thrashing it, retting* it in Lake Sarah, and drying it in the sun. Then after breaking it, they spun and wove it into the linen.”

*("Retting is a process employing the action of micro-organisms and moisture on plants to dissolve or rot away much of the cellular tissues and pectins surrounding bast-fibre bundles, facilitating the separation of the fibre from the stem.” Wikipedia)

Image and details from SBM.24d01 St. Benedict's Monastery Farm: Preparing home-grown flax for spinning ("Scutching")
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/1106/rec/7
And lastly, the Saint Ben's woods has long been used as a science lab. Here is CSB's first Biology professor, Sister Remberta Westkaemper, amidst the trillium, the flower that gave the woods' "Trillium Trail" its name (although I've been told that, sadly, the deer have decimated the flowers so the name no longer applies). Sister Remberta took many a class on field trips to the woods, and collected and classified over 600 plants from Stearns County, a collection that is now kept at the University of Minnesota.

Remberta (1890-1988) opened the biology department in the College of St. Benedict in 1917.

Left: Sister Remberta Westkaemper amid the trilliums in the St. Ben's woods.
Image from Saint Benedict’s Monastery Archives, PastPerfect, retrieved April 2024.

Right: https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/495/rec/5; SBM.18a01b.
See also: S. Remberta Westkaemper, OSB (Videos-5; audio)
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SBM/id/1126/rec/11
Later, Biology professor Nick Zaczkowski took students on field trips as well. This 1965 piece in the CSB paper The Torch mentions that "the girls" (!) in his class "will make a limnological study of Lake Sarah." That was before the Biology department consolidated on the SJU campus in the late 1960s. (By the time I took Nick’s Field Biology class in the 1970s, none of the field trips included Lake Sarah.)

1965-05-07, The Torch p. 3
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/376/rec/1
If you care to take a walk in the Sisters’ woods, you might find it helpful to have a look at that map on the CSB Archives’ website. Enjoy!
https://www.csbsju.edu/csb-archives/photosandmaps/csbaerialphotosandcampusmaps