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Beyond science

Lakeside Lab in northwest Iowa serves as regents resource center

Minnesota, according to the license plates, has 10,000 lakes. Iowa has about 50.

But even the most ardent northerner can feel at home in Iowa's Great Lakes region, with its blue water, thick woods, and cool breezes. Bait shops and marinas, rooster tails from water skiers, and the Twins on the radio create a lake culture that seems plucked from Crow Wing County and moved south a few hundred miles.

Yet it is unmistakably Iowa, with Hawkeye flags fluttering from the docks, and, on the western shore of West Lake Okoboji, a little piece of the University of Iowa.

The [Lakeside Laboratory](#) is a century-old complex of labs and barracks dating to 1909, when UI President T.H. Macbride purchased the land as a field station for teaching and scientific research on the lake and surrounding woods and prairies. The lab is administered for the Board of Regents, State of Iowa, by the University of Iowa for use by students, faculty, and researchers from all colleges and universities in the state.

Today, the place is rustic in the best sense of the word: a complex of stone, mostly CCC-built science labs; an 1890s lake house original to the property; small visitor cabins; and two transplanted roadside hotels that look like the kind of place your family vacationed as a kid.

It overlooks West Lake Okoboji's Millers Bay and is filled with fields of restored prairie and soaring forests of oak and ash that make for prime scientific research specimens. Cicadas buzz, Evinrudes whine, and children shriek as they play at nearby lake homes and beaches.

The lab's mission has moved beyond science programs for college students, as Macbride envisioned it. In 2006, it was designated a "regents resource center," broadening its scope to include the local community, and its work to more than science.

"Lots of people—artists, writers, business people, high school teachers—have come to see this as their facility as well," says Tom Bedell, an Okoboji business owner and former instructor in the Tippie School of Management's Executive MBA program, who championed greater use of the facility when he was a member of the Board of Regents from 2005–06. "We've become a more important part of the vitality of life here in northwest Iowa, and a better way for the universities to deliver their programs in this part of the state."

Now, the lab is used by students in the Iowa Writers' Workshop as a writing retreat, and a writers program conducts weeklong seminars for northwest Iowa residents. A popular winter event is for an artist to sketch an animal or insect—a cardinal, say, or a dragonfly—on the ice at Millers Bay, then local residents fill in the sketch, creating a piece of "people art" that's photographed from the air.



The lab also is home to the Okoboji Entrepreneurial Institute, a five-day program held every August for eight UI undergraduates and 24 other students from across the state who want to learn more about building a business, but who need help with things like vision, ideas, networking, and money.

And in 2009, Lakeside was the only Midwest stop on a tour of Big Bugs, a traveling exhibition of ginormous insect sculptures, some as big as 18 feet high, that was viewed by more than 20,000 people.

“We’ve just begun to explore more programs involving writing and the arts, so that’s going to be a growth area for us,” says Peter van der Linden, the lab’s director and one of the few UI employees lucky enough to be able to sit on a dock and listen to the waves lap the shore when he needs to get away from the office for a few minutes.

But given its unique location, science education and research are still Lakeside’s bread and butter. The University’s Hygienic Laboratory maintains a water quality testing lab here, and it remains a popular destination for faculty and students studying a biology and ecology found nowhere else in Iowa.

The lab hosts youth science camps that fill up quickly every summer, and also a program for preschool teachers to help them introduce their students to nature. It’s also working with the Spencer Community School District to develop a science education curriculum using the lab facilities.

“Last year, we did a Shakespeare study program that combined art and science,” van der Linden says. “The students came here to write and to study plants Shakespeare mentions in his plays. It’s the kind of innovative program we plan to do more of.”