

The Ice Age in Duluth Township  
Todd Lindahl  
May 2005

The immense glaciers of the ice age erased all that had existed previously in northeast Minnesota. By 11,500 years ago the ice had retreated to a point outside of Minnesota and northward toward Hudson Bay. The climate, while still cooler overall, was gradually warming up. Vegetation began to advance close to the margins of the retreating ice sheet. This was a tundra environment with extensive open areas of grass sedges and scattered stands of black spruce, willow, and dwarf birch trees. The most interesting animal to reside in this early forest was the American Mastodon. While most of the other species of large mammals had become extinct by 8,000 years ago, there is some evidence that the Mastodon may have survived until about 6,000 years ago. It is difficult to imagine why a beast that ate spruce needles and lived in a swamp ever went extinct around here.

By 12,000 years ago the western end of the Lake Superior basin was ice free, but the eastern end of the lake was still covered by the ice of the Superior lobe. This resulted in an ice dam and the level of the lake behind it reached its highest level. During this period in time the shoreline of Glacial Lake Duluth (Lake Superior) would have been close to two and a half miles north of the Duluth Town Hall. On the Homestead Road this would be located just below the junction with the Aho Road. A little better than half of the area of Duluth Township would have been under water during this period. This high water condition persisted for perhaps a few thousand years. By roughly 9,000 years ago the lake was at the level where it is today. This however was not the end of the story since the lake level continued to drop until it was about 300 feet lower than today about 7,000 years ago. At this time it would have been possible to walk from the Homestead Road due south to the Brule River in Wisconsin without much difficulty. The climate at this time was warmer than today, but these conditions too would soon change. The land, which had been depressed by the weight of the glacial ice, was now on the rebound and rising. It is still rising very slowly to this day. The north shore from Hoveland south rises at a slower rate than from Hoveland north past Thunder Bay. This is because the ice sheet persisted on the east half of the lake longer than it did on the west half. Our rate of rebound here has decreased like the third bounce of a ball as opposed to the first bounce. The Canadians it seems are still only on the first or second bounce.

We always tend to take our surroundings for granted and generally assume that what we see today has always been that way. In reality where we live has been a radically different place at times in the past. One has to wonder what it will be like far in the future.