

Chinese Inspired Boat Festival in Minnesota

Those funky-looking boats often steal the show.

But the outrigger canoe-style vessels with the decorative Chinese dragon heads and tails are only a part of the story and history of dragon boats – in China, for sure, and even here on Lake Bemidji.



The Dragon Boat Festival, headlined by the highly popular dragon boat races, has only dotted the Lake Bemidji landscape – or waterscape – since 2006. But the early August event has quickly become a late-summertime favorite on and around the “Lake on the Mississippi” – the resource’s First City – with a host of weekend events surrounding those dragon boat races.

And as in China, where these races originated more than 2,000 years ago, it's as much about the aquatic resource as it is about the boats and the races.

Maybe even more so.



In south-central China, dragon boat races have been a part of the culture for more than 2,500 years, a basis for annual water rituals and celebrations. In China, dragons were traditionally believed to be the rulers of all waters: rivers, seas, lakes. As a result, dragon boat races there are rich in ancient ceremonial, ritualistic and religious traditions.

After just a dozen or so years, the Lake Bemidji celebration is creating its own feel, very much a reflection of the lake and everything that comes with it.

“The park offers a spectacular venue for the event that offers an amphitheater on the hillside for great viewing of the races and spacious grounds for food vendors and entertainment tent,” said Lori Paris, president of the Bemidji Area Chamber of Commerce, which helped bring the races and the festival to Lake Bemidji. “Our cultural sponsor has always been Concordia Language Villages – it has been a great partnership from Day One.”



Same goes for the relationship between the lake and its users.

“Many of our (dragon boat races) participants are also part of the Bemidji canoe and paddle club. These groups are genuinely concerned for our resources,” Paris told *Minnesota Traditions*, which celebrates these resources and the Minnesota traditions that call them home. (For more, go to www.minnesotatraditions.com)

Brice Vollbrecht, a Minnesota Department of Natural Resources conservation officer based out of Bemidji, worked the festival and races in 2017.

“The Dragon Boat Festival seems to be growing in popularity with a lot of people participating in the event and watching it,” Vollbrecht said. “I spent a bunch of time on Lake Bemidji the day of the event, but most of my time was spent monitoring boaters not directly involved in the event. The nice weather we had over the weekend brought a lot of boaters to the lake.

While Lake Bemidji only started hosting the Dragon Boat Festival and dragon boat races in 2006, the lake has long been regarded as a premier recreational destination, with anglers, paddlers, boaters, sailors, jet skiers and other recreational types dotting the waterway during the open-water season: A perfect backdrop for anything that involves water and the summertime here, including those dragon boat races.



“The hillside offers great theater-style seating,” Paris said of Paul Bunyan Park, which overlooks the lake and serves as a headquarters of sorts for the festival and races.

“And the lake then becomes the stage.”

Center stage.

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