

CASS COUNTY CLIPPINGS

July 1, 2014

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THE DAM AT LEECH RIVER WASHES OUT



A hundred foot section of the dam at Federal Dam controlling the water from Leech Lake washed out on June 4, 1957. According to Henry Dart, dam tender at the time, work crews had built a coffer dam in preparation for construction of a new apron at the dam. Space surrounded by the coffer dam had completely dried up and work was about to begin when the current of the Leech Lake river undercut both the dam and coffer dam, sweeping a 100 ft. section of the structure downstream. The coffer dam “blew out”. Water rushed into the dam itself. One of the workers, Norman Miller, was on the apron when the dam burst, but he did escape.

Residents at Walker were concerned that the break might cause a considerable drop in the lake level, but the level of the lake itself dropped only about a quarter of an inch in the first ten hours. Between the time the dam burst about 9:00 p.m. Tuesday night and 3:00 p.m. the next day, the water level at the dam had dropped about 20 inches. However, rising water on the Leech Lake River flooded out wild rice beds in Mud Lake for that season.

The blacktop road leading north out of Federal Dam was cut by the flooding water. Billy Monette, as well as Orin Henderson, had just crossed that area of the road when the dam broke. Orin was dam tender at Winnie and was on his way back to Winnie. He got a call about midnight to shut off the dam at Winnie to prevent flooding further down the river. There was only limited passage on the work area for the next six weeks. Occasionally someone crossed by boat to get to the north side of the river. When Father McHenry arrived at Federal Dam to begin his pastorate, he had to cross the river by boat as the road was closed.

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The Cass County Historical Society is seeking a member of the society to serve on the Board of Directors. This is a three-year term with the option of serving two consecutive terms. Interested parties may contact the museum at 547-7251 for more details.

Linda Gilsrud was added to the museum staff by the Board on June 3, 2014. Linda submitted a brief bio:

My work history includes 25+ years as a Chief HR Officer for three organizations including the hospital in Mankato; the City of Rochester; and, most recently, Bemidji State University/ Northwest Technical College. I obtained my bachelor's and master's degrees from Minnesota State University, Mankato.

I am most proud of my family including my husband, Tim; children, Jenny and Nathan; their spouses, Eric and Jessica; and my five grandchildren, Jacob, Hannah, Emily, Alayna, and Brandon.

We have owned a home in Walker since 2003. In my free time, I enjoy reading, gardening, and crafting. Thanks to the Board, Renee, and Jolene for their support in my new role.

Cass County Historical Society
presents

Free Fridays for 2014

| | |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| May 30 | May Creek Senior Living Center |
| June 6 | Tim Gilsrud |
| June 13 | Walker VFW |
| June 20 | The Ranch House |
| June 27 | Frizzell Furniture Gallery |
| July 4 | Walker American Legion |
| July 11 | First National Bank of Walker |
| July 18 | Bank Forward |
| July 25 | Lampert's Cabinets |
| Aug 1 | Walker Rotary Club |
| Aug 8 | Anderson's Family Resorts |
| Aug 15 | Arvig Enterprises, Inc. |
| Aug 22 | Next Innovations |
| Aug 29 | Walker Motor Sports |

Thank you to our Free Friday Sponsors

Tasks for Volunteers

- Fold brochures
- Collate and staple quarterly newsletter.
- Fold, label and stamp newsletters for post office
- Perform accessioning tasks\
- Perform Museum reception tasks
- Perform carpentry (given carpentry skills!)
- Perform museum maintenance tasks (using glass cleaner on cases, dusting, etc.)

Call 218-547-7251 to talk to a staff member about volunteer opportunities!

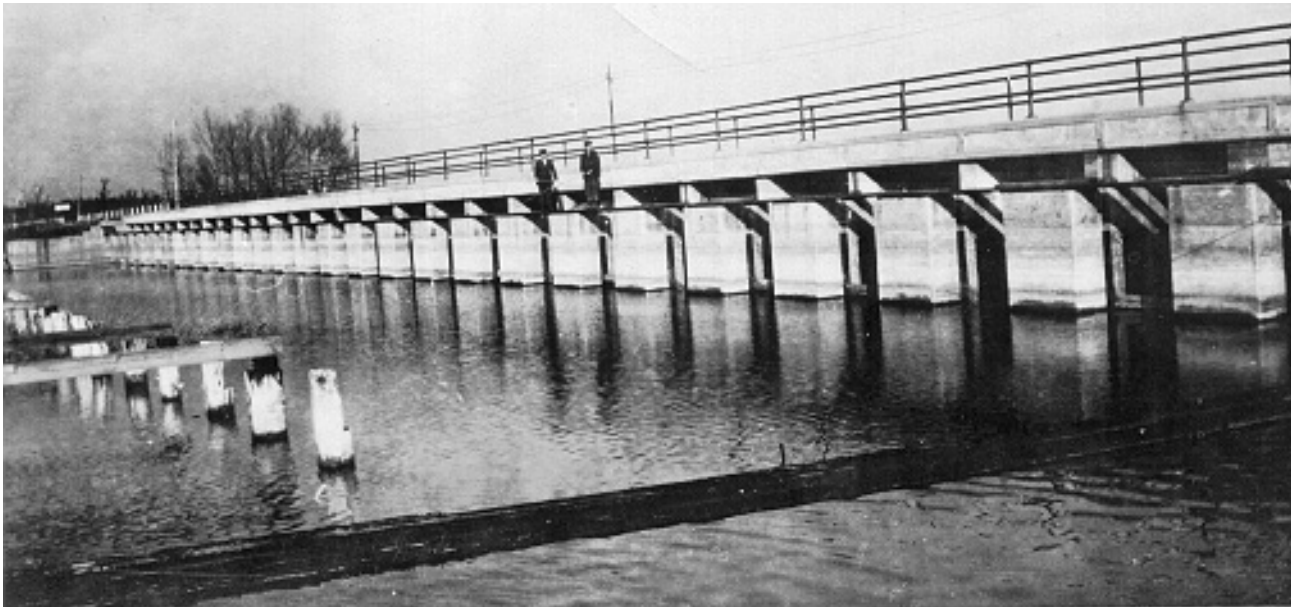
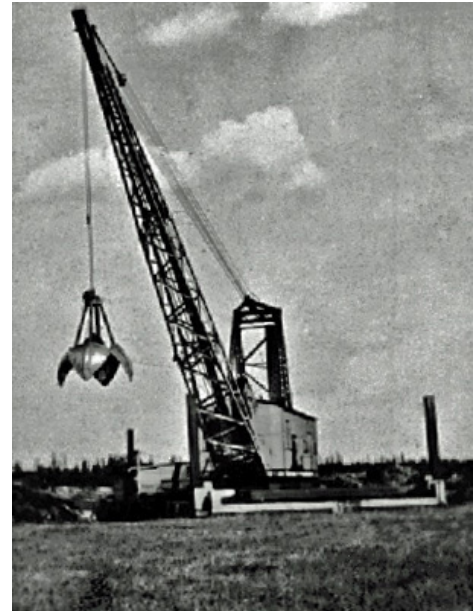
Cass County Research Center

The research center is staffed by the Cass County Historical Society at the Cass County Museum in Walker. Through the winter, research help is available by appointment. The research library, obituary indexes, newspaper microfilm, and other archival materials are accessible for a \$10 research fee for non-members.

DREDGING THE LEECH LAKE RIVER

The Corps conducted dredging operations on the river between 1913 and 1929. Two boats were in operation, the “Manito” and the “Oriole.” The “Oriole” was used on the river between Brainerd and Grand Rapids. The “Manito” was converted into a large dredge at Cohasset and in 1916 the river was cleared as far as Willow Beach where the Leech River and the Mississippi meet. Ole Henderson started working on the dredge in 1914 and his family lived on the accompanying boat. Orin has fond memories of his years living on the river. He and his brother Russell had great times diving off the dredge into the river — much to their mother’s consternation. All river traffic was sharply curtailed during the war and the dredge was pulled back down to Roscoe’s Landing for the duration of the war. The “Manito” worked on the Leech River below the Leech Lake dam as far as to the railroad bridge. It then went downstream and then up the Mississippi between Pokegama Falls and Lake Winnibigoshish. Crews of the “Manito” shortened this crooked stretch of water from one hundred miles to under fifty miles by digging cutoffs during the 1920’s. Ole Henderson was the caretaker from 1923-1929. The crane on the dredge was the largest in the world at that time. The work was continued on the river because it aided small boat navigation and decreased the distance that discharged water had to flow to the Mississippi from the two big reservoirs. The “Manito” project was approved on March 4, 1913 and completed in 1926. The dredge was sold in 1929 after three years of inactivity.

BBb



The dam was much longer and the road from Federal Dam to Bena ran across the top of the dam prior to the washout in 1957 and the building of Hwy 8 in the 1960s.

THE LEECH LAKE DAM

The Headwaters reservoir system was one of the oldest projects in the St. Paul district. Initial surveys and investigation began in 1867 when the Chippewa ceded much of the land and the country was opened up for development and settlement. In 1880, Major General G. K. Warren completed a four year study, and Congress authorized the construction of the Headwaters reservoirs.⁴ Because the bids from private contractors were too high, the Corps decided to do the project itself. George Snetzinger, an old dam builder, was in charge.

The first dam was started at Lake Winnibigoshish in 1880 and completed in 1882. All the material needed was brought up the Mississippi by steamboat during the summer and by ox team during the winter from Brainerd. In 1899, Wight traveled on a big government steamboat called the Northland, piloted by Billy Lyons, hauling building supplies to Winnie Dam. It was so big it had trouble getting around the bends in the Mississippi up through some of the meadows.

The second dam was started at Leech Lake in 1882. Each dam was built by a crew of about 300 skilled and unskilled workers. Laborers were paid \$1.10 per day. Many of the original workers were Indian, and they wrote their Indian names in the book. When the dam was rebuilt in '98, many of the same men returned, but they wrote their adopted English names in the books. Josh Drumbeater and Charlie Campbell, a blacksmith by trade, worked on the original dam. Walt Seelye blasted rock for the original dam and the rock was hauled to Federal Dam over the old winter road. Walt Coombe was a water boy when the dam was built. Two other employees in 1896 were Billy Daley and his friend Chicago. Harry White said that the trees were transplanted by his grandfather, George White, because there was only brush around the dam site in 1884. The government ran a steamboat on Leech Lake from Agency Bay to Federal Dam carrying supplies. B. L. Fairbanks, a trader at Leech Lake, furnished supplies for workers on these dams. John Fairbanks said that his mother cooked for the workers at both Winni and Leech Lake Dam.

The original construction consisted of a 1,000 ft. long timber-crib structure on a timber pile substructure and a 2,600 ft. long earth-filled section. Control was by means of stop logs; access to the dam was by means of a timber bridge on the control structure. There were 125 sluice bays with 8 ft. centers with a clear opening of seven feet. Three of these bays were modified to provide a 12 ft. log sluice way. Loggers could send their logs down the Mississippi to Little Falls or Cross Lake, for example. The log sluice way was still there in 1931. The original structure was built on practical field application in engineering with only basic theory to rely on. There was a minimum of documentation. One dam tender commented that they must have been good at it for the original construction to have lasted for so long. The cost of the dam as completed in 1884 was \$171,805.00.

A 405 foot section was replaced by earth fill in 1895. Between 1900-1903, the timber abutments and bays were replaced with reinforced concrete because of massive deterioration of timber above the water line. The 1903 project cost \$84,380. John Fairbanks described the operation in an interview in 1975. They couldn't trust the sand, so they had to use crushed rock from Sugar Point so the concrete would hold longer. There was no road to Sugar Point then. The Indians gathered the rock during the summer in birch bark canoes. They'd get rock along the shore: whatever they could lift and put it in the canoe. They could put plenty of weight in a canoe. They could load a moose that weighed a ton and not sink the canoe. They'd pile that rock so it wouldn't sink in the ground and they could handle that rock in the winter time. A government man paid the Indians for the rock. Then crews with four-horse teams and sleighs

hailed the rock across the bog from Sugar Point while the bog was frozen. They had a steam outfit to crush the rock at Federal Dam. I saw the rock being crushed; it ran up into an elevator and then onto a big pile like a straw pile.

The old dam had pilings and piers on the reservoir side toward the lake so the men had something to walk on to position the logs in single file and then sluice the logs down through the dam. On calm days when the water is clear, remains of the log piling shoots can still be seen.

John B. Neururer recalled that the top where the horses and cars traveled was wood. That was replaced in 1911 with cement and an iron railing.

Building the dam and the reservoir system, however, was not without controversy. Most of the northern Minnesota newspapers, led by the *Duluth News Tribune*, editorialized and questioned the corps management of the reservoir system. In 1903, the *Grand Rapids Herald* wrote that the federal dams were “a public nuisance and detriment.” The *Deer River News* and the *Walker Pilot* both concluded in 1904 that the reservoirs at Leech Lake and Winnibigoshish had retarded settlement and the “rural progress of the country.” In 1905, the *Duluth News Tribune* stated that the reservoirs were of “no earthly benefit to any section, locality or person” except to those who found employment in their maintenance and operation.

Just as that controversy was dying down, the people around Walker organized a commercial club to fight for lowering the level of Leech Lake, which had flooded lake residences and some of the streets of Walker. By the end of August, 1905, the “reservoir question” had become a major preoccupation of both state and federal authorities. Hearings followed, and the issues of flooding were thoroughly discussed but never settled. Since 1905, there has been no serious attempt to do away with the reservoirs.

Each Headwaters dam site was originally a self-contained complex. Typically it included a house for the dam tender, an office, a barn or stable, a maintenance shop, and a boathouse. In addition, it often had root cellars, chicken coops and barns to maintain a degree of self-sufficiency. The dam tender’s house at Leech Lake, built about 1902, was one of the more comfortable and stylish houses that belonged to the Corps or Engineers.

The first dam tender was William L. Moddy and James Spangelo was the assistant. Neil McKay was listed on the 1905 census as working for civil service watching the dam. Hans Olson must have come to Federal Dam shortly after that and was dam tender for many years. A picture of Hans Olson is hanging in the State Capitol with other pictures of dam tenders for the Corps of Engineers.

The dam tender took rain and snow readings, monitored the river gauges and adjusted the gates on the sluice ways. He oversaw the sluicing of logs and communicated with the St. Paul District Office via telegraph or telephone. He kept a daily log. The dam tenders’ job was year round with long winters. Until the record was broken in 1996, the record for the coldest recorded temperature in Minnesota had been -59 at the Leech Lake Dam (1898). The dam tender’s wife helped with many of the duties and provided meals for Corps visitors.

All dams were carefully guarded as part of wartime security. Carl Anderson was stationed at Pokegama Dam and there was no resident dam tender at Leech during the war years. Nevertheless, Carl Anderson was very concerned about wartime security and used to march up and down the dam with a shotgun. Fred Beaulieu took the readings at the dam during the war.

Between 1884 and 1920, life for a dam tender and his family was often a pioneer experience with only occasional visitors. At Leech Lake, however, the Corps began to provide basic facilities for public recreation very early. In 1896, a news article noted "Prof. D. D. Wilson of Government dam fame will make their home at the dam." Another note said "Dr. Geo E. Harris, Mrs. & daughter of London, England will spend summer and fall fishing and hunting at the Government Dam.

The dam was an extremely popular site for boat excursions from Walker. On the 4th of July, there was a boat excursion to the dam in 1898 and again in 1899. In 1909, the Corps leased part of the shoreline for a public launch spot. John W. Kelsey, born in New York, and a boat builder by trade, was the first to hold a permit for a launch service. Kelsey's Island is named for him. By the 1930's, boaters, campers, fishermen and hunters visited the dam regularly. With the emphasis on recreation and the increase in tourism, the dam tender's job gradually evolved into that of a park manager.

The dam was always a popular place. Today the Corps of Engineers continues to manage the dam and has built an extensive camping area and parking area for fishermen and their trucks and trailers. The dam tender's house was sold and moved. Only one launch service remains. Bait and tackle is purchased at the local grocery store. The highway was changed in the 1960s and the road no longer goes across the top of the dam, but signs of the old road are still visible as one stands at the top of the dam and looks off toward Bena.



The Museum depends on your membership and donations to keep the door open.
If you haven't done so yet, please renew for 2014.

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Walker Motor Sports

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

MINNESOTA'S LOST TOWNS

Presented by Rhonda Fochs

Thursday, July 10, 2014
2:00 pm Cass County Museum

Journey to the past and visit over 125 northern Minnesota lost towns. Hear what created them; learn how they grew and prospered; why they died; where they are located; and what you'll see there today.

NORTH WOODS BUTTERFLIES

Presented by Allison Snopek-Barta

Thursday, Aug 7, 2014
2:00 pm Cass County Museum

Allison Snopek-Barta is back to share information about her ongoing project to search, count, and document 88 species of butterflies in northern Minnesota. Ms. Snopek-Barta is a science teacher at the Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig High School. Come to the museum for an enjoyable presentation!

OUR HUMAN FAMILY'S TRAVELS

Presented by Dan Eikenberry

Thursday, Aug 21, 2014
7:00 pm Cass County Museum

Dan will explore with his audience the travels of modern humans from Africa.