

# **FEDERAL DAM**

## The Settlement of Gould Township and the Village of Federal Dam

### **INTRODUCTION**

Settlement of the area known as Gould Township and the Villages of Gould (1906) and Federal Dam (1910) began shortly before the turn of the century. Although missionaries and fur traders and a few government employees had lived in the area before 1890, it was only sparsely settled along the Leech Lake River. There were large numbers of Indians living at Sugar Point and on Bear Island but the 1880 census indicated only four white men on the Leech Lake Reservation -- George Nichols, government employee, James R. Walker, government physician, Simeon Weaver, tavern keeper, and Theodore Beaulieu, government employee. Simeon Weaver had a stagecoach stop between Hackensack and Walker in the vicinity of the old town of Lathrop.

Many factors contributed to the settlement of this area. With the passage of the River and Harbor Act of 1880, construction began on the Headwaters Reservoir system. The U.S. Corps of Engineers began construction of the dam at Leech Lake in 1882. This brought workers and traders to the area. Passage of the Dawes Act in 1887 and the Nelson Act in 1889 mandated that the reservations be broken up into individual land holdings. Under this Act, the Chippewas ceded all their title to and interest in all their lands in Minnesota with the provision that each Indian could pick an eighty-acre allotment which would be granted by the U. S. government. The government would issue such an allotment to those Indians who failed to select one for themselves. The Act provided that the remaining unallotted land would be classified as pine lands or as agricultural lands. The former were sold at public auction and the latter were disposed of under the Homestead Laws. Allotment, sale of "surplus" land, relaxation of the federal trusteeship role, and outright fraud resulted in the sale of much Indian land.

Timber sales began in Itasca County in 1882 and the name of the Red River Logging Company began to show up on area abstracts in 1884. T. B. Walker was booming logs and hauling them to the Leech Lake River in 1894. Weyerhaeuser successfully bid for logging a major portion of the Leech Lake

Reservation in 1904. Logging began at Sugar Point in 1905. At one timber sale in September 1910 in Walker, Leech Lake Lumber Company purchased over 50,000,000 ft. of pine from the sale of ceded Chippewa reservation timber. The J. Neils Company purchased 65,000,000 feet. Logging reached its peak between 1900 - 1920 and brought many families to the area.

Homesteading and cheap land sales brought many other settlers to the area. Removal of the United States Land Office from St. Cloud to Cass Lake in 1903 made it easier for homesteaders to file their land claims. Timber companies purchased the mineral rights on the land in northern Minnesota after it was surveyed. After the land was cleared, it was offered for sale. After surveys, there was also the chance to choose a homestead of 40 acres, live on and improve it for five years, then claim it. In 1910, farmers were agitating for more land to be opened to homestead entry.

There was also cheap land for sale. Land was advertised in the spring of 1910 at 15% down, and payment of the balance over forty years at 4% interest.<sup>1</sup> At one sale in Walker on April 8, 1910, about 4,000 acres were sold on bids ranging from \$5 to \$15 per acre. The biggest impetus to settlement here was access to the railroad and the choice of Federal Dam as the division point. Population grew until the town reached its peak population of five hundred in 1920.



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<sup>1</sup> Cass County Pioneer, April 8, 1910.

## EARLY HISTORY OF THE AREA

In the latter part of the 18th century, French fur traders passed through this part of Minnesota. In 1784, Jean Baptiste Perrault traveled as a clerk with Alexander McKay from Montreal in two canoes through Lake Superior to Fond du Lac on the St. Louis River. The party split up. Some continued on until they eventually turned into the Leech Lake River and paddled to Ottertail Point on Leech Lake. Many Indians at Leech Lake had died the previous year due to a smallpox epidemic (1783).

In the fall of 1789, Perrault took Alexis Reaume with him to Leech Lake and they spent the winter of 1789-90 at Otter Tail Point. 1790-91, Perrault's trading partners stayed at Leech Lake and Perrault wintered at Crow Wing. Perrault probably passed through the Leech River again in 1794.

A post was built by the Northwest Company about 1796 at Leech Lake. William Morrison traveled through the area in 1804, settled here and traded regularly with the Pillagers of Leech Lake. Hugh McGillis was in charge of the Fond du Lac Department in 1804-05, and had his headquarters at a post on Leech Lake.

Lt. Zebulon Pike passed through in the winter of 1805-06. He built a stockaded camp near Little Falls, and after the river froze, continued on by foot and sleigh. He spent Christmas near Brainerd and then with sleds and a pirogue, pushed north. He arrived at Leech Lake via the Leech Lake River. An early fur trader wrote:

At a time when the world believed the area was capable of producing only icicles and furs, the traders were producing one thousand bushels of potatoes at Leech Lake, near the source of the Mississippi river, and six hundred bushels of potatoes, besides barley and peas, at Sandy Lake... Nor were vegetables the only products of these pioneer farms. There were horses at Leech Lake in 1807; cows which had been driven overland were not uncommon on the Red River

of the North in the twenties; and even the humble hen and pig could be heard within the stockades of some forts.<sup>2</sup>

The Minnesota Territory was created in 1849. After ceding vast tracts of land to the United States, the Leech Lake Indian Reservation was established in 1855. An old trail led from the White Earth agency to the Leech Lake agency and a north branch of that trail led to Cass Lake and Bemidji. The first road connecting this area to the outside world was built by U.S. soldiers from Crow Wing Agency near Gull Lake to Leech Lake Agency. Travel south from Leech Lake Agency was measured by Three Mile Lake, Four Mile Lake, Six Mile Lake, Ten Mile Lake, etc. The road was opened in 1856 by James Macaboy for the convenience of Indian agents and fur traders. B. F. Hartley carried the mail from 1875-1880. Stopping places in 1881 were: Reuben Gray (Gull Lake), George Barclay (Pine River) and the Simeon Weaver House (Leech Lake).

In 1878, James Riley Walker joined the Indian service as a doctor among the Chippewa at Leech Lake. He tried to check a smallpox epidemic there in 1883. He stayed there until 1893 when he accidentally wounded an Indian during an attempt to confiscate a supply of illegal whiskey. He was then transferred to the Colville agency in Washington.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Grace Lee Nute, The Voyageur (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1931), p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Everwien (1972), Handbook, p. 693.



Early picture of the dam from the North end. (Courtesy of Orin "Ole" Henderson)

## 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> He is listed on area abstracts in 1899.

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

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<sup>4</sup> River and Harbor Act of 1880.

<sup>5</sup> Snetzinger was also a dam tender at Sandy Lake.

getting around the bends in the Mississippi up through some of the meadows.<sup>6</sup> After completion of the Winni Dam nearly all the workers moved to Leech Lake.

The second dam was started at Leech Lake in 1882.<sup>7</sup> Each dam was built by a crew of about 300 skilled and unskilled workers. Laborers were paid \$1.10 per day.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> B. L. Fairbanks, a trader at Leech Lake, furnished supplies for workers on these dams. John Fairbanks (not related to B. L. 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-fill 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.<sup>11</sup> The original structure was built on practical field application in engineering with only

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<sup>6</sup> John G. Morrison, Jr., Mainly Logging, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> US Army Corps of Engineers , St. Paul District Pamphlet, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Merritt, Creativity, Conflict and Controversy: A History of the St. Paul District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> Walters, History Afield, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Mainly Logging, p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> Orin Henderson,

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 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 \$84,380.00.<sup>12</sup>

They had to use crushed rock. They couldn't trust the sand, so they got all the rock from Sugar Point and crushed it so the concrete would hold longer. There was no road to Sugar Point then. They got this rock in winter time. There's a bog all the way to Sugar Point. What they now call 5-mile Point -- is called that because it is just five miles from the dam to that point. It was originally just called the point, but later on, they started calling it five mile point. They hauled the rock with a four-horse team and sleighs. The Indians didn't do the hauling, but they gathered the rock during the summer in birch bark canoes. A government man paid the Indians for the rock. They'd pile that rock so it wouldn't sink in the ground and they could handle that rock in the winter time. They'd get rock along the shore: whatever they could lift -- put it in the canoe. Could put plenty of weight in a canoe -- could haul a moose that weighs a ton. They had a steam outfit to crush the rock at Federal Dam. I saw the rock go way up in a pile -- the rock being crushed ran up into an elevator and then onto a big pile, like a straw pile. And that's the way they got the rock to make concrete out of it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Creativity, Conflict and Controversy, p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> John Fairbanks, Interview with Stan Johnson, Cass County History Soc., 1975, p. 14.



Picture of the recreation area showing Moscripp's buildings in the background, Clark's launch service, and Bill Worcester's launch service in the foreground. (Photo courtesy of Orin "Ole" Henderson)



Early picture of the dam. (Photo courtesy of Orin "Ole" Henderson)

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, when 1) Aitken suffered intense flooding, 2) J. Neils Lumber Company was forced to close down because of high water above the dam at Winni, and 3) the Blandin Paper Company was forced to shut down for lack of water, the Duluth News Tribune concluded 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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 was one of the more comfortable and stylish houses that belonged to the Corps or Engineers.<sup>16</sup> It was built between 1902-1904. The house is oriented

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<sup>14</sup> Creativity, Conflict and Controversy, p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> US Army Corps of Engineers, St. Paul District Pamphlet, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

to the north with a view of the dam and the marshes of Leech Lake. Although it was originally covered with narrow wooden clapboards, it remains basically unaltered. The garage at the rear dates from about 1910.<sup>17</sup> Another house built in 1914 by Ed Rawley and Claude Johnson was intended for the use of visiting Corps officers and other personnel. A searchlight was installed to the north of the house during World War II.

The first dam tender was William L. Moddy. James Spangelo was the assistant dam tender. In 1900, William Moddy owned all the property in Lots 6 and 7 of 144-28 which eventually included the future village of Federal Dam. 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. In 1910, he purchased property on the SW corner of Cedar and Third and built a home there. A picture of Hans Olson is hanging in the State Capitol with other pictures of dam tenders for the Corps of Engineers. Hans Olson's grandson, Jim Olson, has a picture of a group of children on a wagon near the dam tender's house when the trees were still very small -- probably a school outing to the dam.

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. Russell and Grace Lego rented the dam tender's house for those years.

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

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

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."<sup>18</sup> Another note said "Dr. Geo E. Harris, Mrs. & daughter of London, England will spend summer and fall fishing and hunting at the Government Dam."<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

The dam was always a popular place. Town kids learned to swim by diving off the dam. Orin Henderson recalled the difficulty of trying to keep kids from the dam and of trying to keep fishermen away from the concrete apron!

There was one drowning recorded in the river although there were numerous youngsters who frequented it. That was the death of young Walter Roberts who drowned on May 31, 1921, after he fell from the gauging board.

One of the problems which the Corps had to contend with was floating bog. In the dry years, the bog grew up. When the rainfall came back in the early '40s, this bog lifted up and floated up against the piling at the dam. Theoretically, by stopping the bog before it got to the dam, it would be easier to dispose of. But the bog floated down against these piling, would roll up and go clear to the bottom. They had a difficult time cutting it up or loosening it, and they decided it would be better to let the bog come down against the dam and then cut it up. When it rolled up or under at the dam, a person could stand on the catwalk and by using a hay knife attached to a long pole, he could cut it up, and there was the advantage of being on solid ground while doing the cutting. The Corps ordered Carl Anderson, the dam tender, to take out the pilings with dynamite. Carl

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<sup>18</sup> Cass County Pioneer, 1896.

<sup>19</sup> Cass County Pioneer, Aug. 1, 1896.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Pamphlet, 1988.

Anderson made several trips to the dam with someone who knew about dynamite and figured out how to do it. It was wintertime, so he used heavy wire to make rings, tied four sticks of dynamite to the rings, chipped the ice away from the piling, and then attached a fuse and placed the dynamite to the piling. The fuse was waterproof, so it was quite a sight when the dynamite cut those pilings off. He did the same with the rock filled cribs, although it took about 20 sticks of dynamite for each crib. People picked up the pilings and dragged them out for fireplace wood. The rock filled cribs simply scattered in the river.

In 1944 there was terrific flooding and about 10 acres of bog lifted up and jammed into the dam.

The office furnished me with a small plywood boat. And I had a four foot crosscut saw, and I could have the boat on the bog and drag it along, and by sawing it, I cut this bog up in strips. Some of them were a hundred feet long. And then I'd go back to the dam, open the log sluice, which was real wide, and the rush of water would take that strip right through like the speed of an express train. 21

The Corps tried to get help for him, and they tried to arrange for the prisoners of war in the camp at Bena to help out. The red tape proved to be too much, and the Corps couldn't get any help for him.22

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21 Carl Anderson, History Afield, pp. 14-16.

22 J. Wesley Walters, History Afield, pp. 13-14.

## THE DAM WASHES OUT

A hundred foot section of the dam 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 (Bemidji Pioneer - June 5, 1957). 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 (Bemidji Pioneer - June 6, 1957). 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.

**Damage at the Dam, June 4, 1957**  
**(Pictures taken by Ed McKeig)**



The present 294 foot structure has 25 six-foot sluice ways, one 12-foot log sluice, and one fish way.<sup>23</sup> There were many changes made at the dam such as the following:<sup>24</sup>

1962 - Bank erosion at Leech due to heavy rains in May and June

1963 & 1964 - Parking lot & dredging a small boat channel

1967 - 38.67 acres acquired for recreational use

1967 & 1968 - Construction of recreation facility

1969 - Modernization of Leech Lake Dam begun

1970 - Slide gates completed at cost of \$68,550

1973 - Recreation equipment purchased for Leech Lake (\$6,324)

1974 - New warehouse building construction

1975 - Add sewage treatment and improve discharge channel at Leech

1984 - Centennial celebration

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<sup>23</sup> US Army Corps of Engineers pamphlet.

<sup>24</sup> History Afield, pp 2-9.