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Rice Lake Iowa,—Its History and Possibilities for Developments

A Series of Discussions Regarding the Unpopular Drainage of One of Iowa's Natural Lakes

Compiled by F. B. Trenk

At a time when a sister state of ours is turning to her "ten-thousand lakes," with a jealous pride and is engaged in a determined effort to make safe forever from the exploiting industrialist the virgin beauty of her natural waterways, Iowa may well look to her own heritage of lakes and lake beds and adopt a similar policy. If Minnesota, with her great wealth of fresh water lakes in the northern part of the state, can find it profitable to dam and maintain smaller lakes in the southern part, Iowa surely can afford to handle wisely the limited bodies of fresh water that are still hers. But Iowa has not always recognized the wisdom of such a policy.

In 1906, Rice Lake was a body of clear water, covering some 1200 acres of land, dotted here and there with well wooded islands, and varying in depth from four to twenty-five feet. It lay partly in Winnebago County and partly in Worth County. Its wooded shores were inhabited by numerous fur and game animals; its bayous of wild rice (Zizania aquatica) provided a rich store of food for the migratory water fowl as they journeyed southward in the fall; its water contained an abundant supply of the choicest game fish. Not only did the wild rice fields serve to attract great numbers of ducks and geese on their southward journey; it was one of the few spots in the state where many such birds chose to spend the summer months and rear their young. Vacationists had built a number of fine cottages on the higher banks of the south shore, while the community in and around Lake Mills had looked upon Rice Lake as their greatest natural asset.

Then came plans for draining the lake. Citizens of Lake Mills vigorously protested such actions; but it was argued the land would be worth more if drained than covered with water. The proposed drainage ditch approximately 20 feet wide by 9 feet deep was to begin about one and one-half miles above the lake, west of Lake Mills. It was to pass through Greely or Town Lake, a bay of Rice Lake at the southwest, "and thence on the south side of the lake toward the east to join a ditch which passed through the east end of Rice Lake, and then coming in a southerly direction to join the
ditch aforesaid.” It was planned to make the bottom of the
ditch four feet above the bottom of the lake.

Dr. Thomas MacBride, in volume thirteen of the Iowa
Geological Survey, pages 89-90 has given a very entertain-
ing description of the topography of the surrounding country.
As a breeding place for wild game and birds, it was unex-
celled anywhere in the state. Yet in spite of organized oppo-
sition to the project, Rice Lake was drained, and what was
once a large sheet of clear water was transformed into an
impenetrable marsh, with not over sixty acres of the 1200,

Photo by U. S. Forest Service.

A BAYOU OF PELICAN LAKE, MINN.

Many of the lakes of northern Minnesota have extensive areas
of wild rice growing in the more shallow bays. The above picture
illustrates how densely it will grow.

bearing the semblance of what might be called a lake. The
success of the attempt has well been questioned. Today,
much of the original ditch has been filled in; none of the land
has been put to agricultural use, though some few acres
support a dense growth of sedges and coarse wire grass which
are used for cattle. The white pond-lilly bed of about eighty
acres in the northwest part of the lake has disappeared, and
a rank growth of weeds, cat-tails and rushes has taken its
place. The State Highway Commission, in its report on
Iowa Lakes and Lake Beds, 1917, refers to the failure of Rice
Lake drainage and its impracticibility. It says in part:

“During the progress of the investigation the Commission
has taken opportunities, when offered, to inspect the beds
of lakes already drained to determine their actual value
as farm lands. Several of these lake beds were found
supporting a crop of weeds, shoulder high. The ground under foot was soggy and good for nothing else. A few were used in whole or in part for pasture land. On only two were crop crops actually found growing.

"These conditions are due to several reasons. In the first place the plans for drainage have often been entirely inadequate. The ditches have been too shallow to drain the water from the deep soft mud of the lake bottoms. Rice Lake in Winnebago County is an example. The lake was drained in 1906. In 1916 a stagnant pool of water covers several acres in the south central part of the lake bed. The remainder is a marsh too wet to afford safe footing and covered with a rank plant growth. Plans on file in the county auditor's office show that the bottom of the ditch was to be four feet above the bottom of the deepest part of the lake. The outlet ditch is eight miles in length and it will cost a large sum of money to deepen it enough to afford good drainage to the lake bed. The people in the vicinity are dissatisfied and wish the lake restored. The fact that some thirteen thousand dollars have been legally collected as assessments on the district above the lake, complicates the situation.

"A second reason is that the purchasers of the beds have often lacked capital to properly tile the land and to plant and subdue it. Such land is heavy and requires considerable time and work before it can be expected to produce common farm crops. Making allowance, however, for these conditions it must be admitted that the development of the land has been distressingly slow.

"This brings us to the third, and what appears to the Commission to be the principal cause of the conditions found to exist in the drained lake beds. In a large number of instances there has been no real demand for the drainage of the lake bed itself as it offered the cheapest outlet for the drainage of surrounding lands. The prices at which much of this land has been sold bears out this conclusion. Taken as a whole the results obtained by lake drainage are discouraging from the State's standpoint."

Possibly those who felt most the great mistake of drainage, are those who have lived a life-time in the vicinity, and have seen a useful gift of nature transformed by man into a marshy waste. Mr. R. T. St. John, Assistant State Fish and Game Warden, when asked to write under title, "Some Things I Know About Rice Lake," said:

"During my boyhood days before the Civil War, Rice Lake was my favorite camp for hunting, fishing and trap-
ping; although eighty miles from my home to the old village of Bristol located near the lake shore. It was a veritable gold mine in fur bearing animals, fish in the waters, and with the bosom of the lake covered with wild fowl and dotted with small wooded islands and its shaded shores, its beauty was beyond description. The same number of acres of improved land in the corn belt of the State could not be compared in value to this wild life refuge and with its health and pleasure added it would be riches untold.

“A few years ago while assisting the State engineer in running the lines with a view to restoring the lake to its former beauty and usefulness, I compared the conditions as nature left it then, and now, as man left it, an unsightly lake bed, useless for anything other than the propagation of wild life, a malarial swamp, with a few acres that could not be drained where coarse fish thrive. One of the beauty spots of our State has passed to the unsightly.”

Mr. J. W. Konvalinka, a resident of Mason City, was asked by the writer to make a statement concerning the drainage of Rice Lake. The statement follows:

“At the Conservation Meeting at Ames, February 27 and 28, the question came up of what benefit the draining of some of our lakes was to the State or the farmer.

“I can speak truthfully of one lake—that is Rice Lake in Winnebago and Worth Counties. I hunted ducks on that lake for a number of years and happened to spend a few hours on the ditcher at the time they were ditching it, and I noticed that the shovel brought up very little dirt. It was all decayed vegetation or peat.

“Before the lake was drained it had some fish in it; there were pickerel, perch, and bullheads, and I think it was one of the best lakes in the State for wild life. There were two islands in the lake and several wooded points surrounded by marshland—just an ideal place for birds to nest as there was plenty of food to be had. I have seen wild rice grow so thick in the lake that a small boat could not be pushed through it. I have seen thousands of pond lillies in bloom on the lake at one time, making a beautiful picture.

“I do not think that the farmers gained one acre of ground that they could raise a crop on, by draining the lake. In fact, it spoiled a pretty little lake and left nothing but an unsightly mud hole.”

Dr. L. H. Pammel of the Botany Department at Iowa
State College, chairman of the State Board of Conservation has always taken a great interest in conserving our lakes, along with our native plant and animal life. Writing of "Rice Lake as a Game Preserve," Dr. Pammel submitted the following:

“For twenty years I have been a visitor to Rice Lake. The first time I went there it was a fine body of water. The second time was after drainage had been ordered. It was in part a slough or a lake with shallow water. The places with shallow water contained great quantities of wild rice. There are beautiful wooded islands, splendid for park purposes. On these islands are such trees as

the hard maple (Acer saccharum), northern pin oak (Quercus ellipsoidalis), iron wood (Ostrya virginiana), quaking aspen (Populus tremuloides), basswood (Tilia americana), also a few hickory (Carya ovata), slippery elm (Ulmus fulva), American elm (Ulmus americana), green ash (Fraxinus lanceolata), black ash (Fraxinus nigra), black cherry (Prunus serotina), choke cherry (Prunus virginiana), pin cherry (Prunus Pennsylvanica), and on the shores, willows like sandbar (Salix fluviatile), almond leaved willow (Salyx amygdaloides), black willow (Salix nigra), and beaked willow (Salix rostrata). There are also a good many interesting shrubs like the hazel nut, sumach, wild grape, Virginia creeper, dogwood and the hoary willow (Salix candida) in boggy places. There
are fine shore lines at several points. The banks are high and at one time quite a number of cottages were erected on one of those commanding sights.

"It has always seemed to me that this area would make a most desirable one as a game reserve where wild fowl should be protected. If the hunters of Iowa are to have game, then breeding places must be provided and there is no better place in Iowa. Mr. St. John of the Fish and Game Department has on several occasions recommended that this area be set aside as a game reserve. I heartily concur in this suggestion. The drainage has been a failure. The lake is an important source of water for Lime Creek. It is a water reservoir that should be restored for the benefit of citizens living farther down the stream.

"In a conversation with Dr. Oberholser last summer at McGregor, I suggested that the U. S. Biological Station look into the matter and report to me on its value for this purpose. This was done by Dr. Oberholser and the report is a valuable one. The suggestions of Dr. Oberholser should be taken into consideration."

Following is an article submitted by Dr. Harry C. Oberholser of the U. S. Geological Survey, "The Value of Rice Lake, Iowa, As a Breeding Ground for Waterfowl."

"Breeding grounds for waterfowl in the United States are rapidly disappearing. This fact has recently been brought forcibly home to conservationists by the great activity in drainage projects, particularly in the Mississippi Valley. To say nothing of the ultimate damage to the country and the lowering of the water level, often to a dangerous point, such draining of lakes and marshy areas destroys, as a natural consequence, their value as a breeding ground for all kinds of water birds.

"The State of Iowa, once famed as a resort for waterfowl, is now largely deserted by them. If even a remnant of the birds of this State is to be preserved, and particularly if an effort to increase their numbers is to have even reasonably good success in Iowa as well as in other states, more lakes and marshes must be made attractive to these birds. Otherwise, it is but a matter of time when our water birds will disappear forever. It is important then to seek out and to preserve or restore all possible lakes in the State of Iowa. There lies in central northern Iowa near the town of Lake Mills, a body of water known as Rice Lake. Its western half is in Winnebago County, the eastern half in Worth County, and all in a rolling
prairie region. It is the source of Beaver Creek, which is one of the headwaters of Lime Creek, a tributary of the Shell River. Originally this lake was about three miles long from east to west and one and one-fourth miles wide at the western end, although irregular in shape. The area of the lake itself together with the marshy lands surrounding it was about 1200 acres, 500 acres of which were open water, and the depth of the water ranged from 2 to 25 feet. A considerable area along the sides of the lake was formerly covered with a heavy growth of wild rice, wild celery and other water plants. Parts of the shore are now timbered with deciduous trees. This lake was ditched and partially drained in 1906, until at the present time its size is reduced to 60 acres of water from 4 to 15 feet deep, about one-half mile long, and 100 yards wide at the widest point. The following species of water birds have been reported as breeding in and about Rice Lake:

- American Eared Grege
- Pied-billed Grebe
- Loon
- Franklin Gull
- Forster Tern
- Hooded Merganser
- Mallard
- Blue-winged Teal
- Pintail
- Wood Duck
- Redhead
- Canada Goose
- Trumpeter Swan
- American Bittern
- Least Bittern

Great Blue Heron
Green Heron
Black-crowned Night Heron
Whooping Crane
Sandhill Crane
King Rail
Carolina Rail
Yellow Rail
American Coot
Florida Gallinule
Wilson Pharorope
Woodcock
Long-billed Curlew
Killdeer

In addition to these, some 70 species of land birds have been recorded as breeding about the lake.

"Rice Lake could be readily restored to its former condition by damming the ditches leading from the lake and it could thus be made again attractive to the water birds that formerly frequented it in numbers. It could thus be easily made a preserve for waterfowl and a recreation ground for the people of Iowa, since 800 acres of land are already owned by the State and the only requirement would be the purchase of some 300 or 400 acres in order to add all the land that would be affected by the raising of the water level and that would be desirable for the purpose in view. In addition, it would be possible to
lease from 1,000 to 2,000 acres of the surrounding land, which would be highly desirable as cover or breeding grounds for certain species of water birds.

"With our knowledge of the previous condition and value of Rice Lake as a resort for waterfowl, it needs now but a cursory examination to indicate that this lake, if restored to its former condition so far as its water level is concerned would again become an ideal spot as a breeding and a sojourning area for all kinds of waterfowl native to the region. In view of the draining of so many lakes in the State of Iowa and elsewhere that have been the breeding grounds for waterfowl, it is exceedingly desirable that this particular lake be restored, as we know of no lake in the entire region that would be likely to repay so abundantly the money and effort spent in restoration as would Rice Lake; and in view of the great decrease in available resorts for water birds in this general region, it is entirely possible that the lake might be even a more remarkable attraction to water birds than it was in former years. Proof of its former attractiveness is evident from an examination of the above given long list of breeding water birds that used to frequent this lake. From
The facts above presented, it is evident that every effort should be made to restore Rice Lake."

The citizens of Lake Mills have shown great interest in the proposed restoration of Rice Lake. In a mimeographed circular they ask:

"Can the people of this community and county offer any better proof of their judgement concerning the restoration of Rice Lake, than the self-explanatory and urgent petitions bearing the signatures of some two-thousand local persons as filed with the State Park Board of Conservation, asking for improvement of Rice Lake and its environment as a State Park? Can they offer any better proof than the fact that they have spent several thousand dollars through their Commercial Club and by citizens in general to bring the State and Legislature to see that said improvement should be done? Can they offer any better proof than the fact that they have incorporated for said contemplated purposes to save the timber to themselves and improve said lands for said purposes? This organization has already purchased one-hundred acres of shore line and proposes to continue to do so as to other lands. But the State of Iowa must assist us in the way we are asking."