

Devils Lake, the Railroad, and Floods

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Scoop is a word you don't hear often in this electronic world. Back in the day when the printed word was the only game in town, it was common for one writer and his newspaper to be "scooped" by another and it happened to me this week.

Both I and the esteemed Ben Bromley of the News Republic heard the same speaker at Kiwanis recently, and chose to write about Devils Lake and the flooding problems. Trouble is, Ben's story was published on June 2, while my column was awaiting its twice monthly turn. So, I was scooped!

Ben's excellent article focused on the siphon pipe which purportedly will be changed to also control the lake level, while I concentrated on the significant million dollar damage to the railroad in each of those two time periods. Here is my slightly revised article:

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Although my previous article was also related to the Railroad, the lake was not even mentioned. It will be in this article, as will the deluges of 1993 and 2008. And there is good news.

The Old Pipe

Over the years, the lake has had times of change, some years presenting a full and vital lake. Other years showed a drought, with a sand beach exposed for up to a hundred feet south of the Chateau. This was considered a normal variation in lake level.

There is evidence however that at the turn of the century a lake level pipe control existed, but later was destroyed. Many old timers remember such a pipe.

In the interest of being natural, the lake in recent years was allowed to "do its thing" in this respect, without the pipe. Some years there was no beach, and in other years boats could not be launched in a dry lagoon. In 1993 and 2008, the lake overflowed, living up to its name, Devils Lake.

The 1993 Storm of the Century

The spring of 1993 was different. By the week of July 12-17 1993, the lake stood at what must have been an all time high, No beach was present, and the waters already lapped over the stone wall just east of the chateau. No high water control pipe managed the lake level.

The weather forecast was for rain, though forecasters woefully underestimated the potential rainfall. Everyone has their own rain gauge

story, but 12 inches was not an uncommon reading in the bluffs on Saturday night, July 17.

The upshot was that the lake and the babbling brook on the East side, already grossly overfull, overflowed and even the old stone bathhouse near the lagoon had standing water and waves lapping inside. The floor of the chateau was also threatened.

And where did the grossly excess mass of water seek an outlet—to the north along the railroad tracks, a natural drainage area, joining the raging waters of the Babbling Brook which drains part of the land east of East Bluff.

The railroad grade from the park road north was decimated. Details are not necessary here, but it cost the railroad perhaps a million dollars to restore the roadbed. The Pink Lady was still the main user of the trackage then. Luckily, demand for the quartzite probably saved the line from abandonment by the railroad owners.

In 2008 the Deluge is Repeated

People told each other that this was the "storm of the century", not to be repeated until perhaps 2093. What slow learners we are! Details are recent enough that we need not repeat them here, but in some respects the spring of 2008 was carbon copy of the 1993 disaster, especially for the railroad. In June, 2008, history repeated itself, not in 100 years but striking again only fifteen later.

It cost the railroad a Million Dollars to again repair the damage from the "natural happening" at the lake, beautiful but now not too friendly. Remember that railroads are not financially fat as in the old days. A million dollars is significant, surely raising questions as to the viability of the Baraboo-Reedsburg line by the owners of the track.

This is a serious matter for local industries, of which there are 14 in Baraboo and Reedsburg. From using only 618 rail cars in 1968, Baraboo and Reedsburg industries used 6,680 in 2007. They not only used, but depended upon those deliveries. So do farmers, who depend on the Rock Springs Coop and its grain shipments on the railroad.

Those businesses paid \$965,000 in taxes, and employed 2,253 persons, essential to Sauk County progress. Thanks to rail service, about 10,000 fewer trucks rumbled on Sauk County Roads.

Thankfully, the Pink Lady is resuming operations, the industries are now being served again and a I am told a realistic agreement is being worked out between the DNR and the railroad regarding the lake level, ad reported in Bromleys piece.

The new "siphon"

As Bromley reported, for several years past the DNR has operated a siphon, in which phosphate contaminates are drawn from the deepest areas of the lake and discharged to the babbling brook as it exits the park. Yes, this siphon does remove water, but only at a rate of 2 or 3

inches a week, hardly enough to control the lake level in wet years, as in '93 and '08

An overflow or natural flow leveling pipe is said to be planned. This will be done by altering a high part of the present siphon pipe so that it is consistently level with the lake, and can become activated when high water levels threaten. The present phosphate siphon will remain active.

We conceived this article expecting to go to bat for a ground level drainage pipe to control the lake and save the railroad. We are delighted to find that measures may be taken, and only hope that they are sufficient, and not a token action.

Questions arise: Who determines when the lake is dangerously high. What level calls for activating the new pipe? Can it remove more than the tiny 2-3 inches a week that the siphon is capable of removing?

There is good news with the word that the Pink Lady quarry will soon start a five year program, keeping the railroad line viable for itself and for our industries. Yes, it means more whistle toots, but those toots mean jobs which means business and a stronger tax basis, so don't knock them!

It's positive news for everyone, incidentally including the golf course, which has long suffered the effects of a swollen "babbling brook". But we'll be monitoring that lake level, and the means to control It !