

# Tourism may dry up with Lake Shady

By BILL SALISBURY  
Staff Writer

ORONOCO — For more than a century, the historic little hamlet of Oronoco, located 10 miles north of Rochester on the shores of Lake Shady, has been one of the most picturesque spots in southeastern Minnesota.

But not any more.

Lake Shady disappeared last week.

**WHERE DID IT GO?** "Down the Zumbro River," says Jerry Tiedeman, an Oronoco native and Olmsted County commissioner.

Lake Shady, actually a reservoir on the Zumbro, was drained at the county board's direction so the dam at the east end of the lake could be repaired. The lake bottom will be dry until late this fall.

"After 40 years without any major repairs, the dam started leaking around the gates," explains Tiedeman, who farms just downstream from the dam. "The lake level was down about 18 inches this summer because of those leaks. When we get the dam fixed, it will help keep the water level up in dry years."

**BUT FOR NOW**, the ancient farmhouses and faded barns on the tree-lined hills and flagstone bluffs of Oronoco overlook gooey, black mud flats.

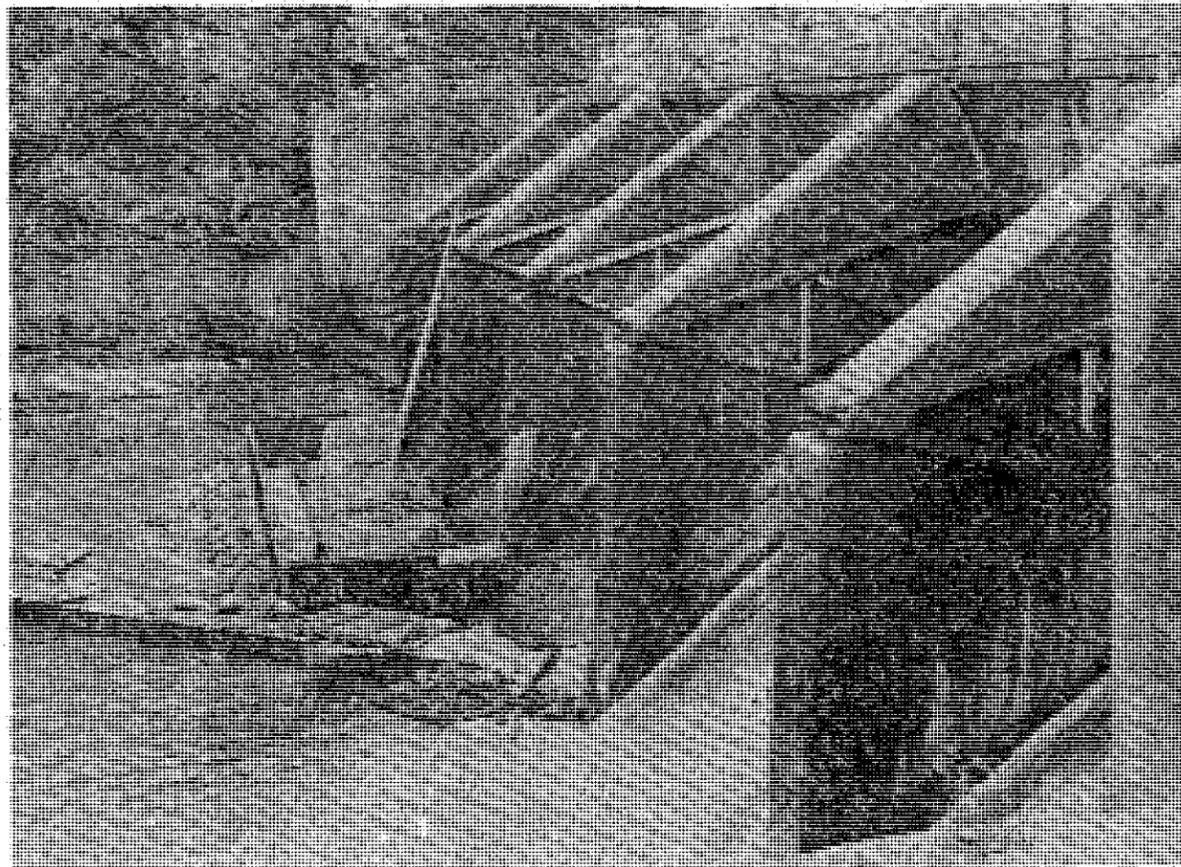
"The lakeshore residents don't seem too upset," Tiedeman reports. "At least, I haven't had any phone calls about it yet."

But that doesn't mean the residents are happy about the situation. At the only cafe in town this week the local fishermen were shooting pool, putting away hamburgers and complaining about the loss of their favorite pastime.

"Seems like every time they do something to 'improve' the lake or river, they wreck it a little more for us," says Earl Berg, owner of a bait shop, antique store and canoe rental business next to the dam.

**WHILE THE FISHERMEN** grumble, some of Oronoco's old timers view the dry lake bottom with philosophical resignation.

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Waters of Lake Shady flow through Oronoco dam as repair work begins.

dustries never were replaced. Oronoco's boom died overnight.

The remaining gristmill prospered until the Zumbro again went on a rampage in 1876 and carried away the mill's flume and millstones. Another natural calamity — a fire on Christmas eve 1879 — completely destroyed that last mill.

**THE RUMBLE OF** the old industries was gone for good, but the turn of the century brought the voices of a new one: Tourism.

Koenig recalls the village teeming with visitors enjoying the boat rides, dance hall, bowling alley, riding stables, YMCA camp and 15 cabins lining Lake Shady's shore. "The fishing was good, and I went for many a boat ride — not always alone, either," he chuckles.

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**NOW ANOTHER NATURAL** phenomenon is threatening Lake Shady. Soil from farms in the Zumbro watershed is washing down the river and filling in the lake bottom behind the dam.

"The lake used to be around 20 feet deep," Berg recalls. "Now you can get out of a boat and stand in the middle. There's only four or five feet of water — and no fish — in most places."

"We used to have three bait shops here, and I would sell 600 dozen minnows a Sunday," he says. "This summer, I doubt I ever sold 100 dozen in a single day."

"And when I was a kid, we used to swim in the lake all the time. One of my kids tried swimming in it this summer and got pimples all over his feet."

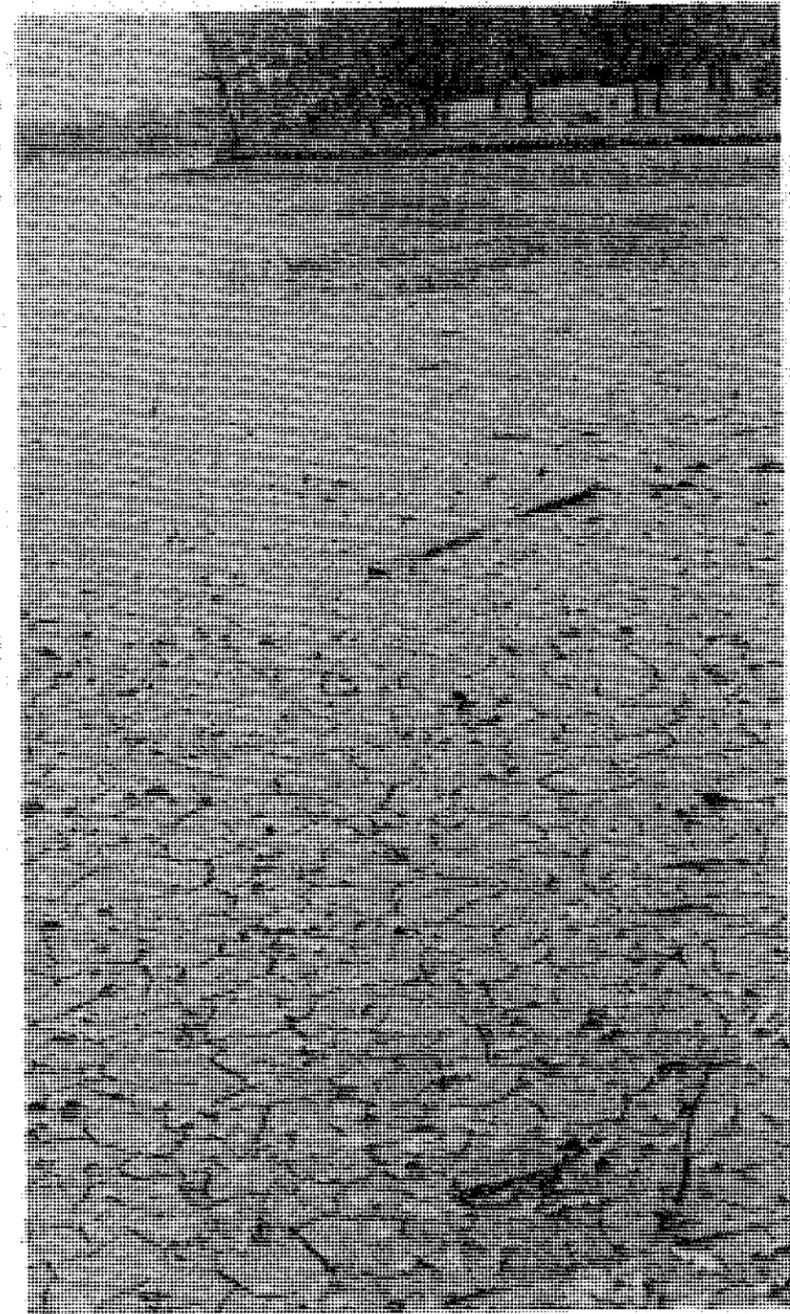
Tiedeman says it is inevitable that Lake Shady will eventually disappear for good. "Like all

sense in dredging until the farmers upstream start practicing soil and water conservation.

"As long as they keep plowing up and down the hills, we're going to have silt washing into the lake," says Tiedeman, who practices the conservation measures he preaches.

For Berg, the silt filling in Lake Shady means "I'll be forced to make my living in the antique business. You can't sell minnows and rent canoes without a lake."

And for Koenig, the lake's gradual disappearance will be "sad, but it just means going back to the way it used to be."



These mudflats, which recently formed Lake Shady's bottom, don't attract many visitors to Oronoco County Park, above.

— Staff Photos by Buzz Magnuson

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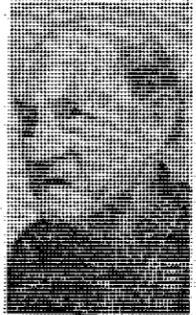
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**WHILE THE FISHERMEN** grumble, some of Oronoco's old timers view the dry lake bottom with philosophical resignation.

"There's times when it's wet and times when it's dry and not much we can do about it," says Arthur Koenig, an 89-year-old native.

History supports his view. Lake Shady has had "more ups and downs than a roller coaster," a travel writer observed 30 years ago.



Oronoco's history goes back to 1854, when three explorers erected a shanty just below a waterfall on the Zumbro. The trio hung out a shingle as townsite proprietors and, demonstrating their sagacity as promoters, donated the potential power site to two men with milling experience.

**THE FIRST DAM** was built in 1855. A saw mill was erected that year, a grist mill followed in 1856, then a sash and door factory, planing mill and a chair factory.

Next came the Oronoco Gold Rush of 1858. The precious metal was discovered in the Zumbro below the dam, prospectors flocked to the site, the Oronoco Mining Co. erected a water wheel and sluices and put nearly 100 men to work, and the village flourished.

"The Great Freshet of '59" washed it all away — the dam, the mills and factories, the mining installations and the high hopes of the inhabitants. Another dam was built, but with the exception of one flour mill, the in-

dustries never were replaced. Oronoco's boom died overnight.

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But on Easter Sunday, 1923, a flash flood burst the dam, and Lake Shady again went down the Zumbro. In the wake of that disaster, a reporter wrote, "The cottages along the muddy shores dwindled to two, the dance pavilion and the YMCA camp burned."

Finally in 1937, the WPA constructed a sturdy, concrete dam, and the lakeshore became a choice spot for year-round homes and cottages.

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Tiedeman says it is inevitable that Lake Shady will eventually disappear for good. "Like all reservoirs behind dams, it only has a life of about 100 years before it becomes silted in," he says.

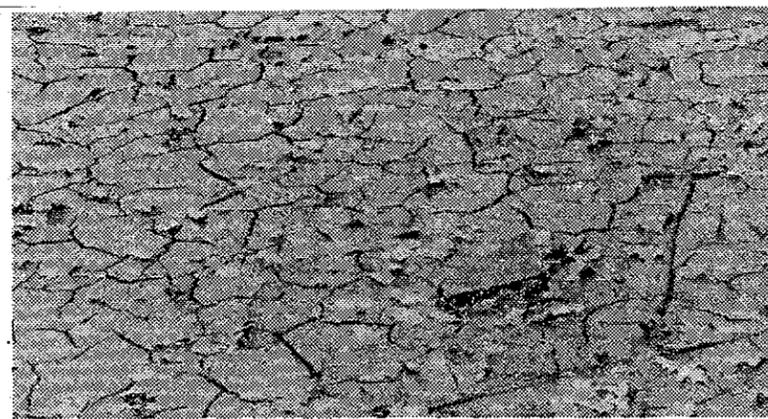
**THE COUNTY BOARD** considered dredging the lake but promptly dismissed the notion, Tiedeman says. The cost is prohibitive, silt disposal is a major problem, and "there is no

sense in dredging until the farmers upstream start practicing soil and water conservation.

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# Committee works to preserve Lake Shady's future

The Pine Island  
Record  
Dec. 30, 1992

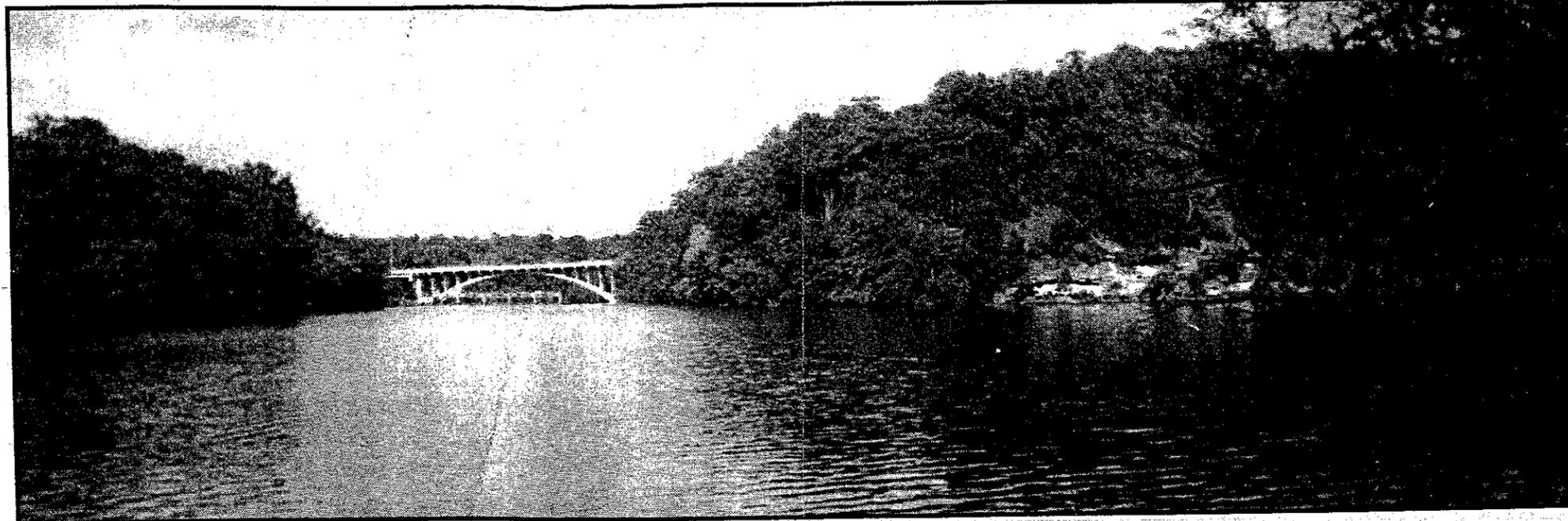
By George Anderson

This is the last in the series of articles about Oronoco's Lake Shady. The first article dealt with the eighty years between the building of the first dam in 1854 and the present dam constructed in 1937. The second article spoke of the lake from the thirty-seven dam to the present. In this article we will think about the yet untold story of the lake.

On July 18, 1989, a group of sixty concerned citizens met at the Oronoco Community Center to discuss Lake Shady and its problems. As a result of that meeting the Restoration and Preservation Organization was formed. The group established goals and working committees and began working on projects concerning the lake. Many of the early meetings were with governmental agencies that have environmental concerns; soil conservation, water quality and fish and wildlife are all inter-connected with the lake and its problems.

A great deal of time has been spent studying the lake and its water shed in order to identify problems and determine possible future action. Many of these projects will require financing so some of the activities have been directed towards raising monies for future activities; both of these activities are always on going. The committee is hoping to eventually receive some financial assistance from governmental grants. These grants would help us do some technical diagnostic and feasibility studies.

One of the difficult things to do on such long term projects is to maintain our group enthusiasm while pursuing long term goals; we would all like to see immediate results. Most of us assumed dredging was the most obvious answer but after meeting with experienced and knowledgeable people that solution has been put on hold. The great cost and complexity of dredging and its rather temporary results have been rather discouraging. We have been told, by experts, that the first place to start in lake improve-



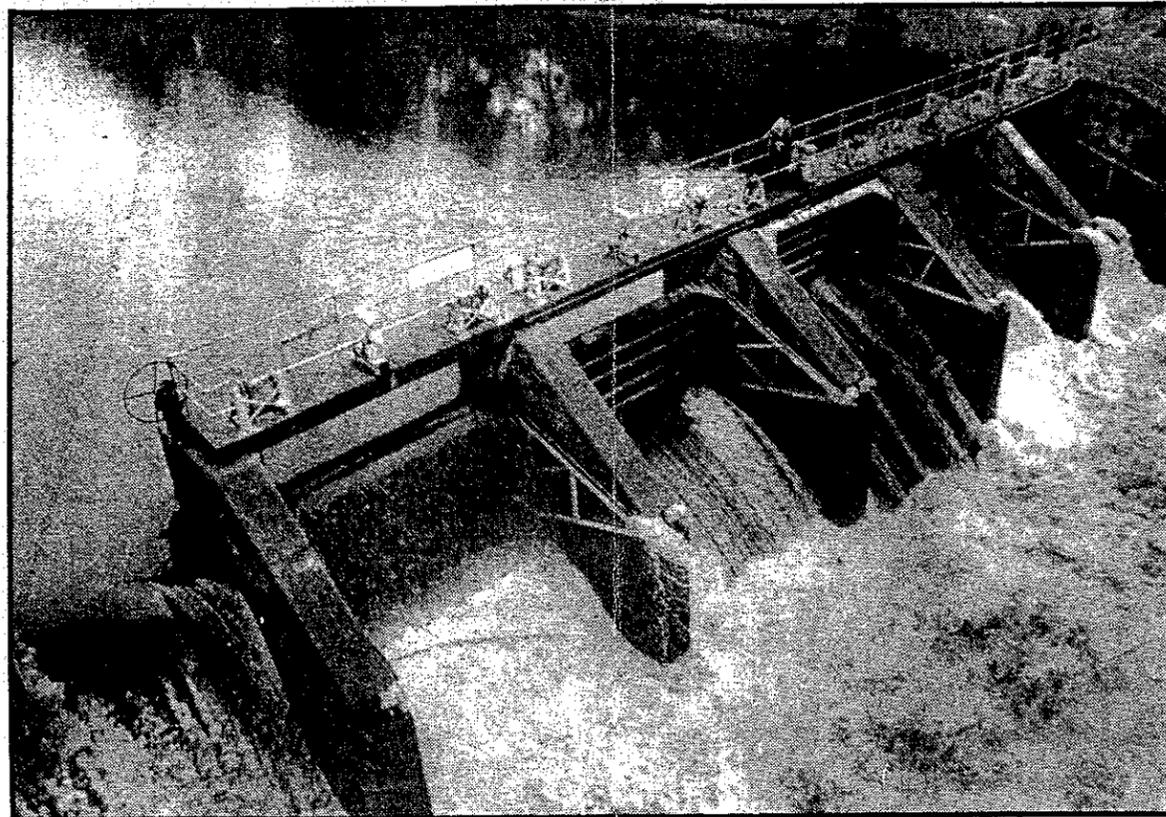
View of Lake Shady.

ment is upstream in the water shed. At the present time most committee members feel our present emphasis should be on preservation rather than restoration.

It is natural for the people living on the lake to be concerned with its preservation. The importance of the lake to non-residents must come from a personal concern for its natural environment and the personal pleasures they receive from occasional contacts with the lake. Even if one does not use the lake for recreational purposes it certainly adds a spark of interesting and welcome natural variety to our area.

The Lake Shady Preservation Committee would certainly welcome anyone interested in its activities to actively join us in this endeavor and we would also welcome any financial help. The committee meets every other month on the Third Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. in the Oronoco Community Center. If you have any questions you may call Tom Knopp, its present chairman, at 367-2195.

We are very grateful for the support of *The Record*.



View of dam — Lake Shady.

## United Methodists welcome new members

On Sunday, December 13, the Pine Island United Methodist Church welcomed 12 persons into membership. The church serves the Oronoco, Pine Island, and Zumbrota areas; this was reflected by those who joined.

LaVonne Anderson, Cheryl Finnegan, Laura Imhof, and Suzanne Ruegg are from the Pine Island area; Charles and Pauline Rupkalis and their daughter, Debra, reside in Oronoco; and joining from the Zumbrota area were Joel and Sarah Pettit and George and Arminta Fowler. Linda Kline, who was a summer intern at the church, also joined; Linda resides in Stewartville.

The United Methodist Church has embarked on a program to add 100 new members in the next three years. Persons not attending a church are invited to worship with them on Sundays at 8:00 or 10:15 a.m.

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