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Lake Shady — past, present, future

*Submitted by George Anderson,
Vice Chairman,
Lake Shady Preservation*

Editor's note: This is the first of a series of articles dealing with Lake Shady — its history, and problems.

ORONOCO — Anyone driving north or south on Highway 52, between Rochester and Pine Island, is probably aware of crossing some bridges near a body of water. Those bridges cross the north and south branches of the middle fork of the Zumbro River and feed the body of water call Lake Shady.

The first time you passed the lake, at highway speeds, you could

have formed a variety of impressions. If you were driving south and crossed the northwest bridge in mid-October, your day was no doubt brightened by the dramatic autumn glow of her maple trees. If you were driving north and crossed the southeast bridge in mid-July, you may have enjoyed seeing some canoeists passing a rustic rock cliff on their way upstream. But if you were driving south and crossing the southwest bridge in mid-October, you might have been shocked and saddened to see the silt islands that are slowly choking this lovely little part of our environment. All of these impressions are a part of the

story and history of Lake Shady.

For those who are more familiar with this precious, small body of water and know its many moods, these signs of its deterioration are very clear and very disturbing.

The Record will carry a short series of articles telling the Lake Shady story. We trust you will find it an interesting tale and will gain a greater awareness of the serious problems we have in conserving our natural resources.

The first of these articles will tell of the lake's birth, its precarious childhood, its robust maturity, its sudden death, its healthy rebirth and its slow deterioration.



A vintage Santa Claus suit is on display at Green's Antiques on Main Street in Pine Island. Photo by Cheryl Finnegan



Tom Morris shows off a piece of art at Green's Antiques. Photo by Cheryl Finnegan



Midwest Antiques

By Corinne Renner

PINE ISLAND — If thoughts of Christmas make you yearn for the "good old days," you may want to browse through Midwest Antiques

glassware, prints, paintings and some small items. They are "always willing anything somebody's got. He adds that they want



Third wooden dam on Zumbro River at Oronoco built in 1867 lasted until 1924. Allis Flour Mill photo about 1900.

Jim Frigaard,
for coffee break

Lake Shady history continued

By George Anderson,
Lake Shady Preservation

What would entice three young bachelors to leave their homes in Iowa and make the arduous wilderness trip, on foot, to this land of the Sioux and Winnebago one hundred and thirty-nine years ago? One thing was water power and promising adjoining land. Carrying a survey permit they also came to help prepare some ground for the stage line that would run from Dubuque to St. Paul.

Their steps must have quickened as they came upon the river called Los Zambros by the French fur traders and later shortened by the English and the Indians to the Zumbro. It was no doubt enlarged with early spring thaw and promised power as it moved through its beautiful, heavily wooded valley. There must have been great excitement when they discovered that two branches of the river joined and formed one strong current. When they heard the sound of cataracts near our present dam they knew they had found what they were looking for. This moment held within it the germination of both the community of Oronoco and the body of water we now call Lake Shady.

Within a year a wooden foot bridge and a wooden dam had been constructed across the Zumbro, a short distance upstream from the present dam. Soon a sawmill and a small grist mill were operating at the site. With this attempt by man to harness nature the somewhat precarious life of the lake began. This dam only lasted four years before a spring flood washed it down stream. In the last years of this dam gold had been discovered in the river banks downstream and a vigorous sluice mining operation was underway. The operation was swept downstream with the dam and never recovered.

A second wooden dam was soon built and for the next seventeen years the community grew and prospered and a very productive flour mill flourished at the dam site; the lake, incidentally, afforded some fishing and boating. This dam, however, also met the power of nature straining at her bonds and the rampaging spring Zumbro again washed away the dam and with it the lake.

A third larger and sturdier wooden dam was built but another stroke of fate had a profound effect on the lake and its role in the lives of people of the area. Three years after the dam construction the large flour mill was destroyed by fire. A smaller flour mill was built but the river and lake gradually shifted from a power source for industry to a source for recreation and play. For the next four decades it gave much pleasure to people for miles around.

As the 130 acre lake began to be used more and more for recreation summer homes were developed on the east side of the lake. So many of these summer places were owned by well known Rochester families including the Mayos, the Plummers and the Kahlers that it was referred to as little Rochester.

The lake formerly called the mill pond was soon fittingly named Lake Shady. A large dance pavilion was built near the park and was a popular recreation center. A bowling alley, a riding stable, some rental cottages, 30 or 40 rental row boats, a boy scout camp, a fine resort hotel, a scenic lake drive, big tent outdoor theatre, roller skating and in the winter ice fishing and ice skating all made the years around the turn of the century truly the golden years of the lake as a recreation center. The coming of the automobile and trolley line to Pine Island made the lake accessible for people from miles around.

All of this came to an abrupt end when once again, on Easter morning in 1924, nature exerted her authority and the river, swollen with rain and snow melt, tore away the third dam and Lake Shady slipped away in two hours.

Money and motivation were not there for a new dam and it would be thirteen years before the lake would come back into being. With the lake gone, most of the cabins soon disappeared and when the pavillion and the "Y" camp burned shortly after that the resort days of Lake Shady were over. Instead of row boats and sail boats the lake bed displayed huge stands of corn for several years.

Hopes for a rebirth of the lake came alive in the mid 1930's. Mr. Burt Eaton spearheaded the effort to the state senate finance committee and through the backing of the

state conservation department, the county and the Works Progress Administration some \$70,000 was provided for a new concrete dam and thirty acres of land for a state park.

The concrete part of the dam was started in October of 1936 and was finished by August of 1937. The construction of the gates was held up for some time by some legal moves for slowage rights. The new dam had five gates and a 50' spillway. It was built slightly down stream from the old dam and was 4'8" higher than the old 14' dam. It impounded a lake of 179 acres, 49 acres more than the old lake.

The eighty-two years you have just read about revealed the often dramatic ups and downs of Lake Shady. The fifty years we will look at in our next article will seemingly have more stability but there are still destructive forces at work which threaten the existence of this precious part of our natural environment.

Elsie Boutelle's book, "Oronoco, Past and Present" is still available by calling 367-4738.

In the introductory article on "The Lake Shady Story," in the December 2nd issue of *The Record*, I said we would try to look at the lake's past, present and future. This article tells you something of its past history. I have chosen to designate the past as the 82 years that lie between the building of the first dam and the building of the present dam. The life story of Lake Shady and that of the community of Oronoco have been intimately interwoven from their very beginnings. Both of these stories are interesting but this article and the two to follow are concerned primarily with the lake.

The historical data woven into the article has been gleaned from the research done by Elsie Boutelle, Harriet (Allis) Glasenapp, Fred Ritzenhouse and George Anderson, all of whom have had long term residences on the lake and have had first hand experience with it. Beverly Hermes, archivist at the County Historical Society, has also been very helpful.

This article is not intended as an historical document but to the best of our knowledge, from the research noted, the historical references made are accurate.

Down

Drive

*Jim Frigaard
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