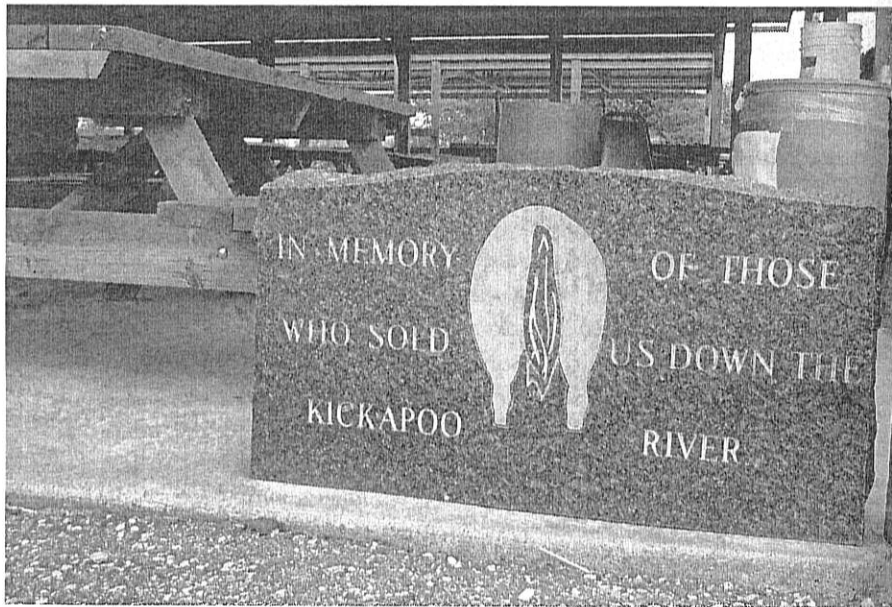

A Dam for New Times

Throughout the twentieth century, farmers along the Kickapoo River found their situation both a blessing and a curse. Catastrophic floods marked the years 1907, 1912, and 1917.¹ In 1935, after a respite of nearly twenty years, one of the most destructive floods on record raged the length of the Kickapoo Valley.² At that time, stretches of riparian forest ran sporadically along the river's edge, but for most of the way agricultural land—fields and pasture—spread outward on either side. The river passed by the village of La Farge in the township of Stark, just as it passed by half a dozen other villages. With 12½ inches of rain in a single night, the river swelled its banks. It swept away crops and animals and rushed through La Farge, damaging homes and businesses and submerging roads and bridges. “Waters of the Kickapoo . . . cut off La Farge, Vernon County, both by highway and railroad, from the outside world,” announced the caption to an aerial photo published in the *Milwaukee Journal*.³ “The residue left by the receding [*sic*] water was slime and mud,” described Grace Hocking. “Tracks of the railroad bed were left suspended in mid air.”⁴ For a time the economic fabric of the area unraveled and families had to make do however they could until roads reopened, buildings were fixed, livestock and equipment replaced, and the next year's crops safely harvested. A dreadful sense of anticipation seized Valley communities afterward. Everyone knew that the floods would return, but the maddening question became “when?” Soon after the 1935 flood, the Valley sent representatives to Washington, D.C., to secure federal help for flood control.⁵ The delegation arrived at a propitious moment, for they were not the only people clamoring for action.

The nation was on the brink of a new era in flood control planning. As

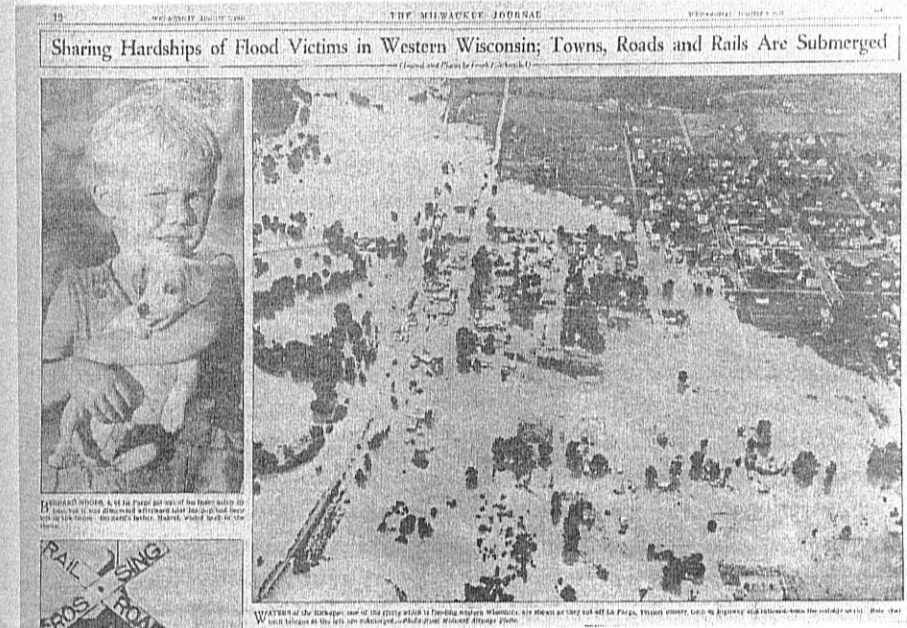
of 1935, Congress had not formed comprehensive plans for the Mississippi River basin, the upper portion of which included the Kickapoo Valley.⁶ But Congress was enduring a flood of its own, inundated with proposals large and small for flood control projects throughout the Mississippi Valley.⁷ At the same time, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was completing a study of all two hundred of the country's major river basins. When the Kickapoo Valley delegation arrived, Congress was awaiting the last few reports from the Corps.⁸ In 1936, Congress pulled together all the studies and requests into one enormous national policy, the Flood Control Act of 1936.⁹ Under this act Congress agreed to finance flood control projects in most American communities. It also gave the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers responsibility for the majority of federal projects. The Corps had not been a passive bystander to the legislation. Corps supporters had in fact initiated it, to the intense frustration of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.¹⁰ As the nation's primary flood control agency, the Corps would now decide how local communities should carry out flood control, or more precisely, the Corps would now carry out flood control for them. The Flood Control Act of 1936 had extended the Corps's reach into almost



Tombstone on the terrace of the Rockton Bar: "In Memory of Those Who Sold Us down the Kickapoo River." (Courtesy of Michael Barrett)

every nook and cranny of the country. The Kickapoo Valley became one of those nooks when, in 1937, Congress authorized the Corps to make a preliminary survey of its river.¹¹

In retrospect, the trip Valley residents made to Washington, D.C., marked a psychological turning point. It would give rise to a cultural origin story about private property (lost) and public property, about the federal government and local places, about land ownership and environmental protection. Stark takes us in a completely different historical and environmental direction from its companions on the landscape, Liberty and Clinton. In this chapter, Stark brings us closest to modern perceptions of property debates. In no small part its history is the history of grievances in the making—grievances that always shout out for attention in any discussion on public land policy. Later chapters will hush the din and listen for other voices, human and nonhuman, to challenge and enrich Stark's



Wednesday, August 7, 1935, *Milwaukee Journal* article on the Kickapoo River flood that submerged much of La Farge. "Bernard Woods, 4, of La Farge got out of his home safely by boat," reads the caption under the boy, "but it was discovered afterward that his pup had been left in the house. Bernard's father, Hubert, waded back to the rescue."

seemingly familiar narrative. In the 1930s, Kickapoo Valley communities had hoped to reshape their environment through a new relationship with the federal government. They never imagined how well they would succeed. What emerged along the Kickapoo River would be unbelievably different from their vision when they sought federal aid in the name of their crops, their livelihoods, and their communities.

Residents thought their continuance on the land was at stake when the Corps of Engineers took its first look at the Kickapoo River. The Corps seemed a godsend, and better yet, it did not insist on any of the uncomfortable trade-offs that the Soil Conservation Service had begun negotiating with area landowners at the same time (the evolution of which I traced in the first chapter). For the Corps, the central task was not to change how people in the Valley used their land. The task was to change the Kickapoo River and its tributaries to accommodate those land uses. After all, the Corps was an organization of engineers. It prided itself on a tradition that united engineering and construction with physical science, and it regarded itself as the nation's premier expert on river dynamics. According to one historian of the Corps, "Army waterway science was order and classification. Rational and precise, it spelled out the theory or natural laws that reduced river construction to a regimen of standardized steps."¹² Flooding along the Kickapoo River presented the Corps with what it considered a standard engineering problem, one it was fully equipped to solve.

Not everyone agreed that the Corps's approach to water projects was appropriate in places like the Kickapoo Valley. Gilbert White, now considered one of the nation's foremost geographers, became renowned for his scholarship on floodplains. In the 1940s he was a participant in national debates over water policy, and he served alongside officers of the Corps on a number of prominent presidential and congressional committees.¹³ Unanticipated problems from flood control had come to the fore of their deliberations. This "was a time when many of the technical people in federal agencies and many state people were gravely concerned about the way in which small reservoir projects were being built around the country," White said. "The files were full of horror stories of reservoirs that leaked, dams that failed, dams that didn't serve their purpose, drainage projects that destroyed large areas of wildlife habitat without proportionate gains in economic production."¹⁴

White proposed beginning any potential project with a different set of questions than those the Corps usually asked. Rather than asking how a

project might prevent flood damage, the alternative question White posed had to do with the best use of the floodplain. White suggested that, rather than establishing the dollar value of single crops, planners should examine larger patterns of land use throughout an entire community. White, the Corps, and many others at the time were arguing the merits of competing paradigms of flood management. The Corps's paradigm emphasized social liabilities, while White's emphasized social and environmental values. The former assumed a linear form during the planning process, while the latter laid out an array of alternatives for any one project, then a still wider array of environmental and social consequences for each alternative.¹⁵ For years to come the Corps would continue along a linear path to flood control. But White's ideas would eventually prove prescient, and in the Kickapoo Valley circumstances would compel a new generation of officers to return to White's basic questions about land use.

Valley communities suffered a quick letdown in their hopes for flood control. Although the Corps was a public works agency, it was also a military organization whose overriding mission was to support the nation's defense systems.¹⁶ The Corps's work in the Kickapoo Valley had barely started before World War II and the Korean War interrupted it. The Kickapoo Valley endured two more catastrophic floods in the interim, one in 1951 and another in 1956.¹⁷ In 1962, the Corps at last unveiled a proposal to build a modest earthen dam above the village of La Farge, filling an 800-acre reservoir, and to make channel improvements farther downstream.¹⁸ Had the Corps implemented this proposal, it would have fulfilled its initial objectives for the Kickapoo River. But within a few years agency engineers had changed their plans. They formulated new blueprints for a massive dam 103 feet high.¹⁹ A more impressive La Farge Lake would sprawl twelve miles behind the dam.

At first glance such a radical change might not make sense. For decades Valley communities had clamored for flood control, not for a huge reservoir submerging more farmland than floods had ever inundated in a rainy season. Nor had any of the Corps's earlier reports discussed a project on this scale. The Corps's vision of water planning had evolved, though not in the way Gilbert White had once advocated. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Corps had strongly resisted multiple-purpose projects, and it had frowned on reservoirs.²⁰ It had resisted, for instance, multipurpose reservoirs for flood control and hydropower, or for hydropower and recreation. The Corps ultimately lost that debate in Congress. But in losing, its influence would be greatly enhanced in the future, reaching its peak

in the 1960s, the time when plans for the Kickapoo Valley were finally coming to fruition. The Corps's shift of emphasis reflected a governmentwide response to a boom in recreation after World War II. By the mid-1960s, Corps priorities no longer centered on flood control. Public recreation now dominated its agenda. In the Kickapoo Valley, flood control became a secondary aim.

The ways in which the Corps made recreation its priority depended on the region of the country. The Army Corps of Engineers had a hierarchical chain of command, but where individual projects were concerned the Corps was one of the nation's most decentralized bureaucracies.²¹ Its smallest regional units, called districts, often wielded the greatest amount of influence because they were the ones that studied a place, formulated a plan, and implemented a project. The St. Paul District, based in St. Paul, Minnesota, was the office that analyzed the Kickapoo River in 1938.²² It was this office that developed flood control plans for the river; it was this office that changed plans to accommodate a large dam; and it was this office that would acquire land, contract for work, communicate with Valley communities, deal with politicians and the press, and carry out any additional task needed to build the La Farge dam and every other Corps project falling within its regional boundaries—a six-state area. Rather than responding to a chain of command that impressed on subordinates the importance of recreation, the districts were helping to shape and direct the goal.

The La Farge dam had presented the St. Paul District with an ideal opportunity to bolster its new master plan for recreation.²³ Justifying a bigger project was easy. The Valley's spectacular scenery would undoubtedly attract tourists. The whole region was impoverished, so it could use the economic stimulus from tourism. Valley communities had once talked of taming the Kickapoo River. Now the Corps convinced them that a dam could solve much larger economic problems.²⁴ Local boosters consented to the Corps's high price for economic development: 8,500 acres of land, over half of that from the township of Stark.

Many public controversies involving the La Farge dam were about to come to the fore. Notably, the condemnation and purchase of thousands of acres of private property was not one of them. A no-nonsense brochure, *Questions and Answers Concerning the Acquisition of Your Real Estate by the Government*, created little stir in the Kickapoo Valley when the Corps distributed it in 1968.²⁵ "It is recognized that various, and often conflicting rumors may come to your attention regarding the acquisition of your property," the Corps said. "You may be sure, however, that you will be

U.S. Army Corps Land Stark Township, 1995

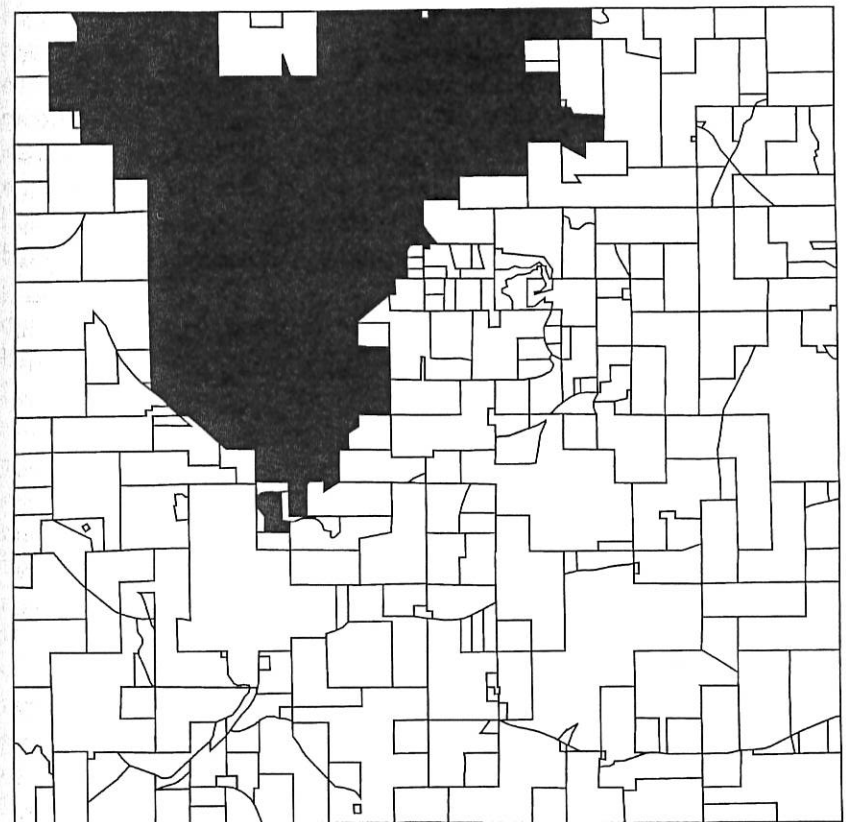


Figure 13. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers land in the township of Stark. These new boundaries would become contested in ways neither local people nor the Corps nor national politicians could have imagined when the land first changed hands in the late 1960s.

officially notified at the earliest possible date when action is to be taken on your particular ownership."²⁶

In 1969, the Corps started acquiring land in Stark. Proceeding upstream, the federal government soon became the township's, and the Kickapoo Valley's, largest landowner. "When the Corps of Engineers came in here they literally treated us as a bunch of dumb hillbillies who didn't know what we had," said Brian Turner, whose father Clifford lost his farm to the dam and was one of the few to protest condemnation. "Dad fought to the last straw. He wasn't against it (condemnation) because of the dam, he was against it because it put him out of business."²⁷ But any anger or grief individual landowners felt at their loss was apparently their own affair.

That the Corps could attract so little negative comment about this—perhaps its most overt show of bureaucratic authority and power—is a testimony to the influence it held nationally and locally. But lack of comment does not mean lack of significance. The Corps has said little in public about the powers of condemnation and purchase it has wielded since the 1930s. It has preferred to focus on its technical expertise, with which it has performed feats of engineering. Yet the Corps became highly proficient in real estate, so much so that by the 1960s it had become the military's chief real estate agent.²⁸ Contemporary debates over federal control of land have rarely featured the Corps of Engineers. The Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Forest Service have always been more prominent. Nonetheless, you would be hard-pressed to identify another agency that has asserted its authority to condemn private land as widely and as regularly as has the Corps.²⁹ To provide some measure of what the incremental accumulation of land can accomplish, by 1991 the Corps owned 24 million acres.³⁰

Until 1970 the La Farge dam seemed to be perpetually in the works. At this moment, when construction of the La Farge dam was finally about to begin, three pivotal events took place. First, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 went into effect. Second, Brigadier General Ernest Graves arrived in Chicago as the new division chief for the Corps's North Central Division. And third, diverse groups joined forces to fight the La Farge dam. Together these events would shift the slow trajectory of the La Farge dam.

When Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, it immersed itself in the political tidal wave of the times.³¹ NEPA, as most people called it, became the apex of like-minded legislation establishing

new safeguards for the country's air, water, land, and wildlife.³² Its scope was grand: "To declare a national policy which will encourage productive and enjoyable harmony between man and his environment; to promote efforts which will prevent or eliminate damage to the environment and biosphere and stimulate the health and welfare of man; to enrich the understanding of ecological systems and natural resources important to the Nation; and to establish a Council on Environmental Quality."³³ The legislation had an almost instantaneous effect on the Corps of Engineers. Hereinafter, the law said, all federal agencies must include a "detailed statement" on any action "significantly affecting the quality of the human environment."³⁴ Congress had instituted the environmental impact statement. For any Corps activity that might alter the environment (presumably all of them), the law now required a statement specifying not only the environmental impacts and adverse effects the project would have, but also alternatives to the proposal.³⁵ This brought the Corps full circle back to the paradigm that Gilbert White had proposed almost thirty years earlier. In Washington the Corps adjusted its organizational procedures to conform to NEPA, while in Minnesota the St. Paul District made hasty plans to put together an environmental impact statement for the La Farge dam.³⁶

Coincident with NEPA was Brigadier General Graves's new appointment as division engineer of the North Central Division. His job description made him responsible for all Corps activities in the division's twelve-state region and—very importantly here—he oversaw the work of the St. Paul District. Historian Todd Shallat noted that the Corps of Engineers had always been rooted in national power structures and local communities.³⁷ If so, Brigadier General Graves balanced on the axis between these poles, one being the corridors of Washington, D.C., the other small-town communities like Stark, Wisconsin. With a foot in both worlds, Graves had the authority to mediate between them or to intervene outright as the circumstances demanded. He stood in a unique place from which to survey both NEPA and the La Farge dam.

Graves had entered what he called a "post-NEPA" world, which meant above all else "coming to terms with the environmental requirements."³⁸ Completing a draft environmental impact statement for the La Farge dam presented the North Central Division (and the St. Paul District) with one of its first opportunities to apply NEPA, to test the law's limits, and to adapt to a new environmental era. This last was especially important to Graves because, as he recalled, "The Corps was probably under heavier

attack in the North Central Division than in any other at that particular time.” By way of explanation he noted that “the environmental movement was more active up in that part of the world. . . . Minnesota, Wisconsin—Michigan, also.”³⁹ For Graves the draft environmental impact statement (EIS) carried good and bad news.

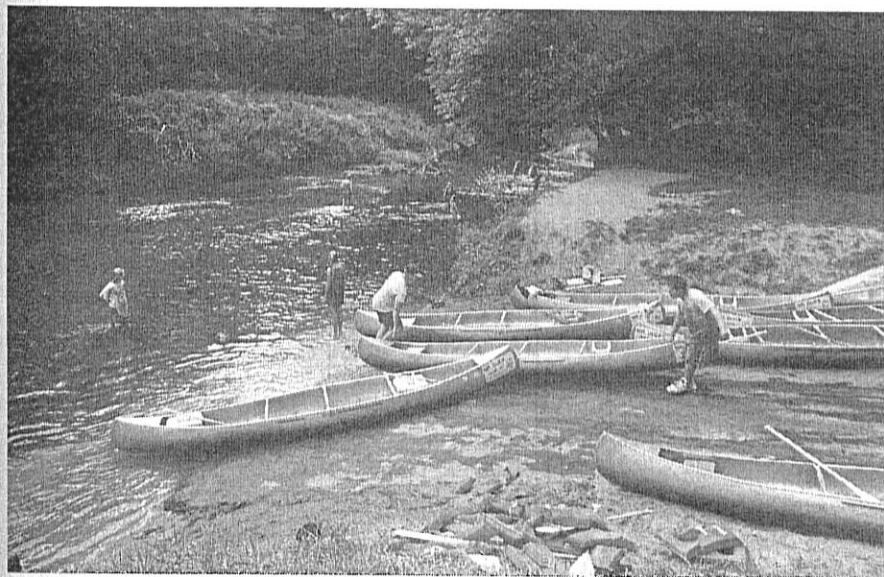
The draft EIS conveyed the inexperience of its authors. These were people steeped in engineering methods trying, perhaps for the first time, to carry out the work of social scientists, biologists, and ecologists. From this vulnerable position they attracted some polite derision from fellow agencies. “The data on fish and wildlife biology is qualitatively weak,” said the Fish and Wildlife Service in its comment on the draft, and furthermore, “we seriously question the implications that conifers give off ‘noxious emissions into the air.’”⁴⁰ The Bureau of Outdoor Recreation found fault with a section of the draft that began: “Most of the flood plain and bluffs are non-productive except for some timber.”⁴¹ “This statement,” scolded the bureau, “does not acknowledge the value of these and associated resources as wildlife habitats, recreational areas, and complementing features of the valley landscape.” More troubling was the bureau’s sense that “the draft statement could be interpreted as an attempt to justify the project, rather than objectively discuss the environmental effect.”⁴² Significantly, none of these federal agencies opposed the La Farge dam project. The tenor of their letters suggested that, like the Corps, they, too, were not entirely sure of their role. Did the law permit them to interrogate a whole project, in effect giving them a veto over Corps’s projects, or only to comment on particulars? With the La Farge dam they appeared to decide on the latter, becoming strict editors who scrutinized every line of the statement but accepted the overall premise and inevitability of the project.

Though these agencies offered no real opposition to the La Farge dam, their comments on the draft EIS did not bode entirely well for the Corps. From Brigadier General Graves’s perspective, they were likely the first sign of a fundamental problem the Corps would have with NEPA. Complexity is the key concept here, and for Graves, finding any kind of social or environmental order in a tangled web of alternatives and outcomes could easily paralyze the planning process. “If you had a simpler idea,” he explained, “for instance, if it was a flood, you went out and built a flood wall or channelized the river or built a dam—you could do it. But when you had to consider everything that happened as a result of this construction, the environment was just too complex.”⁴³ To many who served in the Corps during those first years post-NEPA, complexity seemed awfully close to

chaos. “[Y]ou could study for a thousand years and you wouldn’t get it right,” Graves concluded. “It’s beyond man to divine.”⁴⁴

A growing group of people opposed to the La Farge dam could not have disagreed more. The John Muir Chapter of the Sierra Club had recently pulled together environmentalists, university scientists, a few Valley residents, and people from around the state who simply enjoyed canoeing the Kickapoo River, all united by their opposition to the La Farge dam. With little time to spare, the coalition moved into action. Sierra Club chapters were fighting Corps projects around the country, and for this reason the Sierra Club eventually came to symbolize an omnipresent adversary, “the environmentalists.” “What groups caused you the most trouble?” an interviewer asked Graves. “The Sierra Club was the most aggressive group,” he replied. “They had a good organization, and they were everywhere, helping to organize the people that were opposed to these projects.”⁴⁵

Where Graves saw murky waters and confusion emerging out of NEPA, the environmental coalition saw clearly what would be lost under the waters of La Farge Lake. The area held unique biological features, including rare



By the 1970s, the Kickapoo River had become a prime destination for canoeing. Along with the Sierra Club and some university scientists, recreationalists were vociferous in their opposition to the La Farge dam. (Courtesy of Wolfgang Hoffmann)

plants endemic to the Driftless Area—the arctic primrose, the northern monkshood, and sullivania. Although these plants would be flooded, the draft EIS said nothing about them. A number of priceless archeological sites lay within the property's boundaries—prehistoric campsites, burial mounds, rock shelters, and petroglyphs. The Corps had done no research on water quality, a seemingly important consideration for a large man-made lake. What's more, critics asserted, the Corps had not seriously considered alternatives to the dam, a reservation echoed in a few of the agency comments as well. To dam opponents, the Corps's problem was not the complex analyses that NEPA required of it (complexity was a virtue, not a fault). The problem was that the Corps did not have the institutional capacity to prepare adequate environmental impact statements, or the institutional will to deviate from a linear path of planning.⁴⁶

Marshalling its arguments, the Sierra Club filed two consecutive lawsuits to halt the dam in 1971 and 1972. The Corps's draft environmental impact statement was inadequate, the group claimed. District Court Judge James E. Doyle (father of Governor Jim Doyle) dismissed both suits. The Sierra Club lost again on appeal.⁴⁷ As far as the federal courts were concerned, the Corps had complied with NEPA.

The courtroom was not the only public arena available to the Sierra Club. Using the Corps's own lack of data against it, the group convinced Governor Patrick Lucey to request a halt to the dam. In response, Brigadier General Graves as well as St. Paul District Engineer Major General Charles McGinnis traveled to Madison to meet with Governor Lucey. Reminding the governor of the project's popular support, they suggested a short public review of the issues. Governor Lucey, "who had sort of gotten his neck out a little bit on this," according to Graves, agreed to the idea.⁴⁸ The governor appointed a committee of local Valley residents and environmentalists, thereby setting up a local-environmentalist dichotomy that has persisted in the Valley to the present, even when the environmentalists are local too. Both sides of the committee made their case at the public meeting. Graves and Valley residents persuaded Governor Lucey of the project's merits. Saying he would "give somewhat more weight to those directly involved than those with peripheral interests," the governor gave his blessing to the project.⁴⁹ Graves later recalled that Governor Lucey "had been tremendously impressed with the responsiveness of the Corps and McGinnis and myself and with the way we had come in and done the review."⁵⁰ Graves seemed pleased that the governor thought they had shown great "responsiveness and integrity."⁵¹

On August 13, 1971, a beautiful day by all accounts, the Corps of Engineers broke ground for the La Farge dam. The St. Paul District had planned a big event and was not disappointed in the turnout. Five hundred people came to celebrate. Wisconsin's lieutenant governor made a speech, as did the region's U.S. congressman and also new District Engineer Colonel Rodney Cox, who had just replaced McGinnis in the St. Paul District. Afterward bulldozers began stripping dirt and moving rocks. Very soon bedrock would stand exposed on what was to be the dam's left abutment.⁵²

Work in Stark had begun, but the Corps had not yet completed its environmental impact statement. The Corps had won congressional authorization for the dam years before, in 1962, so it was violating no law. Yet this was an odd parallel track—work advancing side by side with research potentially critical of that work. In a pre-NEPA world, the Corps would have completed the dam with no further ado. Post-NEPA, however, the Corps could continue construction, but it also had to complete the EIS.

Before submitting the final EIS to the Council on Environment Quality, which Congress had established to oversee compliance with NEPA, the Corps was required to hold public hearings and respond to public comment. This comment period formed the basis of new relationships between the Corps and other agencies and also between the Corps and its critics. When, a few months after construction had started, the St. Paul District asked the Sierra Club for review and comment on the next iteration of its environmental impact statement, board member Robert W. Smith replied as follows: "If there was the slightest indication that the Corps was attempting in good faith to comply with NEPA, we would respond. . . . Obviously the Corps' 'mind' has been made up and it certainly isn't going to be changed by the 'facts' or by whatever is thrown together under the title of 'Environmental Statement.'" ⁵³ The Sierra Club had questioned the Corps's professionalism in the strongest possible language.

Colonel Rodney Cox immediately wrote back to Smith. "I am most disturbed," he said, "that you feel that your reply to our requested comments would only be 'an exercise in futility' and for this reason I feel a straightforward response on my part might solicit your most needed, and I am sure, most helpful comments." The aims of the environmental impact statement, Cox explained, "are to introduce our thoughts to our new partners and to help us get to know them." (The Sierra Club would have disagreed that this was the aim of an environmental impact statement,

and so, most likely, would the Council on Environmental Quality.) The Corps had entered a learning process, Cox continued, the reasons being “both because of the recent enactment of NEPA and also because traditionally in the United States, development of the Nation’s resources has been left to the professionals.” Perhaps unaware that his tone had become condescending, Cox nonetheless acknowledged a new day. “We recognize that in recent years there has been a marked change in public attitude. The people of the United States have taken an increased interest in project planning and now the man in the street wants to take part in the determination of how his resources are being used, and in many cases his attitude has been militant.” Getting to the crux of the matter: “You say that our mind has been made up and is certainly not going to be changed by the facts. I can only say sir, that you have read our mind incorrectly.”⁵⁴ Despite Colonel Cox’s lengthy attempt to reach out to the Sierra Club, the group had reason to be cynical about the St. Paul District’s open-mindedness.

Together, NEPA and opponents of the dam revealed a dissonance within the Corps. On the one hand, the Corps viewed itself as a dispassionate group of experts whose purpose was to serve the country. “We are not advocates,” Brigadier General Graves told a reporter in 1971.⁵⁵ “The civil works program was the Corps of Engineers out there doing for the citizens of the United States what they wanted to be done,” Graves continued to insist more than twenty-five years later. To be at odds with the public was “the antithesis of the philosophy of the civil works program.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, Corps personnel were not neutral toward their projects; they were as zealous as any of their opponents. As Graves’s intercession with Governor Lucey made clear, the Corps aggressively shaped and adapted to its political milieu. “Here they had been,” he explained, referring to the St. Paul District, “working away on these things three, four, five, six, seven, even ten years, and they came up with their report as to what was to be done and the citizens all got up and said, ‘We don’t want it done.’”⁵⁷ NEPA and the La Farge dam made it almost impossible for the Corps to assert even to itself that it stood outside the fray—that planning and project implementation were neutral exercises in decision making.⁵⁸

In Washington, D.C., Chief of Engineers Lieutenant General Frederick Clarke was coping with the same dissonance. In Washington as in Stark, NEPA was prodding the Corps toward new relationships with its environmental opponents. In Washington as in Stark, the Corps continued to vet and promote controversial projects. Clarke debated how to approach

NEPA. As head of the organization, his choices would set an important tone for Corps divisions and districts. He decided to appoint an Environmental Advisory Board. The board would try but fail to influence the La Farge dam project. Conversely, the La Farge dam would intrude on the relationship General Clarke hoped to establish with his new board. So, then, have local events reconfigured the national context in which they occurred, in this case national-level policy debates over flood control, river development, and environmental protection.

In appointing an Environmental Advisory Board, Lieutenant General Clarke aspired to make the Corps the most forward-looking of all federal institutions. He selected renowned leaders in the environmental movement to serve on the board, among others Roland Clement, ecologist and vice president of the National Audubon Society, and Harold Gilliam, a well-known environmental reporter. Charles Stoddard, former director of the Bureau of Land Management, became the board’s first chairman. “There were many people in our organization who thought I was completely crazy—sort of inviting the enemy into the camp,” Clarke remembered. Board members were equally leery of their new role on the inside. The Corps’s first internal environmental policy, its *Environmental Guidelines*, confirmed doubts all round.⁵⁹ The guidelines did make environmental preservation, conservation, and enhancement part of the Corps’s mission.⁶⁰ They also included public participation and environmental analysis in the planning process. Even so, the Environmental Advisory Board thought they were vague rather than explicit, reactive to controversy rather than proactive during planning, and tending toward project advocacy rather than objectivity. Overall, wrote Stoddard, “It is no wonder that many of these conservationists have felt forced to resort to political activism or even litigation.”⁶¹

Chairman Stoddard became highly critical of the La Farge dam when Governor Lucey’s public review came to his attention. In Stoddard’s words, Brigadier General Graves had put the governor “on the political spot by encouraging further pressure for construction from the local people with the most to gain.”⁶² He saw a clear conflict of interest in the St. Paul District’s actions. Over time he became ever more frustrated with the decentralized way the Corps made decisions about projects like the La Farge dam. Early in his tenure, Stoddard had proposed that the Environmental Advisory Board have a role in the planning process by reviewing documents and making recommendations on controversial projects. The La Farge dam was one project that Stoddard wanted the board to review.

But General Clarke never intended the board to participate in actual Corps decisions. According to General Graves's recollections, Corps leaders from Clarke onward became "very skillful" in steering the board away from specific projects and toward general policy.⁶³

Stoddard took away a larger lesson from the exchange over the La Farge dam. "The time has come," he declared, "for a transfer of this civilian function from a para-military one and for separating planning from construction in the same agency."⁶⁴ Decades later Stoddard would be vindicated. In 2000, a federal investigation would conclude that the Corps had an "institutional bias" toward large construction projects, to the point that it put heavy pressure on its own staff to justify projects, to get to "Yes," even by manipulating economic and environmental data.⁶⁵

To be fair to Clarke and Graves (who were not implicated in the future scandal), they had accepted environmental opponents as part of the new political landscape. Clarke had created the Environmental Advisory Board in the first place. Likewise, Graves never denied the Sierra Club, Charles Stoddard, or other like-minded critics their point of view, even conceding later that, "Whether the projects were good or bad is a difficult judgment to make because it depends on what your goals are for a particular area."⁶⁶ All the same, the St. Paul District, the North Central Division, and Brigadier General Graves himself made up a quietly passionate group of advocates, though all would have denied the very idea of advocacy. They might have entered a new era, but the earlier era still held sway. The Corps at every level remained unambiguously in favor of the La Farge dam whatever the environmental questions their environmental impact statements might raise along the way.

The St. Paul District was preparing to build the dam's intake tower, outlet works, and spillways while also preparing its final environmental impact statement for the Council on Environmental Quality. How the council responded to the report would help decide NEPA's larger impact on the Corps. With a favorable review, the Corps would have successfully assimilated NEPA into its mode of planning and implementing projects. A negative review might do more than call the La Farge dam into question; it could force the Corps to reconsider myriad other projects. Rather than assimilating a new environmental culture into its own professional culture of civil works, the Corps would face fundamental changes. One sign that the St. Paul District felt some anxiety is that it waited three months after completing the EIS to submit it to the Council on Environmental Quality.⁶⁷

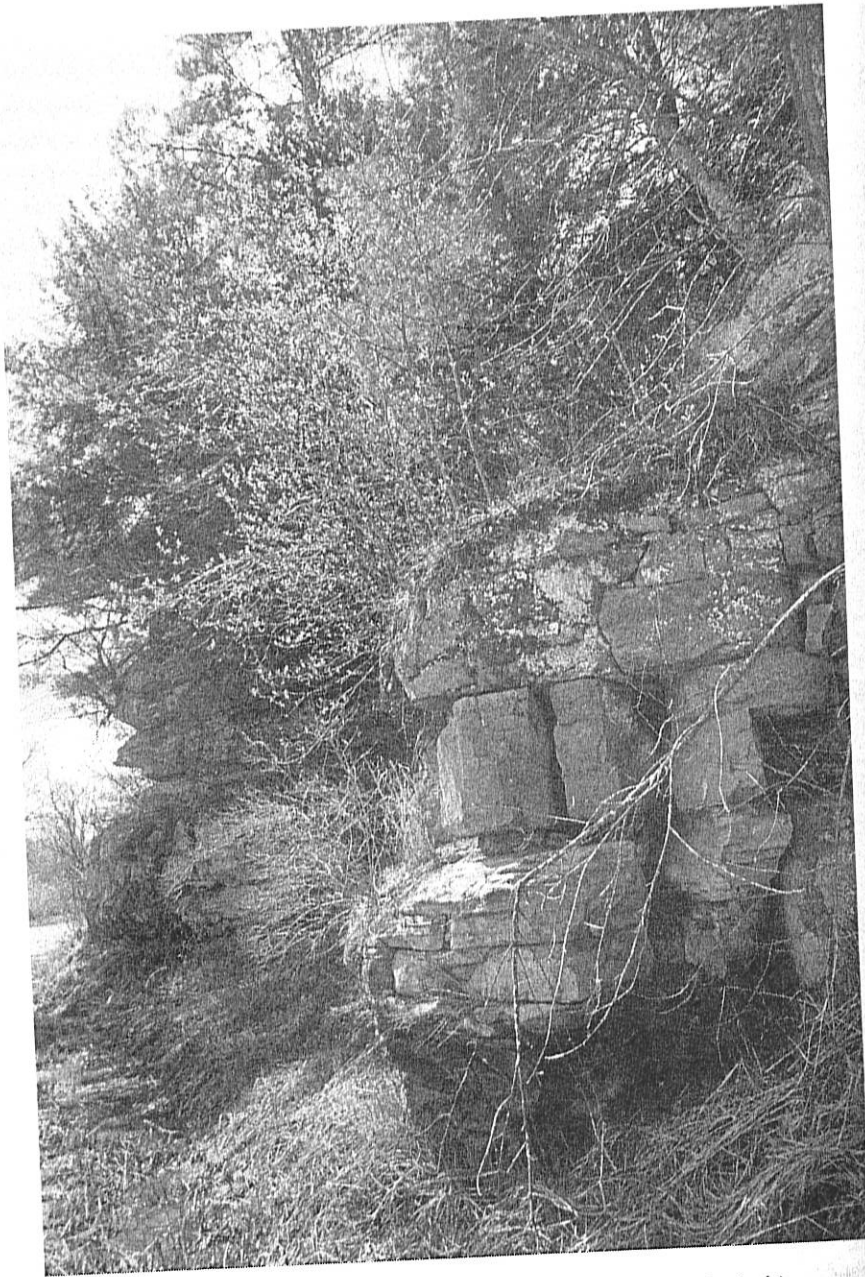
Reading the report, one can see the fine line the St. Paul District walked: on the one side carrying out a respectable EIS, on the other doing as little harm as possible to its project. With each new draft, the Corps's analysis had become more sophisticated. By the final version, the St. Paul District had examined an array of alternatives to the dam, including the option of no action. The report bluntly stated the dam's impact on ecosystems, fisheries, and wildlife. It anticipated, for example, "severe adverse impacts, even possible extermination, of unique cliff vegetation."⁶⁸ (The Endangered Species Act was one year in the future, so the loss of rare plants would not in itself have been a barrier to the dam.) The district adopted its lightest touch on the topic of the future reservoir. Here is what the St. Paul District said about La Farge Lake: "Present levels of nitrogen and phosphorus in the Kickapoo River are sufficient to permit algal blooms in a standing water body such as the proposed impoundment." Moving farther down the same section: "Chemical fertilizers which are used on farms in the basin also result in some nitrogen and phosphorus pollution." A few sentences later: "At current rates of erosion and sedimentation, La Farge Lake would also trap an estimated 100 acre-feet of silt."⁶⁹ Finally, fifteen pages later in a different chapter: "Siltation is expected to be a concern in the upper end of the reservoir due to the high silt load carried by the Kickapoo River."⁷⁰ Buried in the report as they were, these sentences brushed over what some people might have considered important questions: What will the recreational lake look like in the future? (Clear? Swimmable? Like pea soup from algae blooms? Like a mud pit in places from sediment loading?) What will the lake be in the future, biologically speaking? (Decent habitat for game fish? A new stop on the migration routes of water fowl? A eutrophic lake so loaded with nitrogen and phosphorus that weeds will choke out many other living organisms?) With four scattered sentences, the final environmental impact statement raised a bright red flag over the La Farge dam—water quality.

The statement's short summary preceding the report did not mention water quality as one of the dam's "environmental impacts" or "adverse environmental effects." Nor did the longer document list water quality as one of the "adverse environmental effects which cannot be avoided should the project be implemented." The final EIS only hinted that water quality in La Farge Lake might deteriorate over some unstated period. The report asked no questions beforehand and provided no answers afterward. The EIS did aver that "improved sewage treatment . . . would contribute to improving the water quality in the reservoir" and also that "the

acquisition of project lands is expected to remove approximately 5,000 acres from agricultural production and Soil Conservation Service personnel are continually promoting improved land management in the area.⁷¹ These, however, did not make up an analysis so much as an insinuation that the dam's effects might possibly be mitigated, although not by the Corps. The Corps had made little of the dam's greatest weakness, and what an Achilles heel it was.

The Council on Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency castigated the Corps's environmental impact statement.⁷² Both recommended that the Corps halt work on the dam altogether pending further study of water quality in the reservoir. Roland Clement, Stoddard's successor as chairman of the Environmental Advisory Board, prodded the Corps to improve its environmental impact statements.⁷³ Governor Lucey demanded another intensive review of the dam with an explicit focus on water quality. "Lucey was a very charming guy, but he wasn't resolute," said Graves of the turnaround, though plainly there was more substance behind the governor's call than fickleness.⁷⁴ Still testing the limits of NEPA, the Corps did not halt construction, but neither could it ignore the governor. Governor Lucey ensured that the uncomfortable parallel tracks of construction and study would continue.

Almost two years earlier, Brigadier General Graves had suggested that the governor form a committee to review the La Farge dam. Now the St. Paul District engineer tried a similar tack, proposing a "partnership team" of local Valley residents, environmentalists, state agencies, and the governor's office. Once more Governor Lucey agreed, but this time he asked for an independent scientific study of the project. Backed into a corner, the St. Paul District acquiesced. It commissioned a study from a group of scientists in the Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.⁷⁵ Their research confirmed dam opponents' worst fears: sediment would fast fill many areas of the new lake, while nitrogen and phosphorus would make it highly eutrophic. The Institute's report left no hope for a technological solution either, showing that even under the strictest land-use controls and with the most advanced sewage treatment technology, the lake would become polluted in a short time. The economic ramifications of the report were equally severe. Given the high cost of limiting nutrient flows, along with the low economic return from a polluted lake, alternatives to the dam were more feasible. At length the project fell short in the Corps's own economic cost-benefit analyses.⁷⁶ While the scientists involved in the water quality study stated clearly in



The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers eventually documented the ecological impacts of the La Farge dam, which would have flooded rare and endemic cliff-dwelling plants. (Courtesy of Wolfgang Hoffmann)

their report that, "We were not charged with making recommendations about whether or not the dam should be built," they had little need to take a stand. Their findings suggested such serious shortcomings with the La Farge dam that almost everyone concerned recognized the implications.⁷⁷

During this time, Valley communities had watched with satisfaction as the dam advanced foot by foot in Stark. The Corps had relocated Wisconsin state highways 131 and 33 out of the project area, a costly endeavor at nearly \$11 million. It had nearly finished the outlet works, which consisted of a 110-foot-high intake tower, an energy dissipator, and a stilling basin.⁷⁸ Lawsuits, environmental impact studies, correspondence between the Corps and the Council on Environmental Quality, all were moving in tandem with the physical work of the project, but a finished dam was a finished dam. Then, ominously, the Corps canceled an important contract for one of the next phases of construction.⁷⁹ The Corps appeared to be awaiting the fallout from the university study on water quality before going any further. The report had cast a shadow over the future lake.

Valley people did not sit still for this sudden turn of events. Opposition to the La Farge dam came from outsiders, residents fumed. "It took the grit of the early pioneers to come to this vast wilderness and make the Kickapoo valley what it is today and their descendents have enough of the fighting blood in their veins to not let it go back to the wilderness again," said local author Grace Hocking.⁸⁰ They demanded support from politicians. They wrote letters to the editor in local and regional newspapers. They packed every meeting on the dam's status. They even created a folk tradition around the project, thus continuing a long local literary history of lamenting hard times with poetry. The high stakes here warranted homage, so poet Virgil Munns rose to the occasion with "The Ballad of the Kickapoo."⁸¹

It seems they've wrote a song,
about every thing on earth.
The joys and sorrows of time,
Ever since it's birth.

Now comes a song so sad,
it touches me and you.
How some folks are a fuden,
over damming the Kickapoo.

Well son, I lived downstream
from that famous place.
I wish you'd seen my crops
wash away in disgrace.

I've buried your dead cattle,
I've burned your pretty trees,
I scrubbed your mud and refuse
on cold and aching knees.

And I ain't done no fuden,
My wishes are so few
I wish they would just finish
Daming the Kickapoo.

We took your waste and water,
the hard times that they spew
Just wanting for a dam
across the Kickapoo.

You've wash my sock en shoes
away from me too.
I think I'll join the fuden
for daming the Kick-a-poo.

It would be such a joy,
known by very few,
to fish behind the dam,
across the Kick-a-poo.

Valley residents took particular exception to what they considered academic interference in their lives. Robert P. Vosen hammered the point in a letter to the Corps: "We believe it boils down to a matter of production of life, limb, and property from flooding," he began. "This is what our forefathers went to Washington in 1938 to secure. Since that time we have been studied and muddied, assessed and recessed, charted and graphed, reviewed, halled into court by by-law and in-law, held trial by court and newspapers, delayed and relayed by wars, and during all of this time our crops are being flooded, our fences washed out, our cattle drown,

our tobacco wash away. While someone says 'lets study the solution some more.' Amen."⁸²

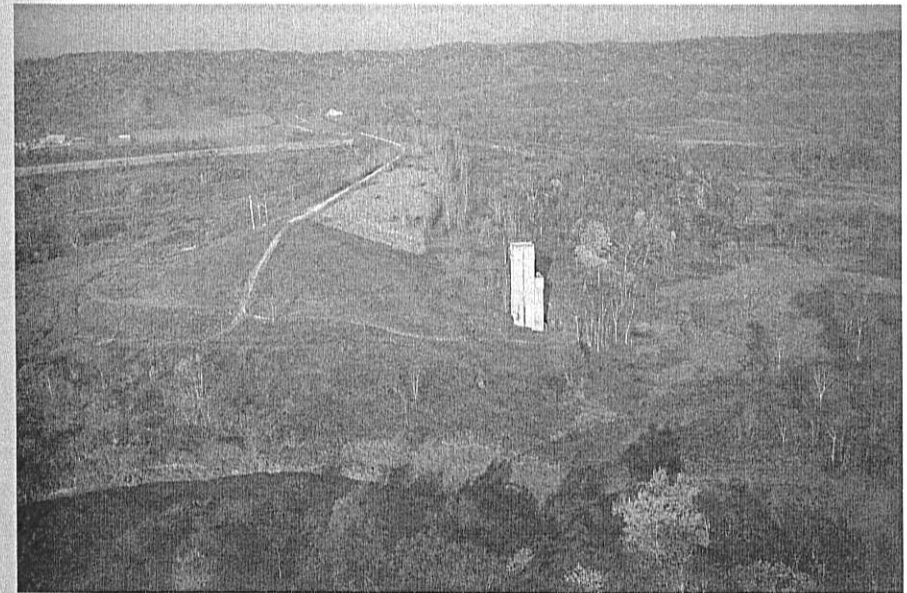
With palpable anger on all sides, powerful Wisconsin politicians were caught in a vice. First there was Governor Lucey, who had questioned the dam, then approved it, and then questioned it again. The environmental community was one of his strongest allies, and he was not alone. There was also Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, a prominent environmentalist best known as one of the founders of Earth Day in 1970.⁸³ Senator Nelson had been the governor of Wisconsin from 1959 to 1963, a time when he had personally reviewed and approved the Corps's plans for flood control along the Kickapoo River.⁸⁴ Finally, there was Wisconsin Senator William Proxmire, who was fast acquiring a national reputation for scrutinizing the financial logic of congressional appropriations. Proxmire had made himself a foe to many federal "pork-barrel" projects, which he would soon mock with annual "Golden Fleece Awards."⁸⁵ Like Lucey and Nelson, Senator Proxmire had once been in favor of the La Farge dam, even writing a supportive letter to Governor Nelson many years before.⁸⁶ That a single civil works project in an obscure part of the Upper Midwest could drag on so long with so many twists and turns along the way must have amazed even these savvy politicians. In the early 1960s, the La Farge dam had suggested little more than a good-faith effort by the Corps to control floods. In the late 1960s, it had appeared to be a popular and innocuous regional development scheme. By the mid-1970s, the La Farge dam had become one of the Corps's most controversial projects nationally—and one of Wisconsin's most popular projects locally.

The three could not escape the project's history, but that history tugged in opposite directions. For Governor Lucey and Senator Nelson, a hard decision became easier when the Council on Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency each officially demanded that the Corps halt work on the dam.⁸⁷ The environmental evidence against the project was now overwhelming. Senator Proxmire's misgivings did not involve the environment per se, so he took a little longer to make up his mind. For him two facts came to dwarf the others: the project's costs had tripled, while the estimated economic benefits to Valley communities had plummeted. In 1975, Governor Lucey and Senators Nelson and Proxmire formally withdrew their support for the La Farge dam.⁸⁸

Being no coward, Senator Proxmire traveled to La Farge to announce his decision. Commiserating with the audience, he said to them, "in spite of the overwhelming support of the people who have lived with this project

and dreamed of this project for years and count on this project for their salvation, I must oppose the project."⁸⁹ Offering less compassion in return, local residents burned Senator Proxmire in effigy, then drove the corpse to its burial via a manure spreader. A sign on the manure spreader read, "Our dam was locked in limbo, our bridge ain't safe to walk, cause Foxy Proxy took our dough and gave it to New Yawk."⁹⁰ The Corps's response was drier in tone but just as dogged in intent. It recommended in yet another report that "the United States undertake the completion of the partially constructed La Farge Dam as presently designed in the interest of flood damage reduction."⁹¹

Though the Corps had long refused to halt the La Farge dam project, environmental, political, and economic pressures became irresistible. At Senator Proxmire's behest in November of 1975, the Senate Subcommittee on Public Works eliminated funding for the project.⁹² Three-fourths of the way along and only a thousand feet left to go, the Corps left the dam unfinished—midstream in the Kickapoo River. This was a significant moment in the history of the Corps, which had never before stopped construction of a dam on environmental grounds. "I trust that the Activists



La Farge dam intake tower. Observe the nearly completed dam to the left of the tower. (Courtesy of Wolfgang Hoffmann)

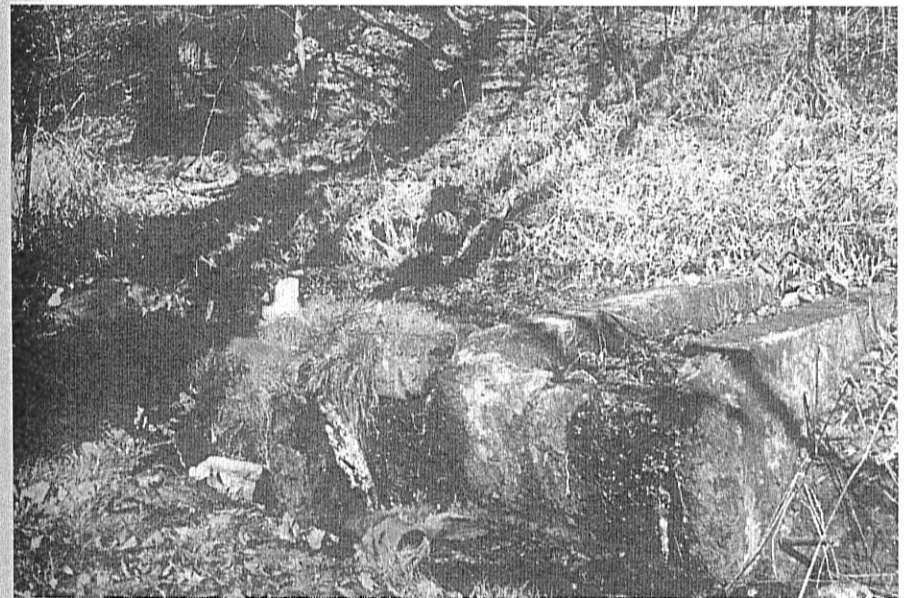
and the DNR and the Institutè for Propaganda are proud of their work of destruction,” wrote one Valley resident bitterly. “There it stands, a monument to negativism. . . . Ten-thousand acres of nothing stand as a monument to the negatives.”⁹³ And so it still stands today. The dam’s concrete intake tower rises tall like a sentinel on the Kickapoo River, a tomb that marks the passing of a community, or a monument to an environmental nightmare averted.⁹⁴

Ten years later and by then retired, Lieutenant General Graves mused on the dam. “It’s hard to say about a project like La Farge,” he said. “I think it was neither as good as some people claimed, nor was it as bad as others said.”⁹⁵ In Stark the sentiment was not so cool or pensive. The dam’s demise provoked a local fury that remained hot through the 1990s. Over time anger coalesced around specific histories. First were the property histories some residents held dear as former owners of the now-public land that was supposed to have been a nice lake. Second was the township’s recent history with the federal government. Local residents were always ready with the facts: after the Corps had acquired land for the dam, Stark had lost 60 percent of its population. The Corps had moved, torn down, or burned all the buildings on the site, obliterating the little village of Seeleysburg. (It razed the community’s heritage too.) In a fiscal blow, the federal government paid no property taxes on the Corps land. (Once their land.) A spate of new academic studies proposing economic development could not compensate or placate them for their losses.⁹⁶ As they saw it, academics continued to benefit professionally from their plight, just like the ones who did the water quality study had benefited. (By the way, they still remember their names.) There were clear winners in all this—environmentalists, canoeists, politicians, university researchers, the state of Wisconsin, and the federal government. And there were unmistakable losers—themselves.

In 1978, the Kickapoo Valley experienced the worst flood in its recorded history. While water surged through village streets, “people in the valley were cursing the politicians who have long fought in stopping the La Farge dam project,” reported the *La Farge Epitaph*.⁹⁷ “In memory of those who sold us down the Kickapoo River,” recapitulated the tombstone standing on the patio of the Rockton Bar.

Each spillover from the dam reinforced a mood of decline. Regret for the past and fears for the future; the mood made some Valley residents promising recruits to the property rights and militia movements new to

Wisconsin in the early 1980s. The sequence of events and rhetoric that make up the story of the La Farge dam is reminiscent of many rural places. The federal government (or just as often, environmentalists) against local people has become a shorthand description for rural conflicts and changes of many sorts. It has also become a default narrative for the way people have come to understand their relationship to private and public land. But in Stark, what exactly is the narrative about? In a strange way, a prominent part of Stark’s history is the tale of what did not happen. The La Farge dam did not get built, although artifacts of the project remain. A large lake did not submerge fields or pastures or rare plants that cling tenaciously to sandstone cliffs. The La Farge dam, however, did mark a place and a moment when two eras collided: the period following the Flood Control Act of 1936, when water planning by the Army Corps of Engineers became national policy, and the period following the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, when environmental protection became national policy. What did not happen in Stark turned out to be a vitally important event.



Ruins of an old springhouse on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers land. The Corps tore down buildings on the site in anticipation of the La Farge dam. (Lynne Heasley)