



*The People
Remember...*

**Edited by
Bonnie Sterling**

**An Oral History
of the Kickapoo La Farge Dam Project**

Acknowledgement

More than 50 residents of the Kickapoo Valley were interviewed in late 2000 and early 2001 for The People Remember project. Their thoughts and stories were put on tape.

The goal of the project was to leave a permanent record of their experiences in order that future generations will better understand the historical significance of the La Farge Dam Project and its impact on individuals and the community.

The taped collection of interviews and transcripts are archived at the Special Collections Department of UW-La Crosse Murphy Library. Taped copies of the interviews are also available at the Kickapoo Reserve Visitor Center, north of La Farge.

The interviewers went out in teams, a local adult and a student from Brad Steinmetz's La Farge High School history class. They took along a tape recorder, questions, maps and pictures of the area.

Each team worked independently of the other and they didn't have the opportunity to listen to each other's interviews.

The project was sponsored by

the La Farge Area Schools, the Norwalk-Ontario-Wilton Area Schools and the Kickapoo Valley Reserve.

Ron Johnson of the Kickapoo Reserve Management Board and Stuart Stotts, consultant, were instrumental in the development and implementation of the project.

Brad Steinmetz, former La Farge High School teacher was one of the initial planners of the project and provided the background historical perspective that was needed by the teams that went out and interviewed people.

Fritz Cushing was the project coordinator and Marcy West, executive director of the Kickapoo Reserve Management Board provided administrative oversight. Fran Campbell, executive assistant to the Kickapoo Reserve Management Board provided fiscal oversight and administrative support. They also provided support for the book.

Kayla Muller of La Farge High School was the project chronicler and Kristi Campbell of La Farge High School provided videotape documentation.

Chuck Lee of the UW-La Crosse

Oral History Program provided technical support and training and Harvey Jacobs of UW-Madison provided the national perspective.

As a result of this project, a series of oral histories were printed in the Vernon County Broadcaster, March 2002 to January 2003.

The original 15 stories for the Broadcaster series were chosen at random. Four more interviews were added to the original 15 for this book. Of the four, two were selected, Henry Trappe and Le Roy Stone because they are longtime residents of the valley. Trappe shared his many memories and stories with Brad Steinmetz in December 2003.

This book came about because the Friends of the Kickapoo Reserve wanted the newspaper series to reach an even wider audience with its compelling stories of a turbulent time in the valley.

The River Valley Newspaper group allowed the Friends to use the articles that were originally printed in the Vernon County Broadcaster. Tom Kelley, sales manager for the Broadcaster supported the series from the beginning with interest and enthusiasm.

Many of the pictures were found by Brian Turner. His nose for local history was helpful in compiling the pictures for this book.

Thanks to Terri, my graphics guru, for her help in assembling the book and pictures. And thanks to Chuck and Brad for their help and support.

I enjoyed visiting with each person who was interviewed and chosen for this book. They were gracious, sharing thoughts with me and also treasured pictures.

I hope you find these stories interesting, compelling and unforgettable.

As David Baldacci said in "Wish You Well", "Oral histories show an appropriate respect for the lives and experiences of those who have come before. And, just as important, they document those remembrances, for once those lives are over, that personal knowledge is lost forever."

This oral history is so no one forgets... "The People Remember".

Bonnie Sterling
February 2004

Historical timeline of the La Farge Dam Project and formation of the Kickapoo Reserve

1935 - Devastating flood on the Kickapoo River hit La Farge and areas along the river. Kickapoo Valley Railroad suffers extensive damage. Representatives from La Farge go to Washington, D.C. to appeal to Congress for help with flood control.

1936 - Congress passes Flood Control Act, authorizes the War Department Engineers to study Kickapoo River flooding problems.

1937 - Public hearing held in La Farge on flood control by Army Corps of Engineers.

1938 - Army Corps of Engineers proposes dam north of La Farge for flood control.

1941 - World War II puts everything on hold.

1951 - Kickapoo River flood ravages valley, 10 killed in the area.

1961 - Major flooding occurs again in the Kickapoo Valley. Gov. Gaylord Nelson and Sen. Alexander Wiley call for more efforts at flood control in the valley.

1962 - Congress authorizes Army Corps of Engineers to build flood control dam at La Farge, 400-800 acre reservoir planned. The plan is supported by Gov. Nelson.

1963-1965 - Army Corps of Engineers conducts studies of project, expands scope to include recreational and economic benefits for the valley.

1967 - Army Corps of Engineers unveils new plan calling for 1,780-acre lake with additional recreational areas and hydro-electric production potential at a cost of \$20 million.

1969 - Army Corps of Engineers starts acquisition of over 9,000 acres of land for the project. A total of 149 pieces of land would be purchased.

1970 - Federal Environmental Protection Act was passed, requiring the Army Corps of Engineers to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for project. Concerns were raised about water quality and endangered plant species. Sen. William Proxmire says one-third of the land acquisition

have been completed.

1971 - Sierra Club files suit to stop project on environmental concerns. Judge Doyle rejects suit in federal court. Sierra Club appeals decision. Groundbreaking ceremony for construction of the dam is held. "Citizens for the Kickapoo" group started to support the project. Construction on project continues for the next three years. The dam and roads are constructed, land is acquired and people are moved off their land.

1974 - Sierra Club drops appeal in federal courts. University of Wisconsin study suggests possible severe water quality problems for the lake. Gov. Patrick Lucey states concerns about project; project over half completed. Army Corps of Engineers delays clearing bottom land. Now Sen. Nelson calls for halt to entire project and wants to replace it with a national park. Environmental Protection Agency and governor also call for stop to project.

1975 - Corps forms a team to study project. Gov. Lucey officially withdraws support. Sen. Nelson blocks funds in Congress. Residents in the valley on both sides of the issue present petitions to government officials. Due to a failed cost-benefit ratio test, the now \$51.5 million project loses support of Sen. Proxmire and the Army Corps of Engineers officially stops project for further study.

1976 - Jan. 14 - Sen. Proxmire was hanged in effigy in La Farge. Emotions are running high in the area.

1976 - Study groups look for alternatives to lake project. The dry dam for flood control was one suggested option. Former landowners who had to sell their land for the project form K.L.O.U.T. to try to get their land back. All their efforts fail in courts.

1977 - Feb. 24 - As a member of the Senate Public Works Appropriations Subcommittee Sen. Proxmire officially withdraws support for the La Farge Dam project by voting against funding.

1978 - Major flood of Kickapoo River once again rips through the valley.

ley.

1983 - A final study was done to see if it was possible to build a smaller dam that would act as a flood control measure without the tourism benefits. This also failed the cost-benefit ratio test.

1992 - Gov. Tommy Thompson forms a Citizen Advisory Committee which begins meeting on a regular basis to focus on the future of the valley rather than dwelling on the past.

1993 - A Drafting Committee prepared a proposal for the future of the dam project land; it would be a reserve in public ownership that offered opportunities for low-impact tourism with a focus on education. The plan is endorsed by committee, local municipalities and state agencies and organizations. State legislation introduced by State Sen. Brian Rude and State Assemblyman DuWayne Johnsrud.

1994 - Congressman Steve Gunderson and Sen. Russ Feingold introduce bill in Congress to transfer dam project land from federal to state control. Bill dies in Senate committee.

1996 - Legislation again presented to Congress to deauthorize the dam/lake project and transfer of land and is passed as part of the Water Resources Development Act. Transfer of the land will hinge on agreement for co-management of land by state and Ho-Chunk nation and designation of 1,200 acres to be held in trust by Ho-Chunk.

Gov. Thompson appoints a nine-member Kickapoo Reserve Management Board which begins holding monthly meetings.

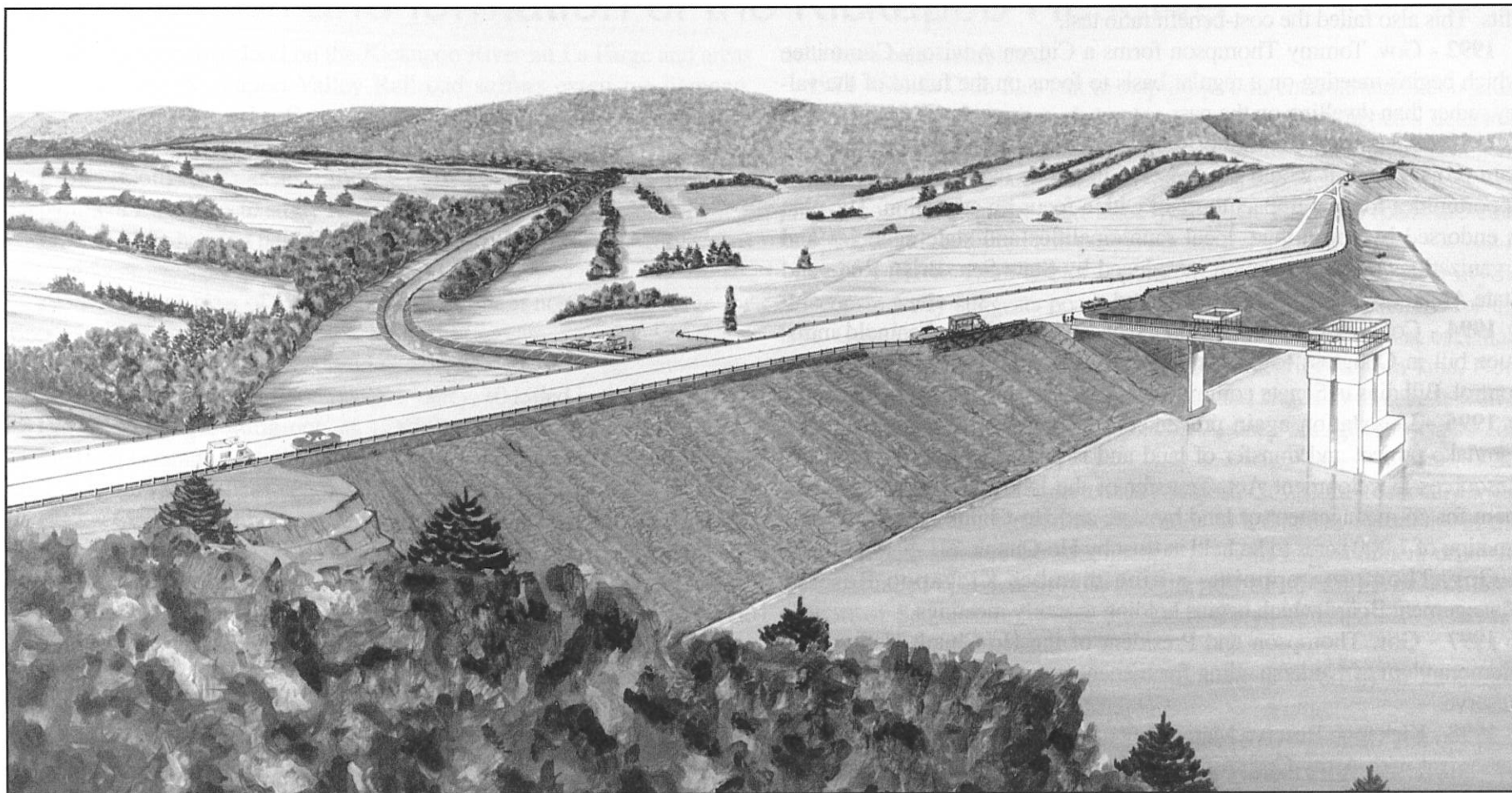
1997 - Gov. Thompson and President of the Ho-Chunk Nation sign Memorandum of Understanding for management of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve.

1998 - Kickapoo Reserve Management Board enters into management agreement with Army Corps of Engineers accepting day-to-day management responsibilities of the property.

2000 - Dec. 28 - The official transfer of the land from the Army Corps of Engineers to local control via the state of Wisconsin with the Kickapoo Reserve Management Board.

2001 - May 11 - Official dedication of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve.

History of the La Farge Dam project



In 1962 the Army Corps of Engineers unveiled a proposal to build a modest earth-filled dam on the Kickapoo River just above the village of La Farge which had suffered through six catastrophic floods since 1900, including one in 1951 and another in 1956.

A few years later, the Army Corps Engineers widened their vision, formulating new blueprints for a massive dam 103 feet high. Behind the dam, a large reservoir would extend for 12 miles called La Farge Lake.

Justifying a different project to people in the

Kickapoo Valley was not hard. The whole region was impoverished, so it could use the economic stimulus that tourism might create. The Valley's spectacular scenery would undoubtedly attract tourists once the lake was in place.

In 1969, the Corps started acquiring land for the lake. The federal government soon became the valley's largest landowner. Any anger or grief individual landowners felt at the loss was largely their private affair. Many major controversies involving the dam were about to come to the surface, yet remarkably the actual condemnation and purchase of almost 9,000 acres of private property, including 140 farms, was not among the major disputes.

At that point, with the Corps on the verge of realizing its plan, a couple of pivotal events took place. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 went into effect and several groups of people (mostly environmentalists from outside of the area) joined forces to fight the La Farge Dam project. These events would shift the slow trajectory along which the dam project had been traveling.

The new Environmental Act required that all federal agencies submit a "detailed statement" of the environmental impact of their projects. The Sierra Club filed two consecutive lawsuits, claiming the Corps' Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was inadequate. But the Sierra Club lost those lawsuits and the appeals.

On August 13, 1971, the Corps broke ground for the La Farge Dam and 500 people came to celebrate. Wisconsin's Lieutenant Governor made a speech as did the region's U.S. Congressman.

Although construction of the dam had begun, the Corps had not yet completed its final EIS, so work on the dam and work on the impact state-

ment proceeded in tandem. Ironically, after surviving legal battles and environmental protests, it would be four fairly short and vague sentences in the final EIS that would eventually stop construction of the dam when it was already three-quarters completed. Those four sentences all had to do with one thing — water quality in the new lake.

Would the recreational lake be clear and swimmable or like pea soup from algae blooms? Would the lake be a decent habitat for game fish or would it be so loaded with nitrogen and phosphorus that weeds would choke out most other living organisms?

The final EIS did not answer these questions. It only hinted that water quality in the lake might deteriorate over some unstated period. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and the EPA both suggested the Corps halt work on the dam pending further study of the water quality. Meanwhile, Wisconsin Gov. Patrick Lucey demanded another intensive review of the dam with an explicit focus on water quality.

Backed into a corner, the Corps commissioned a study from a group of scientists at UW-Madison. Their study, completed in 1974, confirmed dam opponent's worst fears. Even under the strictest land use controls, their report said the lake would become polluted in a short time.

During this time, Kickapoo Valley communities watched with satisfaction as the dam advanced foot by foot. The Corps had relocated Hwy. 131 and 33 out of the project area, a costly endeavor at nearly \$11 million. The Corps had

nearly finished the outlet works, which consisted of a 110-foot-high intake tower, an energy dissipator and a stilling basin. With concrete proof in front of them, people imagined a receding threat in the water-quality studies. After all, a finished dam was a finished dam.

But the study cast a shadow over the plan, and the Corps canceled an important contract for one of the next phases of construction. Kickapoo Valley residents did not sit still for this sudden turn of events. Opposition to the dam came from outsiders residents fumed. They demanded support from politicians. They wrote letters to the editor in local and regional newspapers, and they packed every meeting on the dam's status.

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 amazed even the state's most savvy politicians, including Governor Lucey and U.S. Sens. Gaylord Nelson and William Proxmire. But a hard decision for the politicians became a bit easier when the CEQ and the EPA each officially demanded in 1974 that the Corps halt work on the dam. The environmental evidence against the project was now overwhelming, plus the project's costs had tripled while the economic benefits to area communities had plummeted. So in 1975, Lucey and Nelson formally withdrew their support and Proxmire followed suit in early 1977.

Being no coward, 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 the project and dreamed of this project for years and count on this project for their salvation, I must oppose the project..."

Expressing somewhat less compassion in return, local residents burned Proxmire in effigy, then drove the corpse to its burial via a manure spreader.

Though the Corps had long refused to change course in La Farge, the environmental, political and economic pressures would become irresistible, so in 1977, the U.S. Senate eliminated funding for the La Farge dam. Three-fourths of the way along with only 1,000 feet left to go, the Corps left its work unfinished. And so it still stands today. The dam's concrete intake tower rises tall like a sentinel on the Kickapoo River, a monument of an environmental nightmare averted or a tomb marking the death of a community, depending on your perspective.

This left almost 9,000 acres of public land where the lake would have been. The Corps had jurisdiction, but without a dam to build, the land became insignificant holding to them and they largely withdrew from the scene, leaving it to the cross-country skiers, snowmobilers, hikers, horseback riders and hunters.

The reserve languished in administrative limbo throughout the 1980s, but then in 1993, residents developed a plan in which the federal government would transfer the land back to the state and put it under the control of a local board. Although the federal government rarely

releases public land to a lower level, the fiasco was so recent and the area communities so wounded that this trumped any other concern.

So, after a good deal of legal wrangling, the federal land was returned to the state of Wisconsin and the Ho-Chunk Nation in 2000 and renamed the Kickapoo Reserve. The land was placed under the control of the Kickapoo Reserve Management Board with the mission of making it an area for low-impact tourism or "ecotourism", which is hybrid of recreational development and environmental protection.

The above history is excerpted from a study by environmental historian, Dr. Lynne Heasley by Terry Noble, Broadcaster editor, 2000-2002

Mary Bufton Remembers...

Mary Bufton moved to the area in 1953 when she married Rex Bufton. She was a teacher until her three children were born and then she became a farm wife.

Mary still lives on the 60 acres that were left of the farm after the government bought 60 acres for the La Farge Dam Project in 1969. The Bufton property is located at the northwestern tip of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve on 24 Valley Road. Mary is known as the "Soap Lady" by many people in the area because she makes and sells a line of bath products at her farm under the name of "Countrywoman Soap".

Q. When the Dam project was announced, what were your feelings?

Bufton: At first I think we were a little bit excited. It seemed like this might be a nice thing to have a lake down the road. But when we thought like that we weren't thinking about the people who lived down the road either. I think this is a project every family viewed from their own perspective and everyone was different. Some looked forward to it, some were afraid they would have to move.

Many did.

So I think I was excited because it was something different, something to happen. It took a little time for it to sink in. The lake would stop down where Lower Weister is on Co. P. But we would be the back waters, in case of a tremendous flood on the lake. So we would have to

relinquish half our farm that's in the valley. That was our best land. You can see where [our property is] — just a little peak which is the end of the project.

Rex and I asked whether we could sell the whole farm, "Well if you are willing to accept the price offered," they said. So we said we have to think about it then, if it was going to be just the valley part, [that they were willing to buy].

Q. Did you ever feel you did have an option where you could say no?

Bufton: No, but they wouldn't buy all of it [the farm] from us. This is what we thought—if we got a decent price. We were offered \$13,000. We took \$13,000 for half our farm which made the farm only a recreational place.

That was 60 [acres] and we had 60 left.

The thing that was so horrific; we now had a piece of land [farm] that wasn't good. You could put your name in and rent your land back.

Q. How did you feel about the offer to rent your land?

Bufton: It was hurtful... I don't think the same way my husband did. He had been—he didn't want to sell. He'd sit—actually I shouldn't tell this. Why not—he'd cry.

He had been in the Navy in World War II. He was a submarine sailor. He spent about four years of his life swimming around under the sea in a submarine.

One day shortly toward the end of the war, as I recall it was 1943, the submarine *Segundo*

was—cruising is a good word—under the surface of the sea near Japan. They hit a mine and the submarine sank to the ocean floor. You know, [there] sat, 250 men aboard and Rex was the chief machinist mate. So it was his job to fix the submarine so it could surface, so they just wouldn't just sit down there. Something was wrong with the engine and don't recall that he ever told me how long it took him to fix it. Eventually it coughed like an engine will, the thing shook and the engine started.

Before this dam project ever happened, a shipmate came up from Texas and he had little children with him. One little boy was named Rex. I said, "Well Rex, that's pretty nice that George has named his son after you. Is that it?"

Mr. Umberger said, "I should imagine there's a lot of little Rexs running around the country, their fathers having been on that sub".

To me that was a big deal what Rex did. So he felt that all of those guys on that sub, none would think he should sell that little farm just to build a dam which didn't need to come up so far. It could have stopped below Weister.



Now I buried this inside of me. I don't talk about it a lot. He never talked about it. He told the boys. He didn't dwell on it.

Q. Did you look forward to the lake?

Buften: Yeah, we really recovered that way. Down here where Vic Steinmetz's was, you could look down, the lake would have started right in there. It would have been so nice and everything.

But then when they deauthorized it and we thought the school was going to go... But the people had already gone. There were two sides, they were on one side, we on the other. We all lost.

Q: How did you feel when the project was cancelled?

Then our feelings definitely changed. You see, we couldn't fight. In fact we wouldn't have felt this way if it [the dam] had really occurred. They didn't need us to start with because it was too far away from Lower Weister. The lake wouldn't have come up here. It wasn't necessary. They bought something they could have left alone because they didn't need it. When the thing was deauthorized and there wasn't going to be any lake. Then was where the real trauma started.

Because when we sold and there was going to be a lake down the road and my brother-in-law came over (Rex's brother) said you know this is going to be worth something some day. In a way, that prophesy is true. What's left here now is valuable, still—because of the project what's going to be done with the recreation, the



Old bridge across the Kickapoo 1915

Center, with the beauty of the land. The fact you can step outside and hear a cougar. This type of thing makes it more exciting country than it used to be.

There's some good things about that. They must continue. They must not stop again.

Q: So it is good, what they are doing with the land right now?

Buften: I think it's very good. I think it's a happy ending to a mistake! I think it's going to make La Farge and I only hope something doesn't happen and they quit. That's what scares me... this is going to be a good thing... This year was just wonderful with the many, many tourists who came through and stopped and the buses

I've had at the shop. So I can't sit here and complain but I'm just telling you we really had a hard time and change I think, is always hard...

Now I can't wait to go up there and get onto 131. As you go up through there you can look down in there and see that valley. That place again. I liked that valley down in there. It was real neat.

What I do, I watch for the lilacs up at the old Wolf place down there. The houses have gone [but] you'll see the pump, spring and the flowers people have had. These kinds of things.

Interview by Kristi Campbell and Geri Hall, Fall 2000.