

Early History of the Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge Area

- By Carl Johnson

Note: A copy of this document was given to the Aitkin County Historical Society along with this cover letter from Bartlett W. Foster. According to the "Official Register of the United States 1944" from the United States Civil Service Commission, Foster was the Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge manager, so we assume this introductory letter, written by Foster, was from around that time. Mr. J. Clark Salyer II, to whom this document was addressed, was Chief of the Division of Wildlife Refuges from 1934 to 1961, and is considered the father of the United States' wildlife refuges.

INTRODUCTION

Recently Mr. J. Clark Salyer II, Chief of Division of Wildlife Refuges, requested that historical and background material of the various national wildlife refuges be gathered by the refuge managers.

In response to this request, an old-timer settler, logger, and enthusiastic sportsman, Mr. Carl Johnson of East Lake, Minnesota was contacted. After considerable persuasion, the following manuscript resulted which contains a wealth of historical facts as well as an interesting story of the area in the early days which is now the Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

In view of the scope and completeness of the work, a copy of Mr. Johnson's story is herewith furnished for the Region 5 and Director's office of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Bartlett W. Foster
Refuge Manager.

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In the early 1880s, the country in and around what is now known as the Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge (located five miles south of McGregor, Minnesota) was a vast wilderness with highlands, ridges and knolls covered with pine, spruce, balsam and hardwoods. These higher and more inviting pieces of land were separated by damp and gloomy cedar swamps and tamarack muskeg, so dense with foliage that the sun's rays never reached down to ground level. Such was the country around Rice Lake and the lake, itself, was only a shade wetter than much of the surrounding country. From one Rice Lake shore of floating bog to the other shore of floating bog would take about two hours of the toughest kind of travel in the only means of transportation during the warmer months of the year, namely the Indian dugout canoe which had to be pushed part ways through the dense growth of wild rice with poles and paddled when a short stretch of open water was encountered.

There were, and still are, many fair sized creeks emptying into Rice Lake and were known by the number of the section through which they ran, such as sections 2, 3, 4 and 5. At that time, Rice Lake had only one outlet, a narrow, mucky creek which wound its crooked and tortuous way through the peat bogs and wild grass meadows for a distance of three miles to Rice River. In the spring when the creeks ran full and Rice River overflowed its banks, this same creek became an inlet and the river then helped to again raise the water of Rice Lake to their normal level, which was approximately 5 1/2 feet. This would be the time of year when the Northern Pike would swim and lay their eggs in the shallow water around the lake; and a little later the Suckers would swarm up the small creeks to lay their eggs, and still a little later the Buffalo fish weighing up to 50 pounds would come in large schools and spawn, and the ducks would tarry for a little while and then wing their way north to the breeding grounds in Canada and the Arctic Circle. A few ducks, such as the blue-winged teal, widgeon and mallard would stay and build their nests in the vicinity of the lake.

From then on, it was a humid and drowsy place until in September when the wild rice ripened and it would come to life again when the ducks and mudhens would flock in by the thousands to vie with the only human inhabitants of this region, the Chippewa Indians, in harvesting a part of the wild rice crop.

The Chippewa Indians, or Ojibways as they called themselves, had a permanent camp on a high ridge, about a mile northeast of the lake, known as Indian Point, and upon which the headquarters of the Rice Lake Refuge is now located/ The Indians would move over to the South shore where they harvested and thrashed their year's supply of wild rice. The thrashing was done by trampling on the rice in pits lined with staves. The "Ogema," or "Boss," usually wore a string of sleigh bells and the rest of the trappers would keep time to the sound of the bells. The Chief at this time was Oh-bitivo-wi-dung.

Years passed and so did the families of Indians. The only ones who could rightfully be termed as permanent residents of the "Point" were Sam Eshben, Sam Yankee and John Abbitt. They were good rivermen and hired out each spring on the log drives down Rice River to the Mississippi. John Abbitt purchased the Indian Point and built a frame house in which he lived until forced to sell out to the Government during establishment of the Refuge. He was born near Sandy Lake and at the age of ten, John came to Rice Lake with step-father, Tom Sky. His father, Aganogh, was killed in a card game fight shortly after John was born. Aganogh fought the Sioux on Battle Island in Sandy Lake, which is about

twenty miles from Rice Lake and is said to have scalped two of the Sioux. Franklin, a half-breed nephew of the early explorer Sir John Franklin, lived at that time near the outlet of Rice Lake on a small island which still bears his name. Franklin, being a half-breed son of Sir John's brother, was not desired as a resident of England and was therefore paid a pension to remain out of England, and was known as the "Remittance Man."

Probably the first pioneer was Elmer Antell who the Indians named Great Hunter. Antell married Nancy Brovell, a half-breed, and settled on the northern shore of Rice Lake raising a large family and together with Grogan and Pat Hopkins became the pioneer loggers. From then on the stillness of the frigid wintry days, which had been broken only by the occasional scream of a lynx or cry of a lone wolf, became a bedlam of noise with the crash of the giant pines of the forest as the axe and the saw cut them down, the raucous cries of the top loaders and teamsters, and the grind of heavy loads over the frozen snow.

The logs were hauled to the lake and unloaded on to the ice. A boom was made around the logs and when the lake became free of ice in the spring, which happened as early as March 8th in 1908 or as late as the 9th of May in 1909, the log boom was towed across the lake to the outlet by men operating a winch on a raft. The Raft was then anchored and the rope was wound around the winch, thus slowly towing the boom. It was a slow and tedious process and if the wind was unfavorable, the log boom would drift up against the shore in spite of the men's efforts. One spring during an unexpected storm, the boom parted and the logs scattered and then drifted up against the shore where they lay until they could be salvaged a year later. Oscar Engstrom came to Rice Lake in 1894 and the next year the lake was so low that two million feet of logs lay in the bottom and could not be moved.

About this time, the Great Northern Railway proposed to build a railroad a mile south of the lake, running East and West. This line was duly marked on the map in the Land Office whereupon settlers began to drift into the area. In the spring of 1892, Jonas Johnson was first to file a timber claim bisected by this line, with the promise of a railroad, and perhaps a town built on the land or at least nearby. The railroad was never built and Jonas Johnson and his four sons, John, Jonas, Alfred and Carl (writer) logged during the winters. In the spring they would tow the logs across the lake and drive the logs through the creek to Rice River and down to the Mississippi River. During the summer, they would clear land, raise cattle and hogs and build roads. There were no real roads in those days, only two toting trails. One wound its way eastward towards the headwaters of Rice River and the other from Kimberly southeasterly across Rice Lake. These roads or tote roads were only used during the winter months by the loggers hauling their provisions to their different camps, except for a brief time in the spring when the river opened up and the log drive down to the Mississippi was on. These trails were then tramped down by men with caulked boots until the last river drive in 1911.

In the year 1900, Davidson and McRae purchased the land owned by Antell and several thousand acres near and around Rice Lake which they operated as a stock ranch until the year 1917. They thought that if the water level was lowered, it would be possible to harvest some of the wild hay by machinery instead of having a large crew of men on their payroll putting it up by hand. In 1918, they gave Oscar Engstrom the contract to dig a ditch in the old creek very near Rice River. Mr. Engstrom dug this ditch by hand in a period of 55 days. This, however, did not help matters any because, as stated before, at times the river would overflow and run into the lake. In a few years the old creek grew up for a distance of one-half its length, but curiously, the sucker fish would not use the new ditch and stopped coming into the lake in the spring.

The Davidson and McRae interests were sold out to the Lando F. Oran Company, which in turn, sold to the St. Croix Land and Lumber Company of Stillwater, Minnesota which was controlled by Knute Levine. A saw mill was operated by the Company in "Tom's Island," where the logs and bolts brought in from their land were sawed into lumber and shipped to their factory in Stillwater. This mill had a maximum capacity of about 21,000 board feet per day. The mill was operated for a period of seven years or until all of the valuable timber found on their land was cut. The land was sold to the Government at the time of the establishment of the Rice Lake Refuge. Tom's Island is located on the south side of the present Refuge entrance road and just west of the Rice River Bridge.

The American Grass and Twine Company purchased a block of marsh meadows north of Rice Lake in 1897 from a St. Paul land company and began commercial cutting, baling and shipping to their St. Paul factory the marsh grass found on the land for use in the manufacture of carpets. They greatly enlarged their land holdings in 1900 and at their peak owned 4040 acres, leased an additional 1800 acres, harvested up to 2400 tons of grass annually and employed up to 200 men at a daily wage of \$1 per day and, in later years, up to \$5 per day with keep. The company reorganized in 1911 as the Creck Carpet Company until 1936 when they went into voluntary bankruptcy. Shortly later, they sold a portion of their holdings to the Government and these holdings make up much of the northern end of the Rice Lake Refuge.

In the fall, after the woods had been touched with the magic wand of nature, when the leaves of the oak and maple turned to crimson and gold and the fresh fragrance of the woods was in the air, the Johnson boys, like every true sportsman, would forsake their everyday tasks and heed the beckoning call of the Red Cods, roaming the woods with their rifles stalking the way deer or paddling their canoe through the golden fields of wild rice – bringing down ducks again after their sudden and noisy spring up into the crisp autumn air. Game were plentiful, both furred and feathered. Deer, rabbits, and gray and black squirrels were abundant. An occasional moose would wander through and some bears and always wolves and coyotes were to be found. However, lynx and bobcats were scarce. Mike and sometimes an otter would take a trip up the river and hundreds of muskrats would be busy building their houses in the shallow waters of Rice Lake. In the early spring mornings, the air would vibrate with the drumming of the male ruffed grouse from nearly every moss-covered windfall, and the sharp-tailed grouse would have their song and dance on the cranberry swamp at the west end of Rice Lake. From September to the freeze-up, varying from October 20th to December 6th, the ducks would flock into Rice Lake by the tens of thousands to fatten on the wild rice on their way south.

Market hunting flourished here, as elsewhere, during the hard years that preceded the Spanish-American War. Ducks were packed in barrels and shipped to Saint Paul, where the mallards brought \$3.00 per dozen and the blue-winged teal \$2.20. Antell was one of the principal market hunters, together with many others who shipped their game by rail from McGregor and Kimberly.

In 1921, Oscar Engstrom commenced to rent boats and to board and room duck hunters and others soon followed. His guests included such good hunters as John Taran and Andrew Konchbun. Mr. Engstrom claims to have had his best season in 1929. Altogether, eighty autos were counted the fifth morning of the season in 1930 at different landings. The first automobile to arrive at his place was in the fall of 1919 when the township road down to the lake had just been made passable. The largest bag of ducks brought in to the Engstrom landing was seventy mallards which five hunters brought in after one morning's shoot in the west end of Rice Lake.

During the drought years of 1932, 1933 and 1934, pheasants came into this country and increased very rapidly until they could be found almost everywhere, and especially around the lake where they too were feeding on the wild rice. Then came the gradual diminishing of all feathered game with but one exception – the wood ducks. Carl Johnson and Oscar Iverson, two of the best duck hunters and wing shots in this part of the country, hunted together on Rice Lake every season since 1914 and who nearly always bagged their limit of ducks known to frequent this area, had never seen a wood duck until the fall of 1939. From then on, the increase in wood ducks has been remarkable.

At present, the ducks are far from plentiful in the area. There are very few sharptailed grouse or prairie chicken to be found. Ruffed grouse are rapidly becoming a rare bird in comparison to previous numbers, and the pheasants are nearly all gone and the Canada grouse has been gone long since.

This decrease in birds, however, either directly or indirectly has not been caused to any great extent by the taking of birds by hunters, but to other causes such as unusually severe winters, cold and wet springs, parasites, disease, drought, birds of prey and predatory animals which have increased in great numbers. The fox was practically unknown in this country until three years ago, while now there are fox, both red and gray, to be found everywhere. Another vital factor is the scarcity of food, especially the wild rice.

In the drought year of 1930, standing on the south shore and looking out over Rice Lake, the whole lake looked like an enormous wheat field. The Johnson brothers cut three stacks of wild rice with scythes along one mile of the south shore which they fed to their stock. Now, there is hardly a patch of rice to be seen in the entire lake in comparison to the years gone by, and the muskrats which could have been counted by the thousands up until 1941 have so decreased in numbers due to extreme high water followed by severe ice heaves and lowering lake levels during the winter. Now, it is doubtful if a dozen or two could be found.

Deer, which had been protected for many years, have become a menace to the livestock food supply, especially to sheep, and a bounty has been placed on them together with wolves and fox. Bobcats have increased to an alarming extent. The Wolves which had always been quite numerous, suddenly disappeared in 1925, cause unknown, and thereafter for a period of twenty years, the howl of a wolf was seldom if ever heard. During those years, a sharp increase in deer was noted. Then just as suddenly, the wolves have staged a comeback, and no doubt the deer will begin to become more numerous unless the wolves are rigidly control. And so it goes. As the life cycle of one species declines, the life cycle of some other species takes a swing upwards.

Rice Lake has two islands, one the lovely and picturesque island with plum and thornapple trees and wild grapes growing in profusion. This island is the only spot on which wild grapes could be found in the vicinity and the Indians say that they have always been found there. Mud Island was the name of the other island and was long, flat and muddy, perhaps a quarter mile north of Grape Island. Mud Island, however, moved higher during the high water of the past few years and drifted further into the lake. This island was an ideal spot for duck hunters in the fall and certain points at the close of hunting season were literally covered with empty shotgun shells.

The branch of the Soo Line known as the Cuyuna and Iron Range railroad was completed in 1910, running north of the lake through Indian Point and the Davidson and McRae ranch. This line was abandoned in the 1920s and a portion of the road bed is now utilized by the Refuge headquarters.

During the night of July 2, 1897, Rice Lake rose two feet. Oscar Engstrom went across the lake on skis once as late as the 6th day of May in 1909. During the winter of 1912-13, Rice Lake froze to the bottom and fish remaining in the lake were killed.

Eight men have lost their lives by drowning in Rice Lake, four in the spring of 1901 – Megg, Johnson, Overland and Peterson; two duck hunters in the fall of 1915, Lonntzen and Pendergast; and two during the fall of 1928, Nordstrom and O’Neal. Two more, John Durnott and E. J. McLeod nearly lost their lives when their board capsized about a quarter mile out from the north shore and by the time they got back in the boat they had lost their paddles and thereafter drifted with a very cold north wind almost to the south shore, a distance of about two miles. They were very near death from exposure when rescued by Carl and Alfred Johnson and Isedor Iverson who had decided to have one more duck shoot before putting their boats away for the winter. The ice was already building up and sticking on the wild rice at the time. Their cries for help were heard by the hunters and they were found and rescued just in time.

By: Carl Johnson
East Lake, Minnesota

** Carl Johnson was known throughout the area as a very personable and an avid and knowledgeable sportsman. He most ably served the area people as their East Lake Post Office rural route mailman for many years. It appears that Carl wrote this Early History of the Rice Lake Wildlife Refuge in the early 1940s. We are highly indebted to him for doing so. In October, 1945, Carl Johnson, Alfred Johnson and Paul Olafson drowned when their boat capsized while duck hunting in Lilly Lake (a small lake located near Dam Lake) which is located a short distance west of Rice Lake in Aitkin County. It was a great tragedy and loss to the entire community.

Much of the legacy of the early success of the Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge was built on the legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which was established in 1932. The camp at Rice Lake, constructed in 1939, consisted of approximately 200 men and twenty-three buildings. The project was to construct water impoundment works, replant aquatic and upland vegetation, construct truck trails, walking trails, roads and bridges, erect fences and boundary markers and assist in the construction of patrol cabins and service buildings. Additional training, such as diesel engine mechanics, was also provided to the enrollees. The project ended abruptly after two year. The barracks were torn down and shipped to another location. However, visible signs such as the angled wooden rail fences along the Rice Lake Refuge entrance road were still distinguishable in recent years.

The Rice Lake Wildlife Refuge remains a great National Resource in many ways. It should be noted that the existence of the Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge has, and continues to be, beneficial to the entire area surrounding the Refuge. Since its furred and feathered wildlife do not recognize that the Wildlife Refuge has “established boundaries,” they continue to also take advantage of the many lakes, ponds, rivers, forests and grasslands that lie in the contiguous area. Life at the Wildlife Refuge continues to go on – the Ojibway still harvest the wild rice each year at Rice Lake and the thousands of ducks still frequent the Lake during their migration each year from northern Canada to and from areas to the south.