

FROM BRIDGES to DAMS ALONG the FOX *by Steve Domski*

This winter I've been writing this article in my rather toasty family room with a nice fire going most of the time. Being that my topic looks back at the early 1800's and our early settlers, it has made me reflect on the drastic differences of the times. I question if I'd be game enough to take on the difficulties they did. But I guess if I were to venture out as these young pioneers did, the ones who really were the hero's of the time, I too would choose a place as environmentally blessed as the McHenry, Illinois area. It was a diamond in the rough with fertile prairies, wooded lands, and other abundant resources for growth. At the top of the resource list had to be the Fox River system. It was named for one of the most predominant Indians, the "Fox", which were members of the Algonquin tribe. As strange as it sounds, the village of Algonquin, of McHenry County, was not named after the Algonquin tribe directly, but after a ship a village member once sailed on. Anyway, to these Indians it was a highway north and south, an endless supply of fish and game, a place to play and a way to escape other warring tribes. It was the thread that always led home, the heart of their existence. With the arrival of new inhabitants, there were some less than happy Indians around. This was prior to the 1836 date, when the Indian treaties were in full force and the Indians had to leave the area. There's much to learn about the tribes that migrated along the river, but that's a subject for another day.

The journey of the Fox River system we're going down today starts with the early white settlers of the McHenry area. It was an exciting time. Just looking over its beautiful landscape had to fill them with a wonderful richness, even though they came with little or nothing. They were now committed to harness this new environment. Making the river system work for them was a priority. It would mean growing industry, population and accessibility for trade. I hope the following will shed a little light on how this progressed.

In the McHenry Village area of the river, the Indians left behind a ford. It was a shallow place in the river, where by placing broad, flat, square cut sand stones which were secured by other rocks to keep them in place during high current times, to cross the river. It was probably the first semi-engineered bridge of the area. History has it that these stones have no local origin. I can only ascertain that the ford was something the Indians took pride in considering all the labor that must have been involved in attaining the materials to construct it. As the ford became unsafe during the early part of the settlers homesteading, these nice square cut sand stones were pulled from the river to become hearth stones for fireplaces. It is said that some of these are still around today.

By 1837 ferries and small boats were about the only means to cross the river, except in the winter when the ice was safe. Tragically the first death in the township of McHenry occurred in 1836 when, while crossing the ice on the river, William Herrick accidentally shot himself when his horse broke through the ice discharging his rifle and killing him instantly.

In 1842 the first bridge in the village of McHenry was built. When first researching this bridge I was led to believe it was built in the Pearl Street area, but other research pointed to the Elm Street area. Whatever the case may have been, this bridge was washed downstream during a spring flood in 1849. It was brought back and rebuilt that same year at the price of \$1,545. Also in the fall of 1849, our old

friend Horace Long, owner of the "Mansion House Hotel" which was located on the west side of the river on Pearl Street, deeded to the county property he owned on the east side of the new proposed bridge for purposes of a new exit road. This new Pearl Street Bridge was built in 1852. Then again in 1864 a third bridge was erected replacing the old, at a cost of \$2,350. Some 16 years later in 1880 a new bridge called the "Iron Bridge" was built at the Pearl Street location again, at a cost of \$8,200. This remained until 1977 when it was replaced after 97 years of service, by the concrete bridge we have today. I feel lucky to have had the pleasure of using the Iron Bridge myself, being it was a part of McHenry County history for so long, and well worth that \$8,200.

In 1927 the "State Route 120 Bridge" opened. It helped offset the traffic on the "Pearl Street Iron Bridge", but most of all it was needed to accommodate the automobile.

In those early years before dams were built water levels were not stable in the river and lakes to the north. Generally they were quite shallow in the summer months. In 1887 steamboat operators tried to remedy this problem by building a temporary dam above the Iron Bridge. Raising water levels gave them more access from McHenry up through the Chain of Lakes. Farmers feared losing land to the rising water levels, while summer residents favored it. It's not completely clear how legal this dam was or how long the dam existed. However a strange event occurred in June of 1895 which leads me to believe a new dam was much wanted by hook or crook. On a Saturday that June a special train pulled into McHenry around midnight, loaded with sacks of sand and Portland cement. They were unloaded and dumped into the river 200 yards below the "Iron Bridge". By Sunday morning a dam was built. According to the newspaper, everyone in the village was surprised. This was clearly in violation of the federal river and harbor acts of the time. There's not much known what happened after this event.

In the late 1890's, summer resorts for wealthy Chicagoan's were popping up along the waterways. By 1910 there were 30 hotels and 7 saloons in the Village of Fox Lake alone, with dance halls, camps, and yacht clubs to follow by 1915. With all this on the horizon, in 1901 the newly established Fox River Navigable Waterway Association lobbied for a dam. By 1902 congress granted permission to build a dam 4 miles south of McHenry. In 1900 funds for the dam had yet to be appropriated from Congress even with the help of summer resident Congressman William Lorimer. Citizens were eventually persuaded that financial support for the dam was in their best interest, based on the idea that property values would increase; there would be more tourist trade, better water flow to run factories, the ability to keep water levels more uniform during dry months and help towns below the dam flush sewage and trash downstream. Farmers were once again unhappy, but they were promised to be compensated for lost acreage. A temporary dam was built in 1906 and a permanent wooded dam would follow in 1907. In 1908 the Water Ways Association again wanted to replace the dam and again asked property owners along the river, and businessmen of McHenry to join the association and promote the dam. The dam went under piece meal repair with a hand operated lock added at the east end.

In 1908 deep channels were being cut between the lakes of the chain. The river system had become a money making playground for tourists and a Mecca for summer boaters, with boat races starting as early as 1905. One tourist attraction that needs mention because of its popularity were lake tours on boats such as the early 1887 steam boat "Mary Griswald" and later the 1914 "Gladene" to the lotus

beds. Lotus is an aquatic lily with a large white bloom. They carpeted the Fox and Grass Lakes. Sadly the development of the area and rise in water levels created by the dam, just about decimated them. Today thanks to restoration efforts, a small healthy protected lotus bed again exists in Grass Lake.

In 1912 the wooded dam was replaced by a steel pile dam with removable flashboards to regulate water levels. It also included a new 15 x 70 foot concrete lock on the east side. The first dam and lock tender was James Hughes Sr. He came here from Kilkenny, Ireland in 1879 at age 13, sponsored by John Flusky who came here in 1836 from Ireland. James was his nephew and worked for John as a laborer on his farm. A portion of that farm would have been part of the south west corner of present day Moraine Hills State Park. James later bought a farm of his own along the east side of the dam. This made him the logical choice to become the dam and lock tender in 1912, but with a farm to run it was only part time work for him. His grandson, Jim Blum relayed this story to me as to the operation of the early lock and dam: A tether at the lock was run back to a bell at the Huches farm house to signal a boat needed passage. A "key lock" secured the locks mechanics, so James would run down to unlock it. If he was out in the fields working, one of the children was sent down to do it. I think you can agree it was a slower and much simpler time! James was also responsible for regulating the water flow at the dam with the use of the flashboards, using his own discretion and at times given directives by letter from the Waterways Authority. James Jr. took over for his father eventually, and some years later being an avid hunter and trapper went on to be one of the first area park rangers.

From 1919 to 1923 the Fox River and Lakes Improvement Association was in control of the dam until cost of operation was more than it could afford. At this point control and responsibility for the dam was turned over to the Illinois Department of Public Works.

After the flood of July 1938, the dam once again became unsafe and had to be replaced. This was during the depression, at which time the Civilian Conservation Corps acquired 58 acres from the Thomas Bolger family for the project. This is the present concrete dam without the lock, which was added later in 1960. The Bolger family also donated the boulders used in the dam's construction.

Thomas Bolger Sr. bought his farmland along the river in 1863. Thomas A. Bolger, his grandson, was a State Representative for McHenry, Boone and Lake Counties from 1928 to 1952. This was an unequalled 24 year period of service. He was also very instrumental in forming school district 156. He died in 1953. In his honor for the many years of community service, and his family's contributions to McHenry and the State for their role in the construction of the lock and dam, the name Thomas A. Bolger joined that of Governor William G. Stratton on the lock & dam in 2005. William Stratton was the Governor at the time of the lock's construction which was completed in 1960, and strong advocate of the project.

The Bolger property ran mainly along the west side of the river. While James Hughes' land bordered on the east side. During that same timeframe of the new dam construction, the state of Illinois bought 15 acres from the Hughes family, which became McHenry Dam State Park and now part of Moraine Hills State Park. Directly to the north is the Hughes Indian Ridge subdivision which was all part of the Hughes farm at one time. Jim Blum, James' grandson, grew up there. He had told me that the only way into the McHenry Dam Park was through Indian Ridge, down Black Partridge Road, from the late 30's thru the

early 50's. This was a money making situation for Jim and the other kids. He told me they used to set trot lines in the river at night and sell the fish they caught and lemonade along the roadside to the visitors coming to the Park. At the end of the day, what fish didn't sell went into Ma's garden. With their earnings in their pockets they made their way uptown to the ice cream parlor. A simple yet rewarding life style peppered with childhood adventure and self taught entrepreneurship!

Jim Blum is a fountain of information on local history. I've only touched on a few bits and pieces of things he has told me. I've even suggested that he write a book. I find the more I learn about the people and families that shaped our landscape long before us, the more meaning that name on that street sign, or park, or building take on. In a way it seems to ground you, and you feel a connection to the community you never had before.

I'm learning the names and locations of the farms that once occupied Moraine Hills. The farmer no doubt had the biggest impact on the park prior to its formation. Over the years they changed its original landscape by transforming it to farmable land, but what the farmers did was actually save the land from urban sprawl, which in turn made the land retrievable for restoration. Earlier I wrote about a long time farming family, the Bolgers. In 2006 they again showed their generosity and commitment to preserve the farming tradition and nature when Walter Bolger (the great-grandson of Thomas Bolger, Sr.) and his wife Madeline placed a permanent conservation easement on about 70 acres of farmland they donated. This land will be forever used for agricultural production and will provide an important buffer between the City of McHenry and its developments to the north and west, the county's Stickney Run Conservation Area to the south, and Moraine Hills State Park, (site of the William G. Stratton-Thomas A. Bolger Lock and Dam) to the east. It's good to know that people generations from now will be able to enjoy the Bolger's generosity and maybe create awareness that there are things worth protecting.

Well this is where I sign off for now. But I'd like to leave you with something to ponder. If the settlers could see the progress that they set in motion years ago at its peak today, would they be happy living in it, or would it leave them yearning for the 'good old days'? I suppose there is no real way to know. But my take on the 'good old days' was defined for me by a good friend who passed away a few years back. He used to tell me when the subject came up, that "these are the good old days". And now looking back I believe he was right!