

A Vision of the Skokie Lagoons

Winnetka is blessed with two defining natural features. Two bodies of water that define our eastern and western borders: Lake Michigan and the Skokie Lagoons. We enjoy these natural wonders for recreation and benefit from their abundant resources. But the relationship with our neighbor to the west requires a good deal of work.

An Unwelcoming Neighbor

Once a bayou of the prehistoric Lake Chicago, by the mid-1800s the area was a swampy marsh referred to as Che-Wab-Skokie, or Skokie Marsh. Waters that supported its wide variety of wildlife were confined to the area by a ridge to the east preventing drainage to the lake and an impenetrable layer of blue clay that formed a basin. As Winnetka settlers began spreading west in the early 1890s, this waterlogged wonderland proved an unwelcoming neighbor.

The Skokie's bogs bred swarms of mosquitoes and engulfed stray livestock. In the wet season, the whole area would become a lake. In dry season, winds sent dust billowing throughout town. Peat fires smoldered constantly and ignited into intense fires that spewed heavy smoke and cinders across town for weeks at a time, putting homeowners on constant alert for fires.

No Easy Solution

The first effort to provide an outlet for Skokie waters was the Skokie Ditch. In 1864 this trench was dug toward Kenilworth and helped for a while. But it exacerbated problems with dust and fires. And residents used it as a sewer sending polluted water to the lake. In heavy rains it would overflow and flood parts of Wilmette and Kenilworth.

In time, plans were created for a canal that would provide boating and recreation as well as flood control. But it proved impractical and plans were dropped.

Around 1908, Frank Windes, Winnetka's Village Engineer, showed his own plans to Daniel Burnham in the hopes that Burnham would include the project in his Plan of Chicago. Windes' vision for transforming the Skokie Marsh into a series of lagoons and interconnecting dams would provide flood control while creating a vast area for natural recreation. Burnham commended the young man for his vision, but said that he was at least 25 years ahead of his time.

25 Years Later

In 1933 President Roosevelt created the Civil Conservation Corps (CCC), a public relief program to provide jobs during the Depression for young men in projects related to conservation and development of natural resources. Winnetka native Harold Ickes, as Secretary of the Interior, had authority over the CCC which quickly approved the Skokie Lagoons as a CCC project. By fall of that year 800 young men were barracked at Camp Skokie, in the Glenview Forest Preserve ready for work.

The U.S. Army and the National Parks Service collaborated on this, the largest CCC project ever undertaken. The young, unmarried men were under the care of the U.S. Army, which paid each \$30 per month and provided barrack style housing, meals, clothing, recreation, medical care, and educational opportunities to as many as 2,200 workers in Camp Skokie.

The National Parks Service directed the construction project, which it estimated to take two years. This involved excavating 4 million cubic yards of earth over 190 acres to form seven lagoons, each averaging 28 acres and retaining 600-700 million gallons of water.

It would take almost ten years for the project to be completed.

Lagoons were stocked with fish to control the scourge of mosquitos, and thousands of trees were planted, transforming the marsh into a forest. As the CCC disbanded in 1941 in the lead up to WWII, WPA workers took over final efforts to complete the project in 1942.

What Next?

While the Skokie Lagoon project may have been a success, Winnetka's drainage problems persist. Of course, nobody wants to return the area to the unhealthy miasma of mosquitoes, smoke and fires that plagued Winnetka before its transformation. Yet, once again, we face decisions about drainage solutions. Without a Frank Windes sketch of some new solution, we wonder what creative ideas will surface?



In 1938, while the lagoons were under construction, west Winnetka was flooded after a week's rainfall of more than 7.5 inches. Skokie project officials refused to cut a temporary dike that protected the lagoons from floodwater but instead diverted waters toward neighborhoods. PHOTO COURTESY WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.