

The Des Plaines River Valley
A Challenge Then And - A Challenge Now!
by Irwin F. Plagge (1963).

- A Challenge Then -

Into the Indian country came the Pioneer, to live and work and worship near a most beautiful river, one that abounded in fish and could supply water power. Along its banks were the heavily wooded forests alive with wild game, fruits, and nuts. Nearby were the meadows where he could farm. This, surely, was God's country.

This story is of early pioneering - of settling along the Des Plaines River in Vernon and part of West Deerfield Townships, years of rugged living, extreme privation, long cold winters with illness, the clearing of the land for farming, the raising of food crops to sustain life, the construction of crude log cabins from green roughly-hewn logs held together by notching or with wooden pegs, the building of narrow mud roads where formerly only Indian trails existed through the thick forests, the erecting of a water dam across the Des Plaines River to supply water power to grind the grains and to operate the saw mill where lumber could be cut from hand-felled trees. All these were common experiences of those first pioneers who came to the southern end of Lake County. We shall never know the full story. Theirs was a great faith filled with hope and courage, which carried them through those difficult and adventurous pioneering days.

The small church on the brow of the hill along the Indian Trail where they worshipped on the Sabbath was their source of personal renewal, for their deep trust was in God. Until they could gather logs hewn from the forest to build their church, they held services under a huge oak tree on the East bank of the Des Plaines River. As the weather became bad, one of their homes was used for the Sunday service. This group of Alsatians built the 20' x 30' church along the Indian Trail on the brow of the hill at Dundee Road East of Sanders Road. For eight years they came together here for services, and then a larger church was built in 1847 at Dundee and Sanders Roads, on the northwest corner. They buried their dead west of their church at a presently neglected site. There lie a hundred or more members of those early pioneer families.

Early history of Lake County began when Indian tribes lived in the Southwest part of the County along the Des Plaines River. These Indians were known as the Potawatami, and Miami tribes. Here were the ideal camping places for them, as the wild game and fish gave them their food and the heavy forests gave shelter and protection. These Indians held possession of the land in Lake County until 1836, when the Indians ceded their land to the United States.

The Indians had made a well-beaten-down narrow trail that led from Chicago to Milwaukee and on. This trail followed the high land or ridges, and only crossed the rivers at shallow rocky bottoms known as fords. It is known that there were similar parallel trails which led to the same destinations, and those made connections at their camping sites.

Some of the early white pioneers made friendly arrangements with the Indians and were allowed to build log cabins on Indian-held property.

In the spring of 1833 Captain Daniel Wright came, the first known settler in Lake County. He went directly to the Indian Chief of the Potawatami, and they became

good friends. The Indians even helped Captain Daniel Wright build his first log cabin. Evidently Captain Wright and his family lived with the Indians until his cabin had been built.

The Indian Camp, Mettawa's Village, was located at what is now known as Half Day, the oldest town in Lake County. Two Indian chiefs and other Indians were buried near this camp, but the exact locations have been forgotten.

The Daniel Wright log cabin was built in 1834 on the West bank of the Des Plaines River, near a rocky ford. The Indian trail became known as the Aptakisic Road and passed by and close to the Wright cabin at the River. That trail led to another trail, then known as the Great North Trail, now Milwaukee Avenue. With the aid of the Indians, the cabin was built of green-hewn logs. It was a 20' x 20' one-room building. It withstood a prairie fire during the first year the Wrights occupied it. The family, with their animals, took refuge behind the high river bank and were saved from the fire. Both the shed and the hay burned, but the green timbered cabin was saved.

Daniel Wright was married. His wife and son died in 1834, during that first year in the cabin, the first pioneers to die in Lake County. When Wright came to our county, he brought with him a cow and two oxen, and, as was customary, tools used in building cabins. An older daughter married a neighboring pioneer's son, William Whigham. This marriage ceremony was the first to be conducted in Lake County. It was performed at the Kennicott Store and Mill. Captain Wright died in 1873 at the age of 95 years, and is buried in Half Day.

A new pioneer family coming to this area was that of Hiram Langdon Kennicott, a young lawyer, who had been admitted to the Bar of New York State at the age of 21. He later became the first Justice of the Peace in Lake County, and tried the first law case at his store. Hiram and a brother, sons of the Jonathan Kennicott family, had preceded the rest of the family to Mettawa's Village. Captain Wright had built his cabin to the left, after crossing the ford from the East; the Kennicotts built their cabins on the West bank of the River and to the right of the ford.

The Kennicott family arrived in Chicago in 1834. The rest of that family of 16 soon followed their sons to the log cabin at the River. No doubt Captain Wright, with the aid of the friendly Indians, built the Kennicott's first cabins and the store in 1835. Later, here at the store, the first election in Lake County was held.

The Kennicott family was well educated and talented. They early realized the need of water power, and a dam was constructed across the Des Plaines River. It was located on a solid rocky ford, which gave a good foundation. Casual observations now reveal that from an engineering standpoint the selection of the site for the dam was good. A lake formed behind the dam, which became about one hundred acres in size. It must have been a tremendous task to construct such a large dam, requiring as it did the moving of many large rocks from the bottom of the river and placing and fitting them into a solid holding wall.

Large tree trunks were used for bracing and to reinforce the walls. Although the oxen aided much in the construction of the dam, much labor must have been hand labor. There was no method for driving piling in those early pioneering days. This came much later when the dam had to be rebuilt. Some Indians may have aided in the construction of the dam; however, the Indians had no love for this type of

work. It is known that the dam was rebuilt on three different sites. The first may have been built further north and up the river from the present ruins. Old mill stones were found on the island, which is slightly north of the last dam constructed. Perhaps the island served as part of the anchor for the dam. On the West end of the dam was a long deep sluiceway, which conveyed the water from the lake to a water wheel. The water falling over the wheel caused the wheel to turn, giving necessary power to turn the grinding stones of the grist mill.

In 1835 the saw mill was built on the East end of the dam.

The water collected above the dam formed the mill pond. The force of the water coming over the dam deepened the river below the dam and made an excellent fishing spot. There followed the building of the first wooden bridge across the River. The bridge was located at the ford, close by Captain Wright's cabin. Two trails led from this ford or bridge to the west; one to the southwest, now known as the Aptakisic Road, and the other to the northwest. This second trail, Mauck-Suck, the present Riverwoods Road, led to Milwaukee Avenue, then an Indian trail.

The first wooden bridge was known as the Luther bridge. The road following an old Indian trail from the east to the bridge was known as the Luther Road. It was well marked by an old Indian trail-marking-tree, which still stands along the south side of Riverwoods Road. The Luther Road began at Sanders and Deerfield Roads.

In 1836, the first Post Office and Public School were established in Lake County at Half Day. A new settlement of Alsatian pioneers arrived in covered wagons drawn by oxen. They had followed the Indian trail from Chicago. After living in Warren, Pennsylvania, several years, they travelled westward, following the Indian trails along the Great Lakes from Buffalo, N.Y., to Chicago. The men walked, and their women and families rode in the covered wagons. Their domestic animals followed behind.

The first roads followed the Indian trails and were just wide enough for a pair of oxen. The roads were black dirt, and when two wagons met it was necessary for one to pull off the road to allow the other to pass. In the spring, these mud roads were almost impassable. Only oxen could walk in the soft mud, because their claw-like feet caused no suction when withdrawn from the soft earth. There is no record on the construction of the grist mill, of where the first machinery was obtained, or how the mill stones were transported to the mill site.

The first blacksmith located near Half Day, and later spent part of the week in a neighboring town. The blacksmith attached metal pads or shoes to the oxen's feet to prevent excessive wear.

In 1843, the Kennicott families moved to a farm in Wheeling Township. The Mill became known as Vincent's Mill, and later as Struckman's Mill.

While these early pioneers were settling along the Des Plaines River, more and more Alsatians were arriving in their covered wagons. The settlement was in West Deerfield, Wheeling, and Northfield Townships, and the settlers became closely associated with the families along the Des Plaines River. They brought seeds, cloth, guns, ammunition, fruit trees, carpenter's tools, some crude farming tools, and spinning wheels, as well as cows, sheep, a hog or two, and some chickens.

Open log sheds were first built as shelters for their animals; then followed

low log barns, giving better protection.

At Chicago the settlers arranged for the purchase of land or for land grants. The first to build a log cabin at Deerfield and Sanders Roads was Martin Luther, who arrived in 1835. Ten families built their cabins in a row, each helping the others. The cabins were at the edge of the heavy woods, and to the East were meadow lands with scattered shrubbery. The working of virgin soil was very difficult. The pioneers chose the high land for their homes, but near enough to the river to have good water for their cattle and sheep.

The Martin Luther family arrived in 1835; then followed the arrival of the four Ott families, the Jennings, Stewarts, Dose, and Duffy families. More families followed, and settled along the West bank of the Des Plaines River. Many of these families in Vernon Township, and many living further south, along the River in Wheeling and Northfield Townships, were related to the families in West Deerfield and Vernon Township.

The Indian Trails were widened for easy passage toward the south and to make connections with Milwaukee Avenue, then only an Indian trail that led to Chicago. The early pioneers took grain and other products to Chicago, buying there the needed supplies for their homes.

There was always a most friendly cooperation among all these pioneer families in building the first mud roads, the wooden bridge across the Des Plaines River, the dam, and in providing the most necessary things to sustain the lives of all of their families.

We may well wonder how they lived and survived through those first cold winters; raised their crops and animals; spun wool from their sheep for socks, mittens and large shawls to keep them warm; cooked or baked their food in crude fireplaces or in large out-of-doors bake ovens; made candles to light their homes; and made soap of waste fats and lye from wood ashes.

Here they raised their families, mothers giving birth to their children in little cabins, mostly alone, or, at best, with some kindly neighbor wife to help. Families built their cabins close together during those early pioneer days, so that they could help each other when in need. As facilities for travel were improved, the families spread out, taking on larger farms.

After the Indian trail became a road good enough for travel, a stage coach carrying passengers and mail would pass through the river ford at Daniel Wright's cabin.

In 1843 Hiram Kennicott bought a farm, and the Kennicott family moved to their son's new home, known as "The Groves" near Milwaukee Avenue between Glenview and Des Plaines.

John Kennicott's son became the first country doctor. Doctor Kennicott visited his patients by riding horseback over a circuit of about seventy-five miles, carrying with him such medicines as were available or of his own compounding.

It is written of Doctor John Kennicott: "... even in the lowest hovel, amid squalor and suffering, he was the same considerate polished gentleman, striving with all his might and skill to allay pain and holding out the hand of Hope, ready to cheer and help the weary and broken hearted. And God knows that at times there

was need of just such a ministering Angel." Doctor Kennicott was also interested in the forests and growing shrubs. He often was seen riding horseback, holding some young trees or shrubs, taking them home to plant in "The Grove." He had a keen interest in the great out-of-doors, with its interesting trees, plants, and flowers, and always looked for the unusual, or a new variety which might be of great value.

The Kennicott family was well-educated in the fields of the sciences, law, and agriculture. That good training accounts for the early construction of the first dam across the River, and the building of the first grist mill and saw mill, all in about two year's time. Many pioneers who came early were skilled as shoe makers, tailors, carpenters, blacksmiths, wagon makers, and some as school masters. The country school house also served as a singing school and as a place to practice penmanship. The beautiful flowing hand of some pioneers was the result of after-working-hours application.

And so a heritage was left for us in Vernon and West Deerfield Townships.

The Des Plaines River Valley - A Challenge Now -

Would it not be proper and right that we, the descendants and friends of those early pioneers, preserve and conserve what is left of these historical landmarks and lands along the Des Plaines River, including especially the contingent forests and meadows?

As the wealthiest nation on earth, will we find funds to rebuild the old dam and "the mill that stood by it," the country store, and the saw mill? Will we rebuild the Luther Bridge, now condemned, and open again the Luther Road that followed the Indian trail to the ford across the River and to the store and mill? Will we rebuild Captain Daniel Wright's log cabin as a memorial to the first white pioneer to live in Lake County? And can we muster the energy now to save the oldest remaining building in Lake County - the historic Half Day Inn, built in 1843 by John F. Myrtle?

We should give thanks for, and not forget the "Good Earth," which gave those early pioneers good crops of grain, fruits, and vegetables for man and beast. We should cherish the bountiful forests and all that grows and lives therein, that gave the pioneers and Indians alike food and shelter for their families and inspiration for their souls. And above all, we should purify and restore the Des Plaines River, which gave them pure water to drink and fish to eat, the power to grind their grains, ice in the winter for their ice houses, a place to wash the wool of the sheep in the spring before the shearing, and a spot to take a swim and bathe in the summer. I will never forget what Mother would say after a hard week of labor on the farm during those hot summer days: "Tomorrow let's fill a big basket of lunch and go to the River and sit on the bank of the River, in the shade of that big oak tree. There we will rest and enjoy our picnic lunch." This was their heritage, will it be ours? Even today, as rushed as we are, picnicking remains the most popular family recreational activity.

The early pioneers had a definite philosophy of life. They believed in God. The church and its teachings was a part of each life. One often heard them say during their conversations in their homes, or with their neighbors: "We are so thankful to God for what we have, for the food, and His loving care," or "Our good God," an expression heard so often. They were satisfied with the little they had

and tried to get along with it. They worked hard long hours to save and protect the fruits of their labors. They looked toward the future, and failure of their crops did not defeat them; they would try again. Life's goal was to be happy, kindly, and helpful to all, and especially to those in dire need and to those to whom illness had come; to be honest and truthful in their dealings with all their neighbors, and to raise their children in these same basic principles of the good life, in the love of God and of country.

Now, a hundred and thirty years later, the Pioneer is gone, and many others have followed him. Our Des Plaines River is badly polluted. Captain Wright's cabin, the dam, and the grist and saw mills have disappeared. The iron bridge is rusty and unsafe for heavy passage. The forests have been ravaged of their trees and wild life. Only small wooded areas remain, and these we urgently seek to preserve through our new Forest Preserve District.

The pollution of the River must be stopped and the River cleaned of debris, and our boys and young men can do the job with guidance from their elders. We can beautify, reforest, restore these once beautiful areas, and cease all wanton destruction by protecting the trees and wild life.

If we do not meet "The Challenge Now," we will have a scorched eroded earth; our lovely river of the plains, Aux Plaines, will grow more foul-smelling and filthy until we have no more than an open sewer where once a beautiful and bountiful river flowed.

We can, but will we, preserve our heritage for ourselves now and for our posterity?

Lake County Historical Society,
and The Community Conservation Council of Deerfield.
Quoted from ISSUES, Local History Series No. 1, November 15, 1963.