# Outdoors With

Don L. Johnson

THE TWISTED TRAIL we've trod during the past year, and during the past century, deserves a long and careful look as we set a course for conservation in this year, 1957.

*Only five generations ago, just a moment in time, Wisconsin was generally known as a huge wilderness swamp.*

But in the settlements of the east travellers were carrying the word that along the valleys of the big rivers in that wilderness were fine forests . . . verdant meadows. They told of elk bugling in the hills and buffalo grazing on the grasslands.

And here and there a restless settler packed his few possessions, and with his family, headed west.

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THE RIVERS and the valleys were their highways. Some, from settlements along Lake Huron and Lake Erie, found homelike surroundings in the vicinity of an even bigger inland sea —Lac Illinois, or Lake Michigan as it came to be known.

Others pushed on to the big river, the Mississippi, and then turned north to make their homes in the valleys of the Wisconsin, the LaCrosse, the Trempealeau, the Chippewa.

Here they found almost park-like stands of huge hardwoods, mostly oaks, but with abundant small stands of nut trees. These woods surrounded scattered prairie openings, and separating the meadows from the woodlands were wide belts of hazelbrush.

**That's how it was.**

That's how it was when a man by the name of Mordecai, following the call from New York State, turned east into the Buffalo River valley and, with his family, began clearing a farm near what is now Alma.

"We subsisted mostly on acorns and potatoes," the eldest son, with the improbable name of Count Pulaski Johnson, recorded later of the family's first winter.

They had arrived too late for the buffalo. Probably the last one was felled this side of the Mississippi by 1800. The elk were already disappearing, and were gone by 1850. Prairie chickens and sharptails abounded in the brush belts but the breaking plow changed that.

The timber wolf, the bear, the cougar, the fisher, and the marten all retreated before the sound of the axe, the metallic snap of the trap. . .the flaming bellow of black powder.

In the fall the valley sky was darkened by an awesome flight of passenger pigeons.

Then one day there were no more pigeons. The wild turkey was gone. Farther north the moose and the caribou had disappeared and the wolverine with them. The prairie grouse were gone, and finally, so were the deer.

**And only the deer came back.**

OTHER GAME, once so plentiful, was dwindling fast. The rushing waves of waterfowl which had swept down the valley were thinning so the market hunter had trouble filling his orders— by the barrel. Trout, which had once teemed in the streams, were smothering in mud.

"The Count," who was my great granddad, saw some of these things as he plied his trades of schoolmaster and blacksmith in the valley, but even so, he died an old man without having seen what poverty man had really wrought for posterity.

The next generation began to see as the gullies widened and the topsoil began to trickle, and then pour in torrents into the big river.

**And the generation now growing up may see the end.**

Which ending will it see? Will it see a real replenishing of our renewable resources while they may still be renewed. . .or will it see the last prairie chicken, the last wild goose?

Oh yes, we've made progress on a few fronts— but only a few. Though our forests are coming back our wetlands, just as valuable, are still disappearing at an alarming rate. Though we've demonstrated that a stream can be restored to health and productivity most of our creeks and rivers are still strangling in silt. Many can never be regained. We lose others each year.

We must realize how much we had. . .how much we have lost. Then we may realize how far we have gone towards losing all.

**So, these next 12 months, this column will talk from time to time with the old timers still with us, to give you their recollections of what things were like, and their opinions on what mistakes were made.**

We came to this land poor, and waxed rich on an inheritance which, properly invested, might have kept us wealthy for all time.

Much of our fortune has been squandered. We must dig deep and work hard to save and increase what we have.

Atomic energy may replace depleting resources for fuel. New materials may supplant used-up metals. Science may substitute for all of our mineral resources. Conservation of them means merely avoidance of waste.

**But science will never hatch a passenger pigeon out of a test tube, nor a prairie chicken, nor a single life-giving seed.**

Nor will we manufacture topsoil by the acre.

There have been good men, giants and geniuses, preaching this story for decades. Aldo Leopold's pioneer work in this state will stand forever as a monument of understanding and foresight.

We have the knowledge now . . .more being gathered each year. . .but those most dedicated to the cause are still speaking in the language of science.

We must interpret hard facts into plain language, and then act.

In the year 1957 we are still, figuratively and literally, losing ground.