Looking Back on Horicon Marsh

By Rick Stel

Eugene Sanborn

IWLA members convinced Wisconsin state legislators to protect Horicon Marsh in 1939.

In 1920, Wisconsin's Horicon Marsh lay barren, dry and empty — a monument to human misguidance. No longer did pioneer sportsmen and sportwomen find what once seemed an endless supply of wildlife in this wetland. Unregulated hunting clubs and market hunting raged from the 1870s to the early 1900s. With greed the only rule in those days, species after species disappeared from the marsh.

"Once they overshot the most economically important birds — first the ducks, then the shorebirds, and ended with the extinction of the passenger pigeon in the uplands — it's like the marsh didn't have a purpose because the important birds were gone," said Bill Volkert, Horicon wildlife naturalist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "They referred to this area as a wasteland...and this led finally to the attempt to ditch and drain and farm the marsh."

Pressure on Horicon Marsh came from the agricultural community as well. Farmers found Wisconsin soil fertile and crop prices high. In the never-ending grope for more, they swallowed up every acre possible to increase their profit. In 1914, farmers dug an extensive ditching system, drained the marsh and plowed it into farmland. But the peat soil of the drained marsh did not support good crops. Root plants grown there tasted bitter and did not sell. World War I came and went, leaving the U.S. in the great agricultural depression. Farmers forced into poverty gave up their land and relinquished the great Horicon farm, leaving it a wasteland nearly 14 miles long and four miles wide.

In 1922, Louis "Curly" Radke formed the Horicon Chapter of the recently born Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA). "The waterfowl hunters organized under the Izaak Walton League fought for restoration of the marsh," Volkert said.

And a fight it was. Farmers had invested thousands of dollars in draining the marsh. Suddenly, these new conservationists asked the state to re-flood and restore the marsh, putting the farmers' investment under water. This first clash between the agricultural community and conservationists went all the way to the Wisconsin Supreme Court.

"It was a real important case that led to two things: one was allowing public access to the land, the other was the right to restore the marsh," explained Volkert."It was precedent-setting in our state Supreme Court. They went back to the Northwest Ordinance saying that all navigable waters were public domain. It's the Rock River that flows through this marsh... and because of that, the state has the legal right to regulate water levels within it and to be able to allow public access into it. (The League) lobbied for seven full years in the state legislature until (legislators) passed the Horicon Wildlife Refuge bill."

This historic first conservation lobbying effort in 1927 established the Horicon Marsh Wildlife Area, which was owned and managed by the DNR. In the 1930s, a dam was constructed at Horicon to restore water to pre-farming era levels. In time, with the DNR closely monitoring water levels to benefit natural life, wetland plants and wildlife returned. The 10,000-plus acres of the marsh led the way for formation of the additional 20,000 acres of Horicon National Wildlife Refuge during the 1940s.

In the years that followed, the IWLA remained a constant in the ever-changing story of Horicon Marsh. For instance, the Ikes fought legal appeals against the Horicon Wildlife Refuge bill throughout the 1940s. And, after World War II, League members initiated tree planting projects, worked on wetland improvement projects, gained hunter access, and coordinated fish stocking projects.

"The Watertown Chapter is still very active in planting walleyes in the Rock River," said James Meyer, IWLA Wisconsin Division treasurer. "Of course, we've got many projects going on all over the state. While most of the activity of the League at Horicon was quite a few years ago, several chapters donated money just last year to what will be a major environmental center...for educating children and folks."

The Horicon Marsh International Education Center, as it is known, developed after the DNR purchased the former Flyway Medical Clinic building just outside Horicon, overlooking the marsh. The center will become a place where visitors can obtain information, view exhibits and participate in marsh activities. It will focus on wetlands and the delicate ecological relationships that exist in the marsh. Educational programs also will portray the history of the marsh and teach the importance of conservation groups such as the IWLA.

In addition, programs will describe why the more than 30,000 acres of today's Horicon Marsh support threatened and endangered species, including bald eagles and Forster's terns, attract more than 700,000 Canada geese and 100,000 ducks each spring and fall; and harbor more than 250 species of birds. The marsh is among the largest nesting areas for redhead ducks in the eastern U.S. and is the largest cattail marsh in the country.

"The whole thing would't even be here if it weren't for those people," said Volkert, noting that thanks are due to the IWLA. "What they did was give us a wetland of international significance, a home to a vast array of species, and a place that lures and attracts 3,000 to 4,000 visitors a year...We've got an area that sits as a monument to that early conservation effort." ■

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Wisconsin Conservation Department

State legislators and IWLA Horicon Chapter President Louis "Curly" Radke (tipping hat), nicknamed the "Father of Horicon," boat the marsh to study restoration progress.