

LOUIS "CURLEY" RADKE
1884-1947

"We fight not for the dollar, not for a name in the hall of fame, nr for the glory of man or state, but for the millions to come, the tomorrow of our boys and girls."

"This we know, there are thousands of acres of good land in Wisconsin that can be made agriculturally valuable with much less effort and expense than was connected with the drainage of Horicon marsh."

"A program for world peace can be forcibly strengthened by a program of worldwide conservation."

Louis Radke grew up in Horicon, and spent his life fighting to restore an immense wildlife area once indigenous there. It is a rare person that sees the affects of their work come to pass, Radke saw his dreams become reality.

Over the past century and a half, Horicon has been a lake, a massive agricultural drainage project, and a 'desolate wasteland.' Before settlers came and dammed up the outlet of the marsh in 1844, Horicon marsh, then the Winnebago Marsh, had been the nesting grounds for thousands of ducks. Their numbers were so large their flight blackened the skies as the passenger pigeons once did. Winnebago Indians shared in the resource abundance of the marsh - hunting, fishing and trapping there.

In 1921, a group of individuals concerned about the loss of Horicon Marsh, began a conservation and campaign project to restore the area. Louis Radke, known as "Curley" by his friends, became a leading conservationist in this movement. A Horicon Marsh chapter of the Izaak Walton League was formed and soon received national attention. Radke promoted that "There is nothing in the way of Lake Horicon's restoration if enough

people want it."

President Coolidge called for a Recreation and Outdoor Conference to be held in the Capitol in 1924. The President of the Izaak Walton League of America presented the Horicon Marsh project a "deserving a place among the great conservation measures required to save outdoor America for posterity." Officials in Washington referred to the Horicon as a 'drainage crime.'

Radke spoke impassionately about the marsh in an article appearing in "Outdoor America," June 1926. In it he said "If the activities of a few drainage fanatics, who care nothing for public rights, go unchallenged, the old lake bed's virgin loveliness and fragrance, its golden sunsets and shimmering moonlit nights, its thrill of wild life, and its reedy wave-washed banks, will be lost to the enjoyment of thousands yet unborn. Waltonians ask only that man be compelled to restore the water he has so ruthlessly drained away." Further on he stressed that "Horicon Lake is not a dream of the past, it is a real hope of the future."

Robert E. Gard, in his book Wild Goose Marsh, refers to Radke as "the spearheader and fearless worker of the 'League of the Marsh' project . . . more than any other one individual [he] was responsible for saving the Horicon Marsh and for paving the way for the creation of the refuge as it is today."

Radke circulated pro-Horicon petitions which were signed by 100,000 people in Wisconsin. His daughter, Mrs. Lois Ulmer, recalls "I remember him spending many evenings and weekends talking to women's clubs and men's clubs all over the state of Wisconsin, wherever he was called upon to tell the story and plead for the urgency of saving this great out-of-doors." It was the state capitol in Madison, however, that was the

real battlefield for Radke and the IKES.

In 1927, the Legislature passed a bill putting the marsh under the jurisdiction of the Wisconsin Conservation Commission, to be restored as a wildlife refuge. Reflooding of the marsh began in 1929 but lawsuits filed by landowners slowed the process. Litigations did not end until 1943.

Albert M. Day, former Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, wrote a letter to IKE Executive Director, Kenneth A. Reid, in 1947, in support of Louis Radke. In it he said that "Mr. Radke was one of the longtime sponsors of the restoration of Horicon Marsh, and probably had more to do with its establishment as a refuge than any other single individual." In an autumn 1962 issue of the Wisconsin Magazine of History, Virginia A. Palmer wrote that "... whenever the history of the marsh is told, one name stands out repeatedly as its ardent champion." That name she said, is Louis (Curley) Radke.

Radke's dedication to the marsh didn't end with Legislative protection in 1929. He continued to assure its future by gaining government participation as a landowner with the state. To help restore the legendary duck population at Horicon, he organized "Duck Liberation Day" in which more than a thousand ducks were freed on the marsh to attract wild ducks.

As a wetland advocate he was far ahead of this time, and his interests were not limited to Horicon. Radke urged other counties to fight for the recovery of marshes that had been drained. He advocated that a "restored lake will mean restored wildlife."

Today, Horicon Marsh is the largest freshwater cattail marsh in the United States. Although known more for its Canadian goose population rather than ducks, over 265 bird species, some threatened and rare, have been recorded there.

For 46 years Curley Radke was employed with John Deere, eventually becoming their sales manager. Although his job was with John Deere Company, his work was fighting for a nearly lost wetland. He helped encourage others to save wetlands and end drainage as well. At the time of his death, in 1947, he was a national director and past national president of the Izaak Walton League, and president of the Wisconsin Conservation League.