Introducing the Long Prairie Watershed - Part 2

A series of watershed articles disseminated by the Long Prairie Watershed Collaboration of Todd, Douglas, Morrison, Wadena, East and West Otter Tail Counties



In our previous article Part 1, we defined the term watershed. In this article we introduce one of the up & coming, focus watersheds in our six county area.

he Long Prairie River is not what it used to be. This is primarily due to changes in land use that have occurred within the watershed over the past 200 years. The Long Prairie River is 96 miles long. It originates at Lake Carlos in the eastern portion of Douglas County and meanders through gentle rolling hills, flat meadows and wildlife landscapes merging with the Crow Wing River two miles south of Motley, MN in Morrison County. Until the 1860's, the watershed landscape was covered by areas of grassland intermittent with dense forests of huge towering white pines and hardwood stands of oak and maple. So dense in fact were these forests that it is said that the community of Clotho was settled at its location in Todd County because the forests any further west were impenetrable. Wetlands dotted the riparian landscape as fill between the forests and grasslands. The river and surrounding watershed were early territory of the Ojibwa and Dakota Nations offering excellent hunting and fishing grounds and an extensive water transportation system which included the tributaries of Dismal, Spruce, Eagle, Moran, Turtle, and Fish Trap creeks. The watershed was utilized for these purposes but less likely inhabited by the tribes because the river represented a war divide between the two nations. In the 1847 Chippewa treaties, the region west of the river was ceded by the Chippewa Nation for the anticipated displacement of the Menominee tribe and the region east of the river for the Winnebago tribe during the Indian Removal Act effecting these two Wisconsin area tribes with the passage of Wisconsin into statehood. The Menominee never came to the area, but the Winnebago tribe prospered along with white settlements so successfully that the area at Venewitz Creek south of where Long Prairie now lies was reputed to be more populous than the city of St. Paul at the time. The settlement was abandoned during the 1962 Dakota up rise.

n the 1860's, the forests within the watershed were heavily mined by settlers with axes. The watershed, once comprised of more than 65% forestland, was nearly decimated of trees by the 1890's. Eagle, Moran, Fish Trap, and Turtle Creeks were deep and wide enough at that time that the creeks could power mills. Logs were floated down creek to join the drives in the Long Prairie River to the Mississippi. As



the riparian forests and their stabilizing tree roots disappeared, the sandy soils along the banks of the Long Prairie River were left exposed and unprotected. Tons of soil sediment eroded and washed into the river banks. The creeks and river narrowed and slowed to a point non-navigable by boat. Imagine it! Between Long Prairie and Motley, there were once flatboats and even a steam boat puffing its way up and down the river carrying supplies to settlements and homes. Today, the Long Prairie River remains a very shallow and slow moving seasonal canoe route for amateur recreationalists.

urrently, the Long Prairie River Watershed is approximately 20% forested due largely to reforestation efforts that occurred in the 1990's. 47% of the watershed area is used for cultivated crops such as potatoes, soybeans, corn, and alfalfa; 8% is in grasslands or pastures; 18% wetlands, floodplain meadows, and surface waters, and 7% as development for homes, urban areas, and municipality use. he Long Prairie Watershed covers 883 square miles with 220 lakes greater than 10 acres and 965 miles of streams and rivers. The watershed spans six different counties including Douglas, Todd, Morrison, Wadena, East and West Otter Tail. Remember in Part 1 of this series we learned that the boundary of a watershed is *a connection of all points marking the farthest reaches of land in which all contributing waters fall and flow*, in this example, those land reaches contribute to the Long Prairie River. Therefore, even though the Long Prairie River does not necessarily flow through Wadena and East and West Otter Tail Counties, small sections of their landscape topography, streams and creeks do contribute water to the Long Prairie River.

he Long Prairie River remains a valuable water resource. People and animals that live within its watershed depend heavily on the river for a variety of uses. Uses include aquatic life, recreational activity such as swimming, canoeing, and fishing, industrial consumption, agriculture, irrigation, and wildlife support. The river serves as a sport fishery for Northern Pike and Walleye and also boasts crops of small and largemouth bass. It provides habitat for Painted Turtles, the Horned Lark, the Great Blue Heron, Bald Eagles, several spe-

cies of owl and hawks, numerous songbirds, deer, mink, muskrat, otter, wild turkey, grouse, and pheasants, just to name a few. The Blanding's Turtle is a threatened reptile species within the watershed. Lakes provide swimming, boating and other recreational and aesthetic enjoyment to its users. The Long Prairie River is designated as a Department of Natural Resources' Water Route for canoeists beginning at Lake Carlos State Park, passing the Lions' Westside Park and Rest Area and along



the Long Prairie Wildlife Management Area north of Browerville before merging with the Crow Wing River in Morrison County. There are 4 carry-in access points for small boats along the water route.

s you have read, impairments for the Long Prairie River began nearly 200 years ago, and slowly the watershed is redefining itself. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency still lists 7 streams and 6 areas of the Long Prairie River and 10 lakes within the watershed as impaired. Over time, as people realize the value to their properties of maintaining forested areas

and deep rooted vegetation along shoreland and riparian zones of the river, more tree ground, hay and grassland buffers are being established. However, cultivated land and shoreland development remain a threat through nutrient runoff, wind and water erosion. Environmentally sensitive land practices including less impervious surface areas and increased buffering zones will help filter out pollutants and stabilize soils. The MPCA

continues protection efforts with food and meat processing plants, industrial wastes, city sewage treatment ponds, and city stormwater mitigation plans that contribute **point source** pollutants to the river. *Point sources* are single, easily identifiable sources of pollution. To the 41, 867 individuals living, farming, or recreating within the watershed, you are the *nonpoint* pollution contributors. *Nonpoint sources* are potential



sources of pollution caused by multiple or layered interactions of land use systems. Your contributions, individually, may be smaller, but cumulatively, they add up to rally municipalities and industries with point source pollutant discharges to the Long Prairie River.

uckily, there are serious plans in development to help communities further protect their local water resources and watersheds. Tune in to our next article <u>Rural Dictionary– Acronym of the Year</u>: <u>1W1P–</u> *Part 3* to learn more about One Watershed, One Plans (1W1P) and some current resource concerns for the Long Prairie Watershed.