



Records related to the establishment
of the Minnesota Valley National
Wildlife Refuge

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THE HISTORY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MN VALLEY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

By Ed Crozier

Surprisingly, the refuge became established because of two failures. There was the failed personnel management effort of a federal bureaucrat and the other was the failure of a city council to appoint an advisory commission on natural resources. In the late 1960's, after being the refuge manager of national wildlife refuges in Wisconsin, North Dakota, Illinois and Iowa, I was assigned as the master planner for the 11 state region of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. After a short time in the Mpls. FWS Regional office, a few of us banded together in the office and called ourselves the Regional Planning Team. Since it was the first time that a multi-disciplinary group composed of an architect, a graphic designer, a civil engineer, a writer-editor and a refuge manager worked together on refuge planning, the team got noticed in the Washington office of the Service. Eventually the team was nationalized and we became part of the Washington DC Refuge staff. We became the National Planning Team and completed refuge plans from San Francisco Bay to the barrier islands on the coast of Virginia and Texas coast to Hawaii and Alaska. It was great fun and a wonderful job.

Then, a new Chief of Wildlife Refuges was appointed in Washington, DC. He was our new supervisor and he wanted the team to move to Washington DC, which we didn't want to do. Instead of telling us that our next pay check would be sent to Washington, he took the tack of not communicating and not giving us any new work assignments thinking we would get bored and move on to other jobs. Now, I like to sit around and read, but not during the day so we came up with our own project.

At the time, I was commuting across the river valley every day on the old Cedar Avenue Bridge and would look at Long Meadow lake thinking it and the other large marsh areas in the valley should be part of a national wildlife refuge. So without official direction or authorization we developed a proposal for a wildlife recreation area in the valley. Since there wasn't any money budgeted for this work, the proposal had to be done quietly and on the cheap. The final report was produced by xeroxing.

About this same time there was this guy that kept cross country skiing across the lake behind our house in Burnsville. This was in the days when cross country skiing was pretty unusual and since our family wanted to start the sport I decided to meet this fellow so we hailed him down and invited him in the house. The skier was Dick Duerre and meeting him started a long friendship with mutual interests of environmentalism, hunting, fishing and hunting dogs, at first, golden retrievers then French Brittany Spaniels.

We thought Burnsville should have a Natural Resource Advisory Commission like Bloomington. Unfortunately, the city council didn't agree so instead, along with the Albrechtson, Oulman, and Sullivan families, we started the Burnsville Environmental Council. Dick Duerre got the Burnsville Environmental Council established as a nonprofit organization all by himself. He got the state charter and the IRS approval in a relatively short time and we proceeded to advise the city council whether they liked it or not. The group built the first nature interpretation trail in Burnsville's Lake Alimagnet Park and developed a proposal for a city-wide trail system that would connect parks, schools, churches, neighborhoods and shopping areas using for the most part, existing open spaces and rights-of-way. The city further developed the idea into a city bond issue and put it to a city wide election and it lost by a few votes. If it had passed it would have been a tremendous asset to the city today. Unfortunately, it was the first of its kind and too innovative for the time.

Another major issue for the Burnsville group was the renewal of a permit for the Freeway Landfill where controversy still exists. Our group was against it but lost the battle. We knew that instead of fighting each battle one at a time, that a more comprehensive approach was needed to preserve the valley and as it happened we had this booklet in hand that proposed a national wildlife recreation area in the Minnesota River Valley.

As President of the Burnsville group, Dick Duerre sent the proposal to everyone we could think of from congress to the President of the United States. Fortunately, Congressman Frenzel took enough interest in the idea to refer it to the US Fish and Wildlife Service and he asked the FWS to conduct a feasibility study.

By that time I had moved to a new job and was now the Chief of the Regional Refuge Interpretation, Recreation and Planning Section for the FWS and as such, I was assigned to do the feasibility study for a proposed refuge in the valley. Not surprisingly, the result was favorable and the Regional Office of the Fish and Wildlife Service published a report saying that establishing a national wildlife refuge in the valley was a possibility. Unfortunately, the Interior Department in Washington didn't think it was such a hot idea since up to this time, only the National Park Service managed national recreation areas. The project was not going anywhere unless there was special legislation passed. SEE REVERSE SIDE:

Dick and I knew that our little Burnsville Environmental Council could not do the job, but I knew someone who could do it. We went across the River and asked Elaine Mellott, who was then the Chairman of the Bloomington Natural Resource Council. I had served with Elaine on the Blooming Natural Resources Council and see her in action. When she spoke, people listened. Fortunately, she took on the job of getting public support for the establishment of the refuge. Her friend, Marialice Seal, joined the effort. Marialice was married to Dr. Seal, who was doing some blood work on endangered species, so Marialice was already involved in conservation, but she was the quintessence of a housewife in sneakers fighting for the environment.

The two of them worked hard for many months going up and down the river building support for the proposed refuge. I went along as the Fish and Wildlife Service representative and sometimes Tom Follrath, the regional FWS chief of Realty, joined us. We went to from city council chambers to beer halls. You name it and we were probably there. Elaine and Marialice got endorsement resolutions for the proposed refuge from city advisory commission and councils, service organizations like Rotary clubs and sportsman groups, anyone that would listen to our presentation.

The FWS Regional office developed a two projector slide tape presentation explaining the refuge. Unfortunately the Washington office did not approve of its use. So to get around that prohibition, the producer sold a copy to Elaine and Marialice for a small fee and we used it anyway. The projection equipment was special and had to be carted around in two very heavy cases; so heavy I was about to give up on using the show. But to show you how the river spirit was looking out for the refuge, one night as we were returning home there was a two wheeled cart laying in the middle of the road. It must have fallen off a beer truck, but it saved the day from that point on.

Early on in the process, Elaine, who worked for Control Data Corporation, arranged for the use of the CDC Board room for a briefing which indicated there was high level corporate support for the project. Senator Mondale attended one of these briefings and then took the project on, provided we got enough support and had worked out most of the problems. He assigned an aide whose last name I have forgotten. Gay was her first name and she worked tirelessly. She reworked the legislation that I had drafted so that it would fly in Congress. When anyone would voice an objection about the proposal she would work out a compromise. Without her, there would not be a refuge. She was a wonderful example of the congressional aides that work so hard behind the scenes. Without these aide, congress would not get much work done. We should appreciate their efforts.

Eventually, Senator Mondale visited the proposed refuge with the Chairman of the appropriate senate committee, who co-sponsored the legislation with Senator Mondale and then they held a field hearing.. Jack Hemphill, the Regional Director of the FWS was along on the field trip.

Jack, who supported the proposal, had a tendency to exaggerate and he told Senator Mondale and the other Senator that the area was famous for its large numbers of migratory birds and that over a million ducks used the area every fall. Tom Follrath and I looked at each other and wondered how we were ever going to support that statement. Fortunately, no one every brought it up again.

In the US House of Representatives, we had a problem. There was no way the committee that handled national recreation areas would accept the idea of a wildlife recreation area. Fortunately, Congressman Oberstar, representing northern Minnesota, was on the committee handling national wildlife refuge legislation and he introduced the legislation on the house side and it was eventually passed there. He also made a trip down from Duluth to testify at the senate hearing. Without Congressman Oberstar's help the legislation would not have passed.

So to finally end this saga, the establishment of the refuge was a marvelous case of wonderful cooperation between private citizens, the legislative branch of government, and the executive branch at all levels of government. But the real heroes were Elaine and Marialice who persevered and faced the toughest times in the whole struggle. And they kept up their efforts for many years afterward. They kept lobbying for land acquisition funds and eventually even amended the original act when they decided to expand the size of the area. After I became the first refuge manager, we formalized the citizen support group and with a few others, primarily the Conservation Committee of the MN Valley Chapter of the Audubon Society, organized the Friends of MN Valley which was chosen as the first recipient of the National Wildlife Refuge Association's refuge Friends group of the year. At the time of the 25th Anniversary of refuge establishment. Elaine and Marialice had passed away, but I am sure they were in spirit celebrating this wonderful occasion with everyone there and will be here as future generations enjoy the refuge.