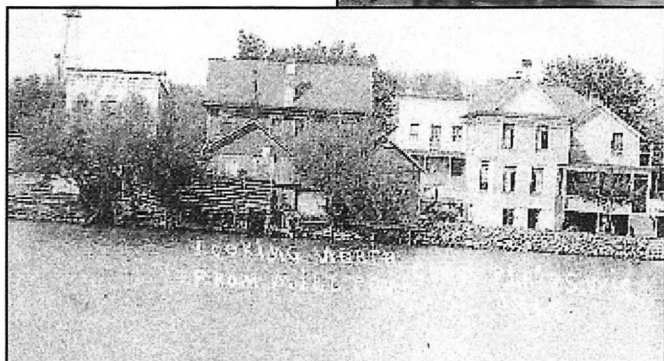
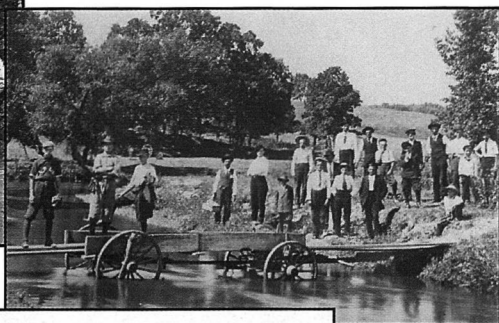


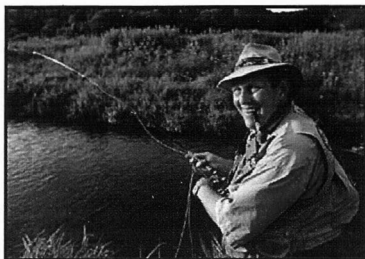
Shedding Light on the History of Black Earth Creek Watershed



Black Earth Creek Watershed Association
1987 - 2007

Anniversary Recollections from Steve Born

Founding Board President



I returned to Wisconsin in 1969 to join the UW-Madison faculty, and soon thereafter my love affair with Black Earth Creek, its watershed, and the challenging spring creek fishing, began. I was involved with conservation concerns in the BEC watershed in several ways. I served a period as President of the local Trout Unlimited chapter, which has done much habitat restoration work on BEC and regards the stream as their "home waters". Having worked in state government, I had a long standing working relationship with DNR staff concerned about local water resources and fisheries. My field at the University involved environmental planning and management, and when the Water Resources Management Program undertook a one year graduate workshop with the watershed as the topic, I co-led that effort.

The Workshop arose from DNR's and TU's concerns about how to protect the creek's naturally-reproducing brown trout fishery. The Workshop recommended a new more integrated approach for managing the watershed. The DNR/UW work, and the strong interest of Dane County, led to the designation of the BEC as a Priority Watershed in 1985, which made landowners eligible for cost-sharing to address non-point pollution problems in the watershed. That project lasted for several years and was one of the most successful projects in the state. The Workshop had conducted citizen surveys, and recommended broad stakeholder involvement in managing the watershed, which dovetailed with the Priority Watershed Program need to establish a citizen advisory committee.

Fueled by the discovery of major groundwater contamination originating from a privately operated landfill in the headwaters of BEC, and concerns for the health of the local citizenry and the creek, public meetings led to the formation of BECWA in 1986. My initial goals for BECWA, developed with a board of directors representing diverse interests, included a) sharing information between and among agencies and watershed interests, b) promoting community awareness of BEC and its value to the region, c) advocating for stewardship and sound use of land and water resources, and d) fostering an ongoing dialog among watershed citizens by providing a forum for people with interest in the watershed, including resource managers and public officials. And we decided that beyond broad advocacy for the health of the stream and watershed, BECWA would try to remain objective and neutral with regard to the many local controversies arising in the watershed.

Have we succeeded? While BECWA has generally succeeded in pursuing its goals, the challenge is unending. The watershed is directly in the path of urbanization, and faces enormous development pressures. How these pressures are accommodated is critical to the future of the stream and watershed. After a series of contentious land-use battles in the watershed, BECWA

tested out the idea of a mediated consensus-building process to address the many land use disputes -- but the contending interests and communities were not ready to work together. It's gratifying to see cooperative efforts in recent years that suggest that the array of communities and interests in the BEC watershed recognize their shared futures.

Finally, in measuring success, keeping a small non-governmental organization made up of volunteers afloat for twenty years --- with the ability to carry out its mission when the times demanded more activity -- has to be viewed as a success in its own right (call it "survival value"!). As the pressures increase in the watershed, I hope the citizens, businesses, and local governments will increasingly work together to protect special places like BEC, while allowing healthy community development to occur in one of the high quality places to live in the Midwest!



Photo by Arthur McEvoy



A Look to the Future by Barbara Borns

Current Board President

From the very first native people who inhabited this part of Dane County, to those who arrived in the mid-1850's, it was the cool, clean, abundant water of the Black Earth Creek that attracted them. The Creek became the defining feature that shaped settlement in this valley—from Middleton to Cross Plains, Black Earth and Mazomanie. Homes, mills, railroads, businesses all arose near the Black Earth Creek both for it's inherent value and it's aesthetic features.

It wasn't long before threats to the Creek that drew folks here began to be felt. Some of those threats were natural; some were caused by the settlers. After awhile a need was seen to protect the valuable assets of Black Earth Creek and early champions emerged. As detailed here in the history of the Cross Plains-Black Earth Valley Watershed Association, by the 1950's, citizen groups stepped forward to take a stake in managing the Watershed. BECWA's history began in the mid 1980's and resulted in its first official meeting July 28, 1987. But volunteer groups are also vulnerable to a variety of threats and we are proud to have survived and to mark our 20th year in 2007. As we begin our 21st year, BECWA is positioned to continue being a vigorous member of the watershed community.

What would be a fitting way to commemorate this anniversary?? A t-shirt—no, already have a drawer full, a hat—nice but doesn't last very long. We looked back at our recent BECWA newsletters and found a consistent thread---the history of the watershed!! Hence the publication of "Shedding Light on the History of the Black Earth Creek Watershed." We hope you enjoy this booklet and join us in our continuing efforts to protect the Creek into the future.



Black Earth Creek Watershed Past Reflected

A series of articles reflecting on the colorful history of the watershed

Before BECWA --

There was the Cross Plains - Black Earth Valley Watershed Association

Based on an interview with Otto Festge by Barbara Borns

Re-printed from the Spring 2007 BECWA Newsletter

Did you know that from 1954 to 1965 there was a Watershed Association in our Black Earth Creek Valley? This fall I learned about the existence of this organization and was curious about it's purpose and history. My first knowledge of this group came when Otto Festge kindly offered to give BECWA his archives from the earlier organization. After reading over those documents, I made arrangements to meet with Otto in his new home overlooking the Pheasant Branch Conservancy.

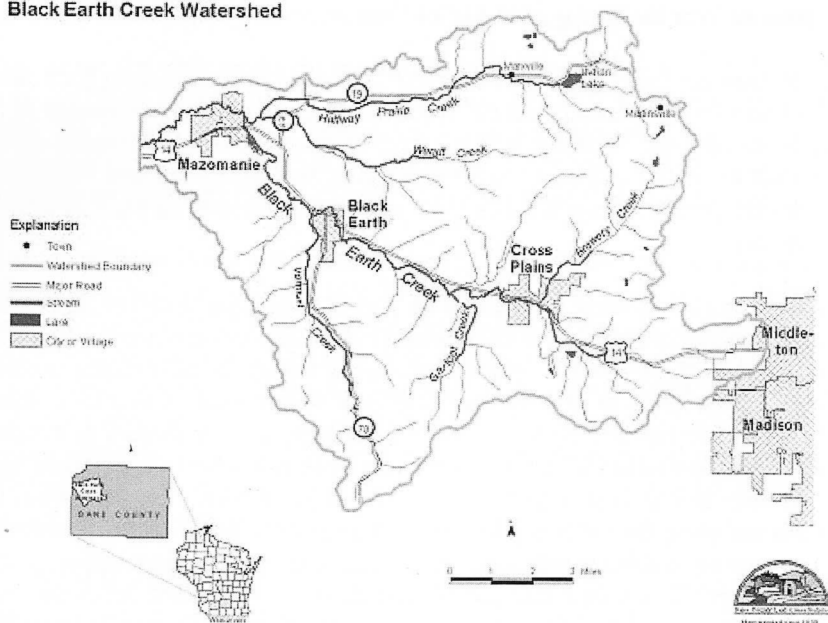
Otto was raised on the Festge homestead in the Town of Cross Plains located on Highway KP near where it intersects with Garfoot Road. He recalls whenever there was heavy rain, the waters of the Black Earth Creek would rise and come rushing through the valley causing flooding and resulting in havoc. In 1954, Otto got a call from Herman Eisner, a local Cross Plains resident. Herman explained that he was the President of the Cross Plains-Black Earth Valley Watershed Association and he wanted Otto to be the Secretary-Treasurer. Otto explained that: "I have never been good at saying NO—so I agreed to join Herman. I knew the history of the area and where there were problem areas." Herman knew that the federal government had grant money available to build some earthen dams to alleviate flooding problems. So the Association applied for grant monies and 3 earthen dams were constructed, one on the Grob farm, and two on the Nonn farm northeast of Cross Plains. These were among the first in the country to be constructed. To a large extent, these structures prevented flooding and decreased sedimentation in the Black Earth Creek. They are still visible today protecting the Village of Cross Plains and downstream areas.

Otto reflected on some history of the area and how flooding became a problem. "When our ancestors came, the area was largely covered with grasses and the hills with trees. But then the ground was tilled and trees were cut to make room for crops. Also there were cows wading around in the Creek and breaking down the stream banks. This led to sedimentation in the Black Earth Creek, which was a prime trout fishing area. The Wisconsin Conservation Department grew concerned."

Otto recalled that for a while the State leased the land along the Creek to protect it and ultimately bought the land to preserve it. The state also assisted farmers by fencing in much of the Creek and building limited crossings to allow cows and equipment to have passageways.

In those days the first priority of the residents was to prevent flooding. Only after that was accomplished did they begin to adopt better conservation practices. Otto said that in the early 1960's there was a move to build two more dams in the Black Earth Creek Watershed. But the federal grant required a minimum of 50% of the residents to participate in the request. Since the Association fell short of that goal, the other dams were never built and shortly after that the Association ceased operations. The Association dissolved in the mid-1960's when Herman Eisner was no longer leading it.

Black Earth Creek Watershed



Harnessing the Creek's Power: The Lynch and Walker Flour Mill

By Mindy Habecker

Dane County UW-Extension

Re-printed from the Autumn 2002 BECWA Newsletter

In 1855, the directors of the Milwaukee and Mississippi Railroad Company had a vision for the development of a thriving village. The point where the railroad grade would confine the waters of the Black Earth Creek for 3/4 of a mile would be an ideal spot for a powerful mill that would serve as an economic development catalyst for processing Wisconsin's leading crop – wheat.

This is where Mazomanie developed and a dam was built one mile east to form the 43 acre Lake Marion which powered the Lynch and Walker Flour Mill beginning in the late 1850's. It initially produced about 100 barrels of flour a day.

Over the years this mill changed ownership many times and sometimes the owners moved. At one point floods on the Black Earth Creek economically devastated the owners, forcing them to sell. Yet, over time, repairs, improvements in milling equipment and efficiency of the water turbines steadily increased the prosperity of the business.

The number of coopers (barrel makers) employed in the village reflects this prosperity. The 1860 census lists 3 coopers and ten years later the 1870 census lists 14. In 1873, the Mazomanie Mills shipped 16,330 barrels of flour. By 1877, the capacity of the mill was 125 barrels per day. In the 1870's the mill was running 24 hours a day. It truly was the economic hub of the community, producing flour that sold across the country and in Europe.

The creek continued to power the mill until 1950 when the spring flood of March 30th destroyed the waterpower system and the mill was then converted to electric power.

In 1885, the mill and the village of Mazomanie collaborated to produce an astonishing innovation. The creek's waterpower from the mill along with an Edison Dynamo generated electricity to operate 175 electric lamps. The mill charged the village \$6.00 per year for each lamp. That is how Mazomanie came to have electric streetlights before Madison did. In 1888, the village and the mill started another joint venture. This one supplied water to the business district primarily for fire protection through a series of water mains. The service was later expanded to residential areas.

Black Earth Creek's power was harnessed to greatly benefit the village and mill owners but the relationship was not always smooth. Numerous major flooding events damaged the mill and the dam. When the dam washed out, private citizens who sustained damages to their land disputed with the mill owners and received compensation and later sold their land to the mill owner. The Mazomanie mill also shared the Black Earth Creek with many other mills in the area. The

**This project is supported by the
Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission
and
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People's Bank of Mazomanie
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Thanks to our generous sponsors!

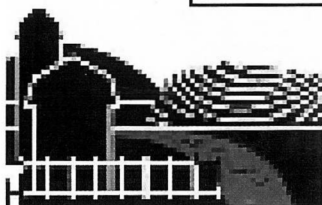
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Design by Deborah Nemeth



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