The Dredge Ditch

A Clay County Illinois Story

Little Wabash Big Muddy Drainage District

Darold R. Herdes

December 2016

Quotations

“It is, Sir, as I have said, a small college.

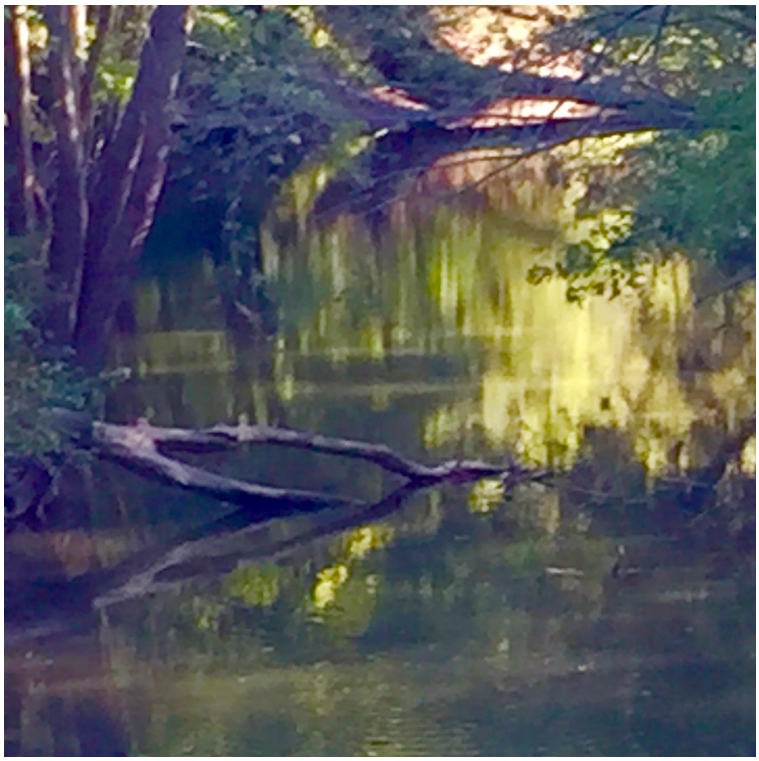
And yet, there are those who love it!”

Daniel Webster, Dartmouth's Favorite Son, 1819.

“Well, Jerry, it is just a ditch.

But here is the rest of the story.”

Darold Herdes, 2016



Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the help of a lot of folks who provided what were often tidbits that filled in many of the gaps. A surprising amount of the historical information came from land abstracts updated when property exchanged hands. Sharon Laughton Phillips provided pages of abstracts from her family's farm through which the Dredge Ditch was dug. Evelyn Pierce and her daughter Shelly located the photo of the dredge machine that was previously printed in the Clay City Sesquicentennial book by Doris Bissey. My conversations with Austin Dash and long time family friend Carrol Lee Frutiger gave me interesting anecdotal stories. My cousin Jerry Stanley was my best supporter and sidekick on many exploratory hikes along the Ditch for photographs and trying to configure in our minds how the ditch was formed and changed.

My grandson Finley Carlson, age ten, accompanied me to Springfield, Illinois, where we examined materials at the Illinois State Library and the Illinois Archives. The reference librarians at these stately institutions and the librarians at the library in Flora, Illinois, did their best to locate sources. Jean Bailey at the Clay County Genealogy Society helped with the maps, and the officials at the Clay County courthouse Assessor, Clerk, and Court offices were all supportive. Not least, my wife Elizabeth helped with editing and keeping me on a narrative track.

I was not able to locate the original reports and court records on the Little Wabash and Big Muddy Drainage District, which frustrated my hunt for more detailed information about the Dredge Ditch. The County Clerks in Illinois counties had oversight responsibility for the drainage districts and for maintaining the records. Unfortunately the method for filing court records is based on the alphabetical listing of defendants with no chronological data included. Absent this information and no archive of the Clay City and Louisville newspapers for the 1910-1915 period, I utilized a variety of other sources to write this account.

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1. A Personal Connection

The Dredge Ditch -- called by some locals either “the drudge” or the “grudge ditch” — is actually a good sized stream about twelve miles in length adjacent wooded areas as well as farm land. It is located in eastern Pixley and Clay City townships in Clay County Illinois. At age 10, my twin brother Garold and I moved with our parents, Denby and Floy (Stanley) Herdes, to a rental farm northeast of Clay City, Illinois. The farm was seven miles from town on a dead end road, now called Barberry Drive. At first living there seemed exciting, but it didn’t take long though for a harsher reality to sink in. We were a long way from town. We were too far away to participate in sports at school, and the long school bus rides to and from school each day were a drag. We lived with wood burning stoves for heat and cooking. Somehow my Mom, who was from a family of thirteen, could do wonders baking on that kitchen stove creating prize-winning cakes and all kinds of assorted goodies. There was no TV, but we had a radio, books, games, and each other to distract us from the never-ending chores. Spending Christmas vacations in the woods on one end of a crosscut saw -- with my brother on the other -- cutting firewood to fuel the stoves must have been character building because it was not much fun. Neither was awakening on winter mornings with wind whistling around the old second floor windows and a dusting of snow on the comforters. Trudging out to the outhouse no matter the weather was also a downer. Worse was my milking a cow on a cold winter morning and have her whip her tail across the side of my face.



It was the Dredge Ditch just a quarter mile downhill from the house that provided an escape and plenty of places for my brother and I to explore. When our many cousins visited, we would rush through our noon-day dinner to run down to the Ditch in search of mussel shells and arrowheads or, in the summer, fish or swim in the deep hole.

The variety offered by the Ditch throughout the year also helped me develop an appreciation for the changing of the seasons. I found my most perfect arrowhead on a sandbar one summer when dry spells would cause the Ditch to dry up. In the fall we turned to gathering hickory nuts and persimmons and hunting squirrels. In the winter I ran a trap line for muskrats, raccoons and mink to make some money. When heavy spring rains caused the back waters to overflow into the pasture between our house and the Ditch, Dad helped us build a fish trap at one of the inlets to catch catfish and carp when the water receded.

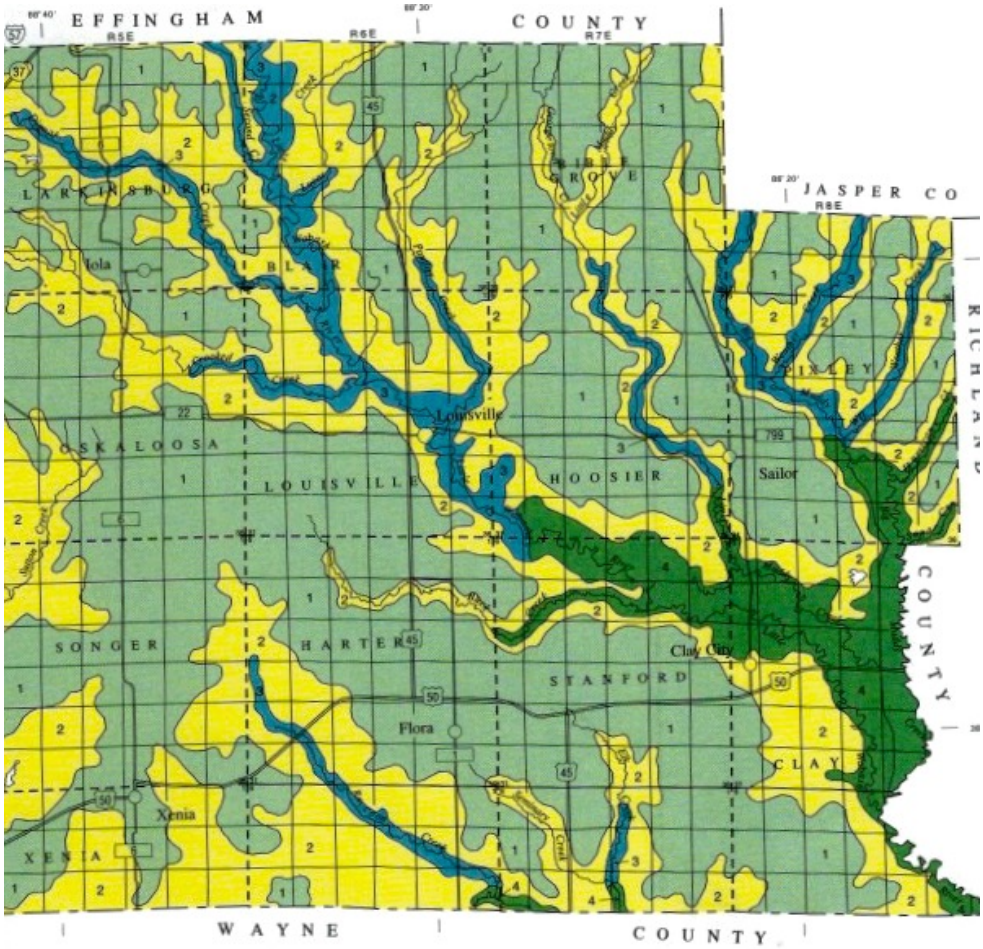


Dredge Ditch flood waters; Pasture in back of our house (1954)

2. Little Wabash Drainage Basin

In time I learned that the Dredge Ditch had a larger purpose in the scheme of local history. The idea of the Dredge Ditch was to drain the low lying bottom land along the Big Muddy Creek to allow farmers to expand tillable acreage. The swampy poorly drained area extended almost twelve miles and was up to four miles wide. The Big Muddy Creek, which originated in Pixley Township and was approximately forty miles long, flowed southward through Clay City Township until it entered the Little Wabash River near the Wilcox Bridge south of Clay City. Before the Big Muddy reached the Clay City township line a couple of miles north of our farm, it made a peculiar 90 degree turn and flowed eastward for about a half mile before continuing its curvy path south. That hard right turn of the creek came to play a major role in the Dredge Ditch story. Clay County's primary drainage basin is made up of the Little Wabash River and its tributaries.

The Little Wabash makes its way south from Effingham County then flows diagonally across Clay County on its way to the "Big" Wabash River. The confluence of the Little and Big Wabash rivers occurs near New Haven, Illinois, about twelve miles before the combined rivers enter the Ohio River. Two of the creeks entering the Little Wabash on the eastern side of Clay County are the Little Muddy and the Big Muddy, both of which were influenced by the digging of the Ditch. By the turn of the century (1900) Clay, and indeed most Illinois counties, had been settled by farmers over the preceding decades, and farm ground was pretty well claimed. One way to expand one's crop land was to drain low lying wetlands and poorly drained soils. One such area, as noted above, lay parallel to the Big Muddy creek starting around the now abandoned Bucktown store located on a country road about four miles east of Sailor Springs. This location was not far from the long extinct settlement of Pleasant Hill. In more recent years the road was formally named the Bucktown Lane.



Little Wabash Drainage Basin
L-R: Little Wabash, Little Muddy, Big Muddy

The Federal Government encouraged drainage projects throughout the nation during this period, but there was no formal program or federal funding at that time. These matters were left primarily to landowners with some oversight by state and local governments. A few farmers in Clay County tried using drainage tiles, but this was impractical mostly because of the clay soils. Cyrus Stanley, my granddad, had tiled bottom ground on his farm along the Big Muddy south of Ingraham. It was a problematic undertaking for many reasons, but one was created by his grandson Bob Stanley who dropped the front end of a tractor belonging to his Dad (Fletcher Stanley) into a tile sink

hole. The answer for farmers owning land further south along the Big Muddy lowlands was to dig a drainage ditch. Thus the Dredge Ditch idea was hatched.

Noah Regnier was one of the farmers owning land in this unlucky lowland zone, and he was among those who pushed for a solution to the drainage issue. Noah was a transplant from New Orleans. His French-Canadian name was pronounced by the locals as Ringy. He purchased a 200 acre farm in Pixley Township that was located on the Pixley/Clay City township line about a half mile west of the Big Muddy. Noah had one son, Lawrence, who later became an engineer in Chicago, but he retained ownership of the farm which remains in the family to this day.



Lawrence Regnier Farm 1954

Noah built a large two story house on the farm where he and his wife raised his son and two daughters. Although initially engaged with the Dredge Ditch project, he moved to the Chicago area in the early 1920s and rented his farm to Charles (Chart) Herdes, my Granddad. Chart moved off this farm in 1950 to a farm only a couple of miles away that he had purchased during the Depression years. So it came to pass that my family then moved to the Ringy farm in 1950 where ironically my Dad had grown up.

Another farmer whose land adjoined the Regnier place on the north side was Elza Lutz. Elza was a quiet but forceful man, God-fearing, well-respected and a World War I veteran. He was married and had five daughters, but unfortunately his wife died giving birth to the fifth baby. He was fortunate in re-marriage to a woman whose name

was Grace, the same name as his first wife. Grace complimented his quiet nature with an outgoing and engaging personality. I helped put up a lot of baled hay in Elza's barn usually on the hottest and most humid days of August. More pleasant were the hay rides and wiener roasts that Grace hosted for her Lathrop Chapel Sunday school class every fall. Lathrop Chapel was a small country church affiliated with the Clay City Methodist Church. Folks living in the Northeast Clay City neighborhood, most of whom were on the same telephone party line, were members of the church and represented a close knit community.



LATHROP CHAPEL METHODIST CHURCH (The church burned to the ground in 1970.)



Grace Lutz's Sunday school class 1951

3. Historical Background

Now back to the story about the Ditch. The broader history of people, places and events can often be put in context by a story that may seem as trivial as one about a drainage ditch. From stories of the struggles of General George Rogers Clark dealing with native Indians recruited by the British during the Revolutionary War, we know his excursions into the southern Illinois territory during 1770s involved a difficult terrain of marshes, lowlands prone to flooding, and swampy woodlands.

The book “History of Clay County” tells us that he encountered five miles of flooded land when crossing the Little Wabash just to the south of Clay County and had to construct rafts to get his men and supplies across the water. This episode occurred on his expedition from Fort Kaskaskia in 1779 to confront the British in Vincennes, a battle he won which secured the Illinois territory. Incidentally, the George Rogers Clark Memorial in Vincennes, Indiana, is a wonderful place to learn more about his role in winning the West during the War for Independence.



Gen. George Rogers Clark



Gen. George Rogers Clark Memorial in Vincennes, Indiana

Most of the people moving into southeastern Illinois after statehood in 1818 were from the neighboring states of Kentucky and Indiana and were looking for better farmland. Abraham Lincoln moved to Illinois from Indiana with his family during this time. I will add that my great great granddad Joseph Herdes also came to Clay County from Germany prior to the Civil War. He purchased 40 acres of land in 1858 near the Regnier and Lutz farms, and his property also extended into the Big Muddy lowlands. This land is in the Herdes family to this day. In fact, old Joseph is buried in the Leonard Cemetery adjacent to the land he bought in Pixley Township. He was a soldier in the Civil War and died shortly after his return from an illness he contracted while serving with the Illinois 155th regiment, which was posted in Tennessee. Fortunately he had one son, James Monroe Herdes, who continued our family's namesake.



FINLEY CARLSON,
grandson and historical researcher
Springfield, Illinois

4: Swamp Land Act of 1850

Settlers coming into the area after Illinois attained statehood had to deal with the same conditions as George Rogers Clark. When Illinois became a state, the federal government retained ownership of millions of acres designated as swamp land. The Congress in Washington D.C. came under increasing pressure, however, to release control of the swamps to the states. The Swamp Land Act of 1850 was passed that turned over ownership of millions of acres of these federal lands to Illinois and several

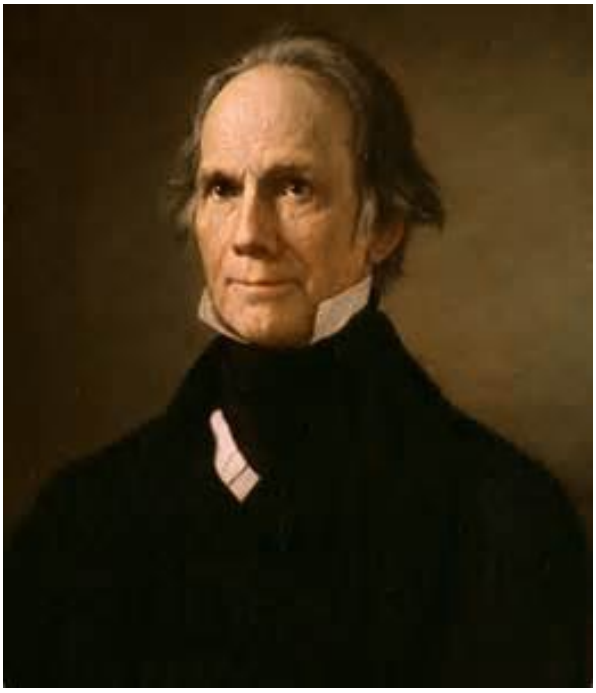
other states east of the Mississippi River. This action was a remarkable development in the nation's agricultural history, although its significance was overshadowed by the country's growing preoccupation with the slavery issue.

The Swamp Land Act of 1850 was passed by Congress in large measure because of the efforts of two well-known senators, Henry Clay of Kentucky and Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois. Henry Clay was a key drafter of the legislation, but he was sidelined by illness and Douglas took the lead to assure passage of the bill. Two other Senators, John Calhoun and Daniel Webster, were also instrumental in getting this legislation passed.

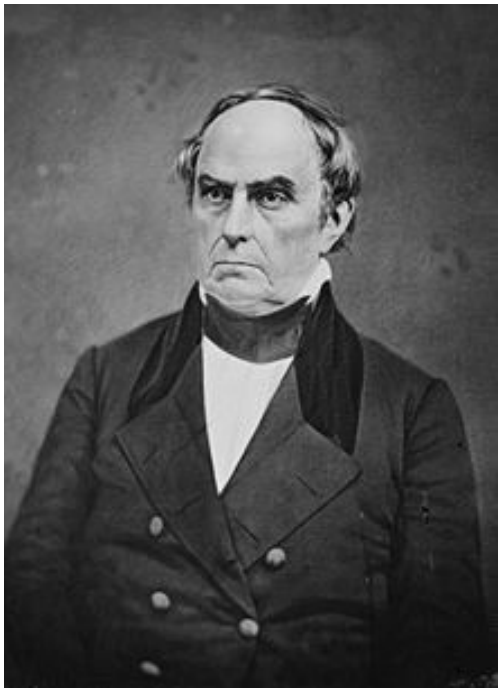
Clay was one of the leading senators and statesman of his time, and he ran for the presidency as the Whig party nominee on three occasions. I mention Henry Clay if for no other reason than Clay County was named after him when the county was formed in 1824. Clay was also a key voice in the passage of the Compromise of 1850, which dealt with the issue of slavery in the territories and specifically those territories applying for statehood. He was joined in this effort by the outstanding and famous senator, the aforementioned Daniel Webster of New Hampshire.

The leading opposition voice of the South was John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. Clay, Webster and Calhoun were known as the Great Triumvirate for their leadership roles in the Senate during this contentious period. But it was Clay who was called the Great Compromiser. Unfortunately for the country, both he and Webster died two years after the Compromise of 1850 was passed.

The purpose of the Swamp Land Act was to give land unfit for cultivation to the states so that the construction of levees and drainage systems could be financed and built to increase acreage available for farming. Over half the land in Illinois and Michigan, for example, was considered swamp land. In Illinois, a large part of the land considered unfit for cultivation was the prairie grass region encompassing a large swath of central and northern Illinois. Referred to as the Grand Prairie, this large extraordinarily flat area required a different solution to deal with the water-logged prairie soils than did the swampy marshes and woodlands located in southern Illinois.



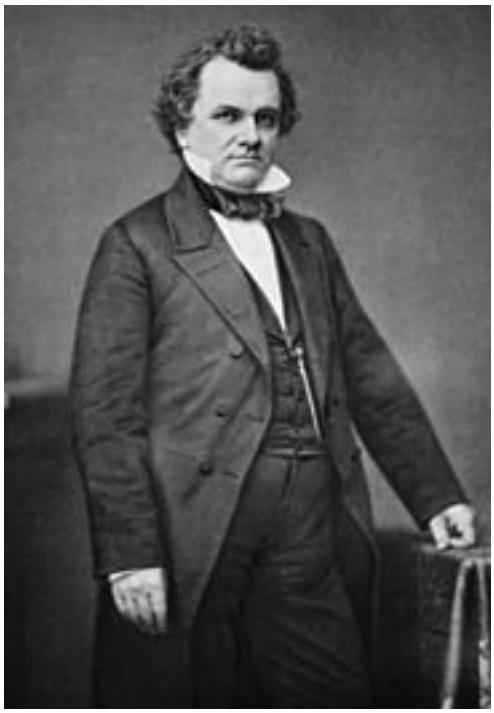
DANIEL WEBSTER
Massachusetts



HENRY CLAY
Kentucky



JOHN C CALHOUN
North Carolina



STEPHEN A DOUGLAS
Illinois

The dividing line between the two geographic areas, roughly along I-70 today, was caused by the Shelbyville Moraine formed when the last glacier receded from the state at the end of the Great Ice Age about 13,000 years ago. The flat region to the North was occupied by prairie grass which in some places created up to 20 feet of black loamy top soil from prairie grass decay. The southern part of the state had a mixture of soils from organic materials of the more forested lands and was less productive but also beset with water drainage issues. Named Little Egypt, the region is bordered on three sides by rivers: the Mississippi, Ohio, and the Wabash. Many of us from this area would have preferred that our forefathers had settled a little farther north and dealt with the prairie grass problems.



ILLINOIS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP SHOWING GRAND PRAIRIE AND LITTLE EGYPT



ILLINOIS SOILS MAP SHOWING SOIL CHANGES RESULTING FROM GLACIER

The State of Illinois received control of over 4 million acres of designated swamp land from the federal government in 1850. A major consideration was how to sell and distribute these newly acquired acres. We know from Clay County Court records that the Illinois General Assembly passed laws in September of 1850 that granted what was referred to as Swamp and Overflowed Land to several counties. A subsequent law in 1854 provided for the state to survey the land received by the Federal government. By 1857 the Clay County Clerk had received a list of the Swamp and Overflowed Lands in the county, which was sent by the State Auditor in Springfield. I found this information in a land abstract which dealt with the sale of 360 acres of land in Pixley Township near where the Dredge Ditch dig started.

When the County Clerk received the designated lands from the state, he had responsibility for the initial sales. The County Court assessed the value of the land which was priced according to three classes: the first at two dollars an acre, the second at one dollar twenty-five cents and the third class at seventy-five cents. These sales were recorded at the courthouse in Louisville in December 1858.

In early 1859, T. J. Bagwell was appointed Drainage Commissioner by the county. His job was to sell the remainder of the land that had not been sold by the Clerk. Bagwell held a public auction in March 1859 and took in a total of $8,590.93 for the land sold. It was at this auction that George B. Bothwell purchased the land in Pixley where later the Ditch commenced. He bought 360 acres of these designated swamp lands for a total of $456.00. The purchase was recorded by the County Clerk, John A. Apperson, on March 15, 1859. My great great granddad's land purchase was also part of the designated swampland in the Big Muddy drainage.

5. Farm Drainage Act in 1885

Although the State of Illinois turned over ownership of the swamp lands to the counties, it still had responsibility for regulating the flooding and drainage problems encountered by landowners. Fortunately the state was not without experience in dealing with water issues. In 1823, the General Assembly passed a law which set up a Board of Canal Commissioners. This was the era of canal building when waterways were constructed for transporting freight. The major canal built in Illinois was the Illinois and Michigan Canal which was completed in 1848. Railroads came along about this time, however, and put a quick end to the canal era.

The gift of the swamp lands resulting from the Swamp Land Act presented significant challenges for the State. It required action for draining water and building levees. In response, the Illinois legislature passed the Levee Act in 1879 and the Farm Drainage Act in 1885. Responsibility for implementing these laws came under the jurisdiction of the predecessor organizations of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Office of Waterways.

The state codified what seems obvious, the laws of natural drainage. The basic principle is that landowners must accept both the advantages and inconveniences that natural drainage places on their land. So, a farmer owning lower ground must accept surface water that flows on to his land from higher ground. The law also applies to water run off resulting from tiling. This simple rule, however, has led to many a conflict between landowners. My granddad Herdes, for example, had a farm which adjoined his brother's land. A dispute between them over the diversion of surface water caused such a rift that the two never spoke again for the rest of their lives — grumpy old fools that they were.

The drainage issue became pressing after John Deere invented the moldboard plow during the 1840s. The plow could turn under the thick prairie grassland at a faster rate than before. The flat ground of the Grand Prairie retained much of the rainfall water. The solution uniformly used in this region was tiling. Clay tiles were used during this

period to drain subsurface water. Over half the farm land in Illinois, or almost 5,500,000 acres, was organized into drainage districts and utilized artificial drainage systems using tiles or drainage ditches. The southern part of the state relied primarily on drainage ditches to deal with both surface water and draining lowland areas. Although much of the work was done by individual farmers, larger lowland areas required cooperation.

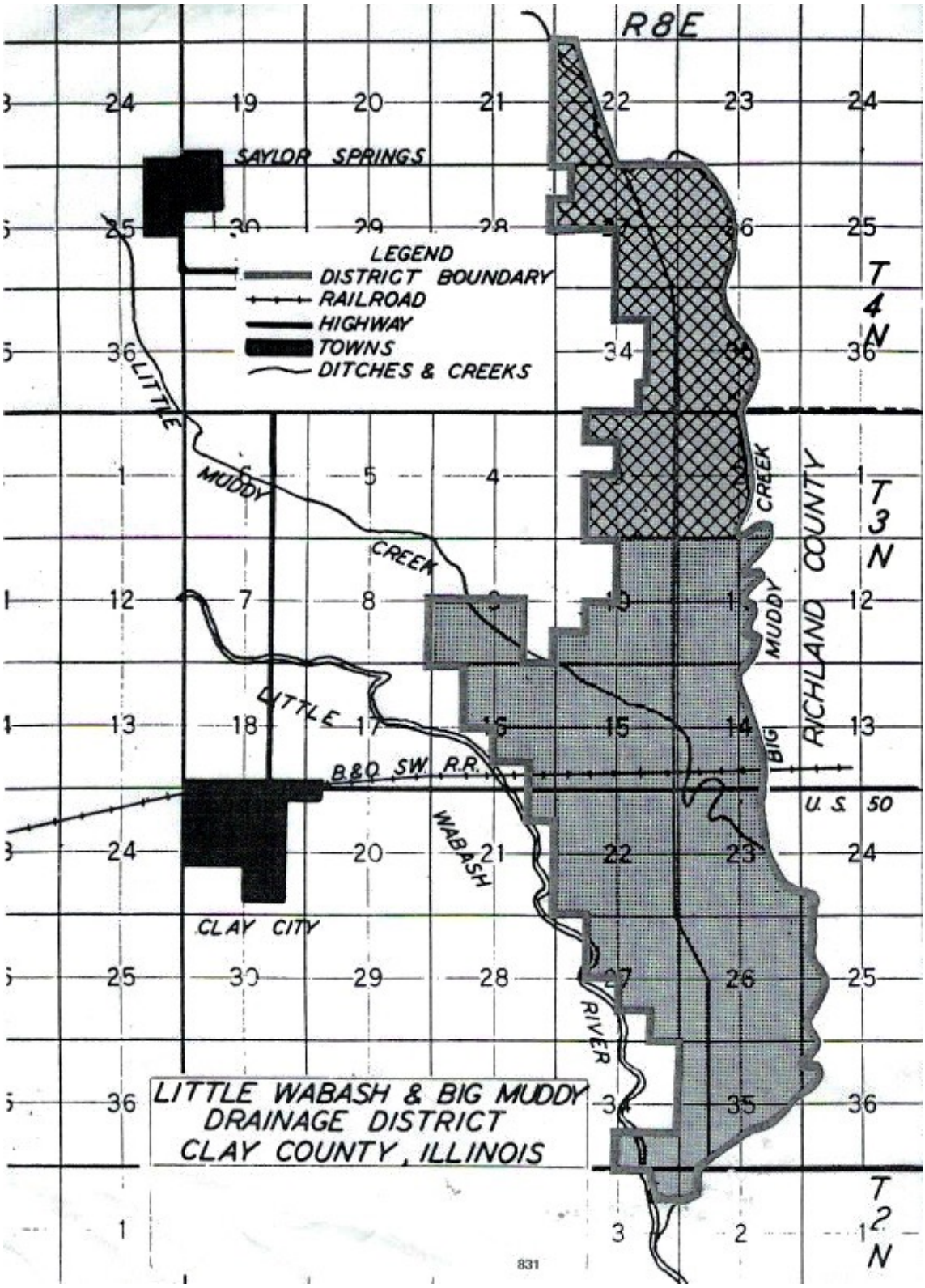


JOHN DEERE PLOW 1837
Smithsonian Institution
American History Museum

6. Little Wabash and Big Muddy Drainage District

The State passed the Farm Drainage Act to address the issues associated with the swamp land acquisition. The provisions of the Act, and subsequent changes brought about by court decisions, provided for the establishment of drainage districts applicable to both the northern and southern parts of the state. Thus it was that the Little Wabash and Big Muddy Drainage District was formed to construct the Dredge Ditch.

Since there was general agreement among landowners along the Big Muddy bottoms that a drainage ditch was needed, backers of the project submitted a petition to the County Court on April 14, 1910. The petition requested a drainage district be established. Two-thirds of the land owners in the proposed district had to sign the petition for it to be accepted by the Court. The petition stated the land proposed for the district would be made up of about 7,500 acres subject to overflow, and the natural drainage was not sufficient to properly drain the area. A hearing on the petition was conducted at the courthouse in Louisville. The Little Wabash and Big Muddy Drainage District (LWBMDD) was decreed on June 7, 1910.


R8E
SAYLOR SPRINGS
LEGEND
DISTRICT BOUNDARY
RAILROAD
HIGHWAY
TOWNS
DITCHES & CREEKS
LITTLE MUDDY CREEK
LITTLE
MUDDY CREEK
BIG MUDDY
RICHLAND COUNTY
B&O SW R.R.
U.S. 50
WABASH
CLAY CITY
RIVER
T 4 N
T 3 N
T 2 N
LITTLE WABASH & BIG MUDDY
DRAINAGE DISTRICT
CLAY COUNTY, ILLINOIS
831

Rules for the drainage districts were established by state law and a number of court decisions filed after the initial passage of the 1885 Drainage Act. Each district was required to have a commission to oversee and manage the project. These commissions were to be composed of six commissioners, three landowners and three appointed by the County Court. In Clay County, the three commissioners appointed to the LWBMDD were Henry Striegel, Thomas Tetrick and Robert L. Meredith.

The next step in establishing the six person commission was an election in which landowners voted for the three elective positions. The Commission members generally had a hands on role in developing a plan for the project. Most districts, however, including the LWBMDD, hired an engineer to develop plans and specifications for the proposed project.

The plan formulated by the engineer with input by the Commission indicated that the ditch would commence just north of the Bucktown Lane where a mile to the South the Big Muddy made its big turn to the East. The ditch would angle slightly to the East for about two miles from the start, then continue in a straight line heading south for about ten miles until its waters eventually joined the Little Wabash River. The approximate midpoint of the Ditch was under the Route 50 Bridge over the Little Muddy Creek about one and half miles east of Clay City. Just north of the highway bridge the Little Muddy joined the Ditch drainage and the combined waters continued south toward the Little Wabash River.

An additional and important requirement of the Illinois Drainage Act was that a jury be appointed to review the plan and determine assessments, benefits and damages, since all of these issues could result in much controversy. A jury for the LWBMDD was appointed and set up shop at the courthouse in Louisville to review the project plan. W. D. Dillman was appointed Foreman of the jury; J. D. Burton was the Circuit Court Clerk who had responsibility for overseeing the jury's work.

The jury analyzed the plan and examined the lands, railroad, and public highways impacted by the project. They then determined the damages and benefits that would result for landowners. The total number of acres benefitting from the project was 6,072, and the benefit was estimated to be a total of $35,640. The jury filed its report on August 17, 1911. Some of these districts in the state were quite large compared to ours. The Lower Salt Fork Drainage District in Champaign County, for example, encompassed 168,000 acres.

According to the Flora paper, the Southern Record, the LWBMDD plan was made available for view by the public and by contractors at the Clay City Banking Company in Clay City in the summer of 1911. Since this was before the era of copy machines, one copy was retained by the Commission and the second was kept at the bank.

The engineer's plan called for digging a ditch twelve miles in length which would require the removal of approximately 311,250 cubic yards of earth. The ditch was to be eight feet in depth and twelve feet wide. Tree removal along the route of the ditch would be the responsibility of the Commission. Bridges required across the ditch were to be constructed by the county, state, and in one case, the railroad.

Contractors bidding on the construction of the ditch were to provide sealed bids due at the Clay City Bank by August 15, 1911.The commissioner selected a contractor after reviewing the submitted bids. The value of the winning contract was approximately $22,000. The company was paid on the first Monday of each month in the amount of 75 percent of the work done. Work was to be certified by the commission engineer prior to payment. At the project's completion the balance of the contract amount was paid.

To finance the construction project, a bond for the contract and interest in the amount of $22,700 was issued by the LWBMDD Commission and managed by the Commission treasurer Frank M. Chaffin. The bond was to be repaid over a ten year period, and the first payment of $2,100 was made in 1915. Annual payments in the amount of $2,200 were made from 1916 through 1922. The bond was retired with two payment of $2,600 in 1923 and 1924.

After the jury had determined the total amount of benefit, the local district commission had the task of apportioning the total amongst individual landowners. Benefiting farmers would be charged an assessment based on their acreage and the percentage of their land which would benefit from the Ditch. Generally farmers owning land for two miles on each side of the Ditch would be charged an assessment. Since a total of 6,072 acres were determined to benefit from the Ditch, land abstract documents placed the assessment at about four dollars per acre.

Some landowners, however, were paid for damages resulting from the dig. For example, the jury awarded Henry C. Bosworth $300 for land taken and other damages to surrounding land when the Ditch was dug on his property in Pixley Township. In January 1912, Francis and Johannes Koehler received $30.00 from the drainage district for a one hundred foot right of way across their forty acres where the ditch was dug. The jury also considered costs for maintaining the Ditch, which involved clearing debris every two years to assure water flow after heavy rains. Maintenance funds would come from a charge of fifty cents per tract.

According to the 1939 State of Illinois Tax Commission report, the Little Wabash and Big Muddy Drainage District paid maintenance costs of $3,050 from 1915-1919, $1,560 for 1920-1924, and $607 from 1935-1939. There seems to be no record of maintenance performed after that date. This issue caused a conflict at the courthouse in Louisville in the 1970s when Elza Lutz tried to determine where the more than $3,000 accumulated for maintenance of the Ditch had gone. Despite his efforts, the funds seem to have disappeared and the matter was never resolved. The tax, however, was discontinued.

7. Digging the Ditch

The phenomenon of digging the ditch became a local attraction. It started with the unloading of a large steam shovel when it was delivered by the contractor to the train station in Louisville. At that time the Springfield and Shawneetown Railroad passed through our county seat. The Louisville paper carried a story and a photo of the dredge, but there are no existing copies of the papers for that period, or at least I have not discovered them. Several teams of horses were needed to pull the rig along the dirt road heading east out of Louisville toward Sailor Springs and beyond to the construction site.

The start of the dig was about a mile north of a crossing on the Big Muddy Creek at a point called the Doty Crossing. It was a low water crossing reached by a corduroy road over the swamp land. About twenty feet in length and eight feet wide, the dredge dug the trench eight feet deep and twelve feet wide as specified in the contract. The steam shovel was mounted on a floating platform, so the steam shovel dug a pond and water was hauled to the project site to fill the pond and float the dredge. The dredge then floated in the ditch as it was dug with the dirt piled to one side. Over the years the dirt mound was washed away with the widening of the ditch. When the dredge had dug its way south to Noah Regnier's farm, his son Lawrence often wandered down the hill to spend lazy summer afternoons sitting on the side of dredge with his fishing pole.

In 1913, the dredge had dug its way south to the last farm in the Drainage District, which was owned by Henry Pierce. Henry's granddaughter-in-law, Evelyn Pierce, managed to retain among family photos the only actual photo of the dredge machine that I could find. The photo was taken when the dredge was working on the Pierce farm. This prized photo was taken by a professional photographer, Charles Garland. He also took a photo of the Pierce neighbors who visited the dredge site and posed for a photograph. Both of these photos were made into post cards and sold as souvenirs in Clay City. Evelyn's photos were actual copies of those post cards.



DREDGING MACHINE 1913
Digging across the Henry Pierce farm near the Wilcox Bridge



Neighbors of Henry Pierce gathered for a photo after watching the dredge dig its way through the last farm before entering the Big Muddy SE of Clay City 1913

8. Bridges

Today there are only two road bridges that cross the Ditch. One is on Sapphire Road, a graveled country Pixley Township Road located about two miles south of the Ditch's start point. When the Ditch was dug, however, Sapphire Lane did not exist.



Bridge over the Dredge Ditch on Sapphire Road NE of Clay City 2016



Dredge Ditch looking south from the bridge on Sapphire Lane 2016

It so happened that the road commissioner for Pixley Township during the 1920's was John Lutz, who owned a farm that adjoined that of his nephew Elza. He built a road which ran east and west along the North border of both of their farms during the 1920s, which required a bridge across the Ditch. The road, now Sapphire Lane, then joined a road to the east of their farms that previously ended when it reached the Big Muddy from the east. The new road made it convenient for Elza, who had to cross the ditch to farm.

The second bridge crosses Highway 50 east of Clay City. In addition, there is the B&O Railroad bridge about a quarter mile north of Route 50.



Little Muddy Bridge
over old Route 50
built in 1923



When the Ditch was constructed the initial bridge crossing was on the road dividing Pixley and Clay City Townships. This road is now called Barberry Drive. Like most county roads it was a dirt road. It stretched along the township line crossing the Big Muddy into Richland County. The bridge built for the Ditch crossing lasted into the 1930s, but it gave way to washouts and was no longer rebuilt by the county. The bridge over the Big Muddy was also abandoned at this time.

Today the old township road, now called Barberry Drive, comes to an abrupt dead end at the Regnier farm. The ditches on each side of the old road between the Dredge Ditch and the Big Muddy reached out to one another creating a new stream bed between the Dredge and the creek. When I was a kid one of the abutments for the township bridge was still visible, but it has since vanished. Interestingly, the Big Muddy at this point and going south forms the border between Clay and Richland counties.



FORMER TOWNSHIP ROAD
Now a connecting ditch between the Dredge Ditch, (foreground) and the Big Muddy 2016

In addition to the public bridges, some private crossings were also built. Noah Regnier's farm required a bridge since his farm, as well as that of Elza Lutz, straddled the ditch. The bridge he built unfortunately kept washing out, so a wooden bottom bridge was built which allowed the water to flow over it. This solution too finally gave way to the force of water. Noah's son, Lawrence, and my granddad gave up on maintaining the bridge in the 1940s. The old relic of the bridge was still there when my brother and I ventured down to the Ditch. When that portion of his farm was no longer reachable, Lawrence sold the land on the East side of the Ditch to Howard Dash who already owned adjoining land.

A couple of miles south of the Pixley/Clay City township line in a largely wooded area another private bridge was constructed by an oil company. After the huge oil discovery south of Clay City during the 1930s, several small companies and wildcatters moved to Clay City. Pure Oil's landsmen, in a surreptitious undertaking, leased a good portion of the land south of Clay City where the oil pool was centered. This forced smaller outfits to try their luck in many less likely parts of the county, including the lowland bottoms between the Little Wabash and the Big Muddy. Nonetheless, some achieved extraordinary success.

The oil company bridge was made of metal and crossed the Dredge Ditch near a local landmark known as the Salt Pond, a natural wetlands lake surrounded by a cattail marsh. The Salt Pond is now known as Gaskin Lake. Carrol Gaskin purchased the property including the pond in the 1950s. He enlarged the pond and built a dam and road along its east side where its natural drainage went to the Ditch. For a number of years the Gaskin Lake was a popular recreation destination for locals. I should mention that Carrol married my third cousin, Iva Herdes, who grew up on a farm not far from the Salt Pond. The metal oil field bridge, however, was only used for a short time before it was dismantled.

Continuing south along the Ditch the next bridge requirement was a railroad bridge for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad that ran parallel to Route 50 on its way westward to Clay City. According to the Drainage District law, this bridge was the responsibility of the B&O. The bridge built by the railroad was of sturdy construction, but it also had its problems. In 1926 the Flora Journal Record reported that a group of workmen was called out to rebuild the bridge across the Dredge Ditch. It seems that the increasing size of the ditch required that a 150 foot long bridge be constructed.

The last and most utilized bridge crossing the Ditch was an existing bridge that crossed over the Little Muddy Creek on the Midland Trail west of Clay City. The Dredge Ditch and the Little Muddy met one another just north of this bridge. While this bridge crossing is still referred to as the Little Muddy, the water and the stream going south is the Dredge Ditch. The Ditch was dug southward for an additional five miles from the Midland Trail. The Midland Trail Bridge also had its problems. In 1922 Virgil Vandyke,

the County Road Commissioner, condemned the bridge after a heavy rain when he discovered that the Ditch had washed and widened the stream bed to such an extent that the approaches to the bridge were practically without support. The bridge was then rebuilt.

The next chapter regarding the Midland Trail Bridge occurred a few years later in 1925 when the Federal Government created the numbering system for national highways. Automobiles were becoming an increasingly popular mode of transportation thanks to Henry Ford, and there was increasing pressure for more and better roads. The Midland Trail became part of Route 50 and was expanded by the construction of a concrete two lane highway.



The bridge over the Little Muddy, and indeed those crossing the Little Wabash and the Big Muddy, was rebuilt with through truss construction popular in the 19th century. These three historic and decaying old metal bridges are still standing on the abandoned “old Route 50," but all three have been condemned and are blocked from usage by motor vehicles. With a little daring one can walk on them today and wonder why these old relics cannot somehow be saved as historic reminders of our past technology advances.



LITTLE WABASH BRIDGE RT 50



BIG MUDDY BRIDGE RT 50

The three truss bridges were pushed to the side in the early 1950s by a major expansion of Route 50. The new highway was built parallel to the existing road, so new bridges were built. One feature of the new highway was the bypassing of all the little towns between Vincennes, Indiana, and Salem, Illinois. An unfortunate consequence of the new highway was the hastening of he demise of all these villages and towns. There are, of course, many additional reasons for the vanishing of our rural towns and villages.

When Route 50 was planned, a future option to expand the highway to four lanes was included. The State acquired rights-of-way for the four-lane highway, which included abandoned portions of the old highway. Current efforts to revive the four lane plan have been without result. With the subsequent advent of the Interstate System, Route 50 is sometimes called the Loneliest Highway.



ROUTE 50 - THE LONELIEST HIGHWAY

Previously mentioned was the Wilcox Bridge over the Little Wabash River SE of Clay City. The combined waters of the Dredge Ditch and the Big Muddy come together just before they flow into the Little Wabash near the Wilcox Bridge. At this point, the Little Wabash River picked up the role as the dividing line between Clay and Richland counties. Many will remember this bridge was also an old truss bridge which was finally condemned and rebuilt. The Wilcox Bridge is a landmark because it is the location of a hydraulic measuring station. The data collected here for weather, water depth and flow are used by a number of state and federal agencies.



Jerry Stanley standing on the Wilcox Bridge
The Hydraulic Measuring Station



WILCOX BRIDGE
2016

9. The Steep Cut

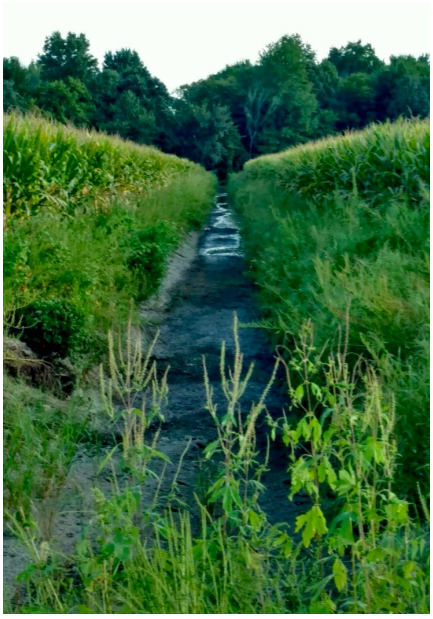
In 1922, a very heavy rainfall occurred which caused the Big Muddy to wash out a path westward from the 90 degree turn south of Bucktown Lane. This caused the water to turn and enter the Ditch, which was only about a hundred yards away. This diversion and the new stream bed is referred to as the Steep Cut. Eventually, the Steep Cut caused all the water in the Big Muddy coming down from Pixley Township to enter the Ditch. The additional waters in the Ditch, however, not only created problems with the bridges downstream but the lowland areas had increased flooding especially following spring rains. The section of the Big Muddy where the 90 degree turn occurred is now dry and filled with trees. But the Big Muddy picked itself up and continues to drain waters on its way south, especially when the water in Hurricane Creek flows in just before the Big Muddy reached the bridge on Sapphire Lane.

A 1960 aerial photo of a portion of southern Pixley Township shows where the Steep Cut occurs. The photo was provided by the Soil Conservation Office in Louisville, Illinois.


STEEP CUT
Big Muddy _____
Dredge Ditch _ _ _ _ _
BGD-2AA-83
Buckfown Lane
Sapphire Lane
29-60



Dredge Ditch entering the Steep Cut



Start of Dredge Ditch



Big Muddy creek bed after water was diverted by the steep cut

10. Success ?

The question arises, then, was the Dredge Ditch project successful? From the story we know that there were many subsequent problems with the Ditch. Most common was the continued issue of flooding and maintaining bridges. Noah Regnier was not able to keep a crossing on his farm, and the township road dividing Pixley and Clay City repeatedly washed out and was abandoned. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad had its washout problems as did the Midland Trail.

Why was this happening? The Dredge Ditch was a mixed success at best because its water combined with that from the Big Muddy Creek caused the Ditch to become a much more significant stream bed than anyone had anticipated. Only 12 feet across when dug, it is now over a hundred feet wide and up to thirty feet deep. We know that the start of the Ditch dig was just north of the Bucktown Lane, but as it was dug to the South it passed within a couple of hundred yards from where the Big Muddy Creek made its 90 degree turn to the East. North of this point the Ditch is now little more than a field drainage ditch. The Steep Cut, however, became the Achilles Heel of the project. The Ditch achieved its objective of opening up more acreage for farming, but there was a tradeoff between more accessible land to farm and flood waters.

In a study published in 1921 by the Illinois State Geological Survey, the authors concluded that the LWBMDD was not a success because there was no improvement in land values. This was also the case for many of the more than 1,000 drainage districts that were formed in Illinois including the Lower Decker in Richland County.

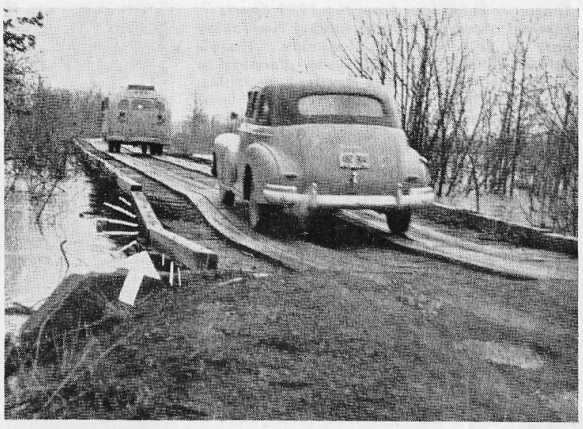
A significant factor is that the drainage ditches create a lot of additional water when they enter the major tributaries. For example, when the Big Muddy enters the Little Wabash it is carrying water from the Ditch and the Little Muddy as well as water from its own watershed. The Little Wabash channel is not capable of accepting this volume thus creating a backup and flooding which can happen well upstream. Drainage districts tend to focus on relative small areas, and water engineers who helped plan the districts often had neither the experience nor the data to adequately deal with the bigger

picture issue. A possible solution is to develop a plan or district which would deal with the entire watershed of major rivers. In 1917 a petition for a Little Wabash Drainage District in Clay County was submitted to the County Court. In this case the Illinois Legislature passed a law approving the district. Later, however, a court decision declared the law unconstitutional.

One proposed solution, which has proven to be inadequate, is to straighten the channels of the major rivers so that they can more rapidly carry surface runoff following heavy rains. This concept seems logical since most of the streams in southern Illinois are replete with loops, curves, twists and turns. The issue, however, as earlier noted, is that the channels are not capable of handling the water volume. In the 1950s the Little Wabash River channel was straightened about a mile north of Clay City where the old water treatment facility stood. The main objective of this project, however, was to accommodate a better bridge crossing for the new Dietrich Blacktop. The previous crossing on the river was an old iron truss bridge set at an angle on a curve in the river. I remember having to walk across this bridge when it was condemned, and the school bus had to dump us out before crossing.



This school bus loaded with children is forced to cross this condemned bridge to pick up its passengers. Bridge spans Little Wabash river in Clay county.



Bus and car cross a bridge over a slough just north of the condemned bridge. Arrow points to weakened section of the bridge which has sunk to near water level.

11. Conclusion

The term swamp land is not often heard today. It seems that for the last forty years wetlands has entered our vernacular in large measure because of environmental concerns. While back in the day individual interests supported by government policies focused on draining swamps and sloughs, conservation policies today emphasize the preservation and indeed the return of wetlands. The Illinois Legislature, for example, passed a new water law in 1985 which sets new requirements for wetland preservation. Environmentalists can be critical of past drainage projects with their consequent destruction of wildlife habitat and increased erosion. Some people may view our Ditch as a wetlands tragedy while others may see it as a major aid for farmland expansion. Like most re-writing of history, there is often a failure to recognize that those bygone events and policy positions reflected the views and interests of the people at that time.

A perhaps unintended but significant consequence of the Little Wabash and Big Muddy Drainage Districts is that it has become a recreation area. A few years ago the State of Illinois Department of Natural Resources acquired a property now designated a Land and Water Reserve, which is open for hunting. The 255 acre acquisition includes the pond and surrounding land. The reserve is located near Gaskin Lake and encompasses what has been locally known for decades as the Flag Pond. In addition to hunting, a popular recreational use of these wetland bottoms is an unplanned network of off-road vehicle trails, especially in the Little Wabash lowlands both north and south of Clay City.

For me the Ditch is a reminder of a long ago part of my past which enriched my life and remains a destination for me today. For most, I expect, it is just a ditch.



About the Author

Darold Herdes was born in Clay County in 1940. He lived there until attending college at Eastern Illinois University and the University of Illinois. His 37 year career with the CIA provided many international experiences and a final tour teaching at the US Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. However, he never forgot his roots and the value of family and small town traditions.

He and his wife Elizabeth currently live in Colorado.





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