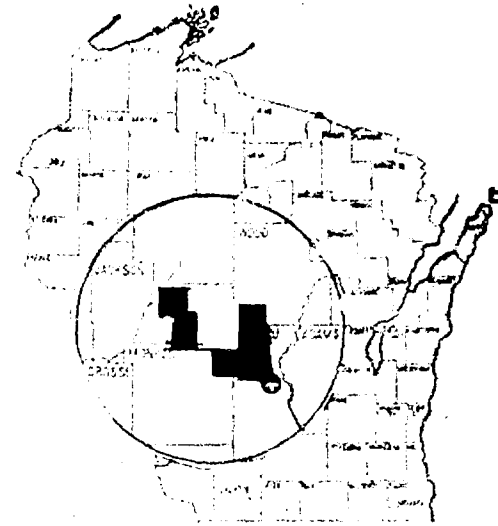




Necedah's main street was desolate on a recent week night. But on the following Sunday evening, recreation seekers put life into service stations, taverns, and restaurants. —State Journal Photos

The Death and Life of a Town!



Change is the order of life—and today The Wisconsin State Journal takes a look at a community in transition: Necedah where the problems of change, foreshadow questions that soon will confront other areas of Wisconsin.

The issue is that of the use of our land. It affects all of us.

As man has fought for a livelihood from the vast reaches of this new nation—from the black loams, the heavy clays, the light sands, the wet marshes—the residents of Necedah have seen previous eras of change.

First there was lumbering. Then there was a period of agriculture and small forest operations. Whether the land was ever suited to farming is still being debated; some authorities say the land and the conditions were hostile; some farmers hotly disagree. But today farming is gone forever.

The government has bought huge tracts of land, taken them out of what it considered hopeless attempts to farm, and is developing them for a new use: recreation. This was, in part, in response to a growing demand across the state for more and more recreation land.

And in the middle is Necedah, a community that served the farmers and the lumbermen and now faces a new kind of neighbor. It has lost some things it wanted, gained some others. It seems like a ghost town one day and a boom town the next.

To bring you the story of this town-in-transition, The State Journal sent to Necedah two of its reporters, William Stokes, outdoor writer, and Robert C. Bjorklund, farm writer. Their findings do not always agree with each other's or with the various Necedah area groups'.

But they have called the shots as they saw them on a problem that may have widespread significance for Wisconsin.

An Outdoorsman's View

By WILLIAM STOKES
(State Journal Outdoor Writer)

NECEDAH—You can buy a hunting hat in a corner service station here, but there isn't a place in town to get a pair of bib-overalls.

You can buy a hamburger in a couple of spots and you can get a cold beer in any one of three taverns. But you won't find a place to purchase a pound of nails or a pitchfork or a bale of twine.

During a good part of the year, you'll see the red and brown garb of hunters striding along the wide main street, past the vacant business places, on their way to food and drink or lodging. You'll see an occasional farmer in his bib-overall uniform too, but not often.

There aren't many farmers hereabouts any more, but there are more and more hunters and other recreation seekers, and therein is the tale of a village.

It is a tale that has made some local people bitter. They blame governmental acquisition of large tracts of land for transforming their community into what they usually call a "ghost town."

It is a story that is accepted philosophically by others, who say that the change was inevitable and that it was caused by a variety of factors.

It is a modern history of assurance to the people outside of the area who come here to hunt and fish and boat and to enjoy thousands of acres of land that is "theirs." They are the people who crowd into the village on autumn weekends, confident that they will find a place in the outdoors where they will be free to practice their varied forms of recreation.

Story of Land—And Man

It is a dramatic story of changing land use. It illustrates both the ignorance and intelligence of man. It shows him as greedy, shortsighted, stubborn, and as his own worst enemy.

It also shows him in more favorable light, with the vision and fortitude to correct mistakes.

In its heyday—around the late 1800s—five sawmills buzzed and whined bustling activity into Necedah. The land was raped in a manner popular with early-day lumber interests.

In the wake of the sawdust, the area was a vast plain of either natural openings or marshland and slashings. Into this area came land development companies with grandiose plans for putting the peat and sand to work, at least to use it long enough to extract money from land-hungry would-be farmers from Iowa and Illinois.

They came—the farmers did—by the dozen and the hundred, and they moved their families onto the land and began to sift the sand for the agricultural gold they had been promised was there.

No Gold, No Living

There was no gold. There was not even a living, though there are those who will argue this point yet today. The land refused to yield the predicted bountiful harvests. These predictions, incidentally had the backing of some agricultural officials with the University of Wisconsin.

And then in the early 1930s the Federal Resettlement Administration moved into the area to purchase the sub-marginal farm land. Most farmers sold willingly, though there are charges still echoing across the marshes of questionable buying tactics on the government's part.

There are also Necedah observers who support the resettlement work, stating that the farmers were slowly starving to death and that the government saved them from themselves.

In any case, the land lay idle, reverting slowly to as much of the wild state as was possible after the changes wrought by man. Scrub tree growth flourished, and blows scarred the landscape, and ditching projects began to sink beneath the years of brush and weed growth.

Refuge Is Created

And then, in 1939, the wild character of the area was given official endorsement with creation of the Necedah National Wildlife refuge—40,000 acres of water and land 11 miles west of Necedah.

Even this sprawling and wilderness is not the largest public recreation area in and about Necedah today. Along the west boundary of the federal land is the state-owned Central Wisconsin Conservation area, comprising some 90 square miles. North of the two areas is the huge Wood county public hunting grounds, and thousands of acres of county forests, bring the total of government-owned recreation land to over 200,000 acres.

This is land that holds a dozen different attractions for outdoor recreation seekers. To archers across the nation, Necedah is bow hunting for whitetail deer. It was here that the sport was pioneered when the deer herd on the national refuge became too large for its own good.

To an ever-growing number of hunters, this is the section of limitless grouse and woodcock cover—where a man and a dog can loose themselves for as long as they please.

Private Facilities, Too

Waterfowl shooters find sport at the flock of Canada geese that honks out of the protected area on fall feeding flights.

A wide variety of ducks explode in watery eruptions to thrill hunters in a thousand and one wilderness locations.

And there are private recreational facilities

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Bumper-to-bumper traffic on Necedah's wildlife refuge during the bow and arrow deer season testifies to the popularity of the area with outdoorsmen.

As the Farmer Sees It

By ROBERT BJORKLUND
(State Journal Farm Editor)

NECEDAH—If you are a farmer traveling through the sandy scrub oak and jack pine country here you are not really enthusiastic about the soil or the season.

These thousands of acres lying west of Highway 80 and north of Highway 21 aren't high potential agricultural lands. They are mostly timber country and—in the multiple-use fashion of the day—recreation country.

But off on the ends of the road network are the covered foundation remains of farm buildings, big old concrete silos—some crumpled, some standing and whistling in the wind.

The farm history here is gone forever. The federal government does plant some of these fields to corn for feed for waterfowl, there are fields of clover and other wildlife browse crops, and some pasturing of cattle.

But it is not agriculture.

What Happened? Agriculture bowed out of the area through a combination of circumstances—mainly man and nature.

Nature took its toll measurably with the early frosts that ruined the corn crop in important years—and every year is an important year. Man ended it in the name of government when he resettled the settlers in an expansive social experiment back in the depression of the '30s.

But even though nature is assisted by man in taking back this area as nature's own, the other man—the agricultural man—doesn't forget.

And a community of men—ready to do business with the men of agriculture—can't forget either.

The community is Necedah, born of the lum-

bering days of a century ago; sustained by farm people for its transition, and now slightly numbed by the complete transition to serving the frequenters of the national wildlife refuge that bears its name.

All Is Not Well

All is not well in Necedah. The big sore for the 691 souls is the row of empty store buildings along Main st. The new and many service stations still aren't a satisfying replacement for a new car agency; the stronger restaurant businesses don't match the closed feed mills; and the three motels are not an answer to the departure of the creamery.

It has been 25 years since this man-made transition started for Necedah. The boom of the logging and lumber days was gone and forgotten. A slice of agriculture, even a minor one, hasn't been forgotten.

When the timber was cut from the land it didn't blossom into farms. The daylight in the swamps opened vast acreages of marshland. Then experimenters of the day found that the marshlands could be drained, leaving exposed the dark peat soil. It gave a promise for agriculture.

The hurried experiments of crop production showed the land could produce remarkable crops. Land developers pictured a golden promise for agriculture and the settlers came.

One of those in the movement from Iowa and Illinois, where land prices were already out of reach for the average farmers, was Lloyd Parker.

Didn't Want To Sell

Parker is 73 today. He was 26 when he moved in with his wife in 1915 and started the dairy farm in the Sprague country north of Necedah.

He bought 500 acres and started his Jersey herd. He was in his third decade of farming when the government's resettlement agency came in to buy the land.

Parker and his Mrs. didn't want to sell. They were proud of the 100-foot barn and a \$7,000 home. What's more they were proud of the way they had learned to farm this soil.

"They said that they wanted to move us off this submarginal land," Parker recalls today.

"I say there isn't any submarginal land. There are only submarginal farmers," he says defiantly.

Juneau county had sold its vast acreages in the area for \$1.75 an acre. Other farmers, who Parker claimed came only to take off the timber and then move on, also signed and sold. "They were glad to get rid of it," he said.

Found Soil Responsive

Parker maintains that the farms of the four drainage districts should have been kept out of the refuge project. He said there are no soils as responsive as the ones in that area.

"On this soil 100 pounds of fertilizer went three times as far as it would on heavier soils," he continued.

Parker's bitterness toward the resettlement move has never diminished. He is farming with his son, Norman, south and west of Necedah today, but his real love for the land is centered on that 500 acres that went for \$5 an acre.

(Continued on Spotlight Page 3)



Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd Parker are resettled settlers who love the land.