

The Birth of Grand Lake St. Marys

Several publication excerpts below detail the birth and history of Grand Lake St. Marys. Special thanks to [George Nearing](#) for providing the articles, images and expertise.

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The History of Grand Lake St. Marys

By George Nearing, Local Historian

The history of the lake begins with the construction of the Miami and Erie Canal that was talked about for the first time by the government in 1817. It wasn't until 1827 before they decided to build it. In 1830 a survey was conducted to show the elevation of the land to build a canal between Lake Erie at Toledo and the Ohio River in Cincinnati. The result of the survey was that New Bremen was located at the highest point, which today is called Loramie Summit.

All the water in the creeks and rivers on the north side of New Bremen flows north. All the water on south side of New Bremen flows south. In order to have water in the canal you would have to have lakes to feed water to the canal from its highest point. Indian Lake and Lake Loramie were built to flow water south. Grand Lake St Marys was built to flow water north. When the lake was built it was called Lake Mercer. Auglaize County was not formed until 1848 and this land was in Mercer County and St. Marys was the County Seat.

The land that Grand Lake St. Marys is on today was originally part of the black swamp and about half of it was covered with big trees. This was a big project. At that time there was no electricity, no gas engines, no trucks or tractors, no chain saws, just lots of trees.

Work began on the Lake in 1837 with approximately 1700 German and Irish immigrants working from sunrise to sunset digging by hand and dirt was moved by wheelbarrows and special built one-horse drawn dump carts to build the lake banks. Their pay was 30 cents a day plus a jigger of whiskey.

A wall was built called a bank made of logs and mud and was placed on the west side near Celina. Then a bank was built on the east side near St. Marys. Water to fill the lake came from the Barnes Creek, the Little and Big Chickasaw Creek, Prairie Creek, Big Beaver Creek and others.

When the water was put in the lake it formed a lake 9 miles long and 3 miles wide with 52 miles of shoreline. It was the largest man made lake in the world at that time. It wasn't until 1845 that the first canal boat came from Cincinnati to St. Marys.

The Miami Erie Canal opened up the western Ohio area to hauling cargo and passengers to and from the area to connections to all parts of the world.

The great flood of 1913 was the death of the Miami Erie Canal. The Railroads also attributed to the demise of the canal. At one time there were over 150 oil wells in the lake and first off shore oil drilling

in the world was in Grand Lake St. Marys.

Today the lake is a prime recreational area for boating, fishing, swimming, picnicking, and camping.

Data from the writings of Hal Miller, Ray Zunk and the County Atlases.

History of Surveys of Mercer County Reservoir

From George Neargarder's Lake History Collection

The Reservoir was constructed from 1837 to 1841. It was made by extending embankments North through Sections 17, T6S. R4E. Sec. 8, same T & R into Section 5, T6S. R.4E. cutting off the flow of the waters of Chickasaw Creek and an embankment running in nearly same direction through Sections 1,12 & 13, T6S. R2E. cutting off the Westward flow of the waters of Big Beaver Creek. At the SE, NE. & NW. corners of the Reservoir waste weirs were built to allow surplus water to escape from this reservoir. They were each about 300 feet in length. These waste weirs were 5 feet higher than the one waste weir that was afterwards constructed at the South West corner of the Reservoir in about 1856.

In 1847 Justin Hamilton, by order of Board, made a partial survey of lands about this reservoir. Some of the lands West of the West embankment were sold under or to the line of this survey, but the surveys along the South & North Margin of the reservoir were not used, In 1848 the Legislature of Ohio passed a law requiring Alexander Conover to make a survey of this reservoir on a plane with waste weirs above mentioned. This was done, but all maps and notes of this survey have disappeared, except a field book of the level work on the North shore of said reservoir. These show nothing to locate the line upon the ground except the fact that it was run to a level with the waste weirs at N.E. & N.W. cor, of reservoir, beginning at the one at the N.E. cor. and ending at the N.W. cor. Under this survey there were a number of lands conveyed. These conveyances are mostly dated in January 1849. They were for lands in sections cut through by this survey, fixing the shore line of said reservoir, and that part of each section so cut through and above his line aforesaid was called "Fractional" and the parts of sections were termed "Fractions".

After this in 1854 Smith H. Clark was ordered to survey, for sale, lands adjacent to and bordering on the reservoir. He made his survey without regard to the Conover Survey or any plane and up to the time of making his survey, only one or two tracts of land, "Fractions" had been conveyed by the State on the South borders of the reservoir. Two sales were made under his surveys. One in June 1855 and one in November 1854. At the time of making these surveys the water in the reservoir was low, and he surveyed well down. Afterwards the waters of the reservoir covered over large portions of the land sold at these sales, and purchasers entered complaint to the Board of Public Works. They then had John Cutler survey said reservoir for the purpose of determining first, the amount of land that had been sold at these sales had been submerged & damaged. Second, other lands that had been submerged and damaged.

His map and notes are on file in the office of the Board of Public Works. It may be well to state in this connection that the map and notes made by Smith H. Clark are all lost except a small pencil pass book of his surveys on the South of this reservoir. In accordance with Cutler's survey and report appraisers were appointed, under the law, to appraise the lands damaged as above stated.

They (reported or recorded) the lands reported by Cutler, and other lands, and damages were paid thereon to each individual claimant. Under the surveys of 1854 and the two

sales as above mentioned a good deal of land had finally been forfeited for non payment of purchase money and a large amount remained unsold.

Then in 1876 another survey of lands adjoining said reservoir was ordered. It was directed to be made level with the then existing waste weir at the South West corner of the reservoir which as above stated, was and is now 5 feet lower than the three original waste weirs to the plane of which Alexander Conover made his survey

The West end of the reservoir from the East line of section 22, Town 6 South, Range 3 East, and the East line of Section 3, same town and range, was surveyed to this plane by I. F. Raudabaugh.

The East part was surveyed by William Limbacher.

Under these surveys a (sale) was made of lands to the said waste weir line on West end of said reservoir, and same plane (as supposed) on East end. In 1886 at the (instance) of the State Canal Commission, William Gibson, A. S. Latty, & R. M. Rownd, the present survey was made and the titles of lands affected by each of (the) surveys inquired into and abstracted so far as they in any way relate to the State. The survey of 1876 to the plane of the waste weir at the South West corner of the reservoir to the East lines of said sections 22-6-3 & 3-6-3, is carried East along both North and South shores.

On the North shore a station or stake is fixed at each 100 feet. On the South shore stations are fixed each 100 feet to station I 11, from which station East, they are fixed at 2 chains each, except where shown on each line on the maps herewith returned, to be fractional.

In 1876 the Board of Public Works requested that little or no attention be given to islands, but under this survey they are all located as shown on said maps, and where any (portion) above said waste weir, courses and distances are given.

At each North and South section line, and one near said waste weir at SW, as aforesaid, a stone is planted level with said waste weir. These stones are on an average 8" X 8" X 24" and marked S. L. on top.

On each map, each section is represented by a single map on a scale of 16" to the mile or 80 chains. Conveyances are shown between the State and the United States, and individuals. Tracts of land yet owned by the State are shown in each section by a series of numbers (agreeing) with which in number is a calculation by latitudes and departures, which is also returned with the field notes and maps.

The following is a correct copy of the acknowledgment found on the original manuscript from which these notes were transcribed. State of Ohio, Franklin Co. SS

I. F. Raudabaugh being sworn says the statements herein and on each map of this survey and the notes thereto are true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief. Raudabaugh

Signature and notarized by Henry A. William Aug 8, 1884.

This is a copy of an original notarized document 8/8/1884

The History of the Mercer County Reservoir

By I. F. Raudabaugh – envisioned by George Neargarder
From the Daily Standard newspaper on Tuesday, July 10, 1928.

Mercer County Reservoir was the name of the great artificial body of water that lies mostly in Mercer County as it is now and when first constructed was all in Mercer County. In 1840 the county seat that had been at St. Marys was moved to Celina. In 1848 a new county was carved out of Mercer and adjoining counties. It was called Auglaize County and the County seat Wapakoneta.

The county division threw three miles of the East end of the reservoir into Auglaize County. Ever since then the folks of St. Marys and Auglaize County have been conjuring names for the reservoir. Their representative procured the legislature to adopt "Lake St. Marys," "The Grand," etc. The surveys and the identifying terms as above stated have always been "The Mercer County Reservoir." Its area comprises one of the most unique areas known. In its original state it comprised a large level plain into which the waters from a watershed, comprising a large part of the South side of Mercer County emptied.

The principal streams coming off this water shed were Coldwater, Grassy Creek, Beaver, Chickasaw, Prairie Creek, Little Chickasaw, etc. The waters from these streams spread over a large area, and were sufficient to form a lake, from which the waters flowed both East and West. The waters flowing West went down into the Wabash river, and thence to the gulf of Mexico, while the waters that went East went down into the St. Marys river and thence into Lake Erie. So it was that the Indians had a waterway from the Mississippi River to the Great Lakes, and frequently traversed this route with their canoes.

Before Girty's Town was located a little old Frenchman had a trading post where Old town, about where the Old town Cemetery now is. The location is lost. Here the Indians came to trade and gather cranberries off the Marsh where this reservoir now is. In the early years of our settlements water transportation was the means of, or for carrying freight in and out. The early Engineers conceived the Miami and Erie Canal and a waterway from Cincinnati to Lake Erie, but especially from Dayton to the lake.

This was a big ditch in which to float canal boats and tow them the whole weary length with mules. To supply this ditch with water and carry this water over the drought season this reservoir was built, by the flow of the water East and West. These embankments were nine miles apart. This housed the water for an area nine miles East and West and 3 to 5 miles in width. It was a great engineering feat in the condition of the country then. The dirt for these embankments was dug out of barrow pits by hand and carted and wheeled into these embankments. The carts were one horse carts so constructed that by pulling a pin the cart was dumped. However, much of the dirt was wheeled into the embankment with wheelbarrows. This embankment was, when first constructed, some 5 feet higher than it is now. At the South part of Main street this embankment: came up into Logan street and formed an elbow turning abruptly to the East. What is known as drunkard's curve was laid out to fit or circle this turn in a curve. This embankment was some 10 feet high in Logan Street and a big ditch creek. The waste well was 300 feet long – one hundred yards and was on the level with the Lake Erie Railroad Tracks.

Time was when the abutments to this waste weir formed the back ground for rifle matches. The big ditch is all filled up, so that you get no idea of it in looking over the ground. The J.W. Riley residence stands right where this ditch was at one time. A boat landing canal came up to between Washington and Logan streets. Canal boats came up and down the Miami and Erie canal and through the "Bulk Head" on the east bank into the reservoir and then were poled its whole length to Celina. These canal boats were come 80 feet long and 14 or 15 feet wide, or more. They were equipped with a steering rudder, a captain, a span of mules, a cook and roustabout or two. It was wonderful to see them move great loads of stuff-merchandise of every description by setting their long poles at one end on the boat and then, by pushing, walk the length of the boat, whence the boat would be moved the length of itself by the pole man walking full length of the boat. In later years they got steam tug boats to do this pulling. One of those poles would be a very interesting relic today. They were of unbelievable length and worked down to ax handle smoothness. They may not have been 20 feet long, but that is the length my memory now serves.

For building the embankment, houses were built out of logs in which the workers lived. The logs of these cabins were still observed as late as 1856. There was a cluster of them where the McMurray residence-Adams opposite where the Mushroom plant now is.- one of the contractors was one William Y. Wallace, who dies several years ago. He lived 4 miles west of Celina. His contract was let in 1837. The water was shut in 1841. The people were dissatisfied with the shutting in of the water without taking any health measures as the state had promised and so in 1843 they came -together about where the New Waste weir now is and cut this embankment and sent the waters down into Indiana. There was no disguising, but no one was allowed to be a spectator that did not throw dirt. The idea was to forestall and keep the matter in such bounds that no jury could be found to convict. The facts were that no prosecutions were ever brought to an issue. In the 50's and 60's the people were very jealous of their canal system and every individual running for office pledged himself to support, and care for the canal system. Mills were built to utilize the surplus water. In 1853, a forebay and lease for the utilization of surplus water was made at Celina, Ohio. Mills were constructed, first for sawing lumber with an old sash saw and later grist mills--run by water. One of the old mill buildings is standing down there yet. There was a mill on either side of the basin or "forebay." In those days the quarrel was to get water. St. Marys always had the call on the water and it was said that they wasted the water so that the Celina mills could not run. However, in 1886, the state resumed this water right and since that time the quarrel is to keep the water from being turned down onto highly productive lands. It is thrown down into Indiana, and thence a bitter complaint comes up the valley of the Wabash about this surplus water that they always prior to 1886--carried to the East. Then they took it away, but now they put it upon the residents of the Beaver and Wabash valleys. By the way, I forgot to mention that in the construction of said embankment they built a core of solid oak plank through the whole length thereat and in its center. This was especially the case where the embankment crossed the streams and their flats. Coldwater creek and Burntwood were turned into the area banked in by extending this bank southwest, as they originally flowed into the Beaver spreads-west of where the embankment now is.

The land where the reservoir now is, and also a large area of land outside was donated by act of congress for the purpose of constructing the canal for the consideration of the right to transport federal commodities free of charge.

At the time of its construction quite a good many settlers had located within the bounds of the reservoir. They had acquired their titles from the United States. The state required all claims for lands taken to be filed within certain time and claimed that their taking possession vested the title in the state. The state has been rather perkish in their attitude toward those who were caught in their toils. The courts have been against the constitutional rights of the individual. Notwithstanding the people have valiently stood by the retaining the said reservoir.

In 1893, or along there, there was a very strenuous effort to abandon the canal system entirely and with that the reservoirs. it was urged that it would be worth much more in corn fields. A large percent of the people of Mercer county favored the corn fields. The writer with three others went to Columbus to hear the arguments of the attorney general and others: for abandonment. The main points for its retention were furnished from Celina. These were some of the points urged on that side: We needed such a body of water between the lakes and the Ohio river for health, for protection against droughts, for its supply of fish, and its advantages by way of moisture in dry seasons, when not in severe drought, etc.

The west prevailed. And we still have the reservoir, and we hear little of abandoning it. If Frank Raudabaugh had the control he would make a ship canal through it.

The scenic view from the west embankment is at times entrancing. Not alone the shimmer of the moonlight on the rippling waves, but from that West Bank the writer has viewed fantasies that cannot be found anywhere. Standing at Hopi Point on the edge of the Grand Canyon one may see a wonderful view, but the writer has seen a complete replica of this grand canyon in every detail. Columns of colors, thousand feet high pillars, stone, stone and you could imagine you were again at Hopi Point looking down the canyon. In a short space of time it was all passed, gone, but which lingers more-impressively the actual or, the imagery.

The imagery, because the imagery is enwrapped in mystery, But-.more practically, the state has wisely set this body of water off as a recreation park. In the washing of the shores by high waters, the shores have been washed down, and sand beaches created for miles and miles where but a few years ago there was muck and mud. These sand beaches make great bathing places where children can wade on the sand in the water, and larger children coming on the second childhood may swim and cavort and disport themselves as well as on the beaches on the gulf or the ocean.

Still more practical, is the fishing, which has been not only a source of pleasure but of profit. Time was when men made fortunes from the fish caught out of this body of water. But still you can have fair fishing if you know the hiding places of the fish you want. A long chapter might be written about the fish families that have come and gone here.

When the water was first shut in there were two prevailing fish in these waters, the pike and the catfish. The shallows around the marsh had been the breeding places for the pike as also the catfish and mud cat. The mud cat was a very democratic fish and boys with pin hook; hoop pole and cotton line could get him. The pike was different. He attained a length of 6 feet, but the shut-in waters held no breeding grounds for him and he disappeared. There was now and then a sucker. Well, it was about 1858 that the "rock bass" made his appearance. At first he was a novelty at Celina. The first one known was carried the whole length of Main street and shown to every one with the question of what kind of a fish, and it was weeks before the folks learned that Rock Bass" were in the reservoir. Prior to that Western Ohio and Eastern Indiana had been coming to the reservoir every spring to get wagon loads of cat fish and they got them.. Dipped them up out of cold water with baskets. They were hauled home, cleaned and salted away for the season's use. Then came the black bass. For several years he ruled the roosts. Catfish became scarcer, but was never eliminated like the pike. Neither did the black bass, but since the fish and game people have taken charge he has become a pretty scarce article. However, it is not to be attributed to the inefficiency of these folks that this has turned out so. The little perch had his day--crappies, and now and then a blue gill. But the old yellow belly "roach" or sunfish, together with the sunfish of an earlier day have disappeared. The young channel cats come out to shore and our fishermen troll them and frequently get quite a number of them. Time will come when some magician will tumble onto a preparation that will clarify these waters and set the moss to growing again, when the bass and the little ringed perch will be as plentiful as ever. In the meantime the boating and other recreations will continually be available. In the meantime, too, the views like a kaleidoscope will be changing from day to day. Soon the colors of green and silvered ripples of waves will be interspersed with the yellow of ripening grain along the shore lines.

. There is no healthier place than just on the shores of this artificial lake. There is always breeze enough to stir the waters so that the stagnant water germs are broken up and dispensed. The turgid condition of the water appears just after heavy rains but this condition gradually disappears and is not noticed at the end of a day or so. There has been complaint about poor fishing for the last year, but that condition has been the case other where. A letter just read to me from one of the Wisconsin lake resorts said the writer had been fishing two weeks and had caught one fish. Another who has a cottage here and one at Bolton lake up in Michigan, went up there to fish, but told me he came back here to catch some fish, as he struck it bad up there. So fishing is one of the things that are given over in large part to luck. Once, years ago, the writer climbed an oak tree on the South side of the reservoir. The water was 3 to 4 feet in depth and clear as any water could be. The sight was some two hundred black bass near the top of the water, fanning themselves with their side fins, big fellows, 3 to 6 pounds. It was a sight never to be forgotten. Well, he had just a 41 ball, an old fashioned long muzzle loading rifle. With the 41 falls and the use of that old rifle 41 of those black bass found their way into our boat, and finally into the home where the population of a large family made use of them. The writer used to be able to prove this story, but his witness is now gone, and you can believe it if you care to. But as a citizen remarked to me yesterday, it seemed that the more they policed and

employed fish and game wardens the fewer fish. This may be too, because there are more fishermen, but in 1889 when we were running the elevation shoreline of the reservoir the warden told me that he had counted the nets that were owned by the fishermen in the reservoir, and that they amounted to 2500.

Still we had good fishing during those years. Set the boys to get out those big catfish by trout line, and we haven't a doubt that the fishing will be better. Stories are told of these big fellows just walking off with any sort of fishing tackle. I know of several dead ones being taken in and weighed that tipped the scales at 25 pounds. Give the boys leave to go after them with trout lines and they will get them.

I must not forget the carp, "The German Carp." He became a nuisance about 1898, and in 1903 and 1904 was at his worst. The state employed a fisherman to net them out of the lake. They would not net simply dug down into the mud and stayed there till the would-be netter was gone. About the only carp catch he made was from Beaver Creek. A bar was taken out of the creek letting off about 3 feet of water, that left about six inches of water above where the bar had been. For some one half mile this bottom of the ditch, some 20 feet wide, was one mass of carp. From this mass the said fishermen got a carload of carp. I think they were sold to the Jews of New York and Brooklyn. In 1899 and along then there were ten carp to where there is one now. One of the strange sights at the time those carp exposed in said Beaver Creek was to see a shepherd dog fishing. He would bark, growl and wade out into the water, grab a carp and walk out on the shore and drop him down, and then repeat the process. He had no trouble finding his carp. The German carp was put into the reservoir in the latter part of the 80's. It is said that Jared (Jed) Kelsey was responsible for their being put in. About the time they became numerous, the moss; disappeared. It is a question now whether these carp ate up the moss and destroyed it, or whether the silt in the water did this. The moss is gone anyway, and the carp is still in evidence. I don't think the fish and game warden will arrest you if you knock him in the head or get him in any way you can. They make sport fishing if you know the knack of catching him.

One of the things urged at the Columbus meeting was the possibility of utilizing the water power that could be had from this reservoir. The policy of those controlling the water in said reservoir was to wait till the heavy rains had everything flooded and then turn on the gaits so as to maintain the damage. It was pointed out at that meeting that in one inch of the surface at ordinary stages there was 52 millions, of cubic feet of water. That when they had their out-flow going at full they were not letting the water down off this vast area more than a quarter of an inch in a day, that evaporation took up nearly as much as they could turn out in a day. The meaning of this was that with proper use of this surplus water thousands of dollars in the way of power could be realized from this surplus water in place of sending it down into Indiana and into the Beaver and Wabash valleys to destroy crops. But that old feeling of "48" still prevails and when the said surplus is accumulated, they, the controllers, let down this water just when they ought to withhold it, and the power plant is off in the dim future. Time is not so very far distant, however, when Celina will utilize this water in producing electric current, and heat with water in the place of coal. Come across and make it a reality. 5

Another thing urged at the survive, perish, swim or drown meeting at Columbus that the body of water, as the reservoir had an equalizing influence on a considerable territory near the reservoir on the moisture. In other words it tended to make better crops as well as better health near, or along the path of a certain area. I am not sure but this idea has been in fact demonstrated by my observances in the near two score years since then, in that a strip of country for say ten miles each way from the center of an East and West path through this reservoir, the crops have been better than anywhere else in the near country. This very, year, there are far better crops within an area that may be supposed to be under the influence of this equalization than anywhere else in the state. It has been so many years, except where in flood times the agents of the State would turn flood upon floor west, thus destroying the crops.

Another thing it was urged that the time would come when the canal system might again come into use for cheap and quick transportation of freight, especially heavy freight. Thence sprang up the question of barge waterways. New York, at a cost of 101 millions of dollars, enlarged the Clinto ditch from 7 to 12 feet and it had been increased from 3 to 7 feet prior to that. It was urged that the State should preserve this water way and the reservoirs connected therewith in anticipation of something like this coming to pass. Truth is we have a great big gold mine, out are too ignorant, or too poor to work it. Let us impress you that in the future something will happen to cause the used of this mine for the betterment of mankind, and somebody is going to reap huge profits thereby.

Twenty years ago a certain tract was in our court, and residents were swearing an oath that was-not worth over \$2.,-but today that tract is of a market value of near \$20,000. Twenty years ago the old brick house lands would hardly have sold for \$100. per acre, but was sold sometime since for \$1,000. an acre and that on speculation. The future is just as pregnant. Get your share.