

Modern History Highlights of the Jessie Lake Watershed

Following is a list of highlights in the history of the Jessie Lake Watershed (JLW) arranged in “eras” or time periods that have similar characteristics. This is a working outline that is amended as significant new information is acquired. Individual items or combinations of items in the list represent potential areas for further research.

Thus far three short papers have been written for the “Jessie Jabber,” the semi-annual newsletter of the JLWA. These papers focus on the railroad, the Chippewa National Forest and electrification, the latter to be included in the Spring 2002 issue.

Indigenous Era: before 1800

- virgin timber and wetlands
- mixed northern hardwoods dominant; wetland and upland conifers
- natural resource balance
- beaver: most important landscaper
- drainage headwaters; no major stream or water transport in JLW
- native persons at very low density; occasional traversing of JLW
- no evidence of long term native settlements
- Big Fork, Rainy, & Mississippi Rivers were “major thoroughfares”
- burial mounds along thoroughfares
- European settlers in eastern US pushed native people westward
- subsistence non-monetary economy: hunting & gathering
- communal self sufficiency
- native remedies for illness

Exploration/trapping Era: 1800-1850

- major rivers are arteries of transport
- non navigable streams, JLW bypassed by explorers
- trappers followed beaver (also mink, fox, muskrat)
- JLW trapped intensively; pelts shipped to European markets
- Fur trade: Northwest Co., American Co.
- native people pushed westward
- territorial battles between Ojibway and Sioux
- Sioux eventually pushed west and south onto prairie
- little protection, support or supplies available to prospective settlers
- Minnesota Territory established 1849; Itasca one of original nine counties

Statehood and Pre-settlement Era: 1850-1900

- Minnesota organized as a state, 1858
- rapid settlement on fertile soils of southern and western MN
- timber cruisers and tree inventorying in JLW
- beaver market curtailed - fur hats replaced by silk
- trapping declined and beaver population gradually recovered
- JLW surveyed 1875
- iron ore discovered and developed on Mesabi Range, 1890s
- first recorded homestead in JLWA

Logging Era: 1900-1910

- intensive timber cutting - mainly white and red pine
- forest fires fueled by slash (cuttings from downed timber)
- logging camps pushed northward
- Jessie Lake township organized 1901 (41 people in 1900 census)
- National Park proposed; Minnesota Forest Reserve established 1902, renamed Minnesota National Forest, 1908
- timber removed from land; short term profits prevailed over conservation
- tote roads and trails only JLW access until RR
- railroad extended from Deer River to access timber and serve settlers; reached Jessie Lake in 1903
- hunting and fishing attracted seasonal visitors
- logging peaked in JLWA about 1910, then pushed northward
- homesteading, stump removal, and cultivation of cutover lands

Settlement Era 1910-1950

- subsistence agriculture: mainly hay, potatoes, garden vegetables and dairying
- villages established along routes of transportation
- Bowstring Township split from Jessie Lake in 1916
- World War I 1917 - 1919
- Minnesota National Forest renamed Chippewa National Forest, 1928; expanded to JLW, 1933
- CCC camps; reforestation during 1930s
- villages grew to serve settlers then faded after WWII: Mack, Jessie Lake, Spring Lake
- peak permanent population 552* in 1940; land in farms declined thereafter
- contraction of agricultural frontier to more fertile soils in S & W Minnesota
- lakeside farms rented boats and rooms, later built cabins, some became fishing/hunting resorts

- telephone service began, 1911 (mainly RR use at first)
- electricity arrived at Jessie lake, 1945
- Farm Bureau branch established at Jessie Lake 1921
- rural schools established at Combs, Jessie Lake, NW Jessie, Spring Lake & ?
- post offices established: Jessie Lake 1909-54; Mack-Hayslip's-Talmoon 1912-54; Spring Lake 1912; Bowstring 1902; Marcell 1902; Bass Lake 1913-43
- churches organized: Pilgrim (Swedish) Lutheran; Norwegian Luth. Jessie Lake Baptist (1911), Spring Lake, Bowstring (1957)
- cemeteries: Greenwood, Norwegian, Spring Lake
- first all-weather roads about 1915
- trucks and cars replace railroad 1920s
- M & R bankrupt, tracks removed in 1934
- Sunday baseball - every community had a team
- World War II, 1941 - 1945, iron ore production reaches peak; hematite depleted

Diversification/expansion Era 1950-1990

- most agriculture part time
- some fields returned to woodlots
- taconite process developed and amendment passed; new vigor to Mesabi Range 1960s
- school consolidation; North Elementary built 1956; rural schools closed
- year-round population bottomed out at 349* in 1960
- vacationers seek hunting, fishing and more
- logging stabilizes; reforestation; aspen valued, no longer a "weed"
- automobiles and paved highways make remote lakes accessible
- increase in private lakeshore development

Contemporary Era, 1990 - 2002

- development pressure increases around lakes
- year-round retired residents bring new money and economic stimulation
- independence emphasized over interdependence
- small resorts sell out or modernize: Jessie Lake (Wood's); Jessie View (Ayer's); Aspen Springs (Birchwood), Three Cedars; Van Cleve; deGroot
- JLW = 32 square miles; 12% water; 35% privately owned land (1995)
- 68% of private land is forested, remainder pasture, fields, homesteads (1995)
- seasonal and second homes increase to 289* in 2000
- total population reached new peak of 577* in 2000
- Jessie Lake Watershed Association established, 1998
- Jessie Lake walleye spawning beds constructed in Spring Creek, 1999
- Jessie Lake Shoreline Restoration project initiated, 1999

- Conservation Partners Grant received; extensive water sampling 2000 - 2001

* includes both Jessie Lake and Bowstring Townships

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