THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

“FUDEEN FOR DAMMING THE KICK-A-POO”
AN ANALYSIS OF THE LA FARGE DAM AND SURROUNDING CONTROVERSY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Abstract

In 1935, the residents of the Kickapoo Valley began the process of getting a dam built in La Farge, Wisconsin. In the next thirty-five years, as plans for the dam solidified, the dam would take on a symbolic meaning as the means through which the town would achieve economic and social stability. The United States Army Corps of Engineers began purchasing land in the area for the dam in 1970. This would create the first round of controversy surrounding the project. In 1975 the dam at La Farge, despite having been partially constructed, was abandoned after concerns arose that the reservoir created by the dam may become eutrophic and destroy the habitat of several endangered species of plants. This paper will examine the relationship between the residents of the Kickapoo Valley, their elected representatives, and the dam itself by analyzing local newspaper articles and editorials, as well as a series of oral histories.
**Introduction**

By most accounts, the 1935 flood of the Kickapoo Valley was an awesome spectacle. There is some consensus that floods in the area today are not nearly as violent or common as they used to be, but they once defined the small communities along the banks of the Kickapoo River in Southwestern Wisconsin. In 1935, the Kickapoo River spilled over its banks for not the first time, but it was nonetheless a dramatic event. Gerald Erwin, a life-long resident of the Kickapoo Valley, recalled that the flood washed out three bridges and a significant portion of the town of La Farge. As the waters rose, residents of the town launched rowboats to rescue their neighbors from their flooded homes. Enough people were displaced by the floodwaters that cottages were built in the valley to temporarily house those who no longer had a place to live.¹ For La Farge, the 1935 flood would become a defining moment in the town’s history, not because of the devastation the town suffered, but because shortly after the flood, representatives of the area would head to Washington and ask for the one thing that could save the town from future floods: a dam.

At that time, it was impossible to foresee the effect of this proposal on the town of La Farge and the surrounding area. The La Farge Dam project spanned almost four decades from start to finish and generated more political attention and outrage than Vernon County had ever seen before. As it went through various stages of planning it became larger project – both in its size and its importance to the town. It went from being a measure to protect the town from flooding to a project that would create a reservoir that would bring tourists and residents to a chronically economically depressed area. It would create controversy in almost every phase of

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¹ Gerald Erwin, interview by Rene Widner and Fritz Cushing, December 21, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI. This is one of several oral histories referenced in this paper. They were conducted in 2000 and 2001 by pairs of locals, including high school students, who interviewed members of the community who were area leaders during the controversy, as well as those who sold their land to the Army Corps of Engineers.
its construction. But, to paraphrase historian Lynne Heasely, what is most significant about the La Farge Dam project is not what happened in the Kickapoo Valley, but what did not happen. No dam was built in La Farge. No tourists came to the area. No residents replaced those who left.² For years the town would struggle with the limbo of not only the dam, but with the future of the area itself.

This paper will examine the impact of dam construction and abandonment in La Farge from 1935 to 1980, with particular emphasis on the late sixties and early seventies. In particular, during the planning stages of the project, the dam itself was viewed as the only way the Kickapoo Valley could have a stable economic and social future. The controversy that surrounded both the purchase of land by the federal government and the later abandonment of the dam reflected local concern for the future of the area and deeply influenced how residents of the Kickapoo Valley viewed their own communities, elected representatives, and the federal government as a whole.

**Historiography**

Within the last two decades, dams have become a popular topic among journalists and historians alike. However, the vast majority of these works emphasize the environmental and political aspects of dams, often at the expense of considering how they impacted local people. Furthermore, when historians and journalists discuss the people affected the most by dams, they often focus on dams that were created despite protests from local people, while ignoring those in the area who may have advocated for a dam. In terms of American dams, most works consider only large dams, dams constructed in the American West, or both in their studies. Thus,

previous works on dam construction have largely ignored small dams built East of the Mississippi. This is significant because the motivation for building a dam and the response to a constructed dam is often affected by not only geography, but different local needs and histories.

One of the most significant, and certainly the most extensive, work on the construction of dams in America is Marc Reisner’s *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*. Reisner, a journalist and environmentalist, wrote several books on the American West and water issues in particular. In *Cadillac Desert*, Reisner meticulously details the history of dam construction in American West, emphasizing in particular the political scheming that often accompanied large dam projects. Significantly, most of the dams Reisner writes about were constructed to create more arable land in arid regions of the country, most notably in California’s Central and Imperial Valleys. Reisner argues that dam construction continued long after it was reasonable to do so, largely because of American ideals about taming the West, the demands of speculating landowners who stood to make a fortune from such projects, and competition between the two main dam building agencies, the United States Army Corp of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation, for funding and prestige, at the expense of sensible development. The vast majority of Reisner’s work focuses on politicians, bureaucrats, and the impact of dams on the environment. He spends little time discussing the impact of dams on local people or local groups that wanted a dam. Nonetheless, Reisner’s work remains one of the most influential books written on Western water use, politics, and dams.

Another important book which examines the construction of dams in the United States is *Big Dams of the New Deal Era: A Confluence of Engineering and Politics* by David P. Billington and Donald C. Jackson. Both Billington and Jackson have written several other books

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on history and engineering. The timeframe of this book is more limited than Reisner’s work, but its emphasis is still on large dams constructed in the West. This is partially a function of the time period they decided to focus their work on. They stress that the impulse to construct dams was not a product of the Great Depression, as many dams were built or planned long before this period of American history. Instead, more dams were constructed during this time because the federal government became increasingly involved in public works projects and the economy as a result of the New Deal. Billington and Jackson take a much more positive view of dam construction in the United States than Reisner does and seem to see the process as less politically corrupt. 4 Additionally, Billington and Jackson spend a considerable amount of time considering local demands for dams from businessmen and other groups, and do not discuss the influence of politicians in as much depth. 5 This is a notable difference from many of the other books written on this topic. While this paper will consider a dam not constructed during the New Deal, this book provides insight into the period when the dam was first proposed, as well as local factors which influenced dam construction.

There have been a few studies conducted on small dams East of the Mississippi River, but generally as parts of larger works. These studies are significant because they show the different reasons for building a dam in the eastern United States, given differences in geography and climate between different regions of the country. In A Thousand Pieces of Paradise: Landscape and Property in the Kickapoo Valley, historian Lynne Heasley examined one such small, Midwestern dam as part of a larger work on the history of the Kickapoo Valley in Southwestern Wisconsin. Heasley’s chapter on the La Farge dam chronicles the evolution of the dam from a simple structure to control repeated flooding to a significantly larger structure meant

5 Billington and Jackson, Big Dams of the New Deal Era, 102-131.
to create a reservoir that would bring tourists to the area. Heasley argues that the controversy surrounding the dam was a function of the transition from one era of dam construction to another. In short, the dam was constructed during a time when the United States Army Corp of Engineers had to deal with new environmental regulations. Prior to this period, construction of a dam was more straightforward and less regulated. In addition, Heasley suggests that the wavering of both the Army Corp of Engineers and Wisconsin’s senators at the time dramatically complicated the relationship between the federal government and the residents of the Kickapoo Valley.\textsuperscript{6} To date, Heasley’s work remains one of the most extensive histories of the Kickapoo Valley.

\textbf{Dams in the United States}

It is impossible to understand the controversy in La Farge without some consideration of the history of dam construction in the United States of America. The La Farge Project spanned many different eras of construction, each characterized by a different set of beliefs about the necessity of dams, government intervention in local affairs, and the relationship between humans and the environment. Historian Lynne Heasley suggests that the dam at La Farge, and the controversy that surrounded it, can best be understood as the result of the attempt to build the dam as the standards for dam construction shifted rapidly as the result of environmental lobbying.\textsuperscript{7} While the situation of the dam was intimately linked to legal changes put in place at the end of 1960s, this view does not address the issue of the dam as the residents saw it, as a potential savior of the town’s economy and population loss as the project sprawled from flood control dam into a recreational dam.

\textsuperscript{6} Heasley, \textit{A Thousand Pieces of Paradise}, 129 - 153.
\textsuperscript{7} Heasley, \textit{A Thousand Pieces of Paradise}, 136 - 148.
National feelings about dam construction played an important role in the construction of the La Farge Dam. The La Farge Dam was first proposed in the early 1930s, a time of unprecedented dam construction throughout the country. Dams had been built before this period, but one aspect of the New Deal was building large public works projects to decrease high unemployment rates.8 Reisner notes that dozens of large dams were constructed throughout the country as part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal. Some of the largest dams in the country today date back to the 1930s, including the Grand Coulee, Shasta, and Hoover dams.9 Even more significantly, Reisner argues that politicians and the public were simply more willing to construct large dams without a significant amount of planning. He states:

> The astonishing thing about…the whole era – was that people just went out and built it, built anything without knowing exactly how to do it or whether it could even be done. There were no task forces, no special commissions, no proposed possible preliminary outlines of conceivable tentative recommendations. Tremendous environmental impacts, but no environmental impact statements.10

The 1930s, were a period of intense change in the construction of dams because of the demand for dams and the attitude of the American people and their elected representatives towards dam construction.

It was during the rampant public works growth of the 1930s that a dam in La Farge was first proposed. Initially, its purpose was simple – to control the recurring floods that damaged crops and businesses throughout the Kickapoo Valley. The Kickapoo River had flooded repeatedly in the town’s relatively short history. The first white landowners would arrive in the area that would eventually be known as La Farge in 1853. From this point on, the area experienced a relatively stable rate of growth. The town quickly became the logging center of

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8 Billington and Jackson, Big Dams of the New Deal Era, 7-8.
9 Marc Reisner, Cadillac Desert, 120-168.
10 Reisner, Cadillac Desert, 160.
the area and the addition of a railroad line in 1897 only furthered the growth of the town through the early part of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{11} In 1899, the majority of the people living in the area voted to become incorporated, and the town of La Farge was formally founded.\textsuperscript{12} Even in the early part of the town’s history, flooding would be a major and reoccurring problem.

Major floods occurred in La Farge in 1907, 1912, and 1917.\textsuperscript{13} As discussed above, the flood in 1935 would be remembered as one of the worst and provided much of the motivation to begin planning for a dam. In the summer of 1935, several locals traveled to Washington and asked for a dam to be constructed just above the town of La Farge. Given the political climate of the time, it is perhaps not surprising that it was not long before the dam was authorized as part of The Flood Control Act of 1936.\textsuperscript{14} It seemed that this would be the end of the issue, and if the dam had been constructed in the 1930s, it may have actually ended there.

However, the La Farge Dam was not immediately forthcoming. The United States Army Corps of Engineers is primarily a military institution and American involvement in World War II and the Korea War would soon divert attention and resources away from large public works projects overseen by the Corps during this period. In 1962, the Army Corps of Engineers proposed constructing a relatively small dam in La Farge with a reservoir that would cover about eight hundred acres of land. Unfortunately, by the time the Army Corps of Engineers was in a position to resume serious construction of domestic dams, the era of large public works construction was coming to an end. Around this time, single-purpose dams also fell out of favor and the Army Corps of Engineers began constructing an increasing number of multipurpose

\textsuperscript{11} Brad Steinmetz, \textit{La Farge: The Story of a Kickapoo River Town} (La Farge: Kickapoogian Press, 2010), 28 – 70.
\textsuperscript{12} Steinmetz, \textit{La Farge: The Story of a Kickapoo River Town}, 54
\textsuperscript{13} Heasley, \textit{A Thousand Pieces of Paradise}, 129.
\textsuperscript{14} Heasley, \textit{A Thousand Pieces of Paradise}, 130-131.
Instead of the relatively small dam they had originally proposed, the Army Corps of Engineers began considering construction of a much larger, multipurpose dam in the Kickapoo Valley that would not only address flooding problems, but also economic ones.

The transition in the Corps general attitude towards multipurpose dams, and thus the function of the proposed dam in La Farge, was brought on in part by a surge in interest in outdoor recreation during the 1950s. By this time, both tourism and outdoor recreation had grown significantly. Tourism had become a major part of Wisconsin’s economy, surpassed only by dairy farming and manufacturing. Annual attendance in Wisconsin’s state parks grew by about 4.4 million people between the end of the Korea War and the late 1950s. By 1960, when the Army Corps of Engineers was in a position to continue planning the dam six hundred million dollars were spent on recreation and vacations in Wisconsin alone. These numbers were likely too large to be ignored. At a national level, the Army Corps of Engineers was facing more pressure from Congress to construct dams that might also capitalize on money from recreation. When these issues played out on a local level, they dramatically changed the plan for the dam in La Farge.

Shortly after the small dam was proposed, the Army Corps of Engineers made significant revisions to the project. Instead of building a small dam at La Farge, the Corps decided to construct a large dam that would create a twelve-mile long reservoir behind it. This project was much larger than any that had been envisioned when the project was proposed in the 1930s. The rationale for the much larger project was that it would not only control the reoccurring floods that threatened La Farge, but also the economic problems of the area by drawing in tourists and

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outdoor enthusiasts who would presumably spend money in the region and boost the local economy. Understandably, this possibility proved to be very appealing to local residents.

The expansion of the dam and the addition of a massive reservoir behind it had turned the dam into a savior for a chronically depressed region of Wisconsin. Vernon County has historically been one of the poorest counties in Wisconsin. In 1969, the year the Army Corps of Engineers began purchasing land in the area, the per person personal income rate in Vernon County was 2,677 dollars. This was fully one thousand dollars less than the statewide average, and it made Vernon County the fourteenth poorest county in Wisconsin. More importantly, it was the third poorest county in Southwestern Wisconsin, with only Adams and Crawford counties having a lower per person income rate. In addition to economic problems, the population of the Kickapoo Valley was decreasing. The preliminary results of the 1970 census found that every one of the communities most affected by the dam had lost a significant portion of their residents since the last census. La Farge itself lost ninety-seven people, reducing the population of the town to about 736 people when construction on the dam began. The residents of the Kickapoo Valley were on the whole poorer than the average Wisconsinite and this issue, along with depopulation of the region, was something the dam could address.

The residents of the Kickapoo Valley were aware of the economic problems that were facing their communities, and they began to look to the dam to address these problems as the project moved forward. Lillian Daines recalled that boosters of the project emphasized that the dam “was going to make La Farge right on the map as a recreational area.”

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22 Lillian Daines, interview by Kayla Muller and Bryan Bufton, November 18, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
County Board backed the project, and one supervisor stated one reason for supporting the project was so it would bring “economic advantage to the whole county.”23 The editor of the La Farge Enterprise made the connection between the dam and the area growth more explicit when he stated that “if the citizens of Vernon County and their elected officials do not start immediate study and planning for growth, we will indeed be stewing in our own mess” in an editorial discussing people in the area who were concerned about the affect of the dam on landowners.24 As time passed, the locals became increasingly invested in the idea of building a dam to address economic and social issues that were facing the town.

The dam was widely supported by most of the locals – except those who would be forcibly evicted from their land. It is true that some people were just as happy as not to part with their land. However, many landowners were not willing to sell their land, and it was here that conflict between the federal government and locals would begin. The complaints of those forced off of their land are telling and mark the beginning of an increasingly complicated relationship with the federal government. As noted earlier, by the time the Army Corps of Engineers was in a position to resume serious construction of the dam at La Farge, the era of large public works construction was coming to an end. However, the larger problem initially facing the Army Corps of Engineers was not building the dam, or finding the funding to do it, but rather purchasing the land that would eventually be submerged by water when the dam closed its gates.25 This would prove to be a complicated process that would fundamentally alter La Farge and the surrounding area.

23 Arnott S. Widstrand, “County Board Meets, Supports La Farge Dam,” La Farge Enterprise, April 23, 1970.
Initial Land Purchase

The United States Army Corps of Engineers began purchasing land in the late 1960s. This proved to be controversial for several reasons. First, many people were forced to move against their will. Second, there was widespread belief that the Army Corps of Engineers were deliberately dishonest when purchasing land and used scare tactics to encourage landowners to accept less money for their land. Finally, the process itself generated controversy within the community which splintered relationships. Each one of these issues deserves some consideration.

Many people were forced to move against their will by the Army Corps of Engineers. However, it is important to note that not everyone was unwilling to sell their land to the Corps to build the dam. Leon McElhose, a resident of the Kickapoo Valley since 1940, remembered that some of the older farmers in the area were okay with the forced sale of their land, but he believes the majority of people did not want to leave.26 Some of the longest residents of the Kickapoo Valley had the hardest time adapting to the change. McElhose’s wife, Bess McElhose, another long-term resident of the Kickapoo Valley recalled that her aunt had a nervous breakdown after the Army Corps of Engineers moved her off of the farm “she had been born, raised, [and] married” in.27 However controversial forcing those attached to the land to move may have been, the Army Corps of Engineers created more problems through its treatment of the residents in the area.

One of the most frequent complaints against the Army Corps of Engineers was not that they demanded the land, but the process they used to acquire it. Many locals balked at the Corps

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26 Leon and Bess McElhose, interview by Jesse Lee and Deb Rolf, November 28, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
27 Leon and Bess McElhose, interview by Jesse Lee and Deb Rolf, November 28, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
initial offer for their land, which they believed were unfair. For some, this was a sentimental manner. Arnold Hagen mused, “…but how do you put a market value on your home…”28 For others, they simply did not believe they were being fairly compensated for their land. James Daines, a former tobacco farmer, eventually got 35,000 dollars for his farm, but the Corps originally offered him 18,000 dollars. He refused this offer and the one that followed it, at which point Corps officials threatened to condemn his land, take it by force, and give him only their original offer.29 Many residents of the Kickapoo Valley reported that Corps officials threatened them with condemnation if they refused to sell. This added an extra amount of pressure to landowners in the Kickapoo Valley. Olive Nelson reported that she stayed up talking with her husband about the issue until the early hours of the morning for days. She said the process was “as brutal as can be.”30 After they sold their land, the Corps gave the Nelsons a specific time when they had to be off their land, which added further stress to the move.31 Others felt pressed to make quick decisions. When Doris Pesik was asked about how her father felt after he sold his land, she responded, “He said they stole it.” She goes on to say that he was not upset about how they treated him, only that he felt like he had to make a decision more quickly than he wanted. While the process of parting with the land would likely have been difficult for many people regardless of how representatives of the government acted, the process government officials used to buy land complicated the issue.32

28 Arnold Hagen, interviewed by Linda Himmel and Rachel VanAlstine, November 27, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
29 James Daines, interview by Chuck Reynolds and Robin Lee, November 27, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
30 Olive Nelson, interview by Brad Steinnetz and Deanna Ewing, December 6, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
31 Olive Nelson, interview by Brad Steinnetz and Deanna Ewing, December 6, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
32 Johnny and Doris Pesik, interview by Chuck Reynolds and Robin Lee, November 21, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
pursued in the Kickapoo Valley would eventually influence how the people of the Kickapoo Valley perceived themselves and the federal government.

Many people felt that the intervention of the Corps in the area negatively affected the community as a whole. One of the most persistent rumors in the Kickapoo Valley was that those who held out longer, despite threats of condemnation, received more money from the Army Corps of Engineers than those who did not. These rumors later proved to be true, as people like James Daines got double the amount of money the federal government originally offered for his land.33 However, this sort of trading caused some resentment among people who did not know a better offer might be forthcoming if they held out longer. In addition, after people sold their land, many of them moved out of the area. Between 1960 and 1970, the population of La Farge fell by about ten percent.34 Of course, this drop was influenced by other factors, but the dam certainly displaced people from their homes. Finally, the dam itself had some ramifications for people living in the Kickapoo Valley. Lillian Daines stated that there was “some tension” between people in La Farge who stood to benefit the most from a dam and those who were being forced to sell their land.35 This is not to say that the majority of the frustration with the project was directed at others within the community, but the tension created within the community about how the project should proceed is an important component of the project.

However, for the moment, the vast majority of people in the area remained supportive of the dam, including many of the people who were forced to sell. There was an understanding that the dam would help everyone in the area, and moving a few people out of the way was hardly a reason to stop construction. Once the Army Corps of Engineers had purchased all of the land, it

33 Lillian Daines, interview by Kayla Muller and Bryan Bufton, November 18, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
34 Steinmetz, La Farge: The Story of A Kickapoo River Town, 103
35 Lillian Daines, interview by Kayla Muller and Bryan Bufton, November 18, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
could begin construction on the dam itself. Once the dam was completed tourists would flock to the area and the future of the area would change for the better. In 1970, it seemed like decades of work was finally going to be completed. Construction on the dam began with little fanfare as the intake tower was built and concrete was poured.\textsuperscript{36} It seemed like the town could finally move on, but the dam project was not done causing problems for the town.

\textbf{Dam Abandonment}

If the dam had been built in the forties, fifties, or even the early sixties, the tale of the La Farge Dam would likely have ended within a couple of years with the completion of a dam and the creation of a large reservoir behind it. But in the years between when the dam was proposed and when construction began a new lobby came to Washington: the environmental movement. Galvanized by \textit{Silent Spring}, environmentalists would soon lobby successfully for legislation which improved water quality, reduced air pollution, and protected endangered species, but in 1970 the vast majority of these laws had not been passed. However, one significant piece of legislation had been passed by the time construction on the dam began: The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, also known as NEPA. NEPA required all federal agencies, including the Army Corps of Engineers, to investigate potential environmental problems that may result from their actions and report these to the public in the form of an Environmental Impact Statement. The Environmental Impact Statement also had to include alternatives that would address any issues found during the investigation.\textsuperscript{37} NEPA and similar legislation would soon drastically change how dams around the country were built.

\textsuperscript{36} Heasley, \textit{A Thousand Pieces of Paradise}, 136.
\textsuperscript{37} Heasley, \textit{A Thousand Pieces of Paradise}, 136-137.
The US Army Corps of Engineers was now faced with a problem it had never seen before. Before NEPA a dam could be constructed wherever the Corps could convince Congress to authorize one, with little concern for the environment. NEPA stood to change all that. While construction on the dam had already begun, the Army Corps of Engineers elected to write a Environmental Impact Statement anyway. Heasley suggests the La Farge Dam project provided an opportunity for the Corps “to apply NEPA, to test the law’s limits, and to adapt to a new environmental era.”  

Without this backdrop, it is difficult to understand why the Corps would bother to write an Environmental Impact Statement while simultaneously breaking ground on the dam. But even before the final draft of the Environmental Impact Statement was submitted there were signs that there might be trouble with the dam. The Sierra Club sued twice to stop construction on the dam, claiming that the Environmental Impact Statement failed to mention three rare plants and numerous archeological sites that would be submerged by the project. They lost both suits and an appeal in the federal courts, and construction on the dam continued. When the Environmental Impact Statement was completed it was roundly criticized by environmental groups. Together these problems would shed serious doubts on the viability of the La Farge Dam project.

Despite the potential problems stemming from the Environmental Impact Statement, the Army Corps of Engineers wanted to continue with the project. Eventually Wisconsin Governor Patrick Lucey would call for another study of the dam, which the Corps agreed to reluctantly. The study was conducted by an independent group of scientists based out of the University of Wisconsin – Madison. The report found that the lake created by the dam would be eutrophic due to run-off from farms found upstream. The report found that even strict regulation of farmers

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upstream would not prevent the dam from creating a lake full of algae. This was particularly problematic because a eutrophic lake would not only be bad for the environment, but also bad for tourism. In light of the high cost of maintaining such a lake, combined with the low economic return, the Army Corps of Engineers eventually decided that constructing the dam would be a poor use of time and resources.\textsuperscript{40} Later, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Council on Environmental Quality condemned the dam. By 1975, all but one of the Wisconsin politicians in a position to influence the outcome of the dam opposed it. At the end of that year, the Senate Subcommittee on Public Works allocated no money for the project, effectively ending the project.\textsuperscript{41} This would set off a storm of controversy in La Farge and the surrounding area that would last for years after the dam ceased to be a viable project.

In the end, the most important factor that stopped construction on the dam, outside of cost, was growing concerns about environmental issues. Of course, handling these issues directly led to the increase in cost, and are related, but these two issues can be discussed separately for several reasons. First, politicians would side for or against the dam for both financial and environmental reasons, and different issues appealed to different representatives. Furthermore the people in La Farge and the surrounding area would place blame on the environmentalists for holding up the dam unnecessarily. The Sierra Club in particular would routinely be blamed for swaying the opinion of politicians and causing them to withdraw their support for the project.\textsuperscript{42} Environmental issues and various environmental groups played a

\textsuperscript{40} Heasley, \textit{A Thousand Pieces of Paradise}, 147.
\textsuperscript{41} Heasley, \textit{A Thousand Pieces of Paradise}, 150-151.
\textsuperscript{42} Lillian Daines, interview by Kayla Muller and Bryan Bufton, November 18, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI; Palmer Munson, interview by Fritz Cushing and Rene Widner, November 16, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
critical role in both holding up construction of the dam and its eventual abandonment, which made them a prime target for local criticism.

However, it is too simplistic to say that the residents of the Kickapoo Valley were “anti-environment” or even “anti-environmentalist.” Indeed the people of the Kickapoo Valley had a complex relationship with the land, water, and air that surrounded them. For nearly two decades the local paper published at least two weekly columns written by locals related to the environment and often allocated more space to these two columns combined than to any other editorial issue. One of these columns emphasized the importance of soil conservation in the Kickapoo Valley, while the other discussed local environmental happenings. As the environmental movement became increasingly popular around the country additional columns appeared in the paper, even as the controversy to surrounding the dam became the most important political issue in the Kickapoo Valley. There is no evidence that these columns were ill received by the local community. Furthermore, many residents of the Kickapoo Valley participated in outdoor activities, including canoeing, hunting for mushrooms, and deer hunting. These activities also often got extensive coverage in the local papers.43 In 1969, the La Farge Enterprise printed the schedule of a local summer outdoor education class for area children. As part of this two weeklong event, children went swimming, hiking, learned to identify plants, went fishing, visited a fish hatchery, and went to a local state park.44 Thus, the residents of the Kickapoo Valley did not necessarily support environmental “destruction” for the sake of it, nor were they opposed to environmentalism per se.

They were, however, skeptical that the needs of the environment should come before the needs of the town, as well as what qualified as harming the environment. The plants found on

43 These observations are based off of my readings of the La Farge Enterprise, from October 24, 1968 to September 3, 1970, and of the La Farge Epitaph, from January 1, 1975 to December 24, 1980.
the ridge seemed common enough to locals. A poem written by a local in 1978 included the
lines “And our flowers are the rarest/You can see them everywhere.”\textsuperscript{45} Locals also questioned
whether the lake would be eutrophic and if this would be a problem. One letter to the editor
argued that the water quality would be no worse than that of other reservoirs.\textsuperscript{46} Of the
environmental quality issues that were facing the dam, the most serious was the possibility of a
eutrophic lake, but this was one of the last issues to come to light. By that point the town was
already committed to the tourists and residents, and thus tax dollars, the dam would bring to the
area. Furthermore, the land had already been bought and construction on the dam had already
started. To the residents of the Kickapoo Valley, it did not make sense to stop the dam for a few
endangered plants and the possibility that the reservoir would be full of algae, even if this would
reduce the number of tourists who would visit the area. The future of the town had become too
intertwined with the future of the dam, and even if it could not fix economic problems, it might
still address the flooding. The conflict between local and environmentalist desires would soon
become something Wisconsin’s politicians would have to address.

“\textbf{Lord Send Us A Senator We Can Trust}”

The controversy and widespread condemnation of elected officials that sprung up in the
wake of the La Farge Dam project is multifaceted. Before addressing how residents responded
to specific elected officials, it is important to consider various other factors that might influence
public opinion of their representatives. Three federal legislators, namely Senator Gaylord
Nelson, Senator William Proxmire, and Congressman Alvin Bladus, would weigh in on the La
Farge project during its most controversial phase. Because the project was being undertaken by

\textsuperscript{45} Agnes Leatherberry, “Kickapoo,” \textit{The La Farge Epitaph}, March 31, 1978
\textsuperscript{46} Bernard Breidenstein, Letter to the Editor, \textit{The La Farge Epitaph}, December 29, 1976.
a federal organization, these three federal politicians had the most power to either to see that the
project was constructed or prevent it from ever being finished. All three of these politicians were
democrats. This simple fact may make the project seem to be about larger political issues,
namely party politics. This explanation, however, fails to consider several important factors.

The political leanings of the townspeople of La Farge at the start of the controversy were
complex, and their elected officials did not always follow the party line. The 1968 election,
which occurred before the Army Corps of Engineers had begun purchasing land, reflected the
complexities of political affiliation in La Farge. In general, the Republicans on the ballot were
supported by the town over Democratic candidates. However, Democratic candidates in both the
presidential and gubernatorial elections won over one hundred votes – a significant number in a
town where 332 people voted for the president. Furthermore, the people of La Farge were not
above supporting a Democratic candidate. Notably, in 1968, Democrat and incumbent Senator
Gaylord Nelson won the town’s votes by a narrow margin. Vernon County, as a whole, also
generally supported Republicans, except in the case of Senator Nelson.47 Together Senator
Nelson and Wisconsin’s other Democratic Senator, William Proxmire, would successfully
eliminate funding for the project. However, Congressman Alvin Baldus, a Democrat, would
continue to support the dam at La Farge, perhaps to the irritation of his colleagues, into the late
1970s. Thus, the issue of the dam at La Farge surpassed simple classifications of party, on the
part of both local residents and politicians.

Senator Gaylord Nelson was one of the most outspoken critics of the dam during his time
in the Senate. By 1970 Senator Nelson had been active in Wisconsin politics for over twenty
years. Even as a governor, Nelson had a strong reputation for being interested in conserving
Wisconsin’s natural resources. As governor in the 1950s, Nelson had instated a variety of

47 Election Results, La Farge Enterprise, November 7, 1968.
environmental policies that would eventually allow him to campaign for national office. Crucially, these policies were popular in the Northern part of the state, a traditional Republican stronghold, and this allowed him to win a seat in the Senate in the 1962 election. As a senator he would continue to advocate for a variety of environmental interests. Famously, Senator Nelson organized the first Earth Day, which took place on April 22, 1970.\textsuperscript{48} Thus, the Senator had made environmental protection one of the cornerstones of his political career by the time the La Farge dam was constructed.

Opposing the dam on the basis that it would drastically damage the environment may have been a matter of personal conviction, but it was also politically expedient for a Senator who had spent much of his career lobbying on environmental issues. The locals found this excuse less than satisfying and expressed their displeasure in several ways. In 1975, a political cartoon drawn by Rich Rumpel appeared in the *La Farge Enterprise*. This cartoon depicted Senator Nelson as a donkey that was being unwillingly pulled into the town by a local.\textsuperscript{49} Portraying the Senator as a donkey may have purely been a reference to his political party, but it was likely also a commentary on the fact that for years the Senator refused to visit La Farge and talk with the people who lived there. The locals found this frustrating, as it seemed that the representative they had supported in the previous election was not listening to their needs and concerns. This was closely linked with another complaint residents frequently lobbed at their politicians. Senator Nelson was roundly criticized for listening to the desires of outsider environmentalists over the locals who would presumably be most affected by the dam. One local columnist charged Senator Nelson with not opposing the dam until environmental groups got involved with the project, and later charged him with showing only “indifference” towards the needs of the


people in the Kickapoo Valley.\textsuperscript{50} Between not coming to the town while the problem was ongoing and his alignment with environmentalists, Senator Nelson won few supporters in the town.

However, the criticism lobbed at Senator Nelson would pale in comparison to the town’s response to Wisconsin’s other senator, William Proxmire. Senator Proxmire supported the dam long after it became controversial. In 1975 he stated, “I do not favor delaying or stopping the project at this point. There have been objections raised about the possible eutrophication of the lake. But the people who would have to live with it are in favor of the project, if that happens, I say it’s their problem.”\textsuperscript{51} However, Senator Proxmire’s support for the dam would vanish by the end of the year. Environmental concerns were never the Senator’s problem as evidenced by the quote above. Indeed, Senator Proxmire’s reasons for opposing the dam were very different from Senator Nelson’s rationale.

Environmentalism was not Senator Proxmire’s political cause, but he had built a reputation on trimming the fat from the federal budget. For many years Senator Proxmire gave out a “Golden Fleece” Award to the most wasteful projects he could find in proposed bills.\textsuperscript{52} It became increasingly difficult for the Senator to justify the millions of dollars it would have taken to complete the dam given the successive waves of research, proposals, and ultimately construction that were legally necessary by this time. In light of this, in September 1975 Proxmire delivered a speech on the floor of Congress stating that he no longer supported constructing a dam near the town of La Farge. Here again, the difference between Senators Nelson and Proxmire is obvious. Proxmire cited the 51.55 million dollar price tag of the dam among his reasons for not supporting the bill, but made no mention of endangered prairie plants

\textsuperscript{51} Lonnie Muller, “Proxmire Supports Dam,” \textit{The La Farge Epitaph}, February 12, 1975, 1.
\textsuperscript{52} Heasley, \textit{A Thousand Pieces of Paradise}, 150.
or a eutrophic lake. Whatever his reasons for changing his mind, without any senatorial support for the project, it was unlikely that funding for the remainder of the dam would ever be produced.

The reaction to the Senator’s speech in La Farge and the surrounding area was immediate. The residents did bear Proxmire a grudging amount of respect for coming to the town to tell them directly that he was withdrawing his support, but Senator Proxmire almost immediately became the most disliked political figure in the region. By Proxmire’s own account, in a speech he later delivered to the United States Senate and reprinted in the La Farge Epitaph, his twenty minute speech was followed by ninety minutes of answering questions and listening to statements made by many of the dam’s most avid supporters. Local dislike for the senator rapidly increased following this meeting. Dale Muller, a local farmer, would later recall that his brother spat in Proxmire’s face after the meeting had concluded. But even more telling than the immediate anger that followed Proxmire’s speech occurred about three months after Proxmire withdrew his support for the project. On January 7th, 1976, the La Farge Epitaph’s editor, Lonnie Muller, reported with barely contained glee that an effigy of “rich ol’ Willie Proxie got lynched by his scrawny neck on a garrot wire tautly stretched high above Main St.” The hanging of the Senator in effigy was only the beginning of an outpouring of frustration at the expense of Senator Proxmire.

The residents quickly turned the event into a chance to express their dissatisfaction with the Senator. Frustrated that traditional methods of political expression did not appear to be

55 Dale Muller, interview by Robin Lee and Chuck Reynolds, April 4, 2001, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
working, they hastily organized a funeral for the effigy for the following week. The tone of the event was quickly established by Red Alderson, a local mechanic, who eulogized the Senator while wearing a Mickey Mouse t-shirt and “reading” from a Sears and Roebuck catalogue.

Alderson’s eulogy made numerous references to local suspicious that the Senator had been paid off. His eulogy was punctuated by cheers from the crowd, which helped load the effigy, complete with a casket donated by the local undertaker and bouquet of endangered prairie plants, on the back of a mule-drawn manure spreader. Dale Muller then drove the manure spreader out to the dam site, followed by a string of cars. With the dam in the background, Alderson spoke again saying:

As we lower these remains into the depths of the dead sea we realize that this is the inevitable end of all public servants who put their own wishes and desires ahead of the wishes of the people they represent. Let the Epitaph on his monument read, ‘He was the best politician that money could buy.’

Again, these statements show not only dissatisfaction with the outcome of the dam issue, but with Proxmire’s handling of it. The senator was accused not only of being a sellout, but with not respecting the needs and wishes of the people who elected him. After the completion of these final words the effigy was pulled out of the casket and flung out onto the area that would have been submerged by the dam while a local musician played taps. As the notes faded, the townspeople dispersed, returning to town for a free lunch at a local establishment.\(^57\)

The significance of this event is two-fold. Frustrated by the actions of both their senators and convinced their voices mattered little to their elected officials in Washington, the people of the Kickapoo Valley found other ways of expressing the desires for their town. But it is significant that they hung and buried Senator Proxmire in effigy and not Senator Nelson. In many ways, the latter Senator was more responsible for holding up the dam and certainly had

opposed it for a longer period of time. However, Senator Proxmire had seemed to be an ally, one of the few to be found in Washington, someone who shared the town’s vision of a better future with the dam. His change of heart made him seem not like a man interested in curbing government spending, but rather in ending the life of a small town. In this light, he was cast as a betrayer of the town and its future. Alderson said during his eulogy, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, Lord send us a Senator we can trust.”  

The Senator was no longer trustworthy, having turned his back on a town struggling to survive. Senator Nelson, on the other hand, had long opposed the dam. In the eyes of local residents, he had already proven that he did not care about the town as much as he cared about a few plants. But the loss of Senator Proxmire’s support cut much deeper, not only was the dam officially out of supporters in the Senate, but the town had been “betrayed” by a politician they thought they could trust. This is what caused the outpouring of the rage toward Proxmire.

Thus, by the end of 1975, there was only one supporter of the dam at the federal level. Congressman Alvin Baldus remained the sole supporter of the dam for many years. As late as 1977, Congressman Baldus used his position in the House of Representatives to secure funding for the La Farge project. As might be expected, many of the residents of the Kickapoo Valley supported his efforts to complete the dam. In 1980, the residents of Stark, a township near La Farge, approved a statement supporting Representative Baldus’ continued support for the project. However some residents of the Kickapoo Valley had complicated feelings about Representative Baldus. Despite his support for the project, in the aftermath of a flood in 1978, he was criticized along with Senators Proxmire and Nelson for failing to provide flood control to

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promote economic and social stability in the region.61 Thus, even Representative Baldus would not emerge from the La Farge dam project with his political reputation unscathed, even though many residents respected him for continuing to defend their interests in Washington.

The reaction of the residents of the Kickapoo Valley to their elected representatives in Washington intimately reflected their expectations for the future of their town. As the funding and political support for the dam evaporated, so did many of the expectations the residents had for the future of their town. The frustration they felt towards their Senators reflected not only frustration with a project they were counting on, but also with the necessity to readjust what they could expect for the future of the area. The debate about what would happen with the land continued long after political support disappeared continued to reflect local concern about the economic and social stability of the region.

If Not A Dam, Then What?

Though the dam was not officially deauthorized until 1996, in all likelihood serious discussion about finishing the dam had ended around the time Senator Proxmire had withdrawn his support for the project. Certainly, for several years rumors would abound that perhaps this year the dam would be finished. For example, in 1977 the La Farge Epitaph reported that the House Appropriations Committee had included two million dollars of funding for the La Farge project as part of a larger water projects bill.62 This funding disappeared in the following year.63 Stalls in the project continued to irritate locals. One local poet wrote in 1977 that he had not participated in the debate surrounding the dam, but was now ready to “join the fuden for

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61 Lonnie Muller, ”Editorial: And The Politicians March As Flooding Rakes Valley,” The La Farge Epitaph, July 9, 1978.
62 Lonnie Muller, “$2 Million Approved for La Farge Dam,” The La Farge Epitaph, June 1, 1977.
63 Lonnie Muller, “No Money In Budget for La Farge Dam Project,” The La Farge Epitaph, February 1, 1978.
By and large the people of the Kickapoo Valley continued to support construction of a dam. A vote taken at a local meeting by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1977 revealed that 539 of the 630 people who showed up to the meeting wanted to see some sort of dam built in La Farge. While the meeting is notable for showing that the locals continued to support the dam, it also demonstrates a shift in how the dam was talked about. At that same meeting, the Corps asked residents how they felt about a dry dam, or a dam that would not create any kind of lake behind it, except during a flood. A startling 274 residents said they would support this type of dam if a larger one could not be built. Arguably, a few years prior to this, few people would have been willing to settle for a dam without the proposed recreational benefits of a large reservoir. The symbolic value of the dam seemed to not depend on the specific kind of dam under consideration.

While the residents of the Kickapoo Valley continued to cling to the hope that the project, still not technically deauthorized, would be completed, various politicians, bureaucrats, and other organizations began making other plans for the valley. In 1978, the Wisconsin Historical Society proposed adding a significant portion of the area to the National Register of Historic Places. In that same year, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources proposed acquiring the land and turning the area into a state park or preservation area. While the first suggestion gathered little attention, largely because it would not have significantly affected the construction of the dam, the second one proved highly controversial among some residents of the Kickapoo Valley. Many felt that the land should be returned to those who had originally owned it, not to the

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state.\textsuperscript{67} The dry dam, proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers as discussed above, was the only one the valley residents supported, and that support was contingent on it being pursued only if a larger dam and reservoir proved politically impossible.

However, as an increasing number of alternatives were proposed and the years wore on, it seemed increasingly less likely that any kind of flood control structure would be built. Included in such proposals were ideas to turn the land into a national historic site or a state park.\textsuperscript{68} These proposals irritated many locals, including several of the people who the Army Corps of Engineers had purchased the land for in the first place. They formed an organization known as KLOUT, or Kickapoo Land Owners United Together. KLOUT’s main purpose was to try to get the land the Army Corps of Engineers had purchased back into the hands of the original owners whenever possible. In the Kickapoo Valley, the organization was tremendously popular, even among people who had not been former landowners. The support for the project seemed to be twofold. First, many people wanted the local communities to be able to tax the land again, which they could not do as long as it was owned by the federal government. Second, some feared that the federal government would take their land and add it to any proposed park. In 1977, over 180 people, including sixty former landowners, attended a KLOUT meeting that was called to address both of these issues. The former landowners readily accepted the help of townspeople in a letter writing campaign started by KLOUT.\textsuperscript{69} KLOUT continued to advocate for returning the land to the original owners for years.

\textsuperscript{67} Lonnie Muller, “LaFarge People Have Negative or Indifferent Reactions to DNR Plans for Dam Project Land,” \textit{The La Farge Epitaph}, April 12, 1978.


\textsuperscript{69} Lonnie Muller, “KLOUT Meeting Draws Large Turnout,” \textit{La Farge Epitaph}, February 16, 1977.
Ultimately, KLOUT would fail to return the land purchased by the United States Army Corps of Engineers to the original owners. For the next two decades the land would be held by the federal government, much to the ire of the locals. Some of their displeasure, undoubtedly, was held over from the initial purchases, the failure of dam construction, and their inability to get the land back, but much of it stemmed from how the loss of that land affected the community. Approximately ninety-three families had been bought out by the Army Corps of Engineers, a significant number in a city of only 833 people in 1960.70 The loss of these families would impact the community in three significant ways: by lowering the tax base of the city, closing local schools, and by ending many friendships as people moved out of the area, as well as continued flooding.

When the United States Army Corps of Engineers purchased the land they quickly became the largest landowner in Vernon County. The land held by the Army Corps of Engineers without a dam on it did not generate local property taxes or contribute to the local economy. Issues with tax rates were especially bad in many of the townships that bordered La Farge. In the township of Stark, one-third of the land previously included in the township had become federal property, and this removed approximately one million dollars from the tax rolls. Many people felt that this put an unfair burden on people who were not forced off their land. KLOUT in particular would continually appeal to concerns about taxes in their drive to return the land to local owners who would pay property taxes.71 Issues with property taxes would also affect one of the most important institutions of the area: local school districts.

Many residents of the Kickapoo Valley felt the involvement of the Army Corps of Engineers in the La Farge area lead to a decrease in the overall quality of education that the local

71 Lonnie Muller, “KLOUT Meeting Draws Large Turnout,” La Farge Epitaph, February 16, 1977.
school districts could provide. With the ninety-three families that were displaced by the dam went many of the children that had attended the schools. An article published after the dam had been abandoned reported that school enrollment had remained steady in the years prior to the federal purchase of land in the area. In 1969, a loss of about forty students was reported, and this downward trend continued into the 1970s.\(^{72}\) Another long-time resident of the area, Mary Bufton, noted that some of “the best teachers” found jobs in other districts because they were afraid that the schools in the area would simply close and they would be out of a job anyway.\(^{73}\) Of course, there were other issues that affected area school districts, including new state laws passed in the 1960s which favored the consolidation of rural school districts. Many locals were concerned that students would have to travel to far for classes and that the resulting larger districts would be expensive to run, thus causing an increase in property tax rates.\(^{74}\) Residents were aware of these issues, but many of them felt the project had done lasting damage to the quality of education by reducing the amount of taxes available to run the school and forcing out both pupils and teachers.

Finally, without any kind of dam constructed in La Farge, floods would continue impact the residents of the Kickapoo Valley. The first major flood to affect the Kickapoo Valley after funding for the dam was eliminated occurred in 1978. During this flood, record levels of water were recorded in La Farge.\(^{75}\) The flooding affected more than just the Kickapoo Valley, and in July of 1978, sixteen Wisconsin counties were declared part of a federal disaster area. This made residents eligible for various kinds of federal aid.\(^{76}\) The flood also caused an outpouring of

\(^{73}\)Mary Bufton, interview by Kristi Campbell and Geri Hall, November 13, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
\(^{75}\)Steinmetz, *La Farge: The Story of a Kickapoo River Town*, 170.
\(^{76}\)Lonnie Muller, “President Declares Southwest Wisconsin Disaster Area Following Flood,” *The La Farge Epitaph*, July 12, 1978.
letters to the editor and editorials on the dam, irresponsible politicians, and the ability of residents of the Kickapoo to survive hardship. One such editorial, called the dam a “monument to political folly and stupidity” and roundly condemned politicians for returning to tour the destruction of the area when they had done little to stop the flooding in the first place. Major floods also occurred in the Kickapoo Valley in 2007 and 2008.78

The effects of the intervention and abandonment of the Army Corps of Engineers continued long after the final decision about the dam was made. For many, the legacy of the dam was the hardest thing about the project to fully come to grips with. James Daines, a former landowner who was bought out by the Army Corps of Engineers stated:

> After they bought me out, I figured then they should be made to go through with it. There shouldn’t be no backing out. After they took it away from us, they should be made to go through with it because they done all the damage. They’d hurt our school districts, they’d hurt our townships, they hurt the communities and they should be made to do something. They shouldn’t have just let it set there like we don’t care….79

In the end, Daines was most bothered by the legacy of the dam and the involvement of the federal government in the Kickapoo Valley, not with being forced to sell his land. The event had fundamentally altered how the people of the valley viewed their future as a cohesive community. The dam had originally brought promises of a new life for an ailing community, but in the end it delivered a host of problems the community never had to deal with before. The residents of the Kickapoo Valley no longer viewed the federal government as a potential helper, but rather as a bringer of ill they had not known before.

78 Steinmetz, *La Farge: The Story of a Kickapoo River Town*, pg 105
79 James Daines, interview by Chuck Reynolds and Robin Lee, November 27, 2000, transcript, Murphy Library Resource Center, University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, La Crosse, WI.
In the end, it would take another famous and long-serving Wisconsin senator to
deauthorize the project and end the political uncertainty that now surrounded the project. In
1993, the feelings toward the dam had changed dramatically. After fifteen years of little being
accomplished, it seemed that the dam would not be constructed. Residents of the Kickapoo
Valley, after a series of meetings, petitioned Senator Russ Feingold to begin the process of
deauthorizing the dam and transferring the land that the Army Corps of Engineers had purchased
to hold the reservoir back to a locally controlled board. In the end, the La Farge dam project was
officially brought to an end by the Water Resources Development Act of 1996.80 The La Farge
Dam, having now spanned almost six decades without completion, was moving into a new
chapter of its history.

The residents of the Kickapoo Valley did not get a completed dam. Instead, the roughly
nine thousand acres once purchased to hold the waters of the Kickapoo River is now known as
the Kickapoo Valley Reserve. Today, the Kickapoo Valley Reserve boasts biking, hiking, and
equestrian trails, twenty-five primitive camping sites, and a scenic stretch of the Kickapoo River
for canoeing and kayaking.81 In addition, the Kickapoo Valley Reserve hosts a variety of
activities and events, including a triathlon, summer camps, special programs for school groups,
and a variety of community programs and workshops.82 These activities, as well as the reserve
itself attract many people to the area, and today the visitation exceeds ten thousand people per

80 Heasley, A Thousand Pieces of Paradise, 173 – 175.
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The Kickapoo Valley Reserve, though it lacks the promised lake, is one way the residents of the Kickapoo Valley can address the need for economic growth in the region.

**Conclusion**

The construction and abandonment of the La Farge project permanently altered the history of La Farge and the surrounding communities. Early on in its planning and construction, indeed almost as soon as the project was proposed, the dam took on symbolic meaning for the residents of the Kickapoo Valley. Initially, it was proposed as a flood control measure that would save the Kickapoo Valley from reoccurring flood damage. Later, as the project grew to include a large reservoir, it was seen as a measure that would save the town from a lack of economic and social stability in the region. Whatever the primary purpose of the dam was, the residents looked to the dam and the federal government to provide for the future for the region. Without it, a stable future seemed unlikely. Even as nearly a hundred families were moved off their land, many against their wishes, the desire for a dam continued to be strong because of the investment of the town in this route to a new future.

In the end, the residents changed their views about the role of the federal government, if not about the value of a dam. This was at least partially because it was the federal government, in the form of Wisconsin’s two senators, that stopped the dam from being constructed. This put the town’s desire for a dam at odds with the desires of lawmakers, and in the end the senators proved unwilling to come around to the town’s point of view about the project. Area residents reacted to their perception that lawmakers were not paying attention to their needs in a variety of ways, each one intended to be a way of venting frustration with politicians. These methods also

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typically showed concern with the town’s future and reflected a sense of abandonment. Today, the town of La Farge does not have the dam it wanted, but time will only tell if the Kickapoo Valley Reserve can address the problems which continue to face the region..
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