

A Slough of Controversy

It is a truly serene sight, abounding in wildlife together with many diverse forms of vegetation. Luedtke's Slough, today partially bordered by homes, was at one time the site of a bitter controversy which took place in the late 1960's and early 1970's. This was a debate felt so strongly by both sides, that it eventually reached the Attorney General's Office in St. Paul, and ultimately District Court.

So, what caused the controversy that divided many of the citizens of Fairmont at that time? It was simply a lake improvement project that proposed using Luedtke's Slough as a depository for silt dredged from the lakes in Fairmont. The slough in question, a wetland, differs from most other wetlands in that it is within the city limits of Fairmont. Thus, the arguing point became whether or not it should be used as a silt disposal site, or preserved as a wetland and potentially used as a nature study. Some viewed the project of disposing silt from the lake into the slough as a means of saving the taxpayers money; others viewed it as a means of destroying the natural habitat of plants and animals in this wetland setting. Eventually, a number of diverse viewpoints were presented from concerned citizens, teachers, students, and city government.

An article from the February 8, 1969, edition of *The Sentinel* in reference to dredging of the lakes states that "A new place for the silt will have to be found, beginning with the city-owned 25 acre 'Luedtke Slough' area southeast of the lake."

The opposition to the slough as a silt depository, and in favor of preserving it as a natural wetland, was led by Dan Kehrberg, then a biology teacher at the Fairmont High School. Kehrberg spoke to local civic organizations and as reported in the January 19, 1971, edition of *The Sentinel*, in speaking at Kiwanis he stated that "dredging is neither the main cause of cleaner lake water nor the algae deterrent many people believe it is." He believed that alternate methods of silt disposal should be utilized.

As the controversy intensified, the publicity expanded. A February 14, 1971, *Minneapolis Tribune* article entitled "Teacher Leads Battle to Save a Slough," made reference to both opponents and proponents of saving the slough as a natural setting. The article refers to the late John Livermore as Fairmont's ex-officio guardian of the public purse and quotes him as follows: "Snakes alive! Now they are spending our tax dollars to tell us we need a stinking, mushy, smelly polliwag slough. . ." This article goes on to tell of a fourth grade class bombarding the *Sentinel* with letters to the editor favoring preserving the slough. It further states that the controversy was a frequent topic on a local radio call in program. In addition, the article included comments from individuals and groups in the community, including the city council. The feelings were strong on both sides; however, those favoring the preservation effort were not opposed to the dredging program, but rather were opposed to depositing the silt in Luedtke's Slough.

Eventually, the debate crept outside of the city limits of Fairmont. The DNR became involved and recommended preserving Luedtke's Slough. According to an article in the November-December issue of *The Minnesota Volunteer*, the city of Fairmont requested

that the Minnesota Water Resources Board conduct a hearing regarding filling part of the slough. However, the DNR felt that the WRB did not have jurisdiction, therefore, refusing to grant Fairmont the right to fill the slough. Then, the city asked District Court to decide whether they should comply with the DNR or WRB.

This article goes on to state that in a special public meeting that was called by the city in March of 1974, an agreement was reached with the DNR to allow filling the northern third of the slough, and leaving the remainder in its natural state. This was, of course, with permission of affected land owners in the vicinity of the slough. The decision was reached because it was felt that continued legal wrangling could go on for years, obviously to no one's advantage. Coincidentally, in 1975, the Federal "Clean Water" act was passed which largely prohibited wetland destruction.

What was the end result of this "slough of controversy?" There was obviously the potential for lingering hard feelings among those directly involved with the controversy. Dan Kehrberg, the Fairmont science teacher, was challenged for his stand on what he strongly believed regarding this issue. City government was involved and faced painstaking, time consuming, as well as difficult and perhaps controversial decisions. Local citizens were divided on the issue. However, one conclusion drawn could be that everyone concerned certainly gained a better perspective and understanding of the importance of wetlands in our environment, and that the stand taken by Kehrberg and Dennis Hanson, area DNR representative, helped to preserve Luedtke's Slough, which today is also utilized as a reservoir for the east side storm sewers.

Wetlands obviously provide a home for wildlife, and they can also certainly serve to enhance educational opportunities for students. Wetlands, such as Luedtke's Slough provide numerous other immeasurable benefits to the environment and the landscape of our community and county as well.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.