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# HISTORY AFIELD

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETIVE ADDENDUM  
MISSISSIPPI HEADWATERS RESERVOIRS  
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

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Submitted to:

John Anfinson

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Paul District

October 1, 1987

by Jo Blatti on behalf of HISTORY AFIELD

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<p>This analysis has been prepared to accompany the phase I and phase II oral history interview series with retired damtenders in the Mississippi Headwaters region in December of 1986. The primary topic of this research is development of recreational facilities at the Headwaters damsites following World War II. Data was also collected concerning the resort industry in the region throughout the 20th century and on native American - white relations in the area.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>John Anfinson, History</i></p>					
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This analysis has been prepared to accompany the phase I and phase II oral history interview series with retired damtenders in the Mississippi Headwaters region in December of 1986. The primary topic of this research is development of recreational facilities at the Headwaters damsites following World War II. Data was also collected concerning the resort industry in the region throughout the 20th century and on native American - white relations in the area. A pilot study in oral history for the St. Paul District Office, this work was conducted under the provisions of DACW37-86-M-1722 and extended at the request of Corps staff via P00002.

Seven persons in all were interviewed in five sessions during the course of the pilot project. The informants were:

-Edmund Fitzpatrick (retired 1973 as area manager Headwaters region; formerly damtender at Cross and Gull Lake)

-Orin ("Ole") Henderson (retired 1975, damtender at Leech Lake 1959-1975)

and

Leroy Campbell (maintenance, Leech Lake 1962 - )  
(joint interview)

-Agnes Henderson, spouse of Orin Henderson

-Russell Kolb (retired 1970; damtender at Sandy Lake 1947-'70)

and

Betty Kolb, spouse of Russell Kolb (joint interview)

-Edward Sunde (retired 1985; parks manager at Leech Lake 1975-1985, formerly maintenance and assistant at Cross/Gull Lake).



The phase I and II documents for this project include: preparatory research notes on the Headwaters; the original oral history tapes; signed release forms, tape indexes, complete transcripts and archival processing sheets for each interview, plus a summary document on historical themes and oral history methodology within the project. This addendum will convey interpretive notes and questions which arise from the individual interviews. However, we will not duplicate materials which have already been produced. Our overall organization will be alphabetical by informant with

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transcript page numbers supplied for direct reference as appropriate. Some general observations concerning questions of dating and language will follow the interview data.

I. Edmund Fitzpatrick

I was just a river rat promoted. I learned as I went along. (EF p.27)

Edmund Fitzpatrick is the kind of informant oral historians are especially pleased to encounter. He sees the forests and the trees. For example, see his explanation of Corps recreation based on increasing personal leisure time and income combined with large public land holdings (EF p.2, p.20). See also his observant description of change over an approximately 10-year period in the type of visitor at Corps damsites - from tent camping to motor homes. In Fitzpatrick's words, "it was really remarkable, from the very basics to almost the extreme luxury" (EF p.4).

His biographical observations at the beginning and end of the interview offer an especially clear picture of how his interests and experience fit into an emerging emphasis on bureaucratic procedures within the Corps and many other areas of American life in the 1920s and 1930s. Fitzpatrick credits his own ability to rise through the ranks to "work and not be afraid of an extra mile once in a while" (EF p.27). However, his subsequent observation:

I always liked to read, so I learned as we went, you know, learned the different techniques, and the language...that was required to do the work (ibid).

is surely just as important. See also his description of work on the locks at Lynxville, Wisconsin with a lockmaster who was a skilled labor foreman, but "...not too good with the paperwork; matter of fact, he was not good at all" (EF p.31).

In terms of recreational facilities, the Fitzpatrick interview offers especially clear perspectives on how the Corps went about the process of developing the campsites. See his description of his first summer on Gull/Cross Lake, circa 1959-60, visiting area resorts (EF p.19), his description of the way "the Corps...had done quite a bit of bird-dogging around the country and found out the proper design for a good campground, and they send up some maps, instruction," (EF p.3), and specific descriptions of the Cross Lake and Gull sites throughout the transcript. Also, his response to the interviewer's question about a typical day (EF p.15) indicates how much the duties and the increased need to delegate mechanical and maintenance tasks changed daily work for the damtender.

Fitzpatrick is the only informant in the series to describe trouble with the native American community; that was over the proper handling of Indian burial mounds at Gull Lake. The issue was resolved through restoration and fencing of mounds which had been inadvertently disturbed (EF pp.9-10).

Mr. Fitzpatrick's description of the damtender's dwelling at Gull Lake ("the best house we ever had" EF p.11) and the officers' quarter facilities jibes very neatly with those of the other informants. His mention of retirement parties (EF p.13), the importance of machinery exchange (EF p.14), and of patrolling the campsites (EF p.17) resonates with the other accounts, as well.

Stories about rowdy visitors (EF p.17) and local residents/resorters' concerns about water levels (EF p.21) seem to take the same form in all the interviews. Ole Henderson and Ike Kolb recount markedly similar memories (OH/LC pp.15-17, 19-20; RK/BK p.26-28, 35-36, 48).

By way of a structural note on the entire Fitzpatrick tape, this interview opens and closes with a similar combination of 1) biographical data 2) expression of concern about environmental issues. In oral history interviewing, that sort of full circle is usually a signal that the informant has conveyed what he/she intended in the meeting and has effected closure.

Notes for possible follow-up:

-How does Fitzpatrick's observation about a decline in wildlife (EF p.25) in the region square with DNR data?

B. Orin ("Ole") Henderson and Leroy Campbell

OH It's [Mud Lake] a State dam and we was just maintaining, or what the hell do you call it? We just operated it, let's say.

LC Tried to keep the water at a certain level, you know, for the rice there. But when it plugged up with bog, why then, it raised the lake up. And up come the bog. And they had a mess there. (OH/LC p.20)

The two go on to give a precise description of the way sedge grass forms "floating bog" in the marshy areas around the Leech and Mud Lake dams and how to chop it away if necessary (OH/LC pp.20-21).

Ole Henderson and Leroy Campbell both grew up in Federal Dam, and they worked together on Corps projects from about 1962 until Henderson's retirement in 1975. Henderson is the principal narrator in this joint interview. This probably replicates long time work relationships and authority habits to some extent. At the same time, a principal characteristic of this joint interview is the complementary, respectful verbal cross-checking the two men do.

Leroy Campbell appeared to be quite shy, almost blushing so, in the interview situation; one wonders if he would have been so with a male interviewer or as a solo informant. No situational element can be expected to overcome basic personality characteristics, but some work better than others. The social characteristics of both narrators - Henderson's colorful dominance and Campbell's sturdy shyness - shape this interview quite a lot. Personality is a principal factor in any oral history interview; here joint narration, the social circumstances of interview are important too. Relatively more of the meat of this interview is to be found in the context of exchange among the participants; there is more going on between the lines.

Overall, this interview is full of interesting and original observations. The information imparted tends to center on work processes like the floating bog or on people and the social contexts of interaction among lakeshore residents and visitors. Its characteristic level of generalization is mid-range comparison - among all of the Corps damsites, for example, or lakeshore residents. Henderson and Campbell don't provide as much of the big picture within the Corps as does Edmund Fitzpatrick.

In terms of substance, the Henderson - Campbell interview contributes suggestive detail about the community of Federal Dam in relation to Corps activities over a couple of generations. Their memories of growing up in Federal Dam in the 1920s and '30s - especially the campsite maintained by the town (OH/LC p.11-13), the importance of rail transportation in the area (OH/LC p.13) and their mental notes on resort operators and facilities around Leech Lake (OH/LC p.14-16)-provide good leads for further investigation via written sources (maps, census, tax records, community histories) and extended oral history. Their description of self-sufficient native American communities along the lakeshore in the 1920s (OH/LC p.34-35) suggests yet another aspect of community life in addition to the locals/summer visitors/Corps presence already identified.

Note: HA staff went to the Headwaters to explore a scenario along the lines of: "the relatively isolated damtending family meets the increasingly prosperous and leisured post World War II public." The is certainly the case. However, the existence of the town of Federal Dam as a service center, Ole Henderson's memories of an

uncle who was a blacksmith for the Corps (OH/LC p.14), Fitzpatrick's mention of Mr. Olson and his "old shack" on government property (EF p.6), the Kolbs' description of the outbuildings at Sandy (RK/BK p.21-22,33) remind us of an earlier period at the dam when construction and maintenance were labor intensive. People and horses rather than energy intensive machines did the work. Traces of this earlier social and economic network, which supported, or sometimes simply ran parallel to, Corps activities in the Headwaters, inhabit these interviews.

In terms of machine-tending and parks management, this interview is where we find the "old-fashioned" point of view (OH/LC p.9). Ole Henderson says, "No, I liked the damtender part where you did carpenter work and concrete work..." (ibid). At another point, he notes, "I liked it real well before they got this campground in 'cus that took eight hours of damn hard work" (OH/LC p.22). For Henderson, the product and the satisfaction of work is in its tangibility. His characterization of the new model camper pads as cow stalls expresses another facet of his thinking in these matters (OH/LC p.8).

Nonetheless, Henderson and Campbell provide clear memories of postwar recreational development in the Headwaters - boat launching construction circa 1958-59 (OH/LC p.7), 1967 contract work at Leech (OH/LC p.8), the beginning of visitor fees circa 1967 (OH/LC p.10), contemporary maintenance and operations (OH/LC p.23-25 ). Their comments and observations match well with those of other informants - generally confirming periodization and shared points of reference.

As regards damtending itself, Ole Henderson's description of wintertime snow slush (OH/LC p.4) mirrors Ed Fitzpatrick's. All of the damtenders interviewed describe the basic need to maintain constant lake levels in similar fashion; Henderson's description is on OH/LC p.17. The same basic similarity holds for snow sampling; see OH/LC p.23 for Henderson's language.

C. Agnes Henderson

Oh, I'm not a talker, only when it comes to cooking and kids.

(AH p.9)

Mrs. Henderson presents herself as a hausfrau somewhat removed from the specifics of the Corps of Engineers world. However, her observational powers are keen; her relatively brief interview raises points of interest in both domestic and public fronts.

Her account of the Henderson's family history with the Corps of Engineers both corroborates her husband's and also supplies an interesting detail - a leave of absence which apparently permitted him to attend Dunwoody Institute in Minneapolis without sacrificing eligibility in the Headwaters region (AH p.1).

Her housewifely view of the damtenders' dwellings at Winni and Federal Dam (AH p.1-3) underlines the high quality of the housing. She made this observation about the Winni dwelling,

"I think the family [the other relatives and stuff] liked it because they had a place to come and have Sunday dinner...It was a nice house, big house, so we could have people stay over with us." (AH p.1)

At another point, she comments that, "I did most of the house, yeah, like the painting and stuff like that...But I think in recent years, then the guys more or less took that over," (AH p.3). This is particularly interesting in comparison with the Kolbs interchanges concerning his work on domestic interiors at Sandy (RK/BK p.6). To what extent was this a matter of individual choice within families or of Corps policy?

Mrs. Henderson's observation that their three children had to observe strict rules about fishing and play in the dam area (AH p.5) mirrors a similar observation of her husband's (OH/LC p.3). This may reflect the Hendersons' local roots and the relatively public damsite in the town of Federal Dam as much as anything else. The Kolbs didn't mention any similar concern at Sandy, but then, who besides anxious parents would have known of their girls' antics if they played any at that somewhat remote site? The Fitzpatricks were childless, so this would not have been an issue for them.

Agnes Henderson's observation that "our fishing has gone down considerably from what it used to be" (AH p.10) bears comparison with DNR statistics and also with a similar statement by Edmund Fitzpatrick (EF p.25).

Mrs. Henderson's characterization of Federal Dam campers as economically self-sufficient (AH p.11) bears further consideration, also. How does this fit with storekeepers' perspectives and aggregate economic data? To what extent does this reflect the relatively remote and untouched character of Federal Dam as compared with Cross Lake described by Ed Fitzpatrick as a lively beneficiary of tourist dollars (EF p.11)?

On a related question, compare Mrs. Henderson's assessment of competition between local commercial resorts in the Federal Dam area and Corps sponsored camping (AH p.8-9) with Edward Sunde's



view (ES p.10-11) that resort operators are responding to the same general forces.

See also Mrs. Henderson's comments about wild rice production in the area (AH p.7) in comparison with her husband's description of brother Russell Henderson's commercial paddies (OH/LC p.19-20) and Edward Sunde's general overview of wild ricing (ES p.19-20).

D. Russell ("Ike") and Betty Kolb

BK Towards the end, they got to the point where they'd put a lot of things out on contract. Remember...that...water pump...? You didn't approve of the way they were doing it, but it was on contract. And you, Bill Schultz, I think, was the one up that supervised it.

RK Anything that Schultz supervised, why -

(RK/BK p.45)

This interchange characterizes much of the dynamic in the joint interview with the Kolbs. She is the talker, and he is the interjecter. The stated explanation at this juncture is a protective one. Russell Kolb's memory is not as keen as it used to be, and Betty Kolb obviously paid close attention to Corps doings in their years at Sandy and elsewhere. At the same time, one has the suspicion that Mrs. Kolb may have been an equally loyal and equally outspoken spouse long before her husband's memory faltered.

In general, the Kolbs joint presentation conforms closely to other informant's accounts. The reserved attitude expressed regarding contract work runs through their interview and Ole Henderson's as well (OH/LC p.31). A little later in the same general passage quoted above, Mrs. Kolb remarks,

Years ago, you went ahead and did things...; it had to be done, you did it. But it got to be, had to be, professional.

(RK/BK p.46)

How much of this strong feeling about contract labor was about skill and credentials? How much of it was about, in effect, removing decision-making and supervisory power from the individual damsites and relocating in it a newly created regional office or in St. Paul contracting? Is that why Russell Kolb makes the point that he "never reported to anybody in Remer" (RK/BK p.43); he

"always talked to St. Paul" (RK/BK p.44)? This would be an area to probe in any future interviews.

As a narrative document, the Kolb interview flows rather fitfully. The most telling example may be that Owen Emsweiler, the Corps colonel first mentioned in connection with recreational development at Sandy on page 8, is finally identified by name on page 36. The communicative variation in the Headwaters pilot interviews - from the episodic Kolb transcript to the fluid internally symmetrical Fitzpatrick interview - is fairly standard and is to be expected in any series of oral histories among the elderly.

As regards Russell Kolb's statements about beginning to clear out the Sandy point circa 1947 (RK/BK p.14), a good ten years before other official activity is reported or remembered, the key to sorting that out is probably additional interviews with St. Paul personnel such as Wesley Walters, Owen Emsweiler, and Jim Von Lorenz. These are the people who made policy and oversaw developments at the individual damsites. Maybe Kolb was an independent so-and-so who happened to start clearing brush on his own as a formal policy was, in fact, in development. What we noticed when recording the pilot interviews was that the other damtenders declined to actively corroborate Kolbs' self-presentation. What we've noticed in reviewing the data is that the dates every one else is reporting do, in a sense, corroborate the Kolbs' account.

One thing we realized we had missed upon review of the transcripts was a clear geography of damtending at the individual sites. Russell Kolb speaks of gage reading at the junction of the Mississippi and the Sandy on especially cold days (RK/BK p.31); the site of a Leech Lake gage house is embedded in an Ole Henderson story about an especially difficult resort operator (OH/LC p.16). What were the damtending perimeters or circuits on each lake? This is something that could be picked up in any additional interviewing.

Russell Kolb's comment that "Betty would read gages while I was gone [snow-sampling]," (RK/BK p.13) would be interesting to follow up with other dam-tending couples. We identified another sort of split of responsibility entirely in conversations with Agnes and Ole Henderson. What range of options would a more complete set of interviews reveal?

For some very clear discussion of the officers' quarters issue and damtenders' wives' rates of pay for cooking and cleaning see RK/BK pp.5-6 and p.8-9.

See also the Kolbs' description of the damtender's dwelling at Sandy, amenities such as electricity, telephone and the

outbuildings on-site (RK/BK pp.9-10, 15-16, 21-22). All of the informants mention the houses and domestic arrangements with the Corps to some extent. The picture that emerges, though no one says it in so many words, is of relatively privileged housing provision in a relatively poor area. Clearly, this was an important perquisite of Corps employment (even if too close to work for social comfort in Ole Henderson's estimation OH/LC p.2 ).

E. Edward Sunde

Really, as far as the work went...I was in a pretty much of a construction down here [Gull] and up there [Cross]...But Leech had more to do with the public, you know, with the campers and other public relations...I kind of favored Leech on that part.

(ES p.16)

Edward Sunde is a pivotal figure among the pilot informants. The youngest of the interviewees, his career with the Corps coincided squarely with the new recreational facilities and the new regional office in Remer. One line of Sunde's narrative is neatly complementary to Edmund Fitzpatrick's observations. The two worked together on recreational facilities at Cross Lake/Gull Lake in the 1960s, and they share an institutional perspective on the Corps. Another aspect of his experience follows along lines suggested in Ole Henderson's testimony. These two men share similar career paths. Also, Sunde followed Henderson at Leech, so there is a strong shared reference in their interviews.

Like Henderson, Sunde is a native of the Headwaters region who worked his way up from laborer to damtender. Unlike Henderson, however, Sunde saw the new emphasis on parks and people as a positive challenge. His accounts of wintertime recreational planning and reporting requirements (ES p.5,17) suggest that his pleasure in the authority and the responsibility made up for the hassles of paperwork.

Of all the informants, Sunde offers the most detailed, most observant overview of change in visitor patterns. See his analysis of the progression from "die-hard fisherman" to retirees and big families at Leech Lake (ES p.11). In fact, his fresh details and descriptive capabilities are the strong suit of the interview overall. His description of the financial terms and domestic arrangements at the Leech dwelling (ES pp.6 and 13) adds new information to the Hendersons' account and to the stock of "house-proud" memories generally. His mental voyage to all the Headwaters campsites (ES p.21) is an expressive counterpoint to Ole Henderson's survey of their water management characteristics

(OH/LC p.17-18); their choices in points of comparison eloquently convey their differing perspectives.

Taken together with Edmund Fitzpatrick's account of the recreational development at Cross/Gull, Sunde provides especially clear descriptions of the Cross Lake development (ES pp.2 & 8), arrangement of free sites at the Leech campground (ES p.4), comparative methods of handling overflow crowds at Cross and Leech (ES p.10), and a clear account of tenure and of managerial process at the Remer regional office (ES pp.3 & 18).

Sunde also provides demystifying detail on routine maintenance - cracked fireplaces and how they got that way and so on (ES p.12). He and Leroy Campbell are the only two informants to discuss financial cutbacks at the Corps and their effects on work and personal schedules (ES p.5, OH/LC p.7). From this, we infer a 1980s impact. There's also a nice sense of the Army's maintain-it-until decommissioned habit of mind in Sunde's account of building repairs and replacement at Gull Lake (ES p.15).

#### Notes on language, dating and work processes

As a group or set of datum, the five pilot interviews raise a couple of issues about choice of language, specificity and relative precision in weighing or interpreting evidence. On one hand, there is a noticeable specificity to the language of damtending and later recreational development in the Headwaters that is rooted in the work processes. Some terms, such as "resorter," "contract," and "hired labor," remain constant through these 5 interviews. Other terms - such as "gage," "gage-house," and "snow sampling" refer to the operations of the hydraulic department in the St. Paul Office. These belong to the pre-recreational period in the informants' collective experience. In describing recreational development, new terms begin to pepper informants' recollections: "brushing out" undergrowth; the construction of "camper pads"; "collecting" [fees] from campers; the "ranger" appears as a job description and references to the recreational division in St. Paul begin to displace hydraulics. This is something to watch for in any oral history series which documents change in a specific way; there is often a concomitant change in on-the-job terminology.

Edmund Fitzpatrick's and Edward Sunde's accounts notwithstanding, there is less specificity in the informants' explanations of day-to-day tasks and in their assignment of dates than we expected. With the Kolbs, in particular, this may be a consequence of relatively advanced age. (Note: However, the age/memory factor should not be generalized too far. While we don't know as much as we wish about either historical memory or the psychological mechanisms of recall, widely reported studies of memory indicate

(OH/LC p.17-18); their choices in points of comparison eloquently convey their differing perspectives.

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