

# WAUKAU CREEK NATURE PRESERVE & WAUKAU DAM SITE

Waukau

Wild Area Preserve

*By Ruth Westover (1979)*

Waukau Creek has always been useful. At one time it had three dams providing waterpower for industry. Now Waukau Creek and its scenic valley is being recognized for its beauty and educational values. Over the years the creek has carved out a valley for the six miles it travels in a twisting course between Rush Lake and the Fox River. The Indians found it a bountiful source of fish. On its banks grew plants and trees that provided food, medicine, dyes, textiles and preservatives. The trees on its banks furnished shade for summer encampments of the Menominee tribe which came seasonally in search of wild game. The ash trees gave the Indians material for baskets. When the first white settlers arrived in 1846, the first aspect of the creek to impress them was the great amount of fall per mile which they immediately took advantage of for waterpower. Later the creek banks were further valued as lovely spots for church picnics and impressive baptismal services. Even though cows have been pastured on the creek bottom and the bordering hillsides, wildflowers are still abundant in the brushy areas. A wide variety of fruiting and nut-bearing plants and vines make the place a sanctuary for birds and small animals. In the deeper holes there is excellent swimming if one knows how to avoid the occasional patches of quicksand. Until the Department of Natural Resources interfered with the spring spawning run of fish from the Fox River to Rush Lake, fishermen by the score used to come to spear the carp that fought their way upstream. Federal regulation curbed indiscriminate fishing in later years. The spring run of suckers used to be another drawing card for area fishermen. By 1966 the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) bought Waukau, just south of the bridge over Highway 116. They put in a Parking lot, and planting, and installed a dam and holding pond to trap carp. For a few years the carp were removed in large quantities and sold.

## Waukau Wild Area Preserve

A sign alerts visitors to the nature of the park-like area they are seeing at the north end of Waukau on Delhi Road, Wildflowers, beginning with trout lilies and hepatica and then trillions of trilliums later in May, are a few of the treats for the eye for people who walk the nature trail laid out in the hills and along the banks of Waukau Creek. The dynamic forces of the turbulent creek are in evidence in the deep valley it has carved for itself over the centuries and the many trees it has undermined and toppled during the high water in the spring of 1978. For several years the DNR allowed the Waukau Flying Mane Riding Club to use a portion of level high ground at the top of the east bank of the creek for horse shows. (The riders now have their own ring in another location.) For generations, everyone who saw Waukau Creek valley said, "It looks like a park. It ought to be a park."

The dream began to take form May 18, 1974. May 18th was a very rainy day. Winnebago County Park and Recreation Committee members gathered to dedicate a 50-acre site in Waukau Creek valley as a wild area preserve. The dedication culminated many years of interest in preserving the area because of its natural beauty and wide assortment of native plants, many of which are becoming rare. Max Carpenter of Eureka, the Town of Rushford's representative on the Winnebago County board, had long urged the move. Gordon Bubolz, general chairman of Natural Area Preservation, Inc., and Charles Harvey,

a landscape architect, confirmed Mr. Carpenter's belief in the value of the site for the public. The Natural Area Preservation group purchased the 50-acre plot and subsequently donated it to the county board.

Through the efforts of the Winnebago County Park and Recreation Committee of the board, headed by Alfred Becher, a feasibility report was submitted to the board and, with their acceptance, the preserve became a reality. A brochure published at the time of the dedication of the new recreational and educational facility, stated, "Today we honor those memories in preserving a segment of an ecosystem unique in Winnebago County: a flowing stream with its associated flood plain and adjacent upland woods and marshes. There exists no other site in the entire area where there is public access to natural displays of wild flowers." At this point the brochure pointed out the new psychological uses of the site.

## WAUKAU'S FIRST HUNDRED YEARS

By Fred L. Holmes (1883-1946)

Wisconsin Historical Society web site 2006 original publication 1946-47

THE END of her first century finds Waukau a prosperous community surrounded by rich farms, owned by persons engaged in dairying and diversified agriculture. Seventy-five years ago this section of Wisconsin vied with the La Crosse area in offering the most productive wheat lands in the State. Both sections developed important flour industries. Both have since moved to dairying. A backward look shows that a century has brought economic independence to the dwellers of both localities. Back in 1870 Waukau was a place of commercial importance, with a supporting population close to 1,000, with several industries, and a large number of professional men. It was the trading center for three townships. When Luther M. Parsons came to Waukau as the first settler, March 7, 1846, his family had long been on the immigrant trail. He was born in Massachusetts, migrated to Vermont, lived in Ohio, then at Fox Lake and Ripon, Wisconsin, before moving here. "I passed my childhood in Massachusetts" Mr. Parsons would tell his old Waukau companions. "My boyhood I spent in Vermont, my manhood in Ohio, my dotage in Wisconsin." The Parsons family was a branch of the Morton family of Vermont, which in the last century produced Levi Parsons Morton, the noted American and London financier, who served as vice president of the United States during the administration of Benjamin Harrison. Fred L. Holmes, of Madison, late curator of the STATE Historical Society of Wisconsin, was the afternoon speaker, on July 27, at the centennial celebration of Waukau, the little Winnebago County village near which he was born. "Memories flooded upon me like the sunshine as I drove down the streets of Waukau today" said Mr. Holmes in his address and, as he was about to end his recollections, he collapsed and died. This somewhat condensed historical sketch, which may well have been the last effort of Wisconsin's popular historian, is printed in his memory.

**Term: Waukau [origin of place name]**

**Definition:**

Explanation 1: Waukau was Laponese village and is said to mean zigzag or lightning. It is the name of the river outlet of Rush Lake and empties into Fox River, and the name of a village in the town of Rushford.

Explanation 2: Waukau means the spawn of a fish or frog, from "wak" (pron. wauk). Explanation 3: Means "habitually" or "often". Explanation 4: Means "sweet flag".

**Term: Waukau, Winnebago Co.**

**Definition:**

A community in Winnebago Co. at latitude 435921N and longitude 0884618W

Description from John W. Hunt's 1853 Wisconsin Gazetteer: "WAUKAU, P. V., on section 36, in town of Rushford, Winnebago county, 12 miles southwest from Oshkosh, and about 60 miles northeast from Madison, 2 miles south of Neenah [Fox] river, on the outlet of Rush Lake, with 30 feet fall of water, in a good and productive section of farming land. Population 500, with 150 dwellings, 7 stores, 3 hotels, 5 mills, and considerable water power unoccupied."