



The cover image is a word cloud made from narratives representing We Are Water MN. Image courtesy of Minnesota Humanities Center.

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# WHITEWATER STATE PARK: 100 YEARS IN PARADISE

By Sara Holger

“Oh there’s not in this wide world a valley so sweet  
as the valley in whose bosom the Whitewaters meet.”

—After Thomas Moore, “The Vale of Avoca,” via Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

This year, 2019, marks the centennial anniversary of Whitewater State Park located in Winona County in the southeast Minnesota blufflands region. The story of how this place

evolved into the popular tourist destination it is today is both fascinating and frightening and the park naturalists are working to make sure that story is not forgotten.



*Whitewater State Park naturalists Jeremy Darst and Sara Holger pose on Seibenaler Ridge overlooking the Whitewater River in the Whitewater Wildlife Management Area. The naturalists are the story keepers for the Whitewater valley. They share the valley history so that others might learn from the past and make better choices for the future. Image courtesy of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.*

Over the span of 100 years, the Whitewater valley went from wilderness to tamed landscape and back to near wilderness again. The following narrative is a common story of how human relationships with the land evolve over time. Travel the world over and in nearly every region you will find a similar story. Today, more than 30,000 acres of public lands comprise the valley, providing opportunities for visitors to hike, hunt, fish, camp, bird-watch, and more. The Whitewater valley has become a paradise, but this

was not always the case. In this piece, I include excerpts from stories shared by local residents during a Whitewater State Park oral history project that began in 2017 that illustrate the history and changes of this place. These stories are being transcribed and will be available online at [Minnesota Reflections](#) in the coming year.

*Click here for the [online version](#) of this article with an interactive map.*

## Before Bridges and Roads

Nestled in the Whitewater valley is the famed Whitewater River, named by the Dakota people who once lived here as *Minneiska*, meaning

“white, water.” Historically, the river would swell with snowmelt each spring and erode light-colored clay deposits along the riverbank, turning



*“Wabasha’s Village,” by Seth Eastman, ca 1845, depicting Wabasha’s village of Mdewakanton Dakota on the Mississippi River. Accounts by early European settlers to the area noted the clarity of the streams, even after heavy rains, suggesting erosion and sedimentation did not result from the traditional Dakota way of life. Image courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

# Whitewater Valley Timeline

- Sometime between  
50,000 – 14,000 Years Ago The first humans arrive in North America and migrate across the continent. Their descendants include the Dakota who have lived for countless generations in the land we call Minnesota.
- 10,000 – 14,000 Years Ago Glaciers advance across the Midwest, never reaching southeast Minnesota. Their meltwaters flow into the area and carve the river valleys deep and wide.
- Prior to 1850 A traditional lifestyle of communal support is the basis for Dakota society and culture. The Dakota move their villages and vary their work according to the seasons. They are the first farmers of the region, cultivating crops such as corn, squash, and beans.
- 1851 The Treaty of Traverse de Sioux opens land west of the Mississippi River for white settlement. The treaty relocates the Dakota to reservations along the Minnesota River and forces the cessation of nearly 24,000,000 acres of their land to the US Government.
- 1854 Early settlers arrive in the Whitewater Valley. The village of Beaver is platted and by 1871, there are five prospering villages in the valley. Early settlers comment that the Whitewater River never leaves its banks except during the spring snow melt. Even after a spring cloudburst, the water runs high, but clear.
- 1868 Wheat is the main agricultural commodity grown in the area and by 1868 Winona is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest wheat market in the country. As the prairies on the highlands are converted to wheat, and the forested hillsides are logged for timber and grazed by livestock, the land loses its ability to absorb runoff.
- 1900 Early flooding due to land-use practices begins to impact the towns and the 100 farms located in the valley. Large gullies begin to form on the steep hillsides as soil is washed down into the valley and streams below.
- 1919 Whitewater State Park is established to protect one of the most scenic sections of the valley from encroaching land use.

- 1920s                      Flooding is intolerable. Farms and small towns in the valley flood up to 20 times per year. Low lying fields and homes are buried under 15 feet of eroded sand and silt.
- 1931                      The Izaak Walton League petitions the State of Minnesota to consider purchasing flooded farmland in the valley and establishing a game refuge.
- 1932                      The Minnesota Department of Conservation purchases the first parcel in the Whitewater valley and establishes the Crystal Springs Fish Hatchery on the site.
- 1933                      The Elba Fire Tower is built to detect intentional fires set by landowners who clear hillsides for grazing. The clearing of hillsides contributes to erosion and flooding.
- 1937                      Congress passes the Pitman-Robertson Act, placing a tax on hunting guns and ammunition in an effort to fund wildlife habitat restoration projects.
- 1938                      Beaver village floods 28 times. Richard J. Dorer is hired by the Department of Conservation to oversee the Pitman-Robertson funds and develop a plan to restore the Whitewater valley. Winona County establishes the first Soil and Water Conservation District in the state to assist farmers with implementing conservation practices that reduce runoff and erosion.
- 1943                      After building public support, Dorer's proposal is approved to purchase 38,000 acres along the Whitewater River for a wildlife area.
- 1961                      After retirement, Dorer continues his crusade to protect the forests and sensitive trout streams of the region. His plan for a Memorial Hardwood Forest dedicated to the veterans and pioneers of Minnesota is approved.
- 1974                      After his passing, the 1-million acre forest is renamed the Richard J. Dorer Memorial Hardwood Forest.
- 1987                      The Whitewater River Watershed Project is initiated and later, in 2011, helps establish the first Farmer Led Council in the state.
- 2019                      Whitewater State Park celebrates its Centennial Anniversary. Park staff work to ensure the lessons of the Whitewater Valley are remembered.

*Timeline courtesy of the author.*

the river milky white. By the time Elaine Holst's grandfather, Emanuel Hessig, settled near Beaver village in the 1870s, the clay deposits were gone and the Dakota were seasonal migrants in the valley. Now in her nineties, Elaine shared stories her grandfather once told her.

“Grampa would tell us kids . . . about the Indians coming up there. Yes, and those Indians would come and they were kind. I mean, they didn't make any disturbance, only when they came they always raided the chicken house and they'd take all the eggs. And they would go up the head of the

valley, that's what Grampa always called it, the head of the valley. And that's where the Indians would settle in for the summer. My brother always talked about how the Indian children would slide into the creek.”

The Dakota were forced from their homelands by the government and European settlers. By the 1890s, five villages were established in the Whitewater valley; from north to south they were Weaver, Beaver, Whitewater Falls, Elba, and Fairwater.



*In 1890, John Mauer immigrated from Luxembourg and established a small tavern in Elba. Over the years the establishment has withstood many floods. Today the Mauer Brothers Tavern continues to be a favorite stop for visitors to the Whitewater valley. Image courtesy of Sara Holger.*



## Post-Treaty Development

In Elba, Mike Mauer's great grandfather arrived from Luxembourg in 1890 to work for Bub's Brewery out of Winona.

"Basically, the president or whatever the owner of Bub's, told my great grandfather to come to the valley because 'I think you can start a bar there and have a heck of a business.' And the town was

already started; I don't think there was much for businesses then. So, they built the bar."

Elba has managed to remain on the map and Mike's family continues to operate Mauer's Tavern. The tavern has become a destination for campers, trout fishermen, and hunters who come to the Whitewater valley seeking respite from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

## Changing Land Use

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, floods caused by agricultural erosion plagued the valley villages. It turns out that plowing up the vast root systems of the virgin prairies and converting them to wheat and corn fields was not sustainable. Rain and snowmelt flowed off the fields, carrying the fertile topsoil down into the valley. Clogged streams became choked with sediment and flooded with the slightest rainfall, sometimes filling homes with up to three feet of sand and burying crops and pastureland. Beaver village flooded 28 times in 1938 and residents began to relocate (Whitewater River Watershed Project n.d.). Yes, you read that correctly: 28 times in 1938!

Meanwhile, efforts were underway to establish a state park along the middle branch of the Whitewater River. National parks were becoming very popular and Minnesota had already established a handful of state parks. Local settlers wanted to preserve the most scenic portion of the Whitewater valley as pleasant grounds for future generations. The editor of a local newspaper photographed tourists using the valley for leisure and assembled a book of photos called *The Paradise of Minnesota: The Proposed Whitewater State Park* (Warming 1917). Articles ran almost weekly in the local papers praising the proposed park.

In 1919, the Minnesota legislature approved the establishment of the park, but it wasn't until the New Deal programs of the 1930's that infrastructure was built with help from the National Park Service and the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration (Meyer 1991).

During the time the park was being developed, farmers in the valley were taking huge losses on their flooded properties. In 1931, the Izaak Walton League petitioned the state legislature to purchase the abandoned farmsteads and transform the valley into a game refuge. In 1932, the state purchased its first valley farmstead and made it into what is known today as the Crystal Springs Trout Hatchery.

In the early 1900s, Mike Seibenaler's grandfather arrived from Germany and settled on the ridge overlooking Beaver village. As the floods forced families from the valley and the country schools began closing down, those who remained had to face a tough choice: how to get their kids to school.

Mike recalled, "People on the ridge were willing to . . . sell. I remember my mom and dad telling the story . . . where the kids were all little, all of a sudden they were going to start school. . . . The

state was offering to buy land and they thought . . . ‘We can’t afford to drive them to school. . . .’ So, they decided to move to town . . . and so then they

sold their land to the state. My grandfather, Peter Kronebusch, was not happy. Not happy at all!”

## Conservation

Most families were not happy about selling their properties, but they knew they could not make a living in the flooded valley. After the passage of the Pitman-Robertson Act of 1937, which placed a sales tax on hunting guns and ammunition, the Minnesota Department of Conservation had a funding source to acquire farms and develop a game refuge.

Richard J. Dorer was hired to oversee the Pitman-Robertson funds for the state and he devised the plan to restore the Whitewater valley. Dorer envisioned a place where urban folks who had no personal connections to private land could come experience the traditions of hunting and fishing. A self-proclaimed crusader, he worked tirelessly to enlighten others about conservation



*Beaver Village circa 1900. Image courtesy of the Winona County History Center.*

and stewardship. At the same time, the first Soil and Water Conservation District in Minnesota was established in Winona County and helped local farmers better understand how their farming practices contributed to soil erosion and runoff. The area farmers were some of the first in the country to help pilot experimental conservation practices at the time, such as rotational grazing, contour strips, and grass waterways.

Mike Seibenaler's father, Alex, grew up on the ridge overlooking Beaver village. He witnessed the erosion, flooding, and devastation caused by poor land use. He sold his farm to the state and later became a soil conservationist. During his career, he led many field tours to share the lessons of the Whitewater valley.

## Keeping the Story Alive

Today, only two of the original five valley towns remain. The story of the Whitewater valley is now being told by the naturalists at Whitewater State Park. Monthly tours to Beaver village cemetery introduce the powerful story of destruction and restoration in the valley. During cemetery walks, visitors hear the stories of those buried at the site

and learn how poor land use practices caused floods and destroyed homes, businesses, and communities. The Watershed Field Experience, a field day designed for area high school youth participating in agricultural education classes, allows students to investigate watershed issues while learning the history of the valley. In addition, the



*Beaver Village flood in 1912. Image courtesy of Plainview Area History Center.*

park Visitor Center houses both permanent and travelling exhibits that relate to watershed protection, including the We Are Water MN exhibit the park hosted in 2017.

Managing the natural resources of the park and surrounding Wildlife Management Area is a delicate balancing act. There is a vast spectrum of interests among visitors. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, through its various divisions, works to address the interests of all Minnesotans while using science to guide sound management planning. It is easy for visitors to see the restored bluff prairies and

oak savannas and vastness of green perennial vegetation along the river and think, “Wow! The Whitewater valley has been restored!” But to the educated observer, the invasive species, high sediment content in the river, and recent increase in flooding tell us there is much, much more work to be done in the Whitewater valley.

Find out more about the current issues impacting the [Whitewater watershed](#) and explore the health of this and other watersheds with the [Watershed Health Assessment Framework](#) tool developed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.



*Whitewater State Park volunteers dress in period-appropriate attire to portray the residents of Beaver cemetery. During the Pioneer Cemetery Ghost Walk offered in October, the history of the Whitewater valley is shared through the stories of those who lived in the valley. Image courtesy of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.*

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## About the Author

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