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Man Made Lake

Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox

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Poem: "Man Made Lake"

Poet: Gaylon "Jeep" Wilcox

NA 1582

Donated by Jeep Wilcox on September 29, 2011

"Man Made Lake" is a commentary on the flooding of a twenty-five mile stretch of the Dead River in Western Maine, which submerged Flagstaff Plantation, Dead River Plantation, and Bigelow Township. Jeep Wilcox wrote the poem in 1954 while on guard duty as he was serving in the United States Army. His impetus for writing the poem is best explained in his own words: "As a young teenage boy I worked on the project of clearing the land to make Flagstaff Lake. I could not believe the power of eminent domain. I could never forget some of the people whose lives were ruined by the project. From 1953 to 1955 I was in the Army and I was overseas and one night on guard duty I was still recalling what I saw happening." Clearing the land of people, homes, and trees proved a massive undertaking that took more than twenty years to complete.

Flagstaff Lake, a reservoir that controls water flow to hydroelectric facilities downstream on the Kennebec River, is the product of the push to electrify rural Maine in the early twentieth century. The region's name derived from a story that Benedict Arnold rested his army in the area while marching to attack the city of Quebec in 1775. While there, he ordered construction of a flagstaff and raised an early flag of the not-quite-yet United States. (A tablet commemorating this event can be found in the Flagstaff Memorial Chapel in Eustis.) Settled in the early 1800s, the three aforementioned villages – Flagstaff, Dead River, and Bigelow – were established as farming and logging towns. By the late-nineteenth century, small-scale, local electricity-generating facilities were spreading all over Maine. Most of these were hydro-powered, and Maine may have had more of these facilities than any other state.

These local generating facilities produced low volumes of electricity and generally supplied a manufacturing plant as the primary user, with electricity supplied to area residences in off-peak hours. Walter S. Wyman and Harvey D. Eaton, the founders of Central Maine Power (CMP), were among the first businessmen in the state to start consolidating all of these electricity producers into a unified system that could reach more people in Maine and out-of-state. They began buying small generation facilities in 1899 with the purchase of Oakland Electric Light Company. Wyman wanted to build a dam at The Forks, where the Dead River and Kennebec River meet. This was deemed impractical for a number of reasons, and instead he set his sights on three smaller dams: On the Kennebec River at Bingham (Wyman Dam was completed there in 1931), on the outlet of Indian Pond (Harris Dam, completed in 1954, is the largest dam in Maine), and Long Falls Dam on the Dead River (which dramatically increased the size of Flagstaff Lake). The primary impediments to Wyman's plans were the Fernald Law, which prohibited the sale of electricity generated in Maine to out-of-state consumer, and Percival Baxter, a Maine State Legislator then Governor. The Fernald Law ultimately limited the scope of Wyman's plans, but did not completely block the project. Baxter, however, was able to delay (and almost defeat) Wyman because he did not want to see any more of Maine's natural resources given away to large companies.

The final legislation that allowed the construction of these three dams was enacted in 1927. It allowed CMP to build the dams on state land under a long-term lease that is still in place. Moreover, it gave CMP the right to claim privately-owned land through eminent domain. In 1930, CMP began purchasing the

land that would be flooded. The people who lived there only reluctantly parted with their property, though there were no violent protests, and considered the offers made on the land to be modest at best. Resigned to their fate, the residents of the three small villages were mostly unhappy that they had to relocate to make life better for people downstream. Most of the residents settled with CMP, and their houses and other buildings were either razed or picked up and relocated. Those who did not settle in time left their houses standing and they were burned down as part of the final stage of clearing in the winter after the flooding began. The gates on the newly constructed Long Falls Dam closed in 1950 and Flagstaff Lake slowly filled in, eventually growing to a surface area of over 20,000 acres.

Man Made Lake (Copyright Jeep Wilcox)

I'll never forget the day,
They took my home away,
To make a lake that God did not plan.
Though it has been many years,
I still recall the tears,
Shed when they made Flagstaff Dam.

My only choice made me sad,
Either move or wish I had,
No way, could I stop their flood.
So knowing nothing I could do
Using a token dollar or two,
They took what cost me sweat and blood.

From Eustis Ridge I see,
Man's lake of misery,
Where once I tilled the fertile sod.
T'was there I made my stand,
Trying to convince my fellow man,
To leave the lake building up to God.

Yes, my life still goes on,
But for me dreams are gone,
Haunted with nightmares from days gone by.
Like a vagabond, I still roam,
For the day they took away my home,
Was the day my dreams began to die.

Someday I'll pass on,
And from this land I'll be gone,
Inside of heaven's gate I'll stand.
Once again I'll shed a tear,
For all of those still hear,
With roots in a forgotten land.

Sources: For a brief pictorial history of the submerged villages, read Burnell, Alan L. & Kenny R. Wing. *Lost Villages of Flagstaff Lake*. Images of America Series. Portsmouth, NH: Arcadia Publishing, 2010. MPBN produced a documentary on the history of power generation in Maine that features several segments on Flagstaff Lake; the video is available at [Windows on Maine](#). Northeast Historic Film also has a [Central Maine Power Collection](#) with many videos from the early twentieth century, though none related to Flagstaff Lake or Long Falls Dam.

Maine Folklife Center