

The *Atlantic*

U.S.

Where the Roads End in Water: The Lake That Won't Stop Rising

LISA M. HAMILTON | MAY 13, 2011

For 18 years, North Dakota's Devils Lake has been flooding non-stop and turning farms into resorts—this year as badly as ever. The first installment in a three-part series.





The lake itself is not shocking. In fact, to eyes like mine, seeing it for the first time, it looks unremarkable, benign even—flat, blue, shallow around the edges. What's unnerving are the signs that the land beneath was dry not long ago. Every few miles along the highway, a cross-street leads straight into the blue, the yellow center lines almost beckoning drivers to follow and submerge. In the town of Minnewaukan, just past D Avenue, Main Street itself disappears into the water.

Around the corner, the playground in front of the local school awaits the water without defense. The football field across the street is already gone, transformed into a wetland with little mounds of grass where marsh birds nest. A wire cage still stands where the baseball diamond was, but on a Saturday afternoon in April, the only people near it are a man and a woman in rubber boots—fishing.

In 1992, this town in northeastern North Dakota was eight miles from the shore of Devils Lake. The school's classrooms looked onto the football field and, beyond that, a 60-acre alfalfa field and then pasture stretching to the horizon. At that time, citizens from around the region were forming a committee to preserve the vanishing lake. After several years of drought in the late 1980s, the waters appeared to be drying up.

Where wheat fields once were, now there are waves. And the roads—one after another leading into the water, disappearing under the silver surface.

"The Lord must have heard us," one of those citizens told me, for in 1993 began a spate of precipitation unlike anything the living had witnessed. What seemed to be the new normal was that it would snow all winter, and just as that began to melt it would begin raining all spring. In the worst years, falls were wet, too. Creeks and rivers flooded. Wetlands swelled. And the lake rose. It came up five and a half feet that first year, and another four the next.

The problem is that it has not stopped. Unlike with a river flood, this water does not naturally recede after a week or a month. It has nowhere to go: The lakebed is the result of a glacier that melted roughly 10,000 years ago, and its only natural outlet is at 1,458 feet above sea level. Since August 1992, the lake has risen more than 29 feet. That would be a remarkable increase in nearly any body of water, but in the context of North Dakota's famously flat topography it is extraordinary; here, the rising lake spreads across the land like water spilled on a table. At the lake's current size, a one-foot rise consumes more than 15,000 acres of surrounding land. In 19 years it has grown from roughly 69 square miles to 285, an area about the size of Fort Worth, Texas.

In recent years the lake has become so massive that it has begun a sort of self-perpetuation through its influence on the local weather. The body of water adds so much moisture to the lower atmosphere that it may well be increasing the

amount of precipitation the area receives. And on summer nights in Minnewaukan you hardly need the A/C anymore. Nice for sleeping, perhaps, but the cooler air means less evaporation, more standing lake.

Researchers believe similar situations have happened in the past. The lake has reached its 1,458-foot natural outlet at least twice in the past four millennia, most recently about 2,000 ago, and it is now only seven feet from that mark. But our recorded history since European settlement has been a quiet time in terms of hydrologic activity, explains Gregg Wiche, director of the U.S. Geological Survey's North Dakota Water Science Center.

"Our understanding of that place has been that there weren't a lot of big floods," he explained. "So then during the last twenty years, this very wet period comes along. Researchers say, 'Jeez, this happened before,' but in our short experience here it hadn't. You asked me what the untold story here is. Well, the untold story is how variable and surprising nature can be. And now we're left to deal with this."

By "this" Wiche means the drowned football field, the disappearing roads, and building after building taken by the waters—the pieces that together comprise the world built up across this landscape over the past 125 years. With little way of knowing how vulnerable it could make them, settlers and their progeny assumed that the lake would more or less stay put—that a permanent society could safely be established on the land around it. Roads were laid and towns founded. Fields were cultivated, and acreage was bought, sold and passed down through generations. Lives were rooted in the dry land.

Today, as I explore the region around Minnewaukan, nearly everywhere I look I see the reluctant but unavoidable dissolution of that structure.

Rows of grain bins beginning to rust as the flat water seeps through their concrete floors. Houses on high spots stranded, abandoned, for the lake that surrounds them. Where wheat fields once were, now there are waves. And the roads—one after another leading into the water, disappearing under the silver surface. No matter how many I see, each one gives me a chill.

While visiting the area last spring I came across a rack of postcards produced by the local history center. Most were pleasant and nostalgic, with photographs of old steamboats and antique figurines, but there was one that stood out. The picture side of this card had a split frame showing two aerial views. One was a peaceful image of a road alongside the lake, sapphire water on the right and emerald forest on the left. The other was a frame almost entirely steel blue, the lake bisected by only a thin line of asphalt; on it, the tiny cars looked as helpless as insects. On the back of the card, the caption read:

*SINCE SUMMER 1993 DEVILS LAKE WATERS HAVE BEEN
STEADILY RISING — SOMETIMES ROARINGLY CRASHING, OTHER
TIMES INSIDIOUSLY LAPPING — BUT ALWAYS RISING; TO MELT
OUR ROADS; TO STRANGLE OUR TREES; TO STEEP AND TOPPLE
OUR HOMES; TO VORACIOUSLY CLAIM AND DEVOUR ALL IN
THEIR PATH!*

At the time of my visit, the Minnewaukan City Council was wrestling with questions of survival: Should they try to scrape together their \$2.7 million share of the \$18 million that the Army Corps of Engineers said it would cost to build a ring dike around the town? Should they keep building walls of sandbags to

protect individual houses in imminent danger of being flooded? Or should they just accept a watery grave and design a graceful exit for the community, handing over the title of county seat to a drier town like Maddock or Esmond? Over the past 20 years the town had lost more than 200 people. In April 2010, it had fewer than 300 residents. That Minnewaukan would dissolve completely felt almost inevitable, but no one wanted to say it out loud.

I bought one of the split-frame postcards to send back home, but was hard-pressed to figure out what to write on the back. "Wish you were here" seemed, for many reasons, inappropriate.

*





Jim and Diane Yri live on a farm two miles outside of Minnewaukan, across the road from where Jim grew up. For most of his life the farm belonged to another family, but beginning in 1976 it became effectively his own—rented, yes, but it was Jim who plowed and planted, fertilized and harvested. It was he who suffered the roller coaster ride of the impetuous agricultural economy.

The landowner was a widow who did not farm, and every year she would offer to sell the land to Jim. But every year, by the time he had shuffled his finances enough to be ready for a mortgage, the widow would change her mind. It got to be a sort of joke between Jim and Diane, and it never was resolved; eventually the widow just died. In 2001, after 25 years of waiting, Jim bought the land from her kids.

"The lake was like a giant excavator," Jim said. "The waves hit, pull back, and it's not clear water, it's brown. The waves out there are brown—that's land in them."

It's a fitting story for North Dakota. For more than a century, people have been coming here only to leave because of the bitter winters or the seemingly relentless winds, the loneliness they find in the vast stretches of land, or the annual challenge of coaxing a crop to life in a place that is so often too much of one thing—dry, hot, wet, cold. But the people who have driven their feet into the ground and grown roots that would allow them to turn and face the wind head-on, those are the people who built Minnewaukan and communities like it, these knobs of civilization that poke up throughout the prairie and die only when they have exhausted every other option. The regional identity is built on values of solidity, endurance, and permanence. Long-held, often multi-generational relationships with pieces of land are the most fundamental manifestation of that identity. For rural North Dakotans, place is not just a setting in which life transpires. Place—land—is life.

And so it makes sense that the non-farming widow would string the renter along for all those years—and that the renter would allow himself to be strung along. What doesn't make sense about the story, or perhaps perversely underscores that attachment North Dakotans have to their land, is that as the Yris were patiently waiting for their chance to buy the farm, the water around it was rising. Even in 1993, the first year of flooding, the lake edged into their pastures; when they signed the papers in 2001, the water had already been encroaching for eight years. The farm was 2,200 acres when Jim started there, and after purchasing it he and Diane added 650 acres by buying Jim's parents' place next door. In 2010 they were down to fewer than 700 acres of dry ground. They still owned the other 2,150 acres, but those were underwater.

Jim and Diane are in their fifties, he brawny and ruddy-faced, she slender with an air of mischief. Given the choice, they both prefer to deliver a sentence with a chuckle rather than with a serious look, even when they're explaining how their

farm has been almost entirely swallowed. Like so many here, they tell their story with an air of incredulity, perhaps still in shock despite 18 years of flooding.

The lowlands on the south side of the farm were part of what people had always called the "lake bottom," but before 1993 it had been dry land—hay fields, pasture, even some crop acreage. Same with the areas people referred to as "banks." Most people considered these names just vestiges of the lake's glacial origins—artifacts, not omens. The farm's main house was built in 1904, and as far as anyone knew water had never come near it.

In 2002, the farmhouse was moved up the hill to drier land. Sitting in the living room there last spring, Jim told me, "I never in my wildest dreams thought in 20 years I'd be chased away, only to watch it all disappear even more. I never thought I'd see it *actually* become the bottom of a lake. And who knows when it will stop?"

The day before we spoke, there were winds Jim judged at 40 miles per hour. Coming across nearly eight miles of water, they sent waves to crash on what remains of the paddocks that front the farm's old, red barn. As he recounted this, a rare storm passed over him and his face darkened.

"It just chewed the shit out of the shoreline," he said with exasperation. "The lake was like a giant excavator: The waves hit, pull back, and it's not clear water, it's brown. The waves out there are brown—that's *land* in them."

The Yris are not alone. It's almost hard to find a farmer in the area who has *not* lost some land since the lake began rising. Jeff Frith of the Devils Lake Basin Joint Water Resource Board calculates that 164,000 acres of farmland have been lost across the region since 1993. Government payments are available to make up for flooded land that has been planted two out of the last four years, but for

those acres that have gone underwater for the long term, there is no compensation. The burn is that landowners must continue paying taxes on their property or risk ceding ownership to the government. It's a gamble of sorts, since ownership really matters only if the land reverts to being land. For years most farmers continued to pay, but recently that has begun to shift. The cropland and pasture have become a distant memory.

NEXT: From farming to fishing—the rise of a new industry

A February 2011 study by North Dakota State University calculated that the ongoing flood will cause the region \$194.4 million in losses this year, stemming almost entirely from lost agricultural production. For a population this small, that's a huge hit. And yet at the same time, a bittersweet trade-off is taking place, as the rising waters allow the growth of a new, albeit much smaller, market: tourism.

Even when it was small, Devils Lake was a popular fishing spot, but since 1993 it has become a destination for anglers from all over the region. Many of the landmarks that have disappeared are now reappearing on fishing maps of the lake, as angling hot spots with names like "Howards Farm" and "Haybale Bay." Most renowned is the site of old County Road 0322, which used to lead out of Minnewaukan to a popular state park. In a premonition sometime before the flooding began, the county raised the road what seemed like a ridiculous 12 feet above the lakebed. Today the road is 14 feet underwater, and on contour maps it has been renamed "The Golden Highway": its steep slopes are a perfect habitat for walleye, and fishing guides go there when they need reliable bites for their clients.

Accompanying the fishing is an alternate economy in the form of bait shops and guide services, resorts and RV parks. The capital infusion is welcome, but the shift toward a tourist economy comes with a strange transformation of the community and landscape. As houses are torn down because of flooding, often the land is sold for pennies to people from Fargo or Minneapolis, who set up trailers and use the lots as fishing camps. On the dry side of the K-12 school in Minnewaukan, a motel has taken over an entire neighborhood block. There's no restaurant in town anymore, but the bait shop is open daily.

I asked what happens if the lake recedes, if their farm ceases to be the prime waterfront location that it is now. They said they hope that their regular customers would keep coming back.

In 2002, the year after the Yris bought their farm, they went to the bank in spring as usual. But this time, instead of asking for the customary farm loan to cover seeds and fertilizer, they had in hand a business plan for an endeavor called "West Bay Resort"—and a request for far more capital than they had ever borrowed before. As they tell the story, the banker was unfazed. His only question: "When do you need the money?"

The Yris brought in three fishing cabins—all modular, so that if it didn't work out they could sell them off. But it did work, and soon thereafter they put in three more. Then an RV park with 30 spots, and 37 more planned. The latest expansion is turning their driveway into a satellite salesroom for Ice Castle Fishing House trailers, which they sell in partnership with a dealer in Minnesota.

"When we came up with the idea for the resort, we'd never done anything like this," Jim said. "We'd never written a business plan before. We'd never even *stayed* in a resort or a campground. But like they say, it's 'location, location, location, 'y'know?"

I asked him and Diane if they felt nervous about the decision, and Diane quickly answered no. "In fact," she said, "when we went to the bank finally, it was the first time I signed loan papers that I didn't feel nervous about."

At first Jim kept farming—he couldn't imagine not farming—but after a few years of success with the resort, he realized he couldn't do both. Spring was especially difficult, as planting came at the same time as prepping the resort for the summer season. In time both businesses fell behind, and he was forced to choose between them. In 2006 he rented out his land to a larger farming operation based in another county, and focused full-time on the resort.

With their son, DJ, they still keep cattle in the pasture alongside the lake. Jim still gets out on the old tractor to put up hay for the herd, or to move equipment around the resort. But does he miss being a professional farmer?

"No, I haven't missed it," he said, then corrected himself. "At least, I haven't missed the stress of it."

I asked what happens if the lake recedes, if their farm ceases to be the prime waterfront location that it is now. They said they hope that their regular customers would keep coming back because of the other benefits of their place—the quiet seclusion, the natural setting.

"I guess our thought is that if we do it right, we'll have a reputation that will mean people will still want to come," Jim said. "It wouldn't necessarily have to be a fishing resort, it could be a—what do you call it?—a getaway destination. And, what the heck, I'm 55. If it takes the lake 10 years to crash, I'll be ready to retire." In the moment he seemed eternally good-natured and optimistic.

But weeks after my visit, as I read an email from him, I could see another storm

passing over, darkening his brow. He wrote that the south winds were up to 40 mile per hour again, and the farm was sure to lose more ground. He told me that he was just hoping the loss would be measured "in feet and not acres."

As I read the email I recalled two wall hangings that decorate the Yri home. One read, "The years tell us much that the days never knew." The other, hanging in the office above where they take reservations for the resort, was more of a joke: "I hope our ship comes in before the dock rots."

This article was written with the support of the Alicia Patterson Foundation.

Images: Lisa M. Hamilton

The Complete Devils Lake Series:

- [Where the Roads End in Water: The Lake That Won't Stop Rising](#)
- [Flooded Lives: The Fight to Survive Devils Lake](#)
- [Spirit Lake Rising: Living With a Neverending Flood](#)

U.S.



One of the National Zoo's Newborn Panda Cubs Has Died

Giant panda Mei Xiang gave birth to the twin cubs over the weekend.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LISA M. HAMILTON is a writer and photographer who focuses on agriculture and rural communities around the world.

 [Twitter](#)
