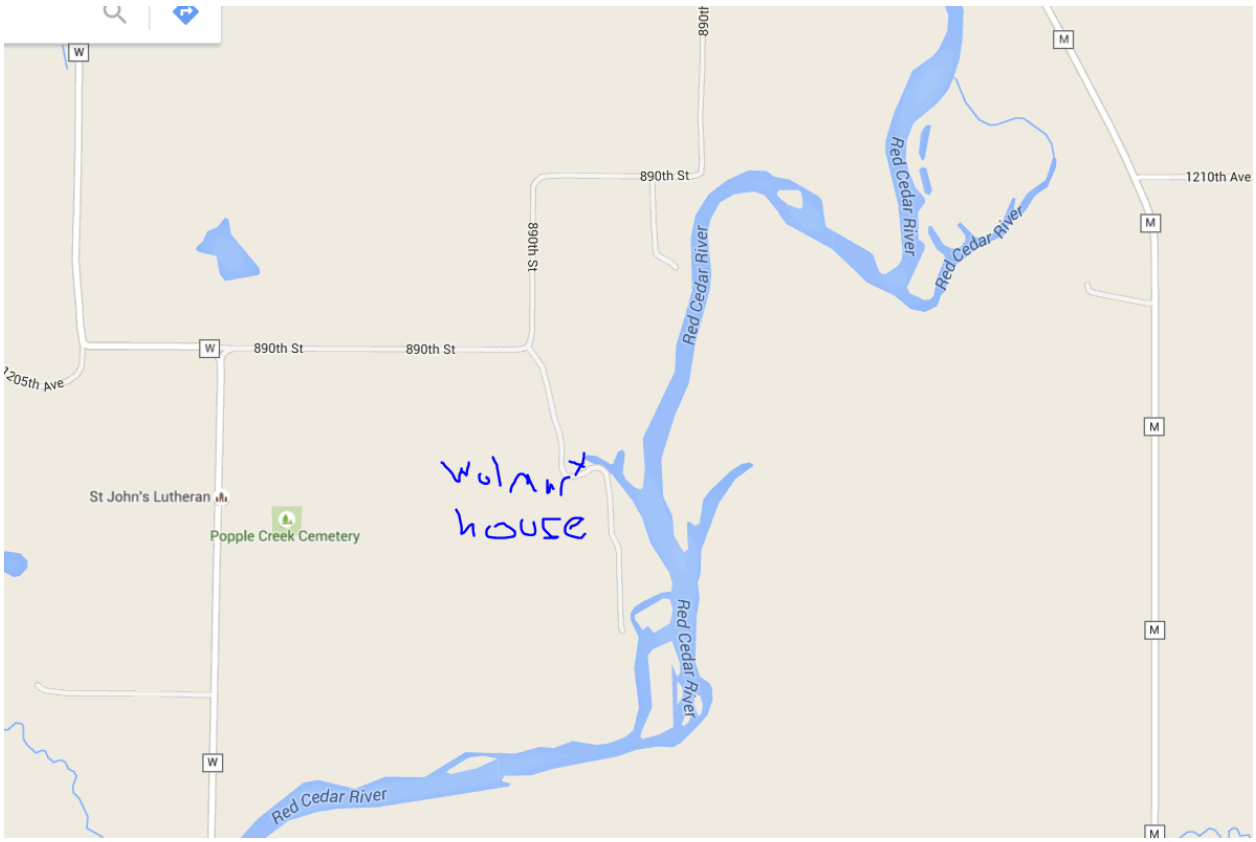
On The Banks Of The Red Cedar River In The 1930's

Written by Wolmar Stoffel about 2001





At the age of 2 years, our family moved from a farm in Cooks Valley, Wisconsin, to a farm in Popple Creek, Wisconsin, that bordered the Red Cedar river. The river was a big and exciting attraction to me at this young age. However, my mother being fearful that I and Rosemary, my younger sister, might drown was very adamant that we not go near the river without an adult to accompany us.



L to R : Kathern (yakesh) SToffel, Hellen Stoffel, Wolmar Stoffel, Rosemary Stoffel , Romona Yakesh, Felex Yakesh - taken at Popple creek FARM WI - Sept 1931

Most of our farm was located on the West bank of the river. However, there was about 3 or 4 acres on the other East side of the river. All of this acreage was wooded and only a few feet above the level of the level of the river. Due to the difficulty of getting farm machinery across the river, it was never cropped. To go by road, the land was about 8 or 9 miles distant, and I doubt if one could get public access to it. It was hard to drive the cattle back and forth across the river so we didn't pasture it. However, the exception was whenever a real hard drought occurred. Since the land was low and adjacent the river there was usually some grass there for grazing even during extreme droughts. I remember helping drive the cattle across the river on several occasions and how difficult the task. The cattle were initially reluctant to go into the water and had to be guided across to prevent them from wandering along the river. Also, since it was not fenced, someone had to remain with them while they grazed. If a cow wandered away it could get lost forever. Due to the time and work required using this land was done only during dire drought emergencies.

In early Spring, as the snow melted, the river level often rose to flood stage. The water covered about 1/5 of our farm - the lower river bottom land. The river often rose 10 feet or more to become a raging torrent, that was about a mile in width. Anything inadvertently left near the river floated away. My father (William Nicholas Stoffel) always had a boat. Unless he moved the

boat to higher ground and tied it up, it floated away during flood stage. I remember one fine boat that my Grandfather, John Yakesh. built for us that was left anchored near the river at flood time. It quite naturally floated away. About a week later, after the water level receded, we found portions of it about a half mile down the river. The anchor, consisting of a pail filled with concrete attached to a chain, was dragged along by the current until it became wedged in tree roots along the banks of the river. The strong relentless current then slammed the boat against nearby trees until it was completely smashed. Only the anchor, chain and two wooded sides of the boat remained.

After the flood was over, my father would usually search the lowlands for other boats that floated down river. However, the ones that he found were usually very battered up and required a lot of repair, or were subsequently reclaimed by their original owners. Occasionally we did acquire a serviceable boat which was not reclaimed.

The river at flood stage was a terrifying thing to behold, particularly to a young child. The roar of the current and the power was exciting. One year my father unwisely left his wood pile too near the river. Even though it was at a fairly high elevation, the river rose to surround it and started washing it away. My father tried to salvage it by wrapping woven wire fence around it. However, the effort was futile, and we watched as all of the wood he had cut, sawed, and split for heating our house the following Winter floated away with the current.

We pastured our livestock on the low lands adjacent the river. This required a fence along the river to keep the cows from wandering away. During flood stage many trees and assorted debris floated along in the strong current. The many trees and logs became entangled in our fence and either ripped it away or accumulated on it. Later we would spend days removing the logs and trees and repairing the fences, realizing that the whole operation would probably be repeated the next year.

The river was a great source of excitement and pleasure. My father and I would go fishing quite frequently when a lull in farm work permitted it. We would first dig for angleworms, and then catch minnows in a small creek on our farm that ran into the river. We would then get into our boat and my father would " pole " the boat to one or more of his favorite fishing holes. Occasionally when the fish weren't biting, we would go up one of the many small streams that feed into the river until it got too small to go any farther. This would open up new areas which I had never seen before. The fishing was usually quite good so I usually caught fish. These fishing trips were very pleasant and exciting for me. There were several islands on the river that I explored and I used to imagine that I was the first person to set foot on them. We sometimes would go a mile or more up stream or down stream from our farm to fish. Since the rive was quite shallow in places, an outboard motor was unusable. Besides, we couldn't afford one. Occasionally we would load the boat on a trailer and traveled several miles up river, and then float down, fishing as we drifted with the current. The ever changing scenery of the river was a great source of excitement and pleasure at my youthful stage.

From time to time, we had a hired man to help with the farm work. My father and him would work hard and fast so that they could have time for fishing on the river. One young

neighbor named Jesse Dire was a frequent hired hand who enjoyed fishing immensely. We all got along great! For a time my father obtained the assistance of a young man from a Catholic orphanage near La Crosse. His name was Alfred, and he stayed with us for several years. He was a born sportsmen and spent all of his leisure time fishing. Alfred came to stay with us when he was about 15 years of age. At first, everything was fine. However, as he grew older he became very belligerent and refused to help around the farm. At about age 19 he started threatening my father. I recall on one occasion he picked up a heavy steel rod and bent it over his knee. He stated that he might do the same with my father. This made quite an impression on my father, our neighbors, friends and relatives. Many of them tried but none could straighten the rod. The neighbors became frightened of Alfred and urged my father to send him back. My mother, fearful for our safety, called the orphanage and asked them to come and take Alfred back, which they did.

Mary Yakesh, my aunt, frequently visited us while we lived in Popple Creek. She loved to swim and would take us children swimming in a fairly deep portion of the river, She helped me learn to swim. The river had a lot of weeds growing on the bottom, which restricted where we could swim. Mary, my mother, Rosemary and I usually spent a portion of out swim time pulling weeds which would then float away with the current. After I learned to swim, I acquired a new sense of self confidence. I realized that I could now go anywhere on the river without the fear of drowning.

Times were very hard in the 1930's, since this was in the midst of the great depression. As farmers, we raised our own food from the garden, raised chickens and eggs, and used all of the fish that we caught in the river. We had to buy flour, salt, and sugar for baking, and cloth for clothing. In order to supplement our cash income, my father would run a trap line in the Winter along the river. He usually caught quite a few muskrat, which he skinned and sold the furs. I remember one time when he caught a mink, which was worth about $20. This was a huge amount of money at the time and therefore was quite an event. He would check his traps daily. Sometimes other unethical trappers would get to his traps before he did, and take both the trap and the animal in the trap. There was very little that he could to prevent this loss unless the thief was caught in the act. Trapping was done in the Winter and early Spring. At times the ice in the river would break up, and float down stream until it jammed up at some constriction in the river. This would serve as a temporary dam and the water would back up and start to rise. One several occasions my father had to run to escape the rising water.

My mother was a very devout Catholic who insisted that we all go to mass every Sunday, and also attend other religious services during Lent and Advent. The closest Catholic church was 16 miles away in Cooks Valley. Attending services took quite an effort, particularly in Winter when there was a lot of snow on the roads, and in Spring when the roads were very muddy. Few of the roads were hard surfaced in those days. As us children got older, she became quite concerned that we weren't able to attend a Catholic school. She began making plans for us to stay with my grandfather John Yakesh in Cooks Valley.

To her great relief, we were offered my grandfather's farm located in Cooks Valley, when he retired. The farm was located about 3 miles from a Catholic school. The offer was eagerly accepted, and we moved away from the banks of the Red Cedar. I was 10 and a half years of age and in the fourth grade at the time.

After living on the farm for about 8 years, we moved back to Cooks Valley. My Grandfather had a good farm and he wanted to retire. His son, Vern, did not want to be a farmer, preferring to relocate to Washington state. He decided that the Wisconsin climate was too cold for him. The farm was offered to us if we assumed the mortgage. My mother was overjoyed to move away from Popple Creek. She was a very devout Catholic and was concerned that we were not attending a Catholic school. There were no Catholic churches in Popple Creek since nearly all of the people were of Norwegian descent. We had to trail 16 miles to go to church, which was a tremendous distance at that time. The roads were mostly gravel or clay, and the cars were not very dependable.