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John Stallard

To Save a Lake

MAYBE SOME OF THE THINGS the television family of Little House on the Prairie does seem monumental in effort. That story occurred in the latter half of the past century, but a group of people from the same place the Little House author was born is attempting something a lot tougher in this age of 1975 — save a great lake.

Laura Ingals Wilder, the Little House author, was born in a log cabin seven miles from Pepin, Wis. Her first book tells about a trip into Pepin by wagon.

Lake Pepin is a 30-mile long, three-to-four miles wide section of the Mississippi River which the Ingals family crossed just a few hours before the ice broke up on their journey westward.

They still watch for the ice to break up on Lake Pepin each spring, although it is usually done in the first instance by a diesel-powered, ice-breaking river tug.

During the more than 100 years since Laura lived at Pepin, the lake has been abused, spoiled, raped, desecrated and spit in by just about every kind of person who went near it.

Although it is still one of the most attractive places in the United States (I know because I live near Nelson, just nine miles south — and the United States Travel Assn., a few years ago voted the section between LaCrosse and Red Wing as the second most scenic drive in the United States), Lake Pepin is in danger of dying.

It is a relatively shallow body of water and acts as a kind of catch basin for anything thrown into the Mississippi River from the north.

Although people around Lake Pepin have become conscientious in recent years about polluting the lake, not many people northward have. It seems that the bigger the groups or cities are, the more reckless they are about pollution. And little Pepin (popula-

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tion about 750) amounts to little more than a voice in the wind.

The Twin Cities, about 70 miles north, periodically dump in millions of gallons of raw sewerage, always claiming they can't help it because of a strike or equipment breakdowns or something.

There is a current problem of PCB's (polychorinated biphenyls), which has seriously curtailed fishing in the lake. The Food and Drug Administration said tests show that fish from the lake contain far more than the allowed level of PCB's. They have closed commercial fishing of carp on the lake (but not catfish) and recommend that no one eat more than one meal of fish from the lake each week.

That discovery was made more than two months ago when the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency decided it would conduct a search for the source of the pollution, said to be somewhere north of Pepin. To date, they say they can't find anything.

What it all amounts to is the same kind of foot-dragging and piddling-around that we are accustomed to when the government has to crack down on big powers.

Somebody could lower the boom on Minneapolis and St. Paul for dumping raw sewerage into the Mississippi and somebody could find the source of the PCB pollution — if they really wanted to.

Nobody can fool around more or waste more money than the government when the people don't do something. As an example, a governmental group called Great River Environmental Action Team, in cahoots with both the Corps of Engineers (which contends that its pollution or dredging actions on navigable waters can't be governed by states), and the Upper Mississippi River Basin Commission began a multi-million-dollar study of the Mississippi last December. It is a study dragging out over three years (with a great public relations program designed to appease the people) and nothing will be done after the study for four or five years.

Meanwhile, Lake Pepin deteriorates. One of Wisconsin's largest bodies of water fades toward the same history as Lake Erie.

THE PEOPLE OF PEPIN and the surrounding area need help in a gigantic fight. They have formed a group called Citizens for the Preservation of Lake Pepin, Box 61, Pepin, Wis., 54759. They need your support, including donations for expenses, and have supplied a list of people to whom you can write and demand action:

Sen. William Proxmire, 52412 Senate Office Bldg., Washington, D.C., 20510.

Sen. Gaylord Nelson, 221 Senate Office Bldg., Washington, D.C., 20510.

Rep. Alvin Baldus, 109 Cannon Bldg., Washington, D.C., 20515.

Gov. Patrick Lucey, State Capitol, Madison, Wis., 53710.

Sen. Walter Mondale of Minnesota, Senate Office Bldg., Washington, D.C., 20510.

Sen. Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, Senate Office Bldg., Washington, D.C., 20510.

Gov. Wendell Anderson of Minnesota, State Capitol, St. Paul, Minn., 55109.

Rep. Albert Quie of Minnesota, Cannon Bldg., Washington, D.C., 20515.

Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, 1935 W. County Rd., B2, Roseville, Minn., 55113.

You can also get on Jeff Smoller, Gov. Lucey's press secretary. He owns Wisconsin property near Lake Pepin.

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