

The Dam Tenders

By Kay Krans

The Rest Lake Dam was a destination for fishermen to meet guides, obtain lodging, and travel out on the waters of the Manitowish River. It was built to become an important passage for getting the great white pine logs of the Manitowish region to the sawmills downstream and later helping harness waterpower to create electricity. The people who worked as dam tenders played a significant role in making the dam do its work. A dam keeper is responsible for the operation of a dam as well as making sure the dam and structures associated with the dam are maintained. The Rest Lake dam tenders seemed to live or work at or near the dam. The dam in our community has been referred to as Rest Lake Dam, Weyerhaeuser's Rest Lake Dam, Henry's Dam, and Manitowish Dam.

By 1892, Perry Powers was the first known dam tender, and he lived at the logging camp near the dam. During the summers, the logging camp was empty of loggers, and Captain C.H. Henry, his boss and a lumberman from Eau Claire, ran the camp as a sort of "summer hotel." Captain Henry directed Rest Lake Dam operations for the Chippewa River Improvement and Log Driving Company, starting in 1887. According to a *Forest and Stream* article (February 25, 1892), sportsmen found it a "pleasant and unique stopping place." Captain Henry and his family spent part of their summer at the place. Others living at the camp were two cooks, a clerk, Captain Henry's "land-looker" (i.e., a land speculator) and several fishing guides for hire. Fishermen stayed there, paying for room and board. They enjoyed sleeping in the bunk lined with fresh hemlock boughs, warm blankets, and the luxury of a roof over their heads. Captain Henry was very friendly and occasionally invited fishermen staying at the camp to go fishing in lakes that were not even on maps yet. In the evening, fishermen guests, the dam keeper, guides, and other staff would sit around the wood stove and tell stories of the day's fishing and work of the staff.

In 1899, Israel Prouix was dam tender, living at Rest Lake Dam with his wife. He was from Chippewa Falls and described as of French descent and a very friendly man. In 1904, working with the Commissioners of Fisheries, Prouix planted trout in Papoose Creek and walleye in Rest Lake in addition to his work with the Rest Lake Dam. By 1906, it was announced in the *Montreal River Miner*... "that Mr. and Mrs. Prouix will be leaving Rest Lake Dam and moving back to Chippewa Falls." In a 1907 article, "Birching in the Big Woods," written by Shields, there is reference to a group of fishermen entering the dam keeper shack and sitting down to a wonderful meal made by a logging camp cook.

By 1908, Al Miller is found to be the dam tender, and little is known about Miller.

According to long-time resident Jim Bauer's master's thesis, Walcott Johnson started coming to work at the dam as early as 1908, and in the Spider Lake Directory of 1928, he is still listed as dam tender. His daughter and wife were living at the dam with him. His daughter would become Mrs. Winnie Young and a pioneer businesswoman, running in the beginning a general store and later, along with Marie Zimmerman, a resort known as the Win-Mar. Early on, cabins of the old logging camp were part of the resort rentals. It is believed that she helped her father with dam tending, and after the passing of Walcott Johnson, his wife Lorraine Johnson became the official dam tender until as late as 1938. Mrs. Johnson passed away in the 1940s.

The next known dam tender was Arvid Seppala (b.1890-d.1974), relative of Lillian Rayala. He owned a small resort near the dam. In addition to being the dam tender, Seppala was a guide and a mason. He was described as being in charge of the timbers at the Rest Lake Dam in order to raise and lower water levels. It is said that he went through the dam two times and survived.

The next dam tender that we can identify is Calvin LaPorte, who began his job as dam tender in 1947. LaPorte was a master recordkeeper and kept a precise journal of the dam, including local, state and world events. In addition, on the far-right edge of his daily dam record page, he might add notes about the death of a resident or the fact that the trees were at peak color. Bill Dietz, the present dam tender, remembers LaPorte writing in the record book other events besides the dam data, like the day actor Burl Ives passed away. He also might tell of the mischief of teenagers who might throw timbers needed to measure the height of the water into the lake, and he would have to spend time searching for those important pieces of wood. Dwight Westmore helped LaPorte if he needed to be out of town or on vacation. Most of the time, LaPorte would take vacations in the winter when there was little for Westmore to do but make a daily trip to check the dam. LaPorte's last journal entry was March 24, 1995.

Bill Dietz began his training under LaPorte in 1987, and 2024 is his 37th year as Rest Lake dam tender. He grew up near the dam and loved to wander over to the dam and look out at the lake. One beautiful summer day, when he was about 10, Dietz was skipping rocks in the water on the Rest Lake side of the dam. Suddenly, there was LaPorte standing behind him. He never heard him approach until he spoke. In a very friendly manner, Cal asked Bill, "Are you having a good day skipping rocks? You know if you throw too many rocks, the water won't be able to go over the dam!" Dietz said he never skipped rocks there again. Dietz remembers LaPorte as a great mentor and meticulous recordkeeper. Dietz's recordkeeping is a little different because of modern technology. He checks the dam every day, uses a computer spread sheet to track the daily levels, and emails data directly to the Xcel Energy Hydro Department to update its website. As dam tenders before him, he enjoys his work and is very dedicated to keeping the dam safe and the water level correct.