

## **A Look Back to the Beginnings of the PMWC**

Forgive me, but I am tempted to start with:

“It was a dark and stormy night” ...

While it was dark, the snow storm had already passed: However, another storm was just getting started there in the kitchen of Buck Gotschall’s home on the Pere Marquette’s Middle Branch.

A small gathering of anglers, riparians, locals and conservation-minded river users, concerned over the proliferation of small impoundments on the feeder branches of the Pere Marquette River; had led to this meeting being called. (Horvath, Connamara, Baker...)

As well as my aging mind can recall, those there included, Buck, Jimmy Nolph, DNR deputy director Carl Kidder, Larry Westerville, Jack Jarvis and a Middle Branch riparian Warren Mullen who was clearly on the warpath over a new impoundment upstream from his property. He wanted to know what could be done; as it turned out, not much – at least then.

According to Warren, the upstream owner had closed off the gates to his new impoundment and all of a sudden a stream holding brook and brown trout was mostly dry bed with a bare trickle of water coming down. Even when some overflow finally wet the stream again, it would be warmed too much to sustain a viable trout population

Also at this meeting was Frank Mainville, outdoor editor of the Lansing *State Journal*, and this write, there to listen to the story of this increasing impact of impoundments on feeder tributaries. Mainville went on to write an award-winning series on this problem – one plainly stemming from the fact that many of these small feeders were never considered navigable water (under the still-extant-use limit) and thus not covered by the same existing water laws that gave protection to waters deemed navigable.

The questions of rights-of-use as navigable waters were settled after a near decade of court in-fighting (the famous Ne-Bo-Shon battle, and Attorney General vs. Taggart cases) that finally settled the right of fishing and boating navigable waters as public trust rights.

None of those court decisions addressed non-navigable waters of the state, and it was these PM feeder waters being impounded that raised the alarm for those at this first and subsequent meetings.

Because of the concerns raised at that first meeting, the need for a watershed council was realized and such was formed, with Buck Gotschall voted as first president. It was decided to form as a non-governmental entity, since those formed under local government could be subject to political roadblocks.

These early council members found that there was a need to address many watershed problems beyond impoundments. Over those first years the Council had to wrestle with problems of trespass, increasing canoe traffic and related conflicts, littering, rowdiness, the move to add the river to the National Wild Rivers program (at first very much opposed but since then, most now consider it proved a very good thing).

Problems of pollution, lamprey, poaching, lack of fish habitat, and erosion of banks and the resulting smothering sand load needed addressing. Need I add the growing problem of salmon and steelhead snagging and resulting lack of respect for the river?

What was seen as a major need was a revision and strengthening of the Inland Lakes and Streams Act, and all related water laws that affected watersheds. In this goal the Council became a leading member of a growing coalition of other river protection entities, and remains so today.

New concerns arise, but the Council is in place to address these early on. The problem related to groundwater withdrawal just the latest of these. Being on the ground early on, when new threats arise, makes the value of the Council apparent.

There is far too much for this writer to add to this short history of the early days of the PMWC's beginnings. It's enough to say I am glad I was there, and to be a part of it. As a journalist, I was not able to continue in my past association to avoid journalistic conflicts or favoritism. But I have been very proud of all this Council and its partners have accomplished over the years since that.

...”Dark and Stormy night on the Middle Branch.”

Don Ingle

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