14 Mile Creek Watershed

A History

Michael Goc

Adams County Historical Society

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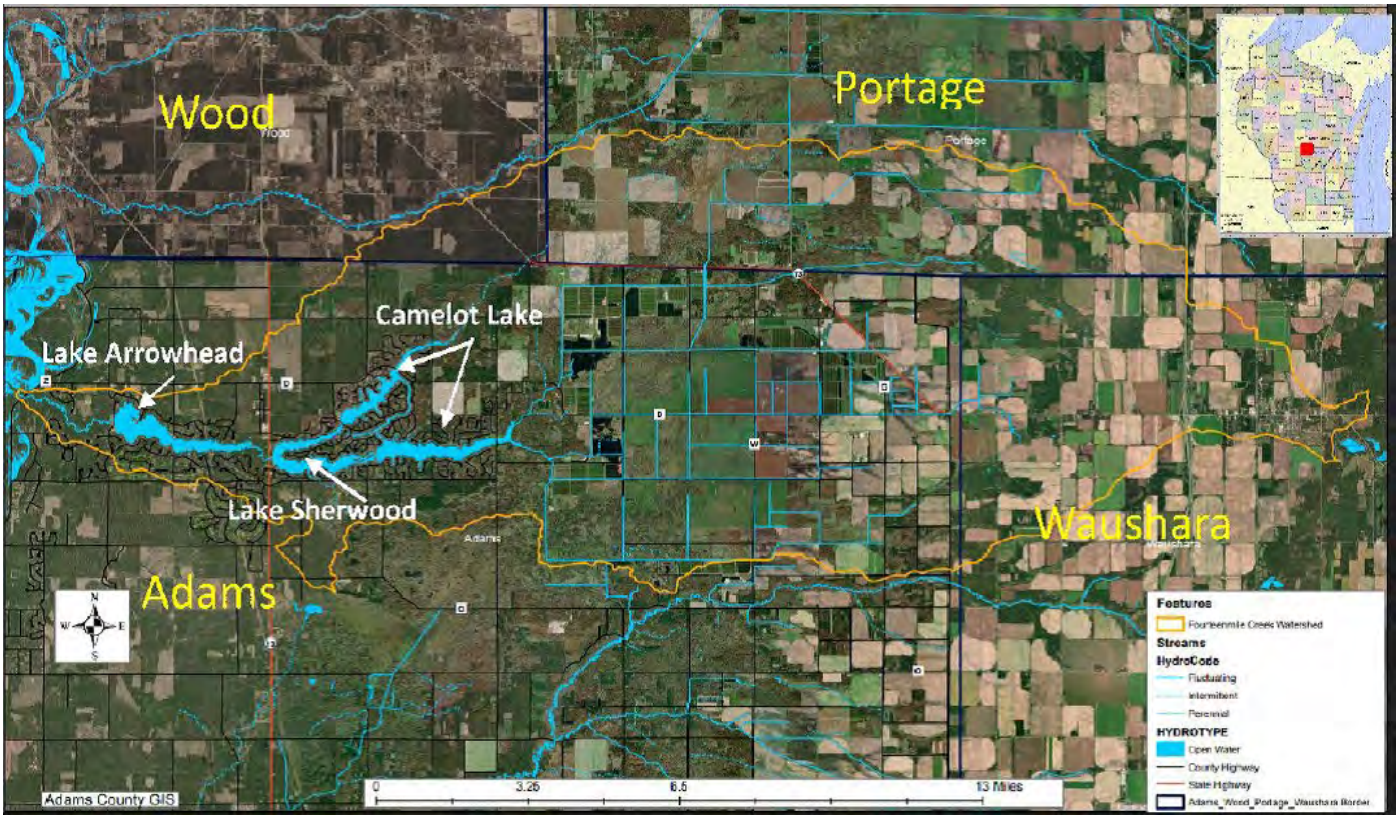
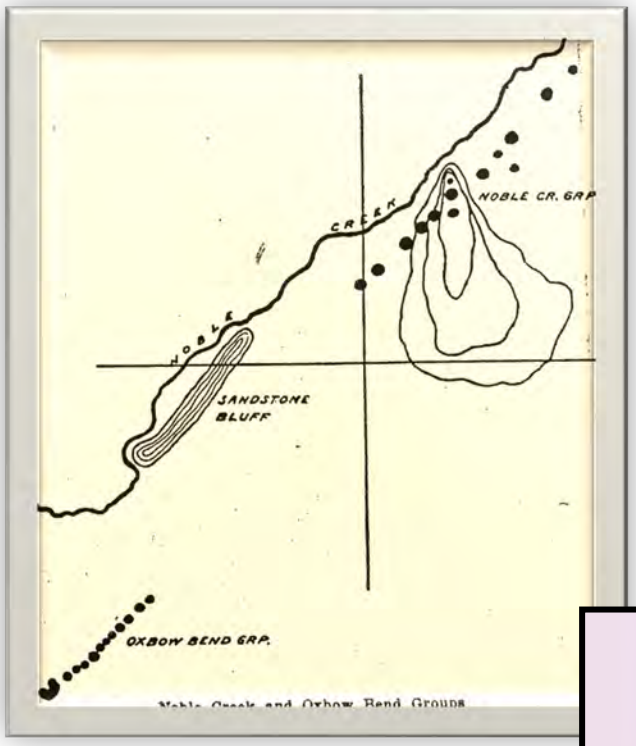


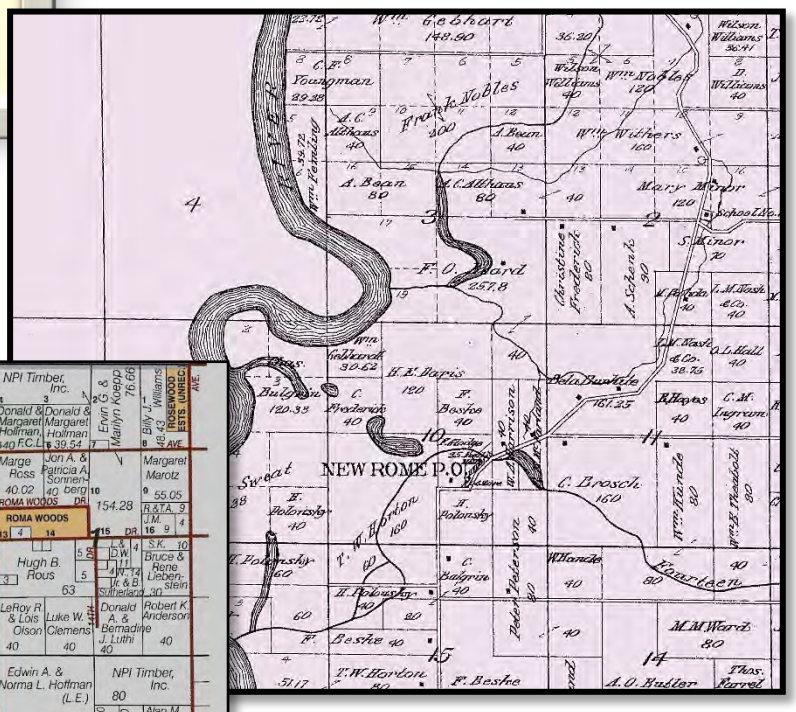
The 14 Mile Creek watershed is covers 55,417 acres principally in the Adams County towns of Rome and Leola, but extends into southern Portage and western Waushara County. Although centered on a once free-flowing river, the watershed has been altered by human action for almost as long as humans have lived within its boundaries.

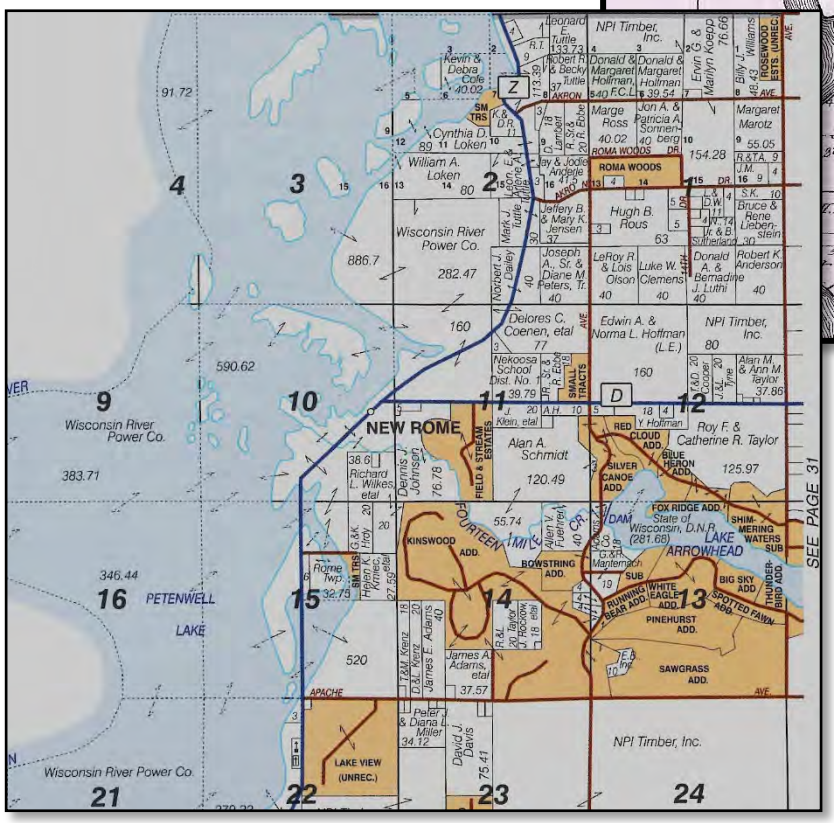
The landscape of the watershed was shaped by Glacial Lake Wisconsin that covered much of the central part of the state from 18,000 to 14,000 years ago. When the lake abruptly drained it left behind the deep sand soil that covers the Town of Rome and the peaty wetlands of Leola and Buena Vista and the sandy loams in western Waushara County.

The indigenous people who came to the area after the glacial lake drained, used fire to maintain the pine barrens, oak savannas and wet grasslands in the watershed. They were the first of the long line of landscape managers to alter the terrain to meet their needs for food, shelter and security.



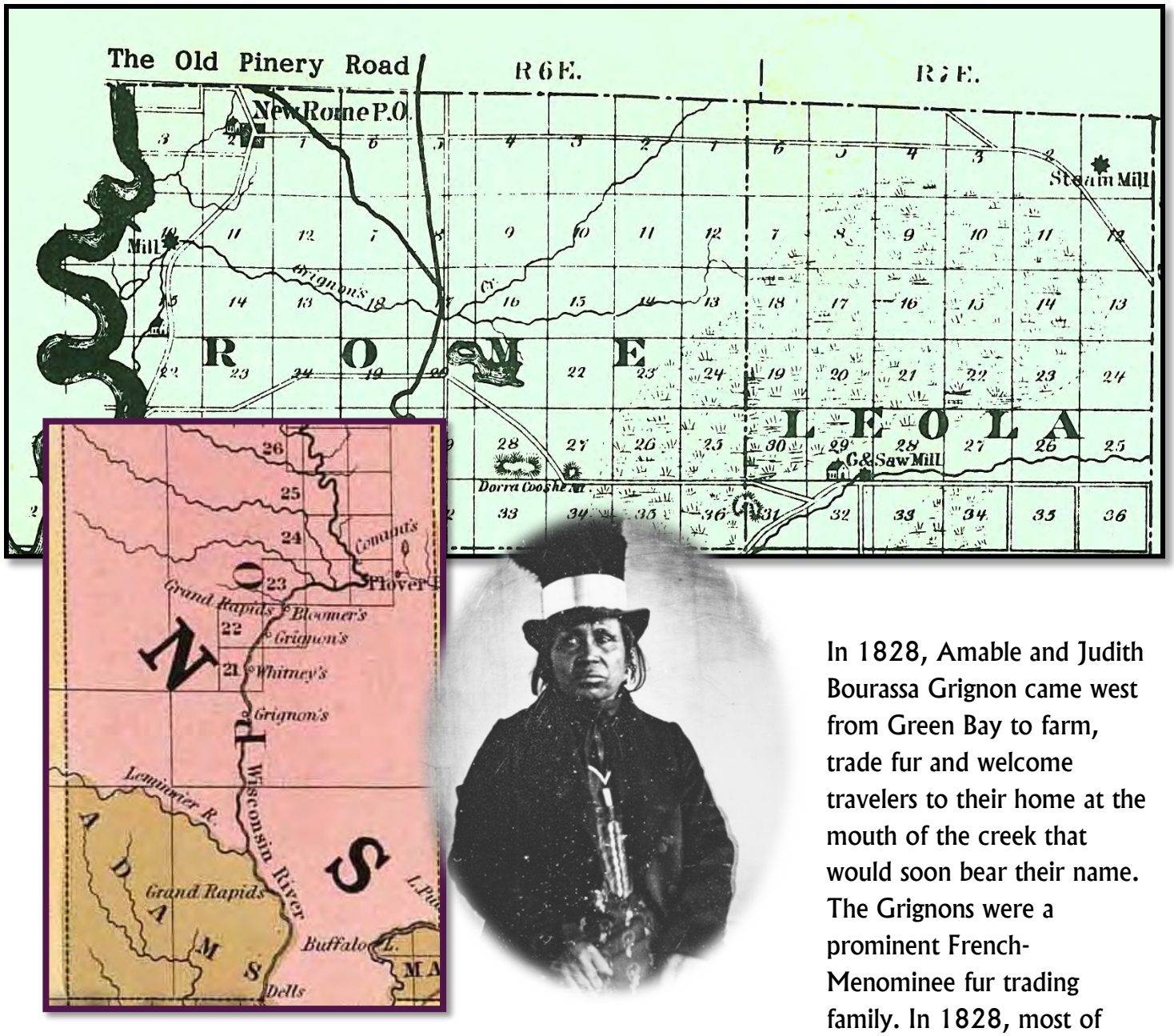
In 1917, state archeologists found 26 burial and effigy mounds along Noble Creek in Section Three, Rome (left). About one thousand years old, most of the burial mounds were dome shaped and about the size of a compact car. One effigy mound was sixty feet long. They were among the 666 mounds located in Adams County at the time. A 1900 plat map (below) shows where Noble Creek and the mounds were located before Petenwell Flowage flooded them over. As the newer plat map shows, the mounds were/are in the vicinity of Akron Drive and County Z. Mounds were built to honor the dead and mark the site as significant for their creators.





The mound building era ended about 800 years ago and was followed by the Woodland Culture period where people combined corn, bean and squash farming with hunting, fishing and gathering of wild foods. They spent about one half the year in large villages with as many as a thousand people. After storing the farm harvest, they dispersed into smaller groups to hunt, fish and gather. Considering the infertility of its soil, no evidence of indigenous farming has been found in the 14 Mile Creek Watershed. Woodland people, including the ancestors of the Ho-Chunk, fished in the creek and the Wisconsin River, hunted prairie chicken and gathered cranberries and other foods on the marshes. They lived in this fashion until the late 1600s when French voyageurs from Canada introduced diseases that more than decimated their population and their traditional culture. The survivors found employment in the fur trade.

Beaver pelts were the bread and butter of the fur trade. The fur was processed into felt for hats, belts and other items. In time, beaver were all but extirpated from Wisconsin, including the 14 Mile Creek, with significant alterations to the watershed. Once marked by a series of dams and small ponds the creek and its tributaries became free flowing streams, lined with the trees beavers had once removed. By the time American settlement began in the 1850s, the creek was a cold water stream lined with white pine and other trees mature enough for logging and milling.



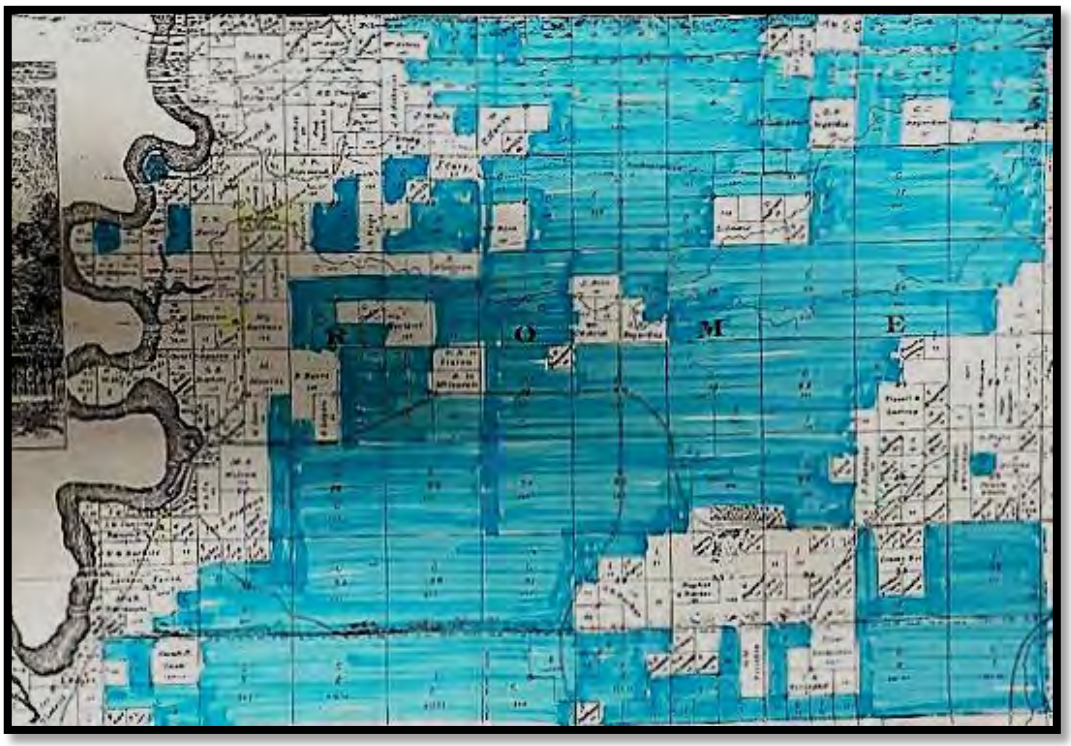
In 1828, Amable and Judith Bourassa Grignon came west from Green Bay to farm, trade fur and welcome travelers to their home at the mouth of the creek that would soon bear their name. The Grignons were a prominent French-Menominee fur trading family. In 1828, most of central Wisconsin was still "Indian Land" nominally controlled by the Ho-Chunk and Menominee people. Indeed, Oshkosh (above) the principal chief of the Menominee, kept a hunting camp on an island in the Wisconsin upstream of the Grignon place.

In 1836, both tribes ceded a strip of land to the United States along the Wisconsin from Nekoosa to Wausau. Water-powered sawmills were soon built up the river and cut lumber was rafted down stream. The Grignon place became a stop on the Pinery Road that crossed Adams County from Portage to Nekoosa. Loggers, millhands and, later, settlers used it to travel back and forth. Amable Grignon died in 1845 and Judith moved north to end her days in Wood County. When federal surveyors marked the river valley in the 1850s, they started at what is now downtown Wisconsin Rapids and noted that Grignon Creek was fourteen miles south. Grignon's Creek became 14 Mile, though the old name turned up on maps as late as the 1900s.

In 1848, the Menominee ceded their land in central Wisconsin to the United States, thereby opening it to settlement. The watershed was surveyed in the mid-1850s and white Americans started to purchase land here. At the time, large numbers of people were leaving western New York, boarding Great Lakes steamboats and landing at ports on the Lake Michigan shore of Wisconsin. People from Rome, New York settled along 14 Mile Creek. In 1854, they petitioned the Adams County board to create a town named after their old home in New York. They built the first dam and mill on 14 Mile Creek at a place they called New Rome, now under Petenwell Flowage west of County Roads Z and D. By 1860, Rome had 134 residents.

Leola was settled at the same time. It is so named because one of the committee members organizing the town was courting a woman named Leola and that is the name they sent to the county board. By 1860, Leola had 155 residents.

The Ho-Chunk never left. Although coerced into signing a treaty ceding their land in 1837, many tribal members did not accept the loss. Starting in 1840 and continuing until 1870, federal contractors and the army captured Ho Chunk men, women and children and deported them to reservations in Iowa and Nebraska. Many returned to their homeland and laid low in the sparsely-populated sections of Adams County, like Rome and Leola. They remain here to this day.



This crude graphic is drafted onto an 1880 plat map of Rome. The areas marked in blue are still in the ownership of the federal and state governments, or have gone to the county due to tax delinquency. It is significant because it shows that, nearly thirty years after the town opened for American settlement, most of the land was unclaimed. It is testimony to the infertility of the soil that discouraged farming. People did live close to the Wisconsin River, in places along 14 Mile and Spring Creeks and in the southeastern part of the town. The land in the other towns in the watershed was nearly all in private ownership, but still sparsely populated.

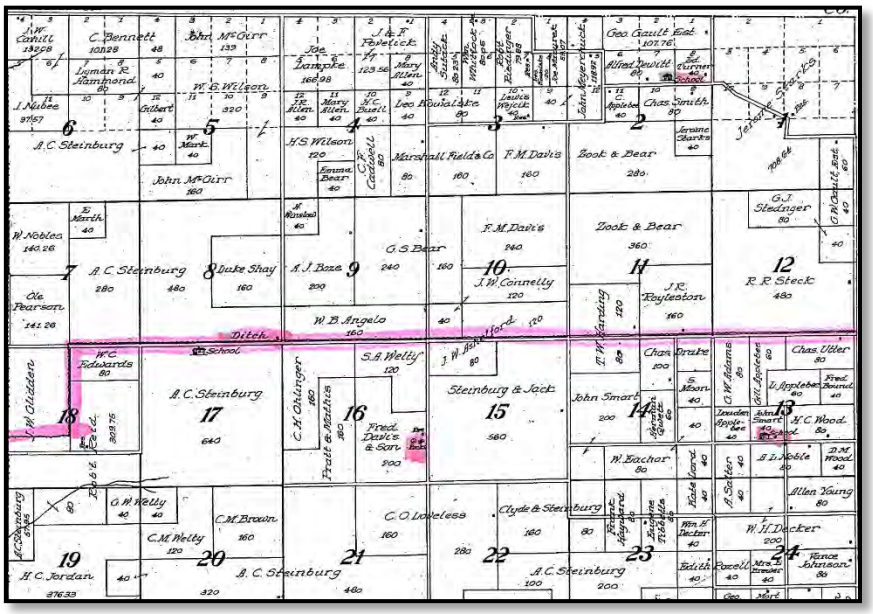
In the 1880s, people from central and eastern Europe—Czechs and Poles—settled on the vacant land in the watershed. By 1900 Rome had 654 people and Leola 384. At right is the "Bohemian Hall" in Friendship where members from all over the county of the Western Bohemian Federation met for fun and fellowship until the 1970s. The 1890s were an optimistic time in the watershed, as the immigrants brought hope for success at making a living in a hard place.

Wherever they had access to them, as in the 14 Mile Creek Watershed, farmers made good use of marshes. Marsh hay was so important a source of feed, especially for work horses, that even farmers who did not own marshland, paid landowners for access to harvest the grass and sedge. August and early September, with the marshes naturally drained and dry, was the time for marsh hay-making. When the water rose again in early winter or spring, some farmers followed the ancient practice of burning the marshes to reduce brush, keep trees from sprouting, and to rejuvenate the grasses. As Aldo Leopold wrote in his *Marshland Elegy*:

"These haymeadow days were the Arcadian age for marsh dwellers. Man and beast, plant and soil lived on and with each other in mutual toleration, to the mutual benefit of all. The marsh might have kept on producing hay and prairie chickens, deer and muskrat, crane-music and cranberries forever."

In the 1900s, what Leopold called "the drainage dream" took hold in marshlands throughout Wisconsin. Contractors, political leaders and landowners came to believe that if the marshes were drained they could be converted to raise corn and other crops that would be more profitable than wild hay. To finance the construction of many miles of ditches drainage districts were organized to levy taxes on the landowners who would benefit from the work. The Leola Drainage District was organized in 1901 and by 1905, 40 miles of ditches were dug to drain about 15,000 acres of marsh at a cost of about $3.5 million in 2025 dollars.The main Leola Ditch (below) crossed the town along what is now County Highway D before turning south to join the 14 Mile Creek. Lateral ditches extended south into Leola and north to drain the Buena Vista Marsh as well. Now, instead of water slowly making its way out of marshes into the creeks it rose, fell and drained downstream.

Farmers plowed the drained marsh and made a decent crop for a few years until the soil wore out. Yields fell, taking farm incomes with them. Without taxes from farmers, drainage districts in Leola and Beuna Vista went broke. In the 1930s, as part of New Deal conservation projects, dams were constructed to control the flow through the ditches.



Much of the remaining marsh became part of Leola Marsh State Conservation Area.

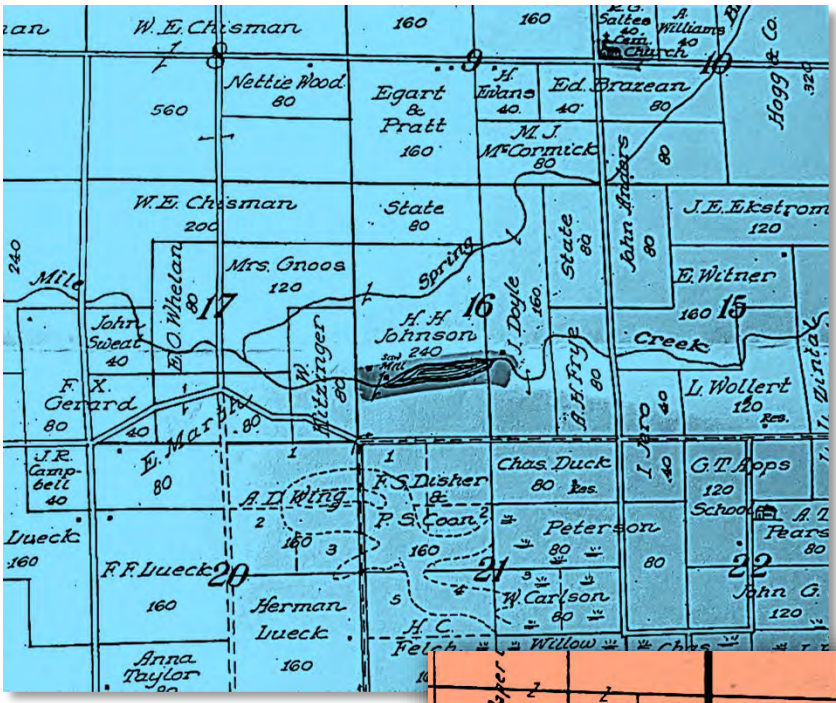
In part because of the drainage bust, population fell in the effected towns. By 1960, Rome had no more than 181 people, while Leola's number fell to 207.

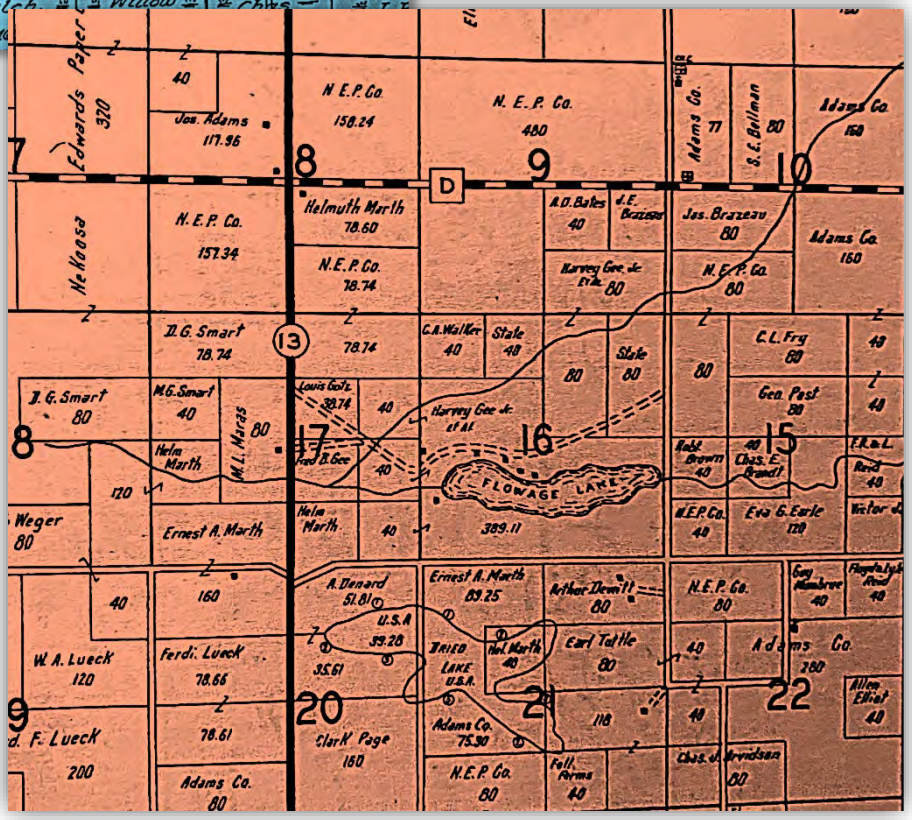
The mid-1930s were years of record drought throughout the Plains states and extending into Minnesota and Wisconsin and created what has come to be known as the Dust Bowl. In May, 1934 a windstorm blew out of the Northern Plains, picking up a cloud of soil and moving east. The sand soils of central Wisconsin were as vulnerable to the wind storm as the plains of the west. In some places in Portage, Waushara and Adams counties as much as three feet of soil was blown off the land, burying oats, potatoes and hay. The drought broke in June and normal rainfall returned, but the severe damage wrought by the storm was not forgotten.

University Extension Ag Agents in the damaged counties organized and, with state aid, created the Central Wisconsin Shelterbelt Project. University foresters enlisted farmers to plant multi-rows of pine trees on the border of every forty acre field. Farmers participated en masse, even though it meant planting and tending what eventually came to millions of trees in 3,000 miles of shelterbelts in the central sands regions. It was the first large-scale planting of trees to combat wind erosion in the United States and served as a template for similar programs throughout the county.

The shelterbelts continues to do their work of conserving soil until the 1960s when irrigated farming came to the fore. In order to make room for the irrigators, the trees were removed. Wind erosion continues to be a part of farming in the central sands.

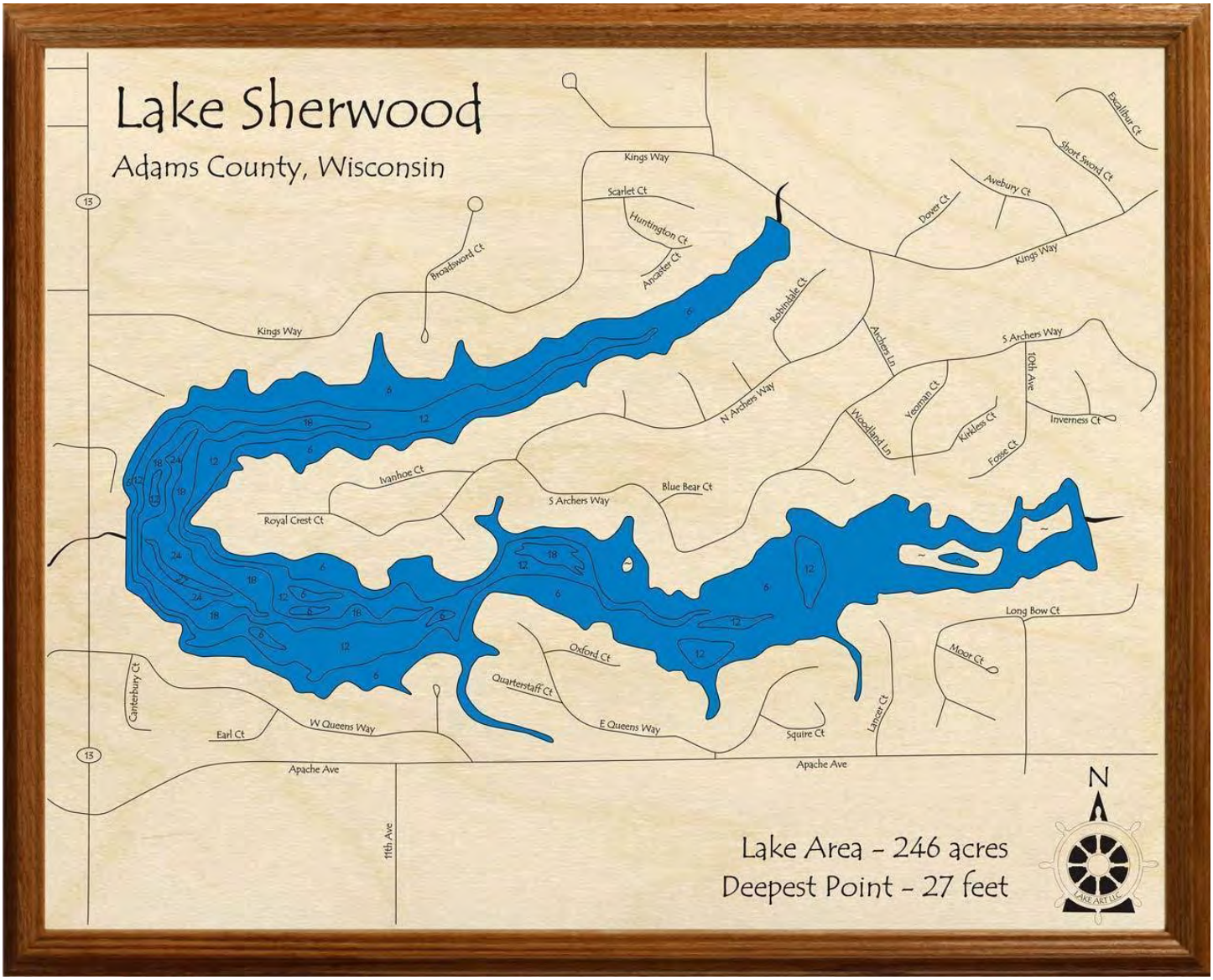
Completed in 1949, the Petenwell Dam on the Wisconsin River created a seven-thousand acre flowage and flooded over the ancient mouth of the 14 Mile Creek, including historic sites and settlements. Originally part of a much larger hydroelectric power development that would have created a lake three times its size in Wood and Marathon counties, Petenwell still had a significant impact on Rome and the watershed. It was a local manifestation of a change taking place throughout Wisconsin and the United States known as the "turnaround." For decades rural people had been moving to cities for work and a higher standard of living. After World War II, people who were not farmers began moving to rural areas, with water frontage the most attractive. Petenwell set the stage for what was to happen in the 14 Mile Watershed less than twenty years after it was constructed.





While the first dam on 14 Mile Creek was built at New Rome in the 1850s, it was not the only pioneer dam on the creek. In the 1890s, H. H. Johnson constructed a dam to hold water to power a sawmill to make lumber for neighboring farmers. It was located about one mile east of Highway 13 on 14 Mile.

In the 1920s, Harvey Gee Sr., of Wisconsin Rapids, acquired the mill property and acreage around the pond and improved the dam. He named it Beske-Gee Lake in honor of his wife and himself. The dam washed out in the flood year of 1938 and his son Harvey Gee, Jr. built a new concrete structure. After returning from World War II, Gee, Jr. platted lots around what he called Deer Lodge Lake. When lake developer N.W. Isaaacson began acquiring land for his Lake Sherwood project, Gee Jr, sold Deer Lodge Lake to him. The concrete dam was dismantled but bits and pieces of it remain in the water to this day.



In 1967, N. E. Isaacson completed the dam that backed up the waters of 14 Mile and Spring Creeks to form Lake Sherwood. In short time, another dam was built on Spring Creek to form Lake Camelot with a canal cut to link it to Sherwood. Lake Manchester was in the planning for construction downstream but it was delayed until the 1970s. By then the original Robin Hood marketing theme was changed and the third lake was called Arrowhead.

With hundreds of residential lots on their shores, the lakes have stimulated development in Rome, as well as contributing to water quality problems in the watershed. From a pre-lake population of less than 200, Rome has grown to over 2,000 residents and is the most populous municipality in Adams County.

The combination of residential and commercial development plus agricultural practices began in the 1960s are the latest in the century's old manipulation of the land and water of the 14 Mile Creek Watershed. All of these changes have had an impact on it--for better or worse? That is the question.