

Moraine View park opened in 1959

There are few lovelier corners of McLean County than Moraine View State Recreation Area. Situated several miles north of LeRoy, the 1,687-acre park is crowned by the calm waters of 158-acre Dawson Lake.

The establishment of the park in 1959 and the subsequent construction of the artificial lake in 1962-1963 represented the culmination of a spirited campaign for such a public works project dating to the 1920s.

Yet our story, naturally, goes back much longer. Moraine View owes its name to the fact that it's situated atop the Bloomington moraine, one of the largest such end moraines in the state. Moraines date to the closing chapter of the Wisconsin glaciation (colloquially known as the last Ice Age) some 20,000 to 25,000 years ago. During periodic standstills in the ice sheet's methodical, melty retreat, ground up rock and other loose material carried by the ice were deposited at its front end, creating ridgelines arcing across the northeastern section of the state and into east-central Illinois.

The elevated, relatively dry terrain of the Bloomington moraine—rising as it does in some sections 100 feet above the surrounding soggy tallgrass prairie—attracted indigenous people for millennia. Well before the arrival of the first Euro-American settlers in the 1820s, the Kickapoo had established a semi-permanent village on east edge of what was once a 14,000-acre old-growth woodlands running along the spine of the moraine.

Today, a two-acre-plus vestige of the “Grand Village” site, which is located several miles east of Moraine View State Recreation Area, is set aside to commemorate the Kickapoo people, and every other year or so it's home to a pow-wow.

More than a century after the U.S. government forcibly removed the Kickapoo from Illinois, progress-minded LeRoy citizens began advocating for the construction of an artificial lake in close proximity to their town. Pro-lake interests—led by the LeRoy Sportsmen's Club, the local American Legion, the LeRoy Kiwanis and others—contended that a such a project would boost the local economy by bringing hunters, picnickers, hikers, horseback riders, boaters and campers (and, most importantly, their disposable dollars) into the area.

In July 1941, five months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Roosevelt Administration's Works Progress Administration signed off on a proposed \$135,000 lake, to be located just east of LeRoy in Empire Township, on a stretch of the north fork of Salt Creek, itself a tributary of the Sangamon River.

Funding for the project had to come partly from local sources. Consequently, it was decided that LeRoy and Empire Township residents had to first approve the creation of a park district and elect board members before they could then vote on a \$30,000 bond issue, which would cover the community's share of the project.

The first election—involving the establishment of a park district and election of board members—was held Dec. 16, 1941. In LeRoy, voters backed the lake project by a nearly two-to-one margin, while those in the township leaned the other way, saying “no” by a closely contested vote of 104 to 83. Combined, those favoring the project prevailed 401 to 262. Yet passage depended on a majority in both districts, meaning the 21-vote difference in the township canceled out the overall 139 majority.

Although lake supporters questioned the fairness—if not outright legitimacy—of the result, the increasing attention given to the world war and the all-out homefront effort apparently hampered plans for a legal challenge. In other words, the lake project was dead in the water.

More than a decade-and-a-half later, in the late 1950s, support for a new lake resurfaced. This time around, it looked like a sure thing, seeing as the state was eagerly expanding its park and recreation acreage. And indeed, in 1958, the state approved the establishment of a park and construction of a corresponding lake, though it was now sighted north of LeRoy in Dawson Township.

This lake—with its southern edge 2½ miles north of LeRoy and its northern edge 1½ miles south of Ellsworth—was created by impounding the upper reaches of the north fork of Salt Creek.

The planned park was first known as the McLean County Conservation Area, while the lake was simply called McLean County Lake. The McLean County Sportsmen's Club solicited suggestions for snappier names, receiving suggestions such as Davis Lake, in honor of Judge David Davis of Bloomington, and Stevenson Lake, after Adlai Stevenson, the former governor and two-time candidate for U.S. president who grew up in the Twin Cities.

In the end, the county selected Dawson, for Dawson Township and its namesake, John Dawson, who with his family came to Old Town Timber in 1826, becoming in the process the first Euro-American pioneers to the area. The suggestion of Dawson Lake came from Frances Wagers, a longtime resident of the area who in 1972 authored a 31-page typed history of the park and lake.

In 1959 and into 1960, before much work could begin on the new lake, the state had to first clear title of something like 900 to 1,000 acres of privately owned farmland and timber. Landholders included Minnie Bane, A.M. Campbell, Frank Wahlstrom, Frank Virgiel and others.

Knapp Brothers of Eureka received the contract to clear a stretch of the creek valley of timber, as the acreage would soon be inundated with impounded water. Paulter Brothers of Chester, Ill. oversaw the construction of the quarter-mile long earthen dam and concrete spillway (see accompanying photo.)

In the fall of 1975, twelve years after Dawson's Lake's completion, the state renamed the surrounding parkland Moraine View State Park. "Here we had a large park and lake area and a great number of people didn't know it," Charles Tamminga of the Illinois Department of Conservation said at the time. "We think the new name will help out. It seems a more logical name and it's flashy."

Twenty years after the first name change, the state park was re-designated a state recreation area, meaning that today it's officially known as Moraine View State Recreation Area, though plenty of folks still call it a state park—and truth be told, nobody seems to mind! In addition to the bird watching, camping, boating, and fishing, Moraine View is a popular site for hunters during the annual whitetail deer, pheasant and wild turkey seasons.

In her 1972 history of Dawson Lake, Frances Wagers paid tribute to her Swedish immigrant parents, Charles and Jennie Carlson, who in the early 1890s settled 3½ miles south of Ellsworth. It was, Wagers said, "the first home they ever owned."

"It was here my brothers and sister spent part of their childhood days," Wagers noted in her introduction. "It was here we had the friendship of our neighbors and shared their happy times and their sad moments."

The old Wagers' farmstead, though, was one of a good number lost to the rising waters of Dawson Lake.

Nonetheless, Frances Wagers embraced the new lake and its picturesque views and wildlife, all the while never forgetting what it once looked like it, and what it meant to the people who once called it home. "Even though there was the loss of the people's homes," she observed, "it has brought about a place of beauty."