

CHAPTER II

DRAINAGE AND RECLAMATION

It was not until recent years that the great work of ditching and dredging and reclaiming the wet and overflowed lands in the county was begun in earnest.

True it is that the state did considerable ditching in the '50s, but, without a sufficient outlet for the water, much of this ditching was of no avail.

The first great effort to drain and reclaim the Kankakee marshes was undertaken by Henry R. Robbins, an attorney of Knox, who after many hard-fought battles in the courts and after several threats to do him injury for his untiring efforts to accomplish his drainage system, finally came out victorious and in the year of 1884 inaugurated the first practical project to drain the Kankakee marshes. He has been and will be ever afterwards praised and honored for his bravery and success in his undertaking.

Then in the year of 1901 the people owning lands bordering upon the Kankakee proper began to realize that they too should do something to lower the waters of the Kankakee River. One Dixon W. Place, now living in South Bend, got up a petition to dredge, deepen and widen that slow and sluggish stream, which was soon dredged from the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in St. Joseph County to a point one mile below the Pittsburgh, Ft. Wayne and Chicago Railroad in Starke County. But the work was not to stop here. The Kankakee Reclamation Company was organized and taking up the work at the last-named place continued down stream to the western line of Starke County. By dredging and deepening, the river has made an outlet for other dredge and shovel ditches to empty into, thus reclaiming thousands of acres and making them into some of the finest farms in the state.

And the same is true of all parts of the county which have been and now are being ditched and drained, converting the once marsh and overflowed lands into as fine farms and luxurious homes as are found in almost any county of the state.

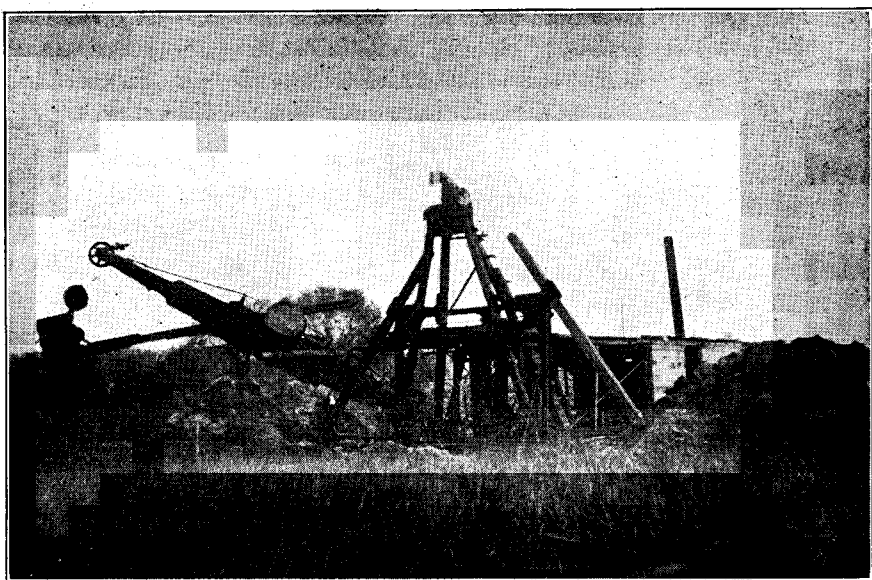
Of course this was a great undertaking and one that required an immense amount of money (reported elsewhere in this history). Several huge dredges were placed at different places on the line of the work and within one year from the time the first dipper-full of earth was removed from that illustrious and much talked of river the whole contract or

contracts were completed, thus constructing one of the greatest water channels in the north end of the state.

From the source of this dredge ditch down-stream to the west line of Starke County its course is in a southwesterly direction, following the general course of the old Kankakee River Channel, cutting off the short bends of that sluggish stream and making the distance something like one-third of the original river.

This gives the Kankakee River a fall of three times the original descent, or instead of .5 of a foot it now has about 1.5 feet fall to the mile.

Not only has the Kankakee River been dredged, deepened, widened and straightened, but Yellow River as well, passing clear through the



DREDGING MACHINE

county from east to west, has been dredged, deepened and straightened and widened affording a good outlet for many smaller ditches to empty into, thus draining many hundred acres of land on both sides of that stream. And after all that has been done in the way of ditching and dredging, the work still continues, to make the system more complete. As someone has said, "If the amount of ditching we have done has accomplished so much, more ditching will accomplish still more."

All this inspired the landowners to take courage and it was then that they put their shoulders to the wheel and pushed the work as it never had been before, opening up new farms as a mighty index to the road to success—"Over beyond the poor house," as some of those people have been heard to say.

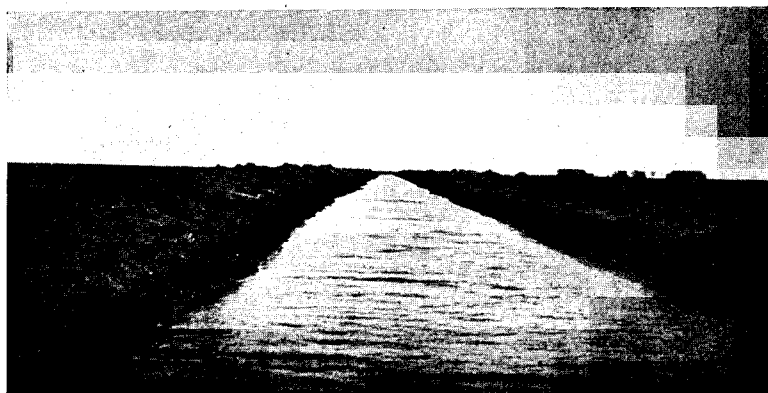
Prior to this of course all the ditching that had been done for years was done by shovels, and those were small ditches at that. Until our

people began to realize the importance of bigger ditches, a great deal of the first ditching accomplished but little good.

Nothing that ever did happen or ever will come to pass will advance the county as much in the same length of time as has the ditching and drainage accomplished in the county.

Had it not been for the bravery and energetic impulse of a few men who undertook a thing that they understood to be necessary to develop the county, the same conditions might prevail today, but it was the work of those who could see far in advance the most important thing to do, which has proved itself away beyond the expectations of most men (the reclamation of those wet and overflowed lands in Starke County).

Eagle Creek has been dredged from its source near the eastern boundary of the county to its outlet into Yellow River, one mile east of Knox, thus draining a great portion of that once wet and overflowed Washington Township. This adds materially to the great drainage



DRAINAGE DITCH, KANKAKEE RECLAIMED LAND

system of the county, bringing into use and cultivation a great expanse of territory that was in an early day looked upon as being a worthless swamp of bulrushes and cane-brake, among which the wild deer and wolves roved at will the year round.

The ditching done by the state, known as "State Ditching," was all done with shovels, and the lowest and overflowed lands were "skipped" as they were thought to be worthless—overgrown with bulrushes and splatter-dock, but which in after years being dredged and properly drained became the finest farm land. The proof of that is shown by the crops that are raised each year, on those same lands that looked hopelessly "gone for" in the early days of the county.

Davis Township, for instance, was at that time considered almost worthless with her low wet marshes covered with bulrush and swamp grass. With the water all over, it did look like as though it would remain so as long as time would last, but what a change! That township is today considered one of the best farming townships in the whole county,

but it has all been brought about by the ditching and draining of those lands.

No township in the county perhaps required the ditching that Davis Township did as it was an almost unbroken expanse of low and overflowed land, thus needing the attention of that great improvement (ditching) which has done so much good to that township, giving it the name of one of the Banner townships for raising of wheat and corn and all other crops planted by the farmers each year.

In speaking of the drainage of the county it is well and in place to note the fact that all the natural streams in the county have been dredged, widened, straightened and deepened—the Kankakee River, the Yellow River, Eagle Creek, Hailstorm Creek, Clear Creek, Pine Creek, Bogus Run Creek, and in fact all other creeks and small tributaries and minor streams which give ample outlet for all small ditches that are so numerous constructed and being constructed in each and every township in the county—the work going on almost every day and night the year round.

We have today about two hundred miles of dredge ditches in the county, which have cost an immense amount of money to construct, a cost of perhaps three hundred thousand dollars, to say nothing about the cost of the miles and miles of the smaller ditches.

The same lands before being dredged sold for \$1.50 to \$6 per acre which today are well worth \$50 to \$100 per acre, and some farms have sold for much more than that price.

The cost of those ditches, as said before, was immense. The first one, being the Robbins Ditch, cost almost \$14,000, and counting arms or laterals, makes about twenty-eight miles in length. The Bliss extension of the Robbins Ditch cost about \$39,000, and Bogus Run or Lucas Ditch is said to have cost about \$21,150. The Craigmile Ditch in round numbers cost \$11,900. The Osborn cost nearly \$8,500, which is eight miles in length. The Fell Ditch cost \$6,000. The Place Ditch, about twenty-three miles long, cost about \$80,000. The Eagle Creek or Walker Ditch cost almost \$11,000. The Bartee Ditch cost \$7,000. The Yellow River or Elsbree Ditch, seventeen or eighteen miles in length, cost \$21,500.

We have a great many more dredge ditches in the county and are still digging more. All those ditches mentioned are dredge ditches. The average cost per cubic yard would be about six and one-fourth cents for excavating, which has been in the aggregate 2,490,000 cubic yards of earth removed by these machines.

The time was when ditching was fought in the courts and out of the courts, but the people can look with pleasure and pride to what has been accomplished by the draining process.

A great spread in the Kankakee River formerly known as English Lake has a greater part become farm lands since that river has been dredged and straightened, which goes to show that what the county needed most has been accomplished, and instead of a low sluggish stream

spreading over so much space it can now be viewed from a standpoint of fine cultivated farms producing tame hay, corn, wheat and onions and other kinds of grain and fruits in great abundance.

FARMING ON RECLAIMED LAND

Since the county has been ditched and drained the farmers can boast of the fact that they can raise just as good crops here as they can in almost any county in the state, both of wheat and rye, corn, cucumbers, potatoes and all kinds of small fruits and garden stuff.

One great crop so extensively raised in the county which should not be overlooked in this connection is the onion crop. Many farmers are giving a great part of their time to the cultivation of onions. The onions



TYPICAL TENANT HOUSE, KANKAKEE RECLAIMED LAND

yield as high as eight hundred bushels to the acre and often bring \$1 per bushel and in some instances more. No wonder then that the farmers raise onions when they can raise so many bushels to the acre and get such prices, but that is not always the case. An average price would be about forty cents per bushel and perhaps about four hundred bushels to an acre.

Small fruits grow abundantly here, apples are generally very plentiful but peaches are not a sure crop every year.

It is a remarkable fact that the lands now so "vigorously sought" to raise onions on are the same lands that were so "vigorously shunned" in an early day. Covered over with flagg and cane-brakes, the land—if you could call it land in the '50s—now grows the finest crops of onions, corn, wheat, oats and vegetables. Another industry that ought to be mentioned here is the "mint" crop which is being quite extensively raised on the low black lands, the same kind of land that the onions are raised upon.

It would perhaps be well at this time, as we are speaking of fruits, to mention the fact that the huckleberry or whortleberry and cranberry crops have been a producer of much revenue to the citizens of the county. These crops have been abundant in years gone by and costing nothing to raise them, as they grow wild, and proved to be a great source of revenue to our people. There are, however, only a few such marshes found in the county in the last few years. The great Bentley Huckleberry Marsh, on the eastern shores of Koontz Lake, for many years attracted hundreds of people every year. There, men, women, children and some you could hardly call human beings would build camps or set up tents and stay during the whole crop season, picking berries and selling them by the quart to the buyers, who would come each year to buy the berries and ship them to the best markets. Holding parties or dancing at night was the chief occupation from sunset in the evening until sunrise in the morning as sleep seemed to be the least thing thought of by those bent on having a good time.

This marsh was destroyed by fire several years ago and the swamp is now converted into beautiful fields of golden grain and the "old camp" grounds are no more the place that it was in the years from 1869 to 1875. No one is left to emulate the good deeds or to discourage the bad deeds committed on that illustrious camp ground.