

Drought!

You've watched the level of our lakes go down this past year and wondered how low they were going to get. Old-timers have told us for years that in the 1930s people walked across the bed of North Center Lake on their way to church in Center City from next-door Lindstrom. They also talked about remembering crops of potatoes planted in the bed of the lake during those dry years. The photo on the facing page was taken in 1931 and confirms these memories. The white line running from top to bottom is Highway 8. The dark areas show water that's still in the lakes, the lighter areas dry lake bed.

The society publication *An Early Look at Chisago County* reports an earlier drought. "During the drought of 1862-1866 the lakes were lowered so much that Otto Walmark had a ditch dug from the lake now called Walmark Lake in order to raise Chisago Lake. This work was done with oxen. This is the controversial channel under highway 8" (1976 page 55).

Charles Fisk in *The First Fifty Years of Recorded Weather History in Minnesota (1820-1869)* reports:

"Prior to the Territorial period, which commenced in early 1849, the only official meteorological observations of any consequence were made by the military in the Fort Snelling vicinity, a minor exception being observations at Lac Qui Parle for a brief interval during the mid-1840's. After Territorial status was achieved, a rapid increase of other weather chroniclers, local newspaper editors and Smithsonian Institution volunteers, began recording their impressions and observations. Not until the early 1870's, though, a full half-century after the initial Fort Snelling observations commenced, did the State's first weather bureau offices begin operations.

"Spring '64 brought little encouragement that the long succession of dry months had reached its end." Indeed, most signs seemed to point to another droughty growing season. April (mean temperature in St. Paul: 43 F; precipitation 1.10 inches) had 'a continued absence of precipitation and the prevalence of winds from the North.' Winds 'blew steadily from that quarter for the first twenty days,' ice forming almost 'every night.' Grass was 'hardly greener on the last day of April than it was on the first.' Most afternoons through the 20th were in the 40's and 50's, the last ten having a few in the 60's, including the month's warmest reading (71 F) on the 25th. The first boat through Lake Pepin arrived on the 14th. Expressing the increasing concern regarding the long continued absence of moisture, Reverend Paterson wrote at month-end: 'We must have rain soon, and that in large abundance, or the crop of the State will not more suffice for its own consumption, and the low stage of water will so enhance freights, that the expense of living will be very seriously increased.' May (St. Paul mean temperature: 58 F) brought some relief, but only near the close. Less than one-fourth inch of rain fell in St. Paul over the first three weeks, 0.47 inches in all for the month. Vegetation was still so backward on the 10th that a hard freeze, with ice forming one-third inch thick, hardly caused any injury to vegetation or crops. Prayers for rain had been offered in nearly all the churches of St. Paul 'both Catholic and Protestant' on the 8th. 'Mid-Summer heat' at the start of the third week further aggravated matters, St. Paul reaching the low to upper 80's on eight straight days over the 15th-22nd. Fort Ridgely on the 18th reported 'vegetation suffering from drought,' but significant rains over much of the state during the last few days brought a badly needed reprieve for the young wheat and other crops. Some of the storms were severe, one that struck Rochester leaving hailstones 'the size of hickory nuts.'"

—Lloyd Hackl