Keeping Iowa's Waters Pure

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When one quietly and sanely considers the great movement embraced by the words "Wild Life Conservation," in all its ramifications, what the past reveals, its influence on the present and connection with the future, the intelligent student of world economy will feel amazed and stupefied at the situation as it looms before him. He will put a question to himself as to where he has been, and what he has been doing during all this orgy of world rapine and world desolation, a question that he can much more easily ask than answer.

Where the ordinary mind of man exercises an antipathy for something to the extent of injuring and destroying it, it must be assumed that the particular thing embodies within itself nothing of an attractive and inviting character, to make no mention of possessing not only inherent beauty, but whose beauty is intensified because of what is closely aligned with it, for the dissemination of happiness and contentment. Perhaps during the recent years, the ordinary mind of man has been ordinary to an extraordinary extent, as this will certainly be our verdict when, taking our own American Commonwealth as an illustration, we look around at the devastation that has been accomplished.

Just an illustration! In the whole arena of life economics and activity, is there anywhere a more fascinating field for investigation, or more wholesome delight in pursuing the study, than the great gripping theme of "The Bird?" Where shall we begin in an attempt to systematize the various avenues and leadings of our subject? Who will reveal the mysteries associated with flight, and explain why it is superior to the duration of time, why the migrating spirit is superior to the circuit of a hemisphere, why a tiny wing can become the annihilator of such far-reaching space? Where again does color run riot in such profusion, with marvellous light and shade, as in the case of the plumage of the aviator, the woodland warbler, the dashing diver of the lake and many another member of the great brotherhood of glorious creatures, where such is woven in wondrous and intricate pattern? And yet with all of this and much more, during the short period of forty years,
it is estimated that ninety-five per cent of the valuable birds of North America have been destroyed.

And is a stream of water to be desired, with all its pristine freshness and setting of nook and cranny, all secured by winding banks of emerald green? The lake on which the sunbeams play and where the lilies bloom, a crystal gem, a joy for ever, do we wish the poison of commerce to enter here and spoil one of nature's richest benedictions? Oh yes, we've been utterly callous to this. But a few voices are heard in protest, and the storm is growing. It is growing because the knowledge is growing of a dark and grievous wrong, brought home to the public conscience, which has become awake at last. And we have enough to awaken it.

Here is a story from the east, that section of our land longest settled, and that has longest been exploited. There are waters running there that once were, as is the air we breathe, charged with the life and exhilaration of cleanliness and purity. But that has gone, and some would doubtless have it, gone for ever. Can it be, that even in thought, we can assent to such a situation as this? Imagine for a moment, a certain area where the atmosphere was permeated with an odor distinctly offensive to the nostrils, and which could by no means be dislodged. Such an area would at once be cut off as civilized territory. Would not civilization on the outskirts of such start an investigation and intelligent study of conditions, having for its object the elimination and removal of that which had culminated in the poisoned territory?

And shall we do less with the stream? True, the filth the stream contains and carries is not suffused and distributed in the way that naturally pertains to the atmosphere, but who shall say that the latter is not contaminated in the stream's neighborhood, for a trail of filth passing through that which is pure and innocuous, would seem almost certain to leave some effects of its poisonous flow?

And then we are deprived of what the stream would be to us from the standpoint of life economy. We dare not bathe in its waters, or permit our children to wade there, no fish are there to tempt the spending of a recreative hour, with pole and line, or to furnish a meal for him, whose larder is bare and resources limited. No cress for the table can be gathered where the water is shallow, for long since its rootlets were contaminated and its means of subsistence destroyed. The waters that formerly gave forth oxygen and exhilaration and the elasticity of bubbling life, are choked, strangled, dead; instead of diffusing health, they disseminate disease.
Such is an eastern stream. Do we wish to follow suit? Comparatively, Iowa's waters as yet are pure. But the mischief has begun, and we have abundant evidence, that the menace of the east is with us, and to an extent that bids us stand forth in no uncertain fashion for Iowa's welfare.

On the morning of Feb. 1, 1924, a company of men stood by the Shell Rock river, near the city of Greene, in Butler County, looking at a piece of open water bounded by ice and river bank. On one side there was a quantity of dead fish, some of them probably twenty pounds in weight. Near these, swimming around in a dazed condition were fish with their snouts poking from the water as if they would fain get out, if only they could. The menace of the east had come to the waters of Iowa, poison from industrial plants had been forced into her waters, and life had given place to death. Moreover complaint had been made that the state of the river had created a foul stench in the locality, which was very offensive to the dwellers there.

The afternoon of the day to which allusion has been made brought an enquiry, attended by a large number of persons, in relation to what had been witnessed, and the attendant complaints. The poisonous refuse of industrial plants was the verdict reached, this being supported in a later hearing at Des Moines. The representatives of two of these plants did not dispute that their industries were responsible for the unhealthy and unsavory conditions, though the evidence in the case of one seemed more conclusive than the other. In fact, their attitude was all that could be desired, in face of the charges made. But their plea was that they were spending money in the endeavor to find a treatment for the water contaminated by use in their plants, that would return it to the stream from which they had taken it, in as pure a condition as they had borrowed it.

No doubt this method of dealing with the water that had been used had been partially successful, but only partially, as the situation proved. Here we have brought before us a possible means of solving the problem, the question as to whether, where an industrial plant takes a certain amount of water from a stream for assistance in treating matter entering into the make-up of its products, it can after using that water, return it in an innocuous condition to the stream from which it was taken.

How successful attempts made in this direction have been, we are not in a position to state, but in view of pollution conditions the country over, fear such success has not been marked. Science, of course, accomplishes what we have a perfect right to designate
as wonderful, and it may be that in the field under review, some of its triumphs are being manifested, but until demonstration has become literally evident, we do not think our streams should be experimented on. The pollution menace of the east, with all its offence and viciousness, should make us stand like adamant against any such attempt.

To preserve the streams and lakes of Iowa, with their pure and pristine environment, will be worth all and much more than all, that it will cost us. And what it will cost is infinitesimally small, merely the auto-septic plants and the sewage disposal plants, that constructed in connection with industrial concerns and our cities, deal in a direct way with their waste products, by rigidly excluding them from the waters of the stream. There is something unfolding to us here that bears a far-reaching appeal, while giving promise of an elucidation of the subject, that in the nature of things, promises to settle the problem and settle it for good.

For the sake of argument we will assume that in certain cases some scientific practice has been discovered, that in the matter of a specific kind of industrial waste, will eliminate anything objectionable before the borrowed water is returned to the stream. But the next product so treated may present something new, requiring altogether different procedure. And as from time to time, new products are introduced to the commercial world, there must be a continued series of experimentation going forward, with more or less success, and the stream suffering in the same ratio.

And we are thus brought squarely to a matter-of-fact and logical situation that the satisfactory and safe way is to rigidly prohibit industrial waste or city sewage from being carried to our Iowa waters. Let all this be dealt with independently of the water, and in many cases, in all probability, a process for dealing with this will be evolved which will pay the expense incurred, in the character of the resulting product, as for instance in the matter of farm fertilizer, as a product of city sewage.

In the case of industrial concerns, the ingenuity of those interested would naturally be devoted, in like manner, to dealing with their by-products, and thus reduce manufacturing expenses to a minimum, but in any event this situation would bear equally on all manufacturers, and thus there could be no complaint. Assuming that in the case of some manufactured products, this procedure entailed an extra cost for the finished article, it would be infinitely better that this be borne by the individual consumer, than that an offensive embargo be placed on the whole out-of-doors.

The State of Iowa embarking on such an undertaking as this,
would present the finest object lesson not only to our commonwealth of states, but the world at large. And in connection with our contiguous states, on the one hand where waters flow to us, we could naturally demand that they order themselves after our pattern, while in the case of the states to which our waters flowed, they would doubtless only be too glad to adopt the same policy. And thus much, very much, would be gained by "keeping Iowa's waters pure."

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