Stories from Main Street: Water/Ways

Episode Transcript
Season 1, Episode 6 : "Worth Saving"

Episode Description: Our waterways are one of our most precious shared resources. But we risk losing them to pollution, climate change, and overuse. In this episode, we hear from folks around the country on why their local waterways matter and why they believe we have to act now to protect them.

Stories used in this episode:

- Violet Spolarich on fighting pipelines and protecting water in her rural community
- Climate Change at the White Earth Reservation–Robert Shimek
- The Singing River has the Blues
- Why Are There So Many Weeds--Erika Gilsdorf
- Grandpa Bill's Big Lake Mistake

Episode Transcript:

Katie and Child:

Katie (K): Are you ready for Mommy's story?

Child (C): Yes.

K: Okay. Mommy grew up in a house across the road and up on top of a hill from a big lake. And in the winter, Mommy's daddy, your Grandpa Bill, used to like to go to work in a warm car. So, what he would do was turn the car on and back it out of the garage, just a little and then go upstairs and have a cup of coffee while his car warmed up.

C: This is the stairs.

K: Yup. This is his house. And then one day, Grandpa Bill forgot to turn on the emergency brake in his car. And his car rolled down the hill and across the road and into the lake [sound of children's toys]. Splash. Just like that. But Grandpa Bill didn't realize what had happened. He was still upstairs having his cup of coffee. Some old nice lady came driving by and thought, "Hmmm, that's interesting." And drove down the road and told the police car, the policeman...

C: "What's wrong?"

K: She told him: “There’s a car in the lake at the other end of the town.”

C: “OH!”

K: He came down. [To the child] Come on Policeman.

C: What? Whoa!

K: He thought: “That’s interesting.”

C: “Yes, that’s interesting.”

K: He thought: “That car’s on. That exhaust pipe is in the water.” He’s like: “That’s really bad.”

C: That’s really bad for the water.

K: That’s bad for the water. Do you know what he did?

C: Yeah.

K: What did he do?

C: Give a ticket.

K: He gave Grandpa Bill a ticket for polluting the lake.

C: But that’s interesting.

K: (laughs)

C: Fall into the lake. I think somebody moved it into the lake.

K: It was an accident.

C: Yeah, it was an accident.

K: Yeah, but he got a ticket anyway.

C: I’m going to move it out of there.

K: And that’s mommy’s water story, bud.

Hannah: *America’s industrial age had many impacts on our waterways. In 2009, an Environmental Protection Agency assessment revealed that 55% of our rivers and streams were suffering from pollution and considered to be in poor condition. That’s not even including our lakes, bays, gulfs, and oceans, into which we’ve dumped chemicals, waste, and plastic.*

For the first two-hundred years of our history, there was often little attention given to the health of our waterways. The only water-protection law passed in the 19th century was the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899, but even that wasn't really about protecting water. It just made it illegal to dump trash in waterways where it would disrupt navigation for boats.

But by the 1960s, the problem of polluted waterways and water sources had gotten bad enough to make headlines. A tipping point came when floating debris and oil in Cleveland's Cuyahoga River caught fire 13 times in just two years. Believe it or not, this wasn't the only river catching fire around that time. But this one caught the attention of citizens and lawmakers and helped push President Richard Nixon's administration to create the US Environmental Protection Agency–the EPA–in 1970. In 1972, Congress passed the Clean Water Act, which gave the EPA the authority to control pollution and fund efforts to monitor and restore polluted waterways.

Over the past century, we've learned that our access to clean, usable water is far from guaranteed. No new water is being created. That's why many Americans are working to protect the water we have and use it wisely. A lot of progress has been made in the last 50 years, but in many places, there's more to do, and in addition to pollution, our lakes, rivers, and bays are also at risk from the impact of climate change and overuse.

The good news is that people are great problem solvers, and it is possible to save and protect our waterways.

I'm Hannah Hethmon, and this is episode six of Stories from Main Street: Water/Ways, a podcast from Museum on Main Street.

For 25 years, Museum on Main Street, a program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, has brought Smithsonian exhibitions to small towns and asked people in these diverse communities to make the exhibits their own. Through its Stories from Main Street initiative, Museum on Main Street encourages the gathering of stories that give a voice to rural Americans.

Since 2016, Museum on Main Street's Water/Ways exhibition has been traveling all over America, stopping for six weeks at a time in over 100 small towns. The stories in this series were collected as part of the programming around that exhibition. They're raw, they're real, and, as such, they're a unique window into America, a country as ever-changing, multi-faceted, and diverse as the waterways that cover our continent.

This is the final episode of this series on water stories, and I want to end by sharing stories about water conservation. I've saved this topic for last for the simple fact that if we don't protect our waterways, we could lose out on the stories from every other episode. Polluted and exploited

waterways negatively impact our identity and culture, our food and water quality, and the many jobs and livelihoods that depend on the water. Industrial runoff and trash in our rivers, lakes, and creeks rob us of the peace those places bring and the timeless joy of a childhood summer spent staying cool in the local watering hole.

Erika Gilsdorf: All right. I'm Erika Gilsdorf. I have grown up in Minnesota since I've been born. My son is the fifth generation, I'm the fourth generation of a cottage on Pelican Lake here in Otter Tail County. As you get older, the more you see changes in lakes. What's really been...I don't know what the word is...scary, or impactful, is how much those changes are impacting your recreational use. So, our lake, we always bragged, was the lake that was clean. You could just jump in. You could swim. You could ski, you could do anything you want.

Now, your boats...because we've had invasive species, and I'm really worried about getting other invasive species in our lake with all of the rapid transfer that's happening right now. You know, people, our relatives, come to visit, our kids come to visit, and they're complaining about, "Why are there so many weeds? Why am I swimming and there's weeds?" My nephew last summer cut his foot really bad on a zebra mussel. It's really hard to tell your kids, when they come to visit once a year, what's happened to the lake, and try and explain what's going on.

And it's sad. So, hopefully, with the efforts to broaden awareness on the spread of invasive species, and what people can do, people will start taking more action, because I think more and more people...I also worked as an AIS Inspector this last two summers. I think more and more people are starting to see the impacts, and they're starting to realize, "Wow, I don't want this in my lake." So they're starting to take a little more concern and action, on what they can do, because it really has come down to what each person can do.

Unless each person takes responsibility, there is no big silver bullet, or some magic chemical, or some magic potion, something that's going to eradicate this. It's a matter of a lot of small actions, that's going to slow the process, prevent the spread, and help the whole situation, so our kids can enjoy the lakes like we did, and swim and not feel like the water's gross, and they need to get out.

Hannah: *As we fix the problems caused over the last hundred years or so, we also have to be thinking ahead to prevention and a more sustainable way of life. It's critical that the next generation grows up understanding the role of water in their lives and the need to protect our waterways and the plants and animals that live in and around them.*

Next, you're going to hear some moments from a class trip, as elementary students from the Ocean Springs School District learn and explore at the Pascagoula River Audubon Center in Moss Point, Mississippi.

Ocean Springs Students:

4 elementary school students taking turns talking: So this is [plant name] and it's harmful to the river because it blocks out the sunlight, so fish, animals, creatures, plants, and anything else that lives in the water. We did an experiment on it. So we put it in cups and we fill the cups up with fresh water. Then the water got saltier and saltier, then we figured out that it likes zero salt, likes freshwater, and saltwater makes it die.

Narrator: These young conservationists put together a skit to demonstrate the relationship between invasive and native species.

[Clip of students performing a skit as different invasive species.]

Narrator: It was a cool overcast day, but our intrepid explorers suit up for a boat trip up the Pascagoula river. Captain Benning will show them up close what they've learned in school.

[Students exclaiming over things they are seeing]

Narrator: As the day comes to a close and river explorers return to port, they leave you with this thought.

Students speaking in chorus: In the end, we can conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.

[Clapping]

Hannah: *Long before the creation of the EPA and our modern awakening to the dangers of pollution, Native American nations understood the need to respect waterways. The traditions, creation stories, and histories of diverse Native American nations have a common thread: respect for water as a sacred gift, not a resource to exploit. For many First Peoples of the Americas….science, identity, spirituality, and heritage are all reasons to defend their waterways from pollution and exploitation today.*

Robert Shimek: My name is Robert Shimek, and I live out on the Mary Yellowhead area here of the White Earth Indian Reservation. The last thing I want to say about the water has to do with the impacts of climate change. I think this is probably one of the most disturbing challenges that we–not only here at White Earth–but people everywhere, all over the world, are faced with. And the changing patterns of precipitation, the changing patterns in temperatures...

Hannah: *Increased global temperatures have a significant impact on the water cycle. Climate change isn't just about heat–some places may become colder, some hotter. But the overall changes in the climate lead to new weather patterns and environmental impacts. Scientists predict rises in sea level, rises in sea surface temperatures, and significant loss of glaciers and ice sheets through melting. Some areas may see more major storms and increased rainfall while other areas will see prolonged droughts. As sea levels rise, entire coastal communities will face potential flooding and displacement. And that's why millions of Americans today are thinking more about the impacts of climate change on their communities.*

Robert Shimek: You know, just for the record, it is January 19, 2017. So daytime temperatures are expected to be around 40 degrees today, 40 degrees above zero here at White Earth. Last week at this time it was 40 below.

You know, we're used to the extremes, but the problem we have here is right now we don't see an end to this 40 degree weather, the middle of January. This is typically some of the coldest times of the year, and right now we're having some of the warmest times of the entire winter. How that's going to affect precipitation patterns, we don't know yet. Some of us were here the winter of '96, '97 when we had a 10 foot snow pack here at White Earth. We had 10 feet of snow. There was 120 inches of snow that year...and the devastating effects it had when it all melted...and went out into the Red River Valley and flooded.

As things stand right now, politically, we as a nation do not have the will to really do anything meaningful about it. I first read about climate change in the *Seattle Times* in 1987. We were talking about it then. We're still talking about it, but what are we doing? The weather is so extreme now. That's one of my bigger concerns. You come back here in 100 years, and we visit again...chances are it's going to be a very different landscape if we do nothing.

Hannah: *Remember the watermen and crabbers from Maryland and Louisiana we met back in the episode on work and the farmers we met in the episode on growing? Their work depends on work that relies on healthy water sources. Folks in these professions can now often be found on the front lines of implementing best practices to make sure the next generation can enjoy plentiful harvests from the land and the water.*

Nicholas Alfonso (No link): What I'm going to show y'all, he on this crab trap is how the biologists come up with them. I deal that lets the little crabs out the trap so they can grow up and be profitable later on. All right. He got crabs and as you can see, there's no little bitty crabs in here. And the reason why is you have these rings that release the little crabs. All the little crabs can get out. See how you went in there. What happens is when you dump it on a grader... what I wanted was these little ones to come out. The grader makes it the way it more or less

determines because a crab has to be five inches or bigger for a fall commercial fishermen to keep it. So this is a five inch crab and the smaller crab, you see this crab here that went through the grader, it just went through like this one here. You push a little bit here. He goes through, so then at the end of the day you throw them back, and it'll take this crab probably about six months to get to this stage, where this crab, right here is like prime choice. Can't get no better than this. This crab here either goes to a seafood restaurant or it'll be shipped to like Baltimore to go to their restaurants. A lot of the good crabs these days is being shipped out of state, out of Louisiana. So there's no sleeping, there's no functions you going to. This is a full time dedicated job. When you eat a soft crab at a restaurant, that guy put his hours in to make that crab become a soft crab.

Hannah: *Many Americans grow up next door to rivers and lakes. The bonds of any important relationship grow stronger over time, and if you've spent your whole life connected to a particular body of water, you might do whatever it takes to protect it, even if that means facing backlash and critics who question your capabilities and qualifications.*

Violet Spolarich: My name is Violet Spolarich, and I live at Palisade in Aitkin County. I always have to brag to the fact that I've lived on the Willow River for 85 years. Our home was on the banks of the Willow River...a little old wooden house. And I try in every way I can to protect our Willow River. One reason I'm so proud is the wildlife. I've seen moose, I've seen black panthers, I've seen bears, almost every kind of animal you could think of...bald eagle....all the important things in life that we should protect and take care of. And I love all those things.

About four or five years ago, a company wanted to put a $93 million garbage dump in Palisade, and it would've been 25 truckloads of garbage a day coming into our town. First, the smoke stack would've been 80 feet high. Well then it went down, down, down, and every time they lied, it went down a little further. Then it was supposed to be 27% tires coming in and burning in our town.

Well, we fought really hard. I was kind of the leader of the charge, so I wasn't very popular with a lot of people. I got called a lot of names for it, and I didn't care. We worked hard to stop that, and we did get it stopped.

We're so thankful now that we don't have to worry about that. It was right on the banks of the Mississippi practically, and it would've been a 40 acre garbage dump, 24 hours a day. They think that little towns are okay to do that kind of thing. When big don't towns want them, send it on down to a little town, they need this and they need that. They thought we could do it because we were promised new streets, new this, new that, new bridge and all that. Well, we didn't get the garbage dump, and we still got the new streets, the new street lights, new bridge, and

everything else. So it doesn't depend on somebody else's garbage being hauled in a hundred miles. We want to keep our town clear, clean, and free.

Two years ago, we were back to kind of the same situation. Enbridge wanted to put their pipeline through here. Where I live, the pipeline, they surveyed right by my bedroom window, just right by the bedroom window. Then it would've gone over and across the Willow River, just across the field. Then across the Mississippi River, across the rice paddies. And we really had to work to stop that from happening. Whatever goes into the Willow River goes into the Mississippi River, and then into the Gulf. We have to keep these things clean and free. Enbridge, they have one of the worst track records that I ever heard of, for the rotten way they do these things. North of Grand Rapids, they still have spills from 10, 15 years ago, where they never did clean it up. And they think it's ok to go do these things. They don't hold responsibility for any of that. There's no price worth ruining our land for it. I don't care what anybody says, there's no right, and our rivers and our lakes....

And Aitkin County is all a lot of lowland. That water, the water level is so high that everything would seep into it. We just don't need that, and we have to protect all that. Everything drains into the Willow River and the Mississippi River, and all these beautiful lakes that people love and that's their home. They don't want that taken any worse then they'd want somebody to come in any place else and ruin it for them. We just can't afford that. We don't want that, and as long as I can fight and the rest of us, we're not going to have it.

Hannah: *Wondering what you can do to help protect your favorite waterways? You're helping just by listening to this show and understanding the diverse perspectives of storytellers from across small-town America. This podcast has featured the water stories of everyday Americans collected as part of Museum on Main Street's Water/Ways exhibition. Water/Ways is more than just an exhibition though. It's part of a larger Smithsonian initiative called Think Water, and in every town that hosts Water/Ways, Museum on Main Street and state humanities councils collaborate to provide funding and support for locally created programs that raise awareness about protecting and caring for our waterways, and bring communities together to problem solve and connect over their unique local water resources and challenges.*

Museum on Main Street is an outreach program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. See a full tour schedule for Museum on Main Street exhibitions and learn more about the program at museumonmainstreet.org.

Thanks for spending this time with me listening to these stories. If you have your own water story that you would like to add to the Smithsonian collection, you can learn how to record and share it by visiting museumonmainstreet.org/stories. That's museumonmainstreet.org/stories OR you can use the free Be Here Stories app to upload a story directly from your phone. That's

the Be Here Stories app. In both places, you can hear the full collection of stories from all over America. On the Museum on Main Street website, you can view hundreds of stories contributed to the Stories from Main Street initiative and watch documentaries created by rural youth through Museum on Main Street's Stories: YES project.

Thank you to our storytellers whose voices can be heard in this episode. Several of the stories in this episode were recorded by Pamela Ferris Olson as part of the Women Mind the Water project, the Minnesota Humanities Center, the Water Bar and Public Studio, the Stories: YES program. The rest of the stories came from the Most of them came from the main Stories from Main Street archive.

You can see a full list of story credits, links to all the stories used in this episode, and an episode transcript in the episode description. Thank you to all the Museum on Main Street collaborators who helped collect these stories.

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