

The Oxbow in the Cass River

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An Oxbow is a “U” shaped bend in a river.

The Caro Dam and the surrounding landscape is what one might call the “Heart of Tuscola” or “Tuscola’s Energy Alley”—it’s the place where in the past raw energy and power have been generated or received, refined, stored, and distributed. The Caro Dam location was traditionally as well called the “Dam at the Oxbow in the Cass River.”

The energy generating capability of the land and waterway is seen in the history of the Oxbow. The last Native chief of Tuscola County, the Cass River, was Chief Mark Joshua or Mash-Kee-Yosh who was born in 1803 at the Oxbow. Chief Mash-Kee-Yosh was at the pinnacle of native political power on the river.

The Oxbow lies in a commanding location: It developed as a powerful meander or sway in the Cass River. Today, just north of the “Oxbow”, is Poet, which is an ethanol bio-refinery, and just northeast is the Michigan Sugar Company, which is a sugar-beet refinery—both businesses produce forms of energy. These businesses sprang from the natural power that was spawned by the Oxbow, which is located nearby.

In the early 1900’s, power lines ran electrical energy generated by the resources of the Oxbow to Caro.

The “Old Cass River Flats” once at or near the Oxbow was where Native People planted and harvested corn, squash, potatoes, and “pinkins” or pumpkins. The local name “Indian Fields” grew from the productivity of the Oxbow and the surrounding area that had such great potential.

Over centuries of time, the Oxbow has supplied energy and power that has been used for nutrition, habitation, transportation, and illumination.

The Oxbow in Native words produced “good times” and not so much “bad times”.

Compared to the river, the land at the Oxbow is relatively high.

The Ox Bow nurtured the “Indian Settlement” where people were first able to store energy from the land and water through their harvests, energy that exceeded the yield of any other Tuscola location. Early on corn and other foods were major resources of power and energy storage. Having corn made you powerful both physically and politically. “Tchimanen”, or dugout canoes, that Native People built here were another creation of power—made from the Cork Pine tree that had absorbed earthly nutrients and elements and light from the sun.

Near the Oxbow was equally the timely site of Curtis Emerson’s logging camp that ignited the Cass River logging boom in 1847-48. Emerson’s Camp likewise was the spark that started the bang, or boom, in the Saginaw Valley lumber industry.

Like Frankenmuth, which was called the “Short Bend in the River”, the Oxbow in the Cass River had major potential for a dam. The City of Caro grew from the energy created or bred from the Oxbow. Major benefits have come from controlling its power and energy.

The Caro Electric Light Works was established in Caro by 1892 and was influenced by the work of Thomas Edison and others. The company was managed and promoted by Joseph H. Harris and owned by Frank Miller who also built the Caro Farmer’s Elevator. In 1892 Caro Electric Light Works began producing electrical energy from a steam dynamo. That year it supplied energy for 40 arc lights. The company also was considering installing a circuit for incandescent light. In 1894 the company had 40 arc lights and 500 incandescent lights with Caro paying \$60 per year each for 18 arc lights burning from dark to midnight. Arc lights were used outdoors while incandescent lights were used indoors. By 1898 that company’s cost was \$10,000.

Caro Electric Light Works was incorporated under the title of Caro Light & Power Company in 1898. Its owners were Charles Montague [President], Joseph Harris, Julian Wilsey, Frederick Wheat, and George Watson. The Caro Light & Power Company at this time operated the Old Steam Plant, the steam dynamo, that was near the Farmer’s Elevator.

In 1902, with growing demand, the company was driven to build a dam at the Oxbow of the Cass River just two miles below Caro. The initial building of the dam though met with a major disaster or set back. The foundation at the outset was built on hardpan instead of bedrock, which would have made it stable. The persistent rains of 1902 penetrated the hardpan and the work of the whole summer was gone. A bedrock foundation was in the end ultimately established. Eventually, late in 1902, for the first time, power was turned on. The gates were closed to hold the water back. Within a few days, the head of water at the dam was five to six feet. The “big water wheels” were started. Electricity at this point was generated and sent over wire lines to Caro. The arc lights in Caro were turned on for the first time with power directly from the Oxbow, and everything worked wonderfully. The cost of the dam with power equipment and fixtures was about \$20,000.

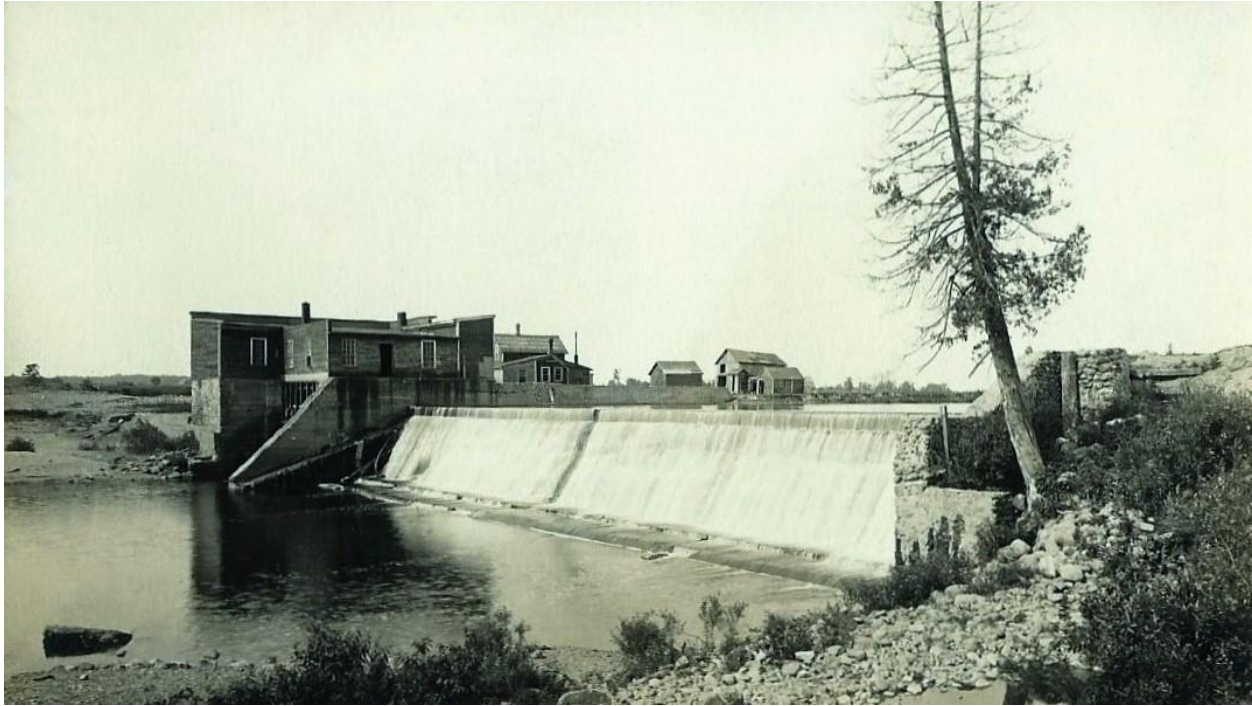
In 1903, though, the assets of Charles Montague went deeply into debt and bankruptcy.

Caro Light & Power Company was then placed under the direction of the Old National Bank of Detroit, and Robert Montague was designated as the local manager.

In 1905 the dam head was reported to be 16 feet. The dam likewise produced a 20-acre lake. As a resource of water, Peninsula Sugar Company, which was located nearby on the north bank of the river, took advantage of the abundant water supply and took water to refine sugar-beets from the lake.

In 1910 the Caro Light & Power Company was acquired by Doctors J. M. Ealy and R. M. Olin.

A year later, the company was acquired by Hon. Theron W. Atwood who made major repairs to the dam. The overhaul amounted, essentially, to rebuilding the entire dam.



Circa 1912—the Caro Light & Power Dam—the Dam at the Oxbow in the Cass River

The repairs were yet in progress when Atwood died in 1917. The business was then up for sale by his heirs.

The President of the Board of Commerce—Fred C. Striffler—devoted much of his time and effort to gain outside interests to invest in the dam.

November 1, 1922, Consumer's Power Company acquired the Caro Light & Power Company along with the dam. Consumer's Power Company also owned numerous dams located along the Au Sable River. The purchase price was \$50,000. Consumer's Power held ownership of the company until April 1, 1923, when it sold it to the Great Lakes Power Company who later changed its name to Michigan Electric Power Company.

In 1932 the dam was known as the Caro Hydro-plant and was operated by the Michigan Electric Power Company who had invested heavily in the dam the previous few years.

November 1, 1935, Detroit Edison took over ownership and maintained an office in Caro.

The dam became widely known as the Caro Dam. The Caro Dam was eventually over time though made obsolete, and its energy was replaced with other cheaper and more abundant resources of energy.

In the 1960's the Caro Dam reservoir, or Caro Lake, was a popular site for boating, fishing, and even water skiing. Today, the Caro Dam is held under private title.

The forerunner of the Caro Dam was the old Oxbow, which was the spark, the startup, the resource of energy that first brought people here to the center of Tuscola County.

Today, even today, the location still carries that drawing power or potential . . . People are still drawn here toward the center of our county.

The ancient Oxbow in the Cass River, now Caro Dam and Caro Lake, is today a resource for recreation and renewal.

The Oxbow was the initial key resource in our community's existence, and I would say it is yet the main resource in our community, the energy, that drives or moves all of us . . . forward—or onward!

The Oxbow in the Cass River, the location of the Caro Dam, today, still effects up and down the river, in the end, all of us!

Indeed, our community, Tuscola County, yet revolves around that deep-rooted Oxbow . . . just south of Caro!