

Environmental History: Formation of the Valley Creek Landscape

1.1 Billion Years Ago

35,000 Years Ago

300 Years Ago

1.1 billion years ago — A rift forms in the earth's crust from Lake Superior to Kansas. Eventually, layers of sandstone, siltstone, shale, and other sedimentary rocks were formed.

550 billion years ago — Shallow seas deposited additional sedimentary layers; seas departed around 450 million years ago and weathering of the sedimentary layers began.

The springs that provide much of the baseflow for the South Fork of Valley Creek originate in these bedrock layers and flow to the surface through vertical faults in the bedrock.

The ancient bedrock layers are tilted in portions of Washington County and are visible in some locations along Valley Creek and the St. Croix River.

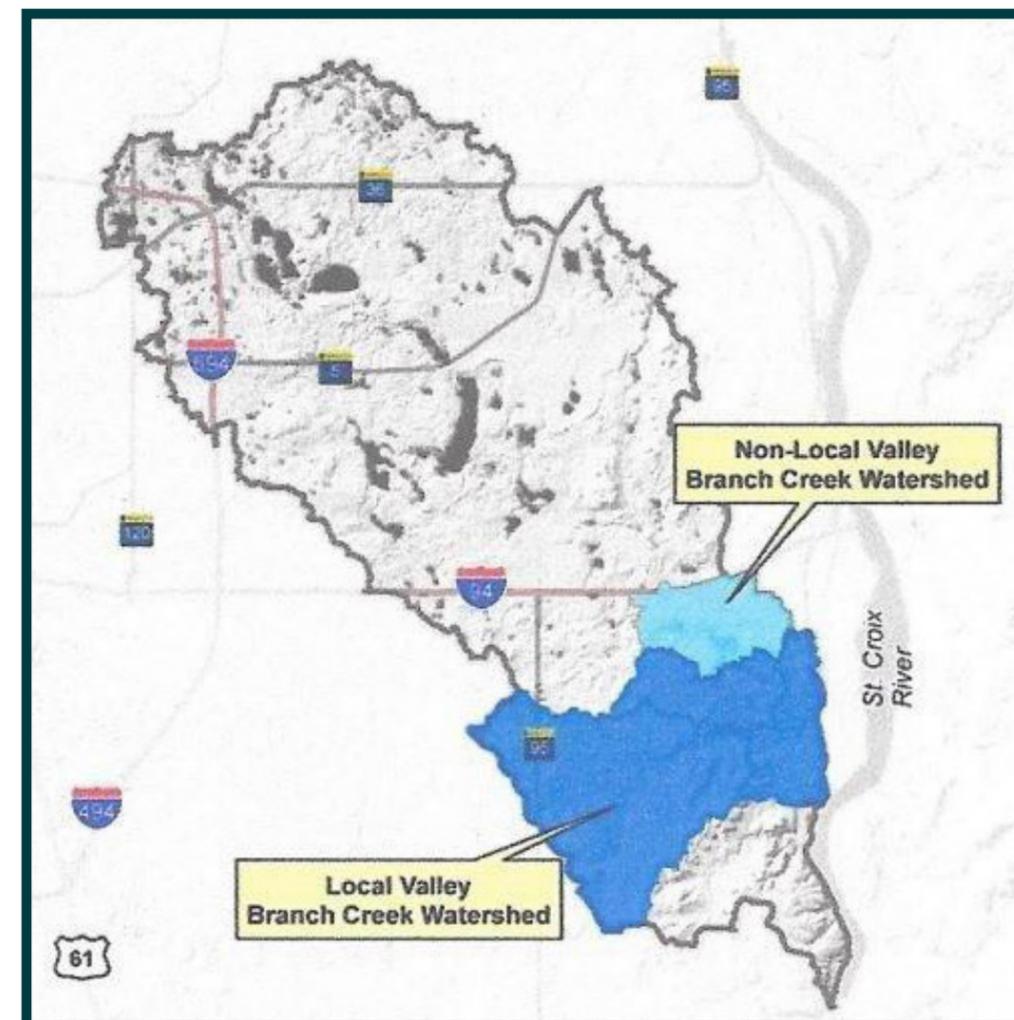
2.5 million years ago — First glaciers cover the mid-North American continent.

35,000-10,000 Years ago — Most recent glacial episode in Eastern Minnesota, the "Superior Lobe of the Wisconsin glaciation". Glaciers shape the major surface landforms visible in Afton today, including topography, soils, lakes, and streams. For example, Valley Creek cut its channel down through a sand and gravel outwash plain left by the last glaciation.

11,000 years ago — The first post-glacial vegetation, largely Boreal forest and Spruce Parkland in this area.

10,000 TO 5,000 years ago — Pine Barrens and Pine Forests (typically red pine with an understory of Bracken ferns). Significant climate warming and pines declined while prairie areas increased. Prairie was at its maximum around 7,000 years ago in the St Croix Valley.

4,000 years ago — Climate began to cool and become moister. Oaks spread into the prairies. The Afton area was dominated by Oak Woodland and Brushland plant communities.



300 years ago — the area became a mosaic of oak woodland-brushland and prairie openings, with patches of oak, pine forest, or wetlands in poorly drained areas.

Past 200 years — major forces that changed the local landscape were the arrival of Europeans and their agricultural practices. Urbanization then fragmented native plant communities with exotic species. By the time of the Minnesota County Biological Survey around 1990, less than 6% of the Twin Cities region remained in native habitats. Less than 3% of the oak woodland-brushland and less than 1% of the native prairies remained.

First Nations in the St. Croix Valley and Statehood

11,000 Years Ago

11,000-10,000 years ago — First Nations in the St. Croix Valley impacted the landscape and plant communities in several ways: through the use of fire to keep savanna and prairie areas open and suppress woodlands, through hunting, and through possible cultivation of new plants.

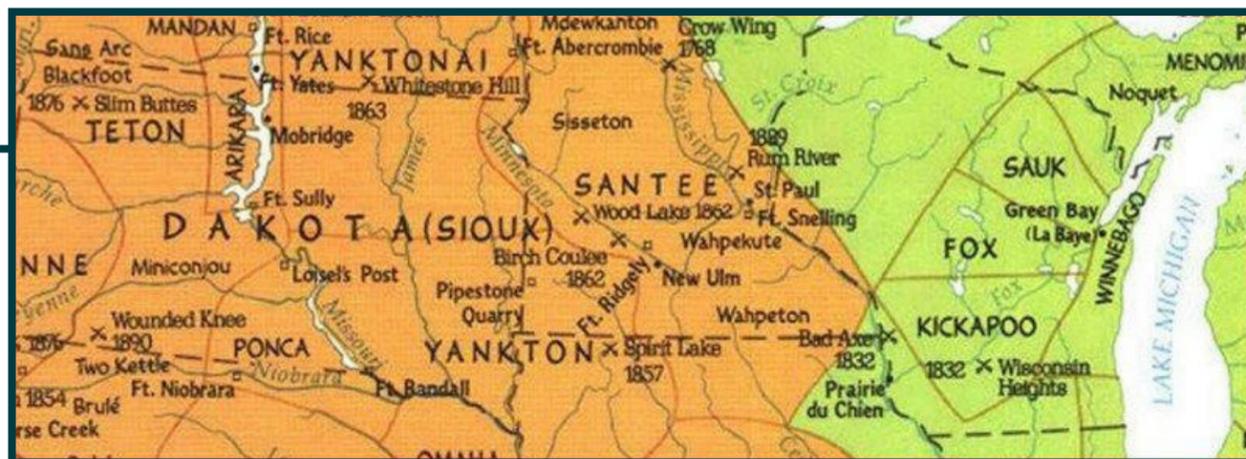
The St. Croix River Valley is settled by the Wahpekute, one of the seven Council Fires of the Dakota.

1600's — Anishinaabeg (Chippewa or Ojibwa or Ojibwe in MN) moved westward, initially by prophecy, then pushed further by European colonists, into Dakota territories. Both groups trade with Europeans: first the French, then the British, eventually with the Americans.

1776-1783 — American Revolution

1805 — Delegation of Mdewakanton Dakota traveled to Washington, D.C. after the U.S. government promised to affirm their southern boundary. Instead, the U.S. government forced the Dakota to sign over all lands east of the Mississippi.

1837 — The U.S. government forced the Ojibwe to sign over 12 million acres between the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers.



First Nations

1805

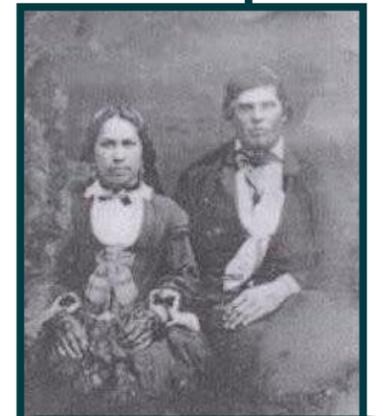
1805-1863 — There were a total of 13 treaties between the U.S. government and First Nations in this region. This is a painful period of broken agreements by the U.S. government that included forced living on reservations, relocation of children to distant boarding schools, and non-payment of treaty annuities.

The land on which Belwin Conservancy exists is the ancestral home of the Wahpekute Dakota people, original stewards of this region. We recognize that despite government efforts to exterminate and diminish the Dakota, their connection to this land, water, history and lifeways perseveres today. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

1837

1837 — First European colonizers arrive in Afton Township - Gaspere Bruce, a French-Canadian voyageur. He claimed 160 acres on Bolles Creek (now called Valley Creek).

1839 — New Englanders arrive and establish farms. Couple Jacob Fahlstrom, Swedish minister, and Margaret Bonga Fahlstrom, a Free African Ojibwe woman, established a farm on Bolles (Valley) Creek in 1841.



Margaret Bonga and Jacob Fahlstrom

1845-46 — Lemuel Bolles built the first grist mill on Bolles (Valley) Creek in the future village area.

1848 — First federal land office was established in the St. Croix River Valley at St. Croix Falls—ten years after the Ojibwe and Dakota lands in the valley were forcibly ceded to the United States. Any claims that occurred before the establishment of the land office were technically illegal.

1849-53 — The region became a territory with Alexander Ramsey appointed territorial governor. He acquired 40 acres on Valley Creek from the United States government in 1853, then transferred ownership to Lemuel Bolles who was already living there.

Afton and Valley Creek

1850s



Jay Kirschner in Valley Creek

1850's — Point Douglas Road, a U.S. military road, was extended through Afton.

1855 — Afton Village was platted.

1858 — Minnesota became a state. Alexander Ramsey was elected governor, 1860-63, and advocated for extermination of First Nations, including payments for the “scalping” of people.

1857 — A second mill was built further up Bolles (Valley) Creek. This mill was located near where Stagecoach Trail crosses Valley Creek. The flume created to power the mill was one of the first human alterations of the Creek.

1862 — The Homestead Act encouraged eastern non-native white Americans and European immigrants to travel westward and claim land that had been forcibly taken from First Nations people.

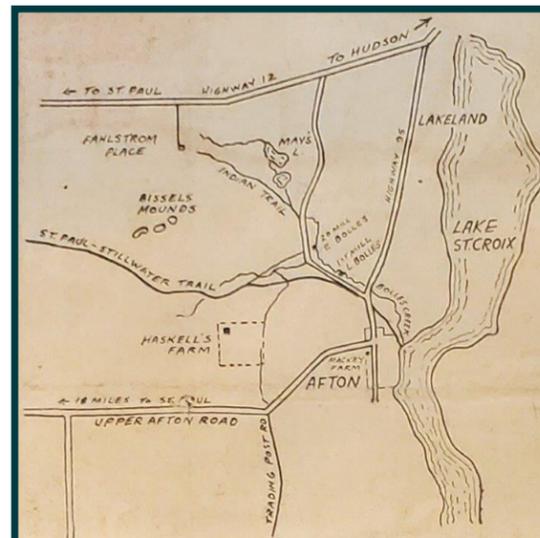
Late 19th Century

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES — Agricultural activity spread throughout the watershed which, by the 1930's, altered the creek through runoff, flooding erosion, and sedimentation.

1958 — The Bells purchased 67.4 acres along the creek. They start to build their cabin and complete a survey of the creek.

“The stream was flowing ... and the whole valley was a big wide open valley, ... I said, ‘Jeez, this is a nice place.’ They said ... ‘We want you to buy it.’ [Spreeman] was being hounded by the developers he wanted to find somebody that had some swamp water in their veins. So he decided that I had swamp water in my veins.” -- Charles H. Bell

1958-1961 — The Bells completed their first stream projects, creating ponds and waterfalls (washed out in 1965 flood), and established a fish hatchery. They bring the first Rainbow Trout to the creek from a fish hatchery in La Crosse.



Cradle of MN Agriculture Map with both Bolles mills

1968



Stream erosion, Farm on corner of VC and Stagecoach

1968 — Valley Branch Watershed District (VBWD) was created to address flooding problems in the watershed. Management of the creek and its tributaries evolved to VBWD, Minnesota DNR, and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.

1987 — VBWD constructed its Project 1007, a major flood relief project that linked the major lakes in the north and central parts of the district (north of I-94) to a large outlet pipe that travels along I-94 and discharges to the St. Croix River, reducing the watershed area that flowed to Valley Creek. The Current watershed is largely located within the City of Afton.

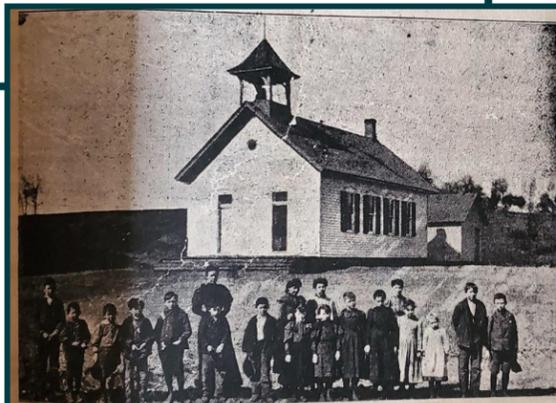
The Town of Valley Creek and Valley Creek Women's Club (VCWC)

1863

The creek was such a strong presence that a community grew up around it long before it was incorporated into Afton. The Valley Creek Women's Club (VCWC) maintained the local community into the 21st century.

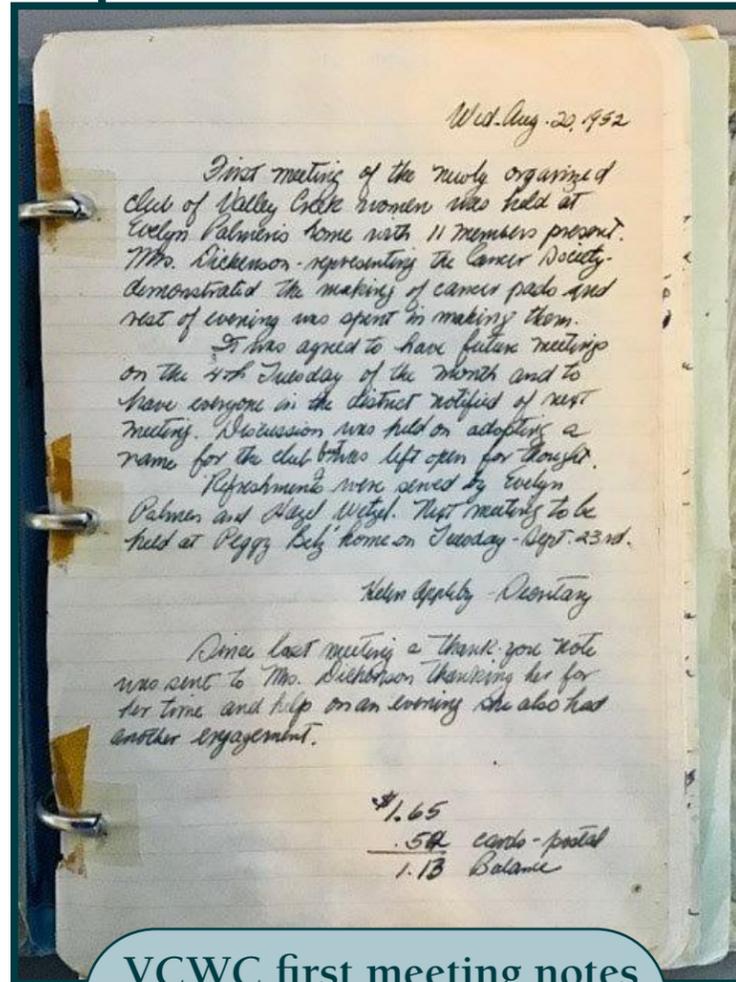
1863 — Valley Creek District School #39 was founded, also known as "Bolles School."

1874 — Valley Creek Post Office in Bolles Store is owned by Erastus Bolles, nephew of Lemuel, with Erastus as first Postmaster of the town of Valley Creek.



Valley Creek school 39

1952



VCWC first meeting notes
Aug 20, 1952

Annual activities include fundraisers for street signs, the volunteer fire department, and cancer medical needs among other causes. Two annual events initially brought in thirty attendees but ballooned to over a hundred local families: the annual 4th of July picnic on May's Lake (now Lake Edith) and children's Halloween parties in the Town Hall on Stagecoach.

1952 — VCWC was organized by and for women in the former school district #39. Three committees were formed for programming, organizing, and publicity.

The women hold monthly meetings on homemaking and political topics such as cake decorating, how to make "cancer pads," nuclear warfare and civil defense, gravel pits, and the problems of "juvenile delinquents." Each meeting also includes an invited speaker, e.g., political candidates, artists, the local fire chief, and exchange students and teachers from Korea, Japan, South Africa, and Turkey.

1958

1966 — VCWC meeting discussion of grass fires from trash burning, and the need for house numbers for the volunteer firefighters.

1967 — VCWC invites Dr. Lindahl from UMN to talk about keeping streams clean; 800 members of the Radcliffe College Club tour places of historical significance in the St. Croix Valley, including the pre-civil war Hipp home and other locations in Valley Creek.

1970 — Afton township, village and Valley Creek merge into "Afton;" Winifred Netherly exhibits "Valley Creek, Winter Scene," EPA is formed

1971 — VCWC invites Afton State Park and Belwin to their September meeting.

1973 — Valley Public Library was founded.

1976 — Bicentennial Exhibit of Minnesota Art and Architecture includes a photo of the Bahneman Barn in Valley Creek (on Valley Creek Trail).



VC Brownie Troop

Belwin and Valley Creek

1959

2022

“I just know that someday this is going to be an important thing to have this kind of property this close to a downtown metropolitan area. I don't know what we're going to do with it, but it's got to be saved.”

- Charles H. Bell



Belwin Outdoor Science class 1970s

1959-1968 — Bells purchase lands that will be used for Belwin Outdoor Science, a partnership with Saint Paul Public Schools that continues today. This is the beginning of Belwin Conservancy.

1970 — Charles and Lucy Bell create the Belwin Foundation.

1980s-1990s — Belwin expands within the Valley Creek watershed to restore land to healthy habitat and protect from development.

2002 — Valley Branch Watershed District created the Valley Creek Subwatershed Plan with the involvement of Belwin and other local landowners. Since the adoption of the plan, the District and its partners have completed a series of projects to stabilize the creek and improve the habitat of the creek for trout and other cold-water species.

2020 — Belwin renews a commitment to protect lands around Valley Creek, coordinating efforts with the Minnesota Land Trust, Washington County, Valley Branch Watershed District, and the city of Afton.

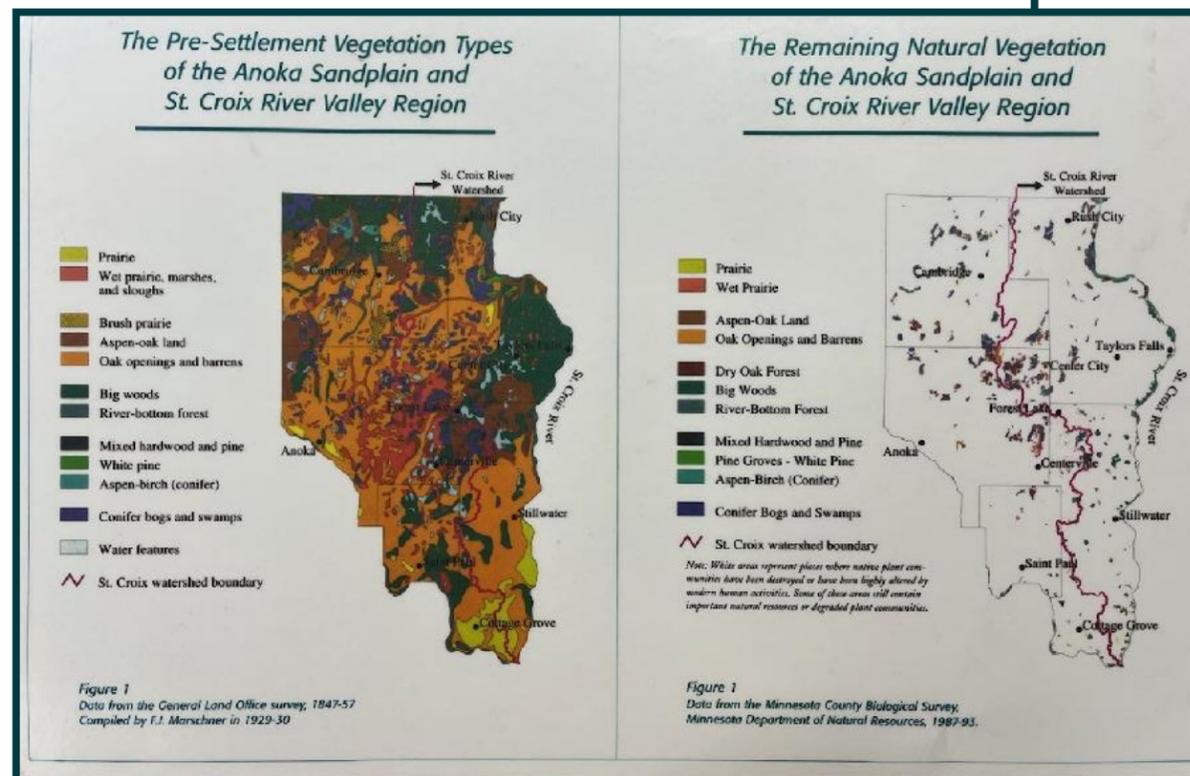
2020 — Belwin forms a partnership with the city of Afton and Washington County to protect a portion of Valley Creek and the surrounding 30 acres of land. Oxbow Trails will be open to the public in 2022.

Over the past 200 years the spread of agricultural and urban areas dominated the landscape, removing native plant communities and altering those that remained by fragmenting them, and introducing exotic species. By the time of the Minnesota County Biological Survey around 1990, less than 6% of the Twin Cities region remained in native habitats. Less than 3% of the oak woodland-brushland and less than 1% of the native prairies remained.

Belwin and our neighbors are working to restore these lands to healthy habitats. Valley Creek is one of our success stories.

Valley Creek is located entirely on private lands with Belwin occupying a significant portion of the current watershed.

The Valley Branch Watershed District management plan notes that the high quality of the creek is largely due to the limited development and high amount of managed open space within the watershed. This is important because it provides habitat for hundreds of species.



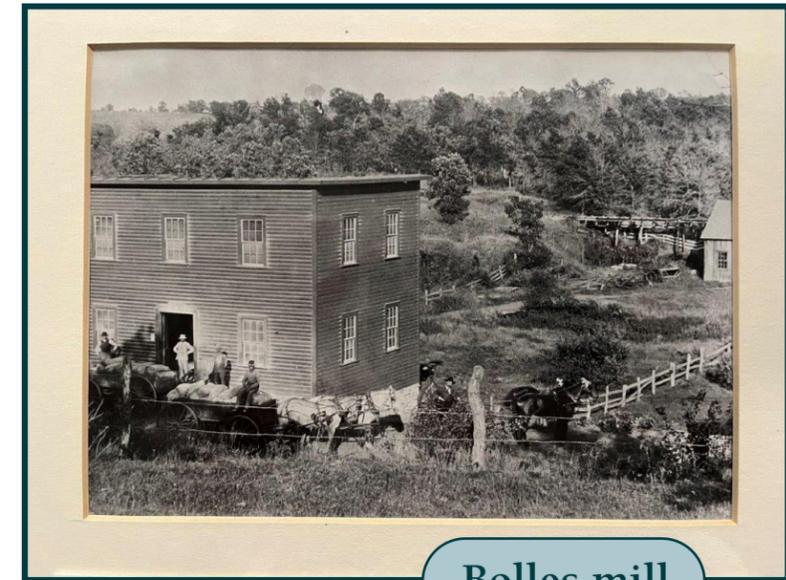
Additional Historical Photos

US to Ramsey to Bolles
40 acres on VC

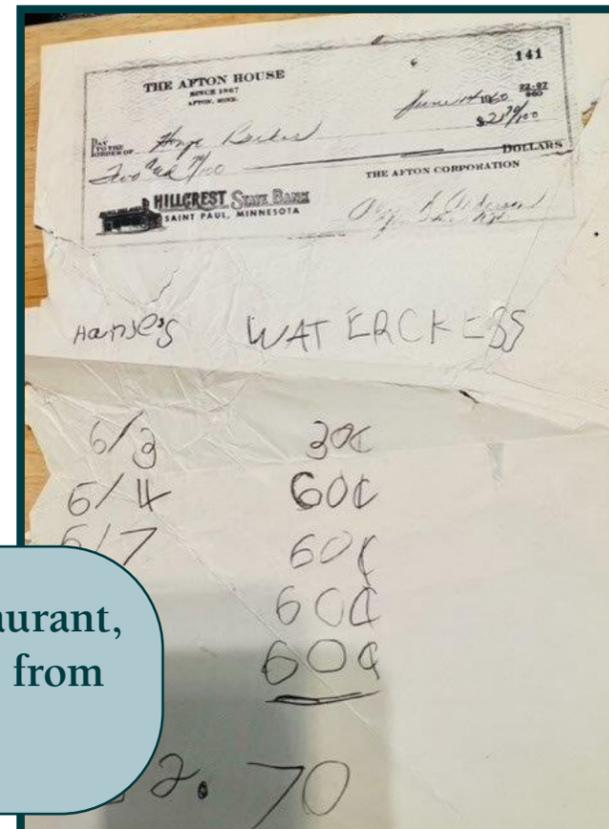
No.1.	Certificate of Location, dated February 22-1853, according to an Abstract of Land Office Records. Locates the NW ¹ / ₄ of NW ¹ / ₄ of Sec.15, Tp.28, Rge.20, containing 40 acres.
No.2.	Patent, dated March 1-1854, Certified Copy recorded January 9-1875 in Book "T" of Deeds, page 349. Grants the NW ¹ / ₄ of NW ¹ / ₄ of Sec.15, Tp.28, Rge.20, containing 40 acres.
No.3.	Quitclaim Deed, dated and acknowledged May 17-1855, recorded July 10-1855 in Book "E" of Deeds, page 499. Conveys the NW ¹ / ₄ of NW ¹ / ₄ of Sec.15, Tp.28, Rge.20, and other real estate.
No.4.	Quitclaim Deed, dated and acknowledged November 12-1855, recorded November 29-1855 in Book "F" of Deeds, page 157. Conveys the NW ¹ / ₄ of NW ¹ / ₄ of Sec.15, Tp.28, Rge.20, and other real estate.
No.5.	Mortgage, dated September 25-1857, acknowledged and recorded July 10-1855 in Book "B" of Mortgages, page 289. Mortgage the NW ¹ / ₄ of NW ¹ / ₄ of Sec.15, Tp.28, Rge.20, and other real estate.
No.6.	Mortgage, dated, acknowledged and recorded August 10-1855 in Book "B" of Mortgages, page 289. Mortgage the NW ¹ / ₄ of NW ¹ / ₄ of Sec.15, Tp.28, Rge.20, and other real estate.
No.7.	Mortgage, dated, acknowledged and recorded October 1-1855 in Book "B" of Mortgages, page 304. Mortgage, dated, acknowledged, recorded July 10-

One hundred and fifteen Valley Creek area people attended the July 4th picnic, sponsored annually by the Valley Creek Women's club, held at the Charles Hipp property (formerly the Henry Hellum's), at May's lake. This was one of the largest groups to attend, and one of the most successful picnics ever held by the Women's club. An evening of feasting, games, races etc. ended with a fireworks display at the Platt home at the lake.

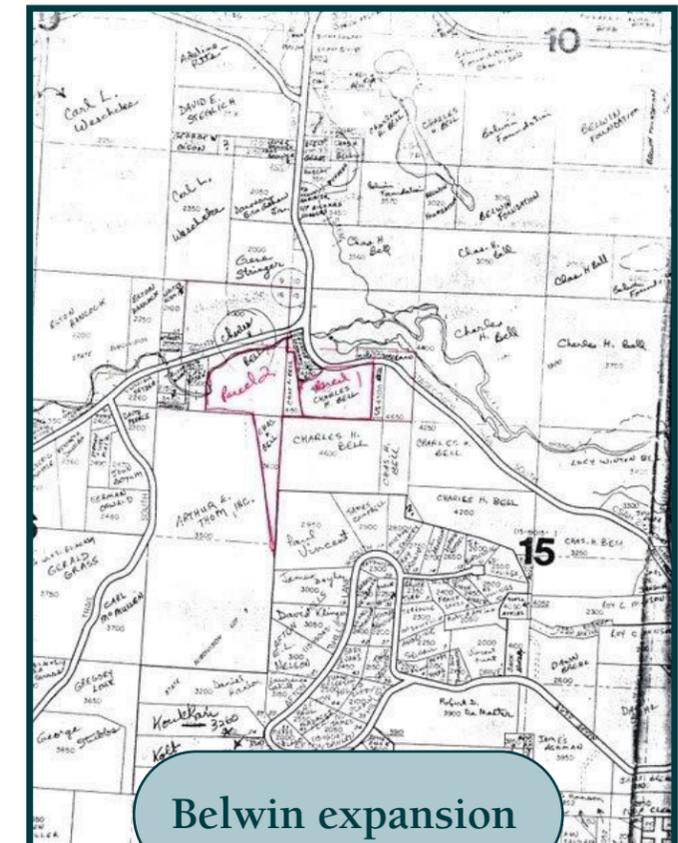
VCWC 4th July on Mays Lake



Bolles mill



1960 Afton House, an inn and restaurant, buys wild Valley Creek watercress from Hanje Becker



Belwin expansion