

Time to end Chicago's thievery

By: Mike Nichols, Superior Telegram

There are a lot of fish tales going around. Here is a true one that is about more than just the recently famous Asian carp.

Once upon a time, many years ago, Chicago was a cesspool.

It was so polluted in the late 1800s, it has been written, that chickens could run across the scum that formed on top of the rivers.

I don't know if I believe this because it has also been written that, instead of fish, the rivers were full of the floating carcasses of dead cats and horses, and I am not sure a chicken would go anywhere near a dead horse. But whatever. The smell and the disease were too much even for Chicagoans to bear. So, they did something about it.

They stole Lake Michigan.

This is not the way they tell the story in Chicago, of course. But, they know it as well as anyone. They looked around and figured all the people who live on the Great Lakes like Superior and Michigan in states like Wisconsin and Minnesota were suckers and pansies, and they decided just to take it in what was, really, a pretty ingenious heist.

They built a 28-mile canal that connected the Chicago River to the Des Plaines River, which eventually connects to the Mississippi. Then, in 1900, they reversed the natural direction of things. Instead of allowing the Chicago River to carry water into Lake Michigan, they used it to siphon water out and carry both Chicago's excrement and its barges to the west and south.

People all across America marveled.

"Water in the Chicago River now resembles liquid," reported the New York Times.

This was a very good thing for the thieves in Chicago. In fact, without the canal and other similar ones built later, Chicago would not be Chicago. Either it would be a cesspool, or it would be much smaller. It would be more like, say, Milwaukee, which never reversed a river, grew very big, or stole a lake – billions of gallons of it every day for decades.

Oh, we suckers and pansies have tried to stop the ongoing thievery a few times over the years.

There have been lots of lawsuits and a few good insults. As recently as the 1980s, Peter Annin recounts in "The Great Lakes Water Wars," Illinois Gov. Jim Thompson supported temporarily stealing billions of gallons more each day to help increase the water level of the Mississippi

during a drought. Annin asked former Wisconsin Gov. Tony Earl about the reaction of other Great Lakes governors to that.

“Jim,” Earl says the Great Lakes governors told Thompson “go powder your ass!”

More recently, as part of an effort to prevent Asian carp from swimming all the way from the Mississippi to Lake Michigan and ruining all the Great Lakes from Superior on down, attorneys general in places like Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin have filed suits and briefs with the U.S. Supreme Court. They say it is time to seal off the link between the Mississippi and Lake Michigan, once and for all. It’s something that would stop both the carp and the water heist. And, they are right.

The problem is the canal has been open and Chicago has been stealing water for so long now, and right out in the open, that many people just figure they have a right to it. These are the same people who figure it’s natural for a river to flow out of a lake instead of into it, and who probably think carp have legs.

Asian carp grow to the size of small cows but they do not have legs. They can swim through the canal that Chicago built long ago. But, they cannot walk over land – not the way Chicago has walked over the rest of us.

Contact Mike Nichols at MRNichols@wi.rr.com.