

## **What was the “Swamp Angel?”**

The earliest settlers of Martin County and southern Minnesota found thousands of sloughs and an abundance of lakes. However, many of the wetlands have disappeared since the first settlers came to this area. The disappearance of these waters was, in many instances, a result of Harry Keck who organized a bull-ditching outfit in the 1880's. The goal of this bull-ditching process was to provide more fertile crop producing soil in the area by draining sloughs and lakes for farming.

Mr. Keck was involved with his ditching operations, in addition to his farm work, for over 30 years. He trained and used more than 40 bulls at times to pull the huge ditching machine, which became known well beyond Martin County's borders as the “Swamp Angel.”

Since there were not motels or places for his crew to stay while on the job, Keck built bunkhouses and fitted them with bunks and locker spaces. He then mounted these bunkhouses on wagons and carried them to wherever his work called. The crew traveling the dusty, narrow, pioneer paths of that time period made a fascinating scene, which often stretched over a quarter of a mile long. The drivers would carry long poles with attached leather thongs, while walking at spaced intervals directing the bulls as they made their way down the narrow paths to their next job.

Also included with the crew was a cook shack which was fitted with a stove and necessary utensils for cooking. The drivers and other members of the crew usually ate outdoors, or in the case of bad weather, in a large tent which served as their dining hall. Mr. Keck bought groceries and meat for the crew; however, the farmers employing the services of the bull-ditchers were expected to provide oats, corn, and hay for the bulls. In addition, the farmers were sometimes asked to allow grazing privileges for the animals.

The cost of the ditch depended upon a number of variables that included the size, width, depth, and distance traveled. The charge was on a per rod basis.

The drivers were characterized as being tall, lean, rugged individuals who frequently risked their lives in wading through water up to their chins while driving the bulls through sloughs or lakes. The bulls could swim, in spite of

their yokes, and in some instances of deep water, the drivers were forced to climb on the bulls backs and crack their whips from that vantage point.

Eventually, as land became more valuable, farmers became much less likely to use the open ditch. In addition, the advent of drain tile which provided effective drainage without wasting the land associated with ditching was another blow to the bull-ditching business.

Finally, Mr. Keck quit the ditching business and sold his “Swamp Angel” equipment at auction on March 7, 1911.

To find out more about the “Swamp Angel” and other ditching operations in the early history of Martin County, visit the Pioneer Museum and review *The Daily Sentinel* Centennial edition of June 14, 1958, which served as one of the primary resources for this article, as well as other available sources, pictures, and artifacts relating to this topic.