

Paul Johnson, a Minnesota-based photographer who grew up in North Dakota, returned to his home state in the summer of 2014 and chronicled the devastation wrought by the flooding of Devils Lake. Johnson snapped this abandoned barn in the town of Churchs Ferry.



## HELL IN HIGH WATER

AN EERIE FLOOD  
IN NORTH DAKOTA  
HAS WIPED OUT  
ROADS, CHURCHES,  
CEMETERIES, AND  
HUNDREDS OF FARMS.

BY SHARLENE BREAKEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL JOHNSON

**I GREW UP ON** a 2,000-acre grain farm in North Dakota, just outside Webster, a town composed of little more than a post office, a schoolhouse, and a lively bar. Mine was one of a dozen hamlets with tiny populations and sprawling, commodity crop farms that surrounded the comparatively big city—7,000 residents strong—of Devils Lake, which shares its name with the largest natural body of water in the state, a few miles south.

When I was a teenager in the late 1970s and early '80s, the lake—home to mischievous spirits, according to Native American lore—lured me and my friends to cut class, drink beer, listen to AC/DC, and paddle around in boats under fluffy blue skies, past grazing cows and John Deere tractors churning the dark soil.

The area was experiencing a mild drought then, so our refuge inevitably took on an uninviting green hue come fall. No matter. We'd wade through the sludge, emerging slime-covered, then wait for the next spring's snowmelt to give the lake new life. The cycle maintained a seemingly predictable rhythm.

In reality, our playground was hardly stable. A closed glacial basin unconnected





to any rivers, Devils Lake is fed only by precipitation and runoff, and emptied by evaporation alone. Consequently, the water has both fanned out and virtually disappeared several times over the past 4,000 years. In the late 1800s, a grand steamboat called the *Minnie H* delivered mail to towns now serviced by postal trucks. My grandparents lived to see the lake shrink—with towns, roads, and farms colonizing the newly exposed land. All that was ancient history to my parents and me. During our lifetimes, the level of the lake stayed consistent enough that we didn't think much about it.

Some wet years in the '70s prompted the city to build a levee to protect its sewage system near the waterfront. Periodically, a handful of concerned citizens also pushed for a man-made inlet/outlet to stabilize the ebb and flow. That never happened. For the most part, the haven of my youth remained unchanged, even after I moved to New York City and embarked on a magazine career in 1987.

**And then the rains came.** A four-year drought shifted into an epic rainy cycle starting in 1993, when storms pelted the area and heavier snowfalls melted onto the waterlogged land. By the time driving summer showers arrived, the lake, with nowhere to go, spilled unchecked across our notoriously flat topography. The water rose nearly five feet that first year, destroying

lakeside homes and adjacent farmland. "It was a gut punch," says Jeff Frith, manager of the Devils Lake Basin Joint Water Resource Board. "During other rainy stretches, there'd be an especially wet year, followed by a drier one, so the water had a chance to recede," he says. Only this time the precipitation continued, causing the lake to double in size by 1999. Unfurling amoeba-like, the growing basin engulfed everything from cemeteries to football fields. "The biggest misconception, among average Joes *and* experienced water engineers, was that the water couldn't keep going up," adds Frith, also a county commissioner. "But it did."

As surprise turned to terror, residents looked for a cause—fewer wetlands, global climate change—to blame. For locals, the rise felt freakish. For climatologists, not so much. "The area shifts in and out of two tremendously variable climate states over long spans of time," explains Karen Ryberg, a researcher with the U.S. Geological Survey in Bismarck, North Dakota, a bureau that has been studying the Devils Lake region intensively for decades. "If you look over thousands of years, this cycle is well within the norms." Indeed, when settlers arrived in the 1800s, the lake held almost as much water as it does today.

That's cold comfort to farmers who've endured catastrophic misfortune. "It was like dying a slow death," recalls Dan Webster, a friend of my dad's, who grows

BELOW Early-morning sunlight illuminates a derelict barn Johnson accessed by kayak. OPPOSITE According to local farmer Dan Webster, when aluminum grain bins become waterlogged, "the concrete heaves and they'll never be usable again."







**“WE SAW FISH JUMPING NEXT TO OUR MACHINE SHED AND KNEW THE HOUSE WAS NEXT,” SAYS FARMER DAN WEBSTER.**

“It’s tough to imagine dry farmland in places where you find wetland grasses and waterfowl now,” says Johnson of the cattails surrounding this grain bin.

11,000 acres’ worth of wheat, corn, barley, and soybeans near the village of Churchs Ferry. After the first 1,500 acres of his family’s third-generation farmstead succumbed, the scene became downright surreal. “We saw fish jumping next to our machine shed and knew the house was next,” he says. In order to keep his childhood home from dissolving into dangerous debris, Webster and his father were forced to burn the place down before waves lapped the foundation. In 2011, water breached a road that had acted as a dam and rushed over the last thousand acres of his grandfather’s land. “It was devastating,” Webster says.

Nonetheless, he considers himself one of the lucky ones. Webster has managed to keep farming by buying and renting acreage, some from neighbors who’ve thrown in the towel. Though precipitation has leveled off in recent years, the lake’s elevation still varies by a few feet annually. In 2014, an uptick put 171,000 agricultural acres out of production—translating to direct losses of \$57 million, according to Dwight Aakre, a former North Dakota State University Extension Service farm management specialist. And a dip last year enabled Webster to seed 800 of his lost 2,500 acres at the lake’s edge. “Those fields under 20 and 30 feet of water? We won’t see that land again in our lifetime,” predicts Frith.

Because the flooding manifested as a relentless creep, as opposed to a unifying rush, the community struggled to coalesce behind a single solution. “It was tough to speak with one voice when our farms were getting picked off one at a time,” Webster says. Nor did it help that the wetter years yielded record-breaking crops for those who weren’t flooded. “I had guys come up to me later and apologize,” he explains. “Once they were affected, they understood.”

**During the mid-’90s**, the Army Corps of Engineers extended the levee to protect the sewage system and to prevent the entire city of Devils Lake from flooding, at a cost of nearly \$60 million, then had to extend it again to the tune of \$130 million when a rise rendered the previous work obsolete. Similarly, major highways were rebuilt—only to be flooded and rebuilt yet again.





ABOVE AND OPPOSITE Johnson recalls his frame of mind on the day he rowed past this century-old house, submerged for 15 years now: "I thought about the generations that grew up here and imagined how hard it must have been to have water slowly take away their heritage." While shooting, the photographer encountered partially sunken plows, augers, and farm trucks—hazardous debris to area boaters and ghosts of livelihoods lost.



In two and a half decades, upwards of \$1.5 billion has been spent by the Army Corps, the city, the state, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to address the problem. A significant chunk of that money went toward the construction of two emergency outlets—dam-like structures powered by electric pumps. Today, officials are confident they've finally nailed the infrastructure. But such safeguards against future disasters won't ameliorate the plight of already inundated farmers.

Some have left agriculture behind, leveraging their newly waterfront outposts into resorts and campgrounds. Jim Yri's parents once ran a cattle and grain farm where he and his wife, Diane, now host overnight guests. "By 2001, the lake had swallowed 2,000 acres, so we had to either take a chance here or pack up and move," Diane remembers. Loath to give up his profession, Jim continued to work what was left of their land as the couple brought in three small modular cabins to rent out. Visitors to the Yri's thriving year-round resort, West Bay, are often oblivious to the area's fraught history. "People will go out fishing and see machinery and buildings sitting in the water and ask, 'Why is that there?'" Jim says.

Of the 20-plus campgrounds and resorts that have sprung up, at least seven were once farms. "My grandpa used to harvest wheat on land that is now in the lake in

front of us, so I get it," says Kyle Blanchfield, who owns Woodland Resort, across from the long-gone beach where I spent many childhood days. "But the high water has given us a world-class fishery, and people now come from all over to vacation in Devils Lake."

It's true. A couple of summers ago, my extended family rented a sprawling cabin at Blanchfield's resort, and I hauled my New York City crew there for a week. I sipped Coronas at dusk beside a fire pit, gazing out at the now-brimming lake. As my 13-year-old daughter strummed her ukulele and my 16-year-old son caught walleye, the sound of a motorboat pulling a skier in the distance released a wave of my own teenage memories and I felt only joy.

"We're pretty happy with the lake now at about 1,450 feet," says Blanchfield, though he knows still-active farmers who aren't. That's the challenge facing the area today: how to balance agricultural interests with those of resort owners, who don't want the water to regress. "If it gets too shallow," says Blanchfield, "we could lose all that we've invested in this place."

It's a conundrum Frith encounters often at the Water Resource Board. He hopes that everyone will agree on a perfect water level "and then fight like hell to make it happen." But he's also a realist. "Chances are," he says, "either way, you'll be stomping on someone's livelihood." 🛠️