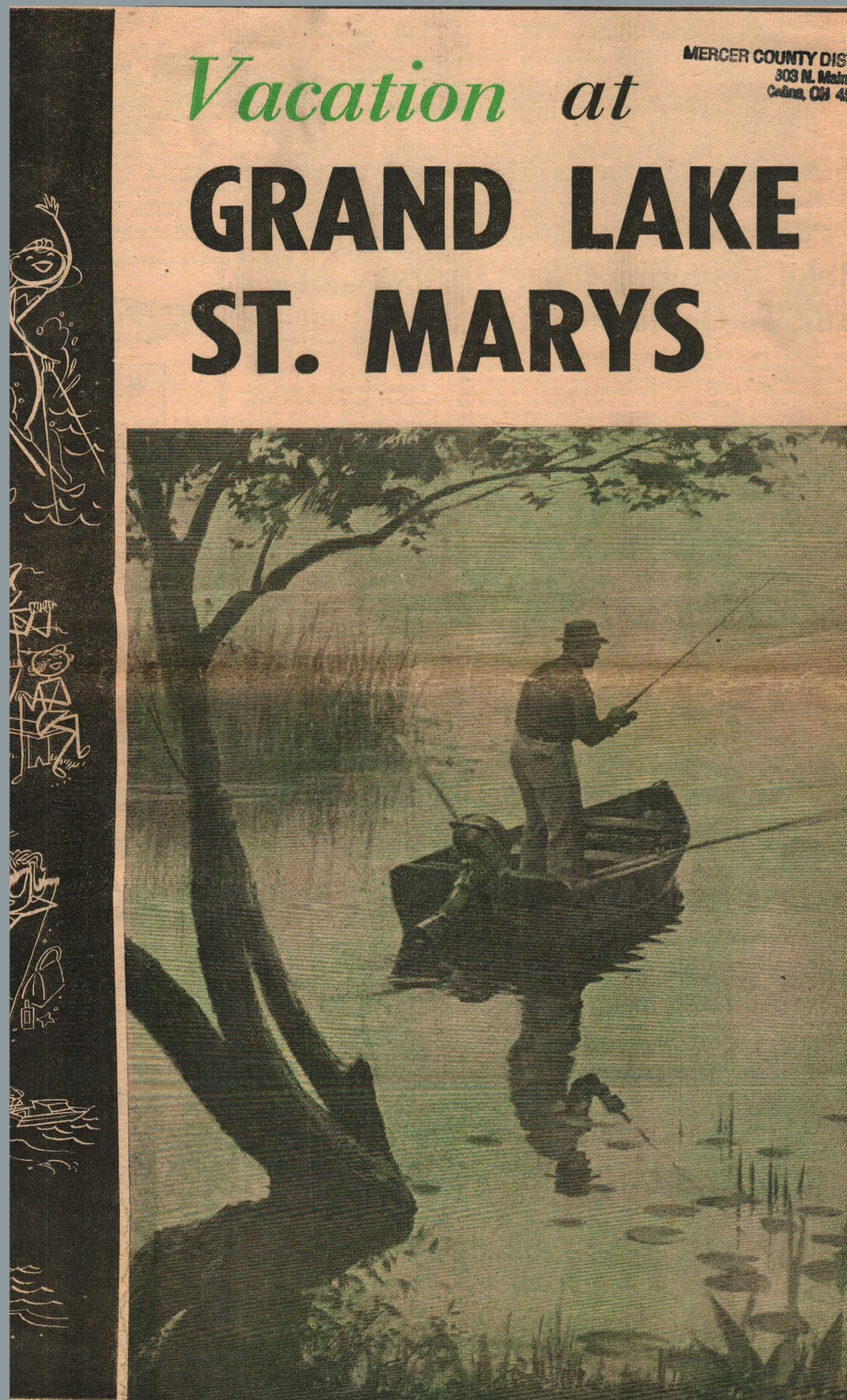


## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The long-term goal of this work is a publicly accessible digital archive of materials (including newspapers, magazines, historical documents, photographs, maps, and eventually oral histories) related to Grand Lake St Marys (GLSM) and other local historical sites.

This project will have both civic and scholarly purposes. The civic value is in giving the public access to the primary and secondary documents related to the lake's history, as well as organizing and creating compelling narratives based on that history. Academically, digital versions of these documents allows for research in the area of environmental history and environmental humanities using the tools of digital humanities.

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL RELEVANCE



Grand Lake St Marys is a site of rich environmental and cultural history significant for the immediate region, as well as Ohio as a whole. GLSM was constructed from 1837-1845 to supply water for the Miami-Erie Canal. At that time, GLSM was the largest artificially constructed lake in the world, and today remains the largest inland lake in Ohio. When the canal system became largely inactive due to the spread of railroads, Grand Lake St Marys became a site primarily dedicated to tourism and recreation. In 1891, the first offshore oil derrick was installed in GLSM, and for the next century, oil wells dotted the horizon. Today, the lake remains a recreational attraction despite continued problems with water quality issues, especially harmful algal blooms and the associated microcystins. Once viewed as environmentally hopeless, Grand Lake St Marys has experienced some improvement in habitat and water quality due to the sustained efforts of local environmental groups.

Regionally, GLSM is important as a geographical facet of the area and has a significant impact on the local economies of, especially, Mercer and Auglaize counties. Environmentally, GLSM is important as a unique case study that integrates water quality, public health, agriculture, and environmental safety and health.

## “DIVING DEEPER INTO THE HISTORY OF GRAND LAKE ST MARYS” A SAMPLE LOCAL HISTORY



Grand Lake St. Marys came into being as a reservoir to supply water for the Miami-Erie Canal. Construction commenced in 1837 and was completed in 1845 at a cost of approximately \$528,000 (EPA 1981 report). GLSM was formed by a dam at its west end on Beaver Creek and a dam at its east end on Chickasaw Creek, which drains into the St. Marys River via the St. Marys Feeder Canal. This seemingly inconsequential detail concerning the damming process (also taken from the '81 EPA report) presents some potentially interesting fodder for discussion. In an early conversation with local historian Joyce Alig, she offered one ostensibly critical caveat: GLSM wasn't *dug*, as many have reported.

This is interesting, as the “digging” of Grand Lake has long been a local colloquialism of sorts, one which conjures garish images of laborers slogging through 20-plus square miles of mosquito-infested marshland, veritably digging their own graves as they plunged their shovels into the seemingly endless expanse of swampy earth. It would be a near-Sisyphean task, particularly as the work progressed toward the center of the reservoir and the earth that was dug out had to be hauled all the way back to shore...Alig's point is confirmed by both the EPA report and Henry Howe's History of Ohio, which states GLSM “was formed by raising two walls of earth, from ten to twenty-five feet high, called respectively the East and West embankment, the first of which is about two miles and the last near four in length. These walls, with the elevation of the ground to the north and south, form a huge basin to retain the water” (Howe). ..GLSM was formed by a dam at its west end on Beaver Creek and a dam at its east end on Chickasaw Creek, which drains into the St. Marys River via the St. Marys Feeder Canal.

To revisit the scale of the lake's construction, the aforementioned Inquirer article estimates about 1,700 German and Irish immigrants worked 12-hour (or longer) days to accomplish the impressive feat. It is likely journalist Randy McNutt took this figure from Nevin O. Winter's “History of NW Ohio,” which cites the same number. Winter also reports the laborers were housed in “boarding shanties,” which were reportedly built at various “convenient places along the line.” What Winter does not mention is the staggering death toll. McNutt states simply that “according to local legend, thousands of workers died from disease, accident, and exhaustion during the grueling construction and were buried next to the lake.” It will be interesting to see what sources lend legitimacy to this “legend,” and whether they put venture a morbid guess as to how many workers might've given their lives.

