

Down on the Wild Rice Farm

By Barbara LaPorte Bartling

Most of us are familiar with the native wild rice that grows in our area's lakes and rivers, but did you know we had a commercial producer of wild rice in our neighborhood for 25 years?

LaRoe Farms, Inc., owned by Cal LaPorte and Benji Roemer, was one of only two Wisconsin producers that cultivated wild rice for sale on the commercial market. In 1971, LaRoe Farms purchased 600 acres of land north of Highway 51 at the Vilas/Iron county line. It took eight years to remove the tamarack and black spruce trees, dig ditches, and build dikes to prepare 200 acres for rice production. The first crop was planted and harvested in 1980.

Wild rice is an annual plant, but it self-seeds every year when the ripe seed kernels drop into the water bottom to germinate the following spring. In June, the rice "paddies" on the farm would be flooded so the plants could germinate and grow to the floating leaf stage. The water would then slowly be drawn down as the rice stalks grew and the seed kernels matured. The crop would be harvested mid to late August and sent to a processing facility in northern Minnesota.

Commercial farming of this native grain presented several challenges beyond the normal concerns of weather and pests. Too many rice kernels re-seeded every spring due to the density of the crop. To solve this crowding issue, an airboat fitted with cutters would be driven through the plants at the floating leaf stage to thin it.

Driving heavy combine tractors on the swampy peat at harvest time, after the paddies had been flooded for several months, always resulted in equipment getting mired in mud. Occasionally, the peat was too wet and deep to even harvest the crop. A fire that started from a tractor spark in the peat soil caused issues for several years (summer and winter) as the fire would burn underground and then suddenly ignite again.

The most significant threat, however, was when California entered this industry. They boasted a mild climate, fewer crop diseases and established white rice paddies that resulted in high-yielding wild rice crops, driving retail prices below the cost of production in the Midwest.

In 1995, having expanded to 400 acres of wild rice, Cal sold his interest in the farm to Benji. To balance the falling returns from the wild rice crop, LaRoe Farms began converting some of the paddies to cranberry beds. The final wild rice crop was harvested in 2005.