

Over the Line: Trials and Triumphs of the Bi-state Association for the Wolf Lake Initiative (AWLI)

Michael L. Boos, BookLocker, St. Petersburg, FL, 2019, 358 pages, paperback, \$35.00, (ISBN: 978-1-64438-974-4)

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“Wolf Lake straddles the Illinois and Indiana state line. It is not known how the area originally became known as Wolf Lake.” “Wolf Lake is a natural lake, but many areas were dredged in years past. It is separated into nine different sections or ponds by dikes left after the completion of the dredging project of the 1950s to construct the Indiana Toll Road span across the lake. Today, the lake’s maximum depth is about 20 feet; average depth is about 8.5 feet. More than a century ago, the average depth was 2.5 feet with a maximum depth of about 5 feet.” (p. 264)

This book will grab your attention. You will not want to put it down, and your interest in the Wolf Lake area will not stop after you have finished reading it.

The book “records the early trials and triumphs of a single, not-for-profit organization seeking to improve and enhance a watershed in Southeast Chicago and Northwest Indiana. That area is known as the Calumet region, which evolved over the years from a swampy hunting and trapping ground to a steelmaking haven. ... From these pages, readers will learn of achievements made by hundreds of individuals brought together to preserve and enhance the Wolf Lake watershed. ... They’ll learn what Wolf Lake means to others through their recorded memories.” (pp. vii-viii)

The Calumet region includes parts of two states--Illinois and Indiana--two states which differ substantially in history, politics, economics, priorities, environmental orientation, and governmental structures. The “over the line” in the title refers to the boundary (state line) between them. Interstate cooperation can be difficult, especially between states that differ so much as they do, especially on complex issues like environmental protection.

The book summarizes the region’s geographic, demographic, and economic history. It is almost unique geologically and ecologically, especially in its native plants and animals. It is very different from most of the rest of Chicago/Northeast Indiana area. The region’s geology stabilized about 1500 years ago when Lake Michigan assumed its current location and depth. But, as late as the 17th Century, “Accounts of explorers and early settlers described encounters with mountain lions and timber wolves and told of hunting for black bear, deer and wood buffalo. ... In earlier years when they appeared in large number, the bear and the mountain lion feasted on deer, elk, and even moose (page 16).” The area also included “bosky glens and sunny glades” that supported a wide range of plants that also differed from the rest of the region (page 16).

However, these unique geological and ecological features were also its undoing. The very water, marshes, and flat expanses that created this natural wonder also invited the population and industry that drained the marshes and built factories, steel mills, and highways.

By the early 1950s, the region was sometimes seen as worthless and not a good place to live. He describes how in 1958 the Calumet Skyway (now called the Chicago Skyway) ignored environmental concerns to go right through the marshes and scooped them up to provide soil for construction.

Mr. Boos also summarizes the history of federal environmental efforts, and how they motivated both Illinois and Indiana to respond. He describes the history of citizen groups in both states that developed to preserve what was left of the Calumet region and to provide recreational opportunities. He points out that in 1999 the Army Corps of Engineers approached citizen groups in both states because it needed a local bi-state group to help implement a multi-million-dollar effort to restore Wolf Lake’s shoreline in both states, not vice versa. This request was the impetus to create the bi-state Association for the Wolf Road Initiative (AWLI) from citizen groups in both states, the subject of the book.

Mr. Boos describes his efforts to make the AWLI a successful bi-state organization. He candidly describes his successes and failures, acknowledging what he would do differently and what he learned along

the way. He credits those who helped him and tries to understand why some did not, rather than just blaming them. He acknowledges cases where he “stepped over the line” in terms of what was possible. He supports his story with extensive details that include agendas, people in attendance, and even records of the number of meetings people missed. He adds links to websites to complement the details included in the book. These weblinks are well worth examining. His descriptions of how local, state, and federal politics and traditions both helped and hindered his efforts are insightful and enlightening. He describes how some local governments in Indiana focused more on developing recreation that would attract tourists rather than on restoring the land to its original condition and why they did.

He also includes interviews with people who regularly bird/plant watch in the area, and interviews people who grew up in the area about how it provided both recreation and opportunities to learn about nature. These interviews show how important the area was to many, even when others wrote it off.

I finished the book eager to learn more about the Calumet region and its current status. As I dove deeper into the current situation, it was obvious that his insights about how the area’s organizations and governments differ in goals and motivations that continue even today.

I have few suggestions for changes. One might be to provide a better map of the area to help the reader understand the total context. I knew about Avenue O in Chicago and the neighborhood it is in because I grew up in Chicago’s southeast side. This background helped me understand the links between Avenue O and his description. He could do more to help other readers to understand his points as well as I did. Another might be to devote greater attention to the goals of the Calumet region efforts, especially how recreation compared to preserving and restoring a natural marsh. While he acknowledges that this question was never resolved (and not really addressed), more attention would help the reader understand the current situation.

These limitations are minor compared to the book’s strengths and I recommend it. While it is not coffee-table reading, it is worth reading carefully.