

### **A Look Back ... Chesley Dinkins**

When Chesley Dinkins retired from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1983, he was 73 – reported to be the oldest employee in the Service at the time – and he had spent his entire 43-year career managing Lake Ilo National Wildlife Refuge in North Dakota.

“All this job takes is common sense and the ability to work,” said Dinkins, who had no interest in the flurry of media interest generated by his retirement. Then-regional director Galen Buterbaugh said that Dinkins’ career spoke of stability and dedicated service at a time of constant change.

Dinkins began working as a Works Progress Administration foreman in 1936, managing construction of the dam that created Lake Ilo in the grasslands of western North Dakota. When the refuge was established in 1939, he became its only manager until his retirement.

Although he had only two years of high school, he observed and studied wildlife habitats, adapted plantings for ducks, grouse, pheasants and deer, and turned the 4,000 acre refuge into prime habitat. He used cover plantings, winter food plots, predator control and shelterbelts (windbreaks) to increase wildlife production. Twenty-eight acres of now-towering evergreens were planted as seedlings.

Dinkins and his wife, Polly, raised nine children – eight of them born in their home on the refuge – and all had refuge chores. Dinkins often referred to different tree rows by the name of the child responsible for hoeing that row.

Maintaining the refuge was a family affair. Refuge headquarters was in their basement. When Chesley Dinkins suffered a heart attack in 1961, his children temporarily assumed responsibility for the refuge. Polly Dinkins did much of the administrative work, but she also poured concrete, operated a tractor and helped with the wildlife surveys. Neighbors referred to the refuge as Chesley’s ranch, because he raised cattle along with the wildlife he protected.

Dinkins used to hunt with legendary Refuge System Chief J. Clark Salyer and, although he knew all six people in the regional office at the time, he traveled there as rarely as possible. “I made 17 trips to Minneapolis and hated every one. Couldn’t stand the traffic,” he said.

Only when he retired did Dinkins move – all the way to Dunn Center, ND, three miles away.

### **CAPTION [Look Back -- Chesley Dinkins (no credit).jpeg]:**

Chesley Dinkins (1910-1992) spent his entire 43-year U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service career managing Lake Ilo National Wildlife Refuge in North Dakota.