

IMAGES OF NATURAL BEAUTY AND RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITY IN MINNESOTA IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

For several decades, strong images of Minnesota have centered on the region as one of tall pines, beautiful lakes and great fishing. Especially since the 1920s, much of Minnesota's tourism promotion has focused on the state's scenic beauty and recreational opportunities. This paper traces the development and use of those positive images both in official tourism promotions and in segments of the popular press. These images have helped stimulate a significant component of Minnesota's regional identity.

INTRODUCTION

Pale light appeared in the east. Pines and firs, still shrouded in diaphanous fog, emerged, their tops touched by the glow. With each moment, more was revealed. Gulls perched on rocks exposed above the calm water. A loon surfaced into a diamond-clear opening. Droplets of dew brought out the tracery of a perfect spider web. Joshua scanned the lake, thought of moose and wolves, bears and blueberries, peace and tranquillity. How fortunate he and Katie were to be in this lovely spot. He placed his rod and tackle into the canoe and glided into the mist.

Minnesota is the land of ten thousand lakes. It says so right on the auto license plates; in

recent years, plates also show a scene of canoeists on a North Woods lake. Enduring and profound images of Minnesota revolve around this basic scene. It is a land of considerable natural beauty, of pines and lakes, of wonderful wildlife and of great fishing. These images, so important in Minnesota's sense of itself and in promoting tourism, are the focus of this paper.

Geography deals not only with objective reality, but also with impressions of places (See, for example, Brown, 1936; Burton and Kates, 1964; Flynn, 1992; Glacken, 1967; Harris, 1978; Lowenthal, 1961; Lynch, 1960; Prince, 1971; Shortridge, 1991; Tuan, 1977; and other works; Wright 1947). Minnesota has had several important images: a cold climate, agricultural productivity, giant iron mines, a Scandinavian heritage, and a high quality of life, as well as attractive scenic features. Each image contributes to an overall regional identity; recognizing and trying to understand these images and this identity is interesting in itself and can provide useful perspectives in the study of historical regional geography. For example, Minnesotans cherish the images of natural beauty associated with the state. Understanding this phenomenon gives insight into why Minnesota has been a pioneer in environmental protection efforts and why there is such emphasis on and pleasure in outdoor recreation in the region.

EARLY PROMOTION FOCUSES ON SETTLEMENT, BUT SCENERY IS APPRECIATED

Following nearly 180 years of European and American exploration and limited economic activity, Minnesota became a United States territory in 1849. At that time, the population total of both indigenous peoples and immigrants in the entire territory was very small, probably fewer than 20,000 people. The territorial government and then, beginning in 1858, the state government actively promoted European and European-American settlement in Minnesota. The government was joined by the railroads and other private interests in this endeavor (e.g., Flynn, 1992; Barton, 1975; Holmquist, 1981; Johnson, 1950; Ljungmark, 1971; Peterson, 1929; Shannon, 1957; Appel and Blegen, 1923). There are many original documents such as grade books and promotional tracts in the Minnesota State Archives (e.g., Folsom, 1905; Hewitt, 1967; State Board, 1881; Wheelock, 1860). Until early in this century, most promotional effort was intended to stimulate immigration and settlement. There were, however, some tourism efforts and appreciative description of the region's beauty by both residents and visitors. (See, for example, Barton, 1975; Gates, 1935; Lewis, 1854; Longfellow, 1855; Northern Pacific, 1900; Twain, 1981.)

Since about 1920, little effort has been expended to promote immigration to Minnesota. Certainly, businesses have been encouraged to move to or set up facilities in the state and there has been significant migration to the region, especially since 1970. However, a high proportion of advertising aimed at getting people to come has been oriented toward tourists. General-interest news publications (e.g., *Time*) and popular magazines (e.g., *National Geographic*) over the years also have been agents for the dissemination of positive images of Minnesota.

1920S AND 1930S: MINNESOTA IS PORTRAYED AS AMERICA'S SUMMER PLAYGROUND

In the 1920s and 1930s, tourists were drawn to Minnesota by a variety of images. The Ten

Thousand Lakes-Greater Minnesota Association referred to the state as "The Nation's Summer Playground"; that organization's brochures contained sketches, photos and descriptions of swimming, fishing, golf and hunting (Figure 1). The described setting was idyllic -- "rustic cabins hidden deep in the forest", "entrancing scenery" of rocky bluffs and tall pines. "More than ten thousand crystal clear lakes cool the air for comfortable play by day and restful sleep at night." Here one could enjoy "the world's finest canoe trails" and "sojourn in the habitat of the moose, the bear and the deer." There were "(s)afe beaches for the kiddies -- no poisonous snakes or insects"; it was a "land of cool breezes and health-giving sunshine." Good roads, as well as railroads and buses, made these beauty spots easily accessible. Minnesota was also "an ideal place for summer conventions"; hotels and some of the larger resorts could accommodate large gatherings (Ten Thousand Lakes, Greater Minnesota Association, 1920s - 30's).

Glanville Smith's long 1935 *National Geographic* article on Minnesota was replete with images of scenery and outdoor recreation. The title, "Minnesota, Mother of Lakes and River," keyed in on a major theme which he noted in the introduction:

"One way of looking at the map of Minnesota is to see it all speckled with sky-blue lakes, the celebrated Ten Thousand. This is the way the intending vacationist looks at it, and it makes a chill of rapture run up his spine" (Smith, 1935, p. 273).

The article dealt with Minnesota in all its complexity in the 1930s and noted both positive and negative natural, cultural and economic changes from earlier times. For example, wildlife was more scarce than in pioneer days because "the white man always insists on altering Nature to suit his own views." Buffalo, elk and antelope had disappeared; wolves, coyotes and other animals were diminished in numbers, but deer, beaver, black bear, porcupine and moose could be found in the North Woods.

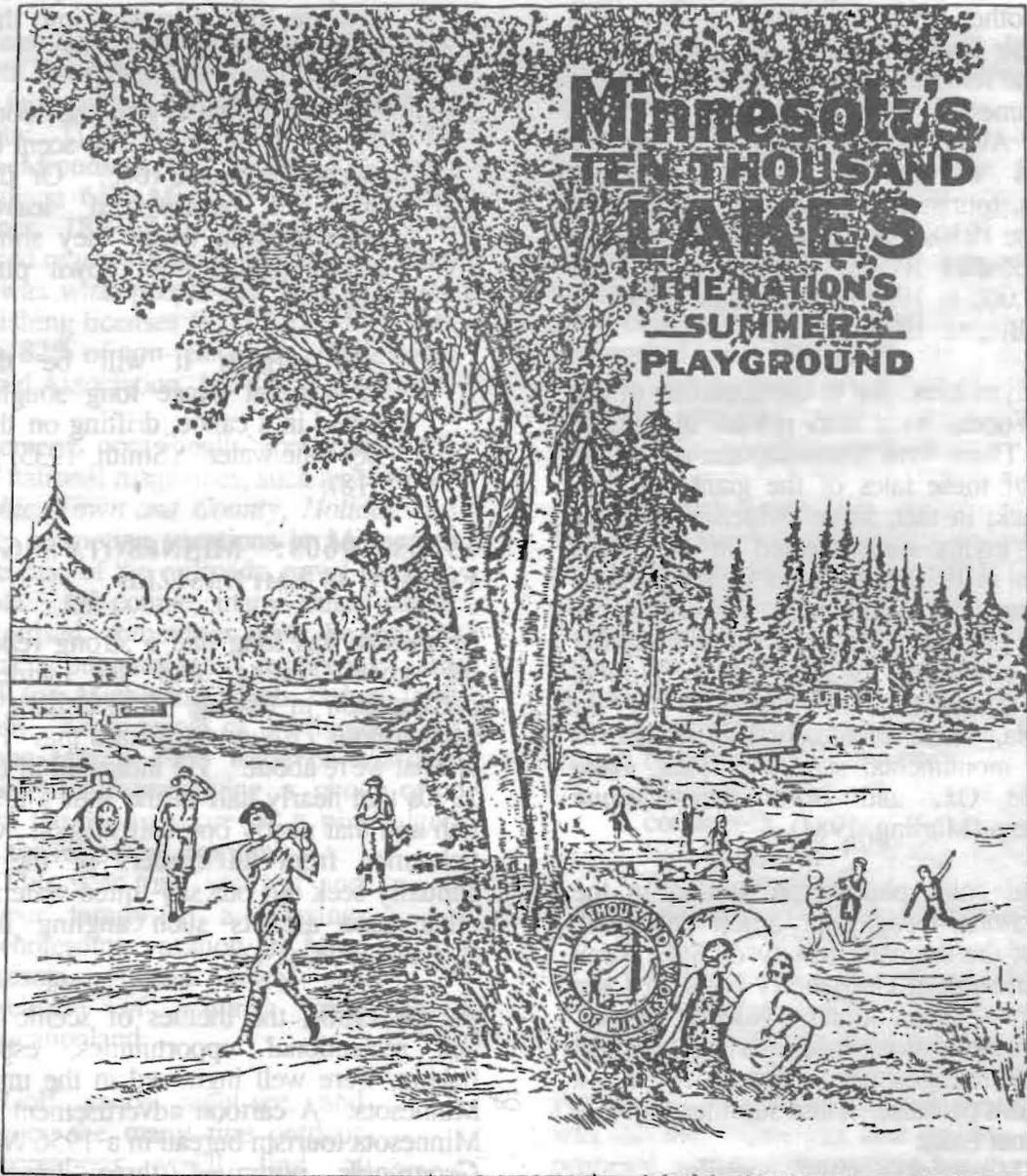


Figure 1. The Nation's Summer Playground (Source: Ten Thousand Lakes-Greater Minnesota Association, 1931 - cover).

Smith discussed fishing and hunting. Hunting potential had diminished because of habitat alteration but was still good. Fishing had changed but remained outstanding in many places; under a photo of a man holding a nearly four-foot long northern pike and several other good-sized fish at Ten Mile Lake, near Hackensack, the caption read, in part, "The remote border lakes of Minnesota are a game-fish paradise" (Smith, 1935, p. 287). Along with fishing enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of Minnesota residents, tourist fishing markedly increased during the 1930s. For example, "the number of nonresident fishing licenses rose from some 37,000 in 1933 to more than 80,000 in 1939" (Blegen, 1975, p. 533).

Paul Bunyan tales, tied to the depletion of the North Woods, were also related in Smith's article. There have been disputes about the origins of these tales of the giant mythical lumberjack; in fact, some evidence suggests that the myths were created in the years beginning in 1910, sometimes for the purpose of commercial promotion (Blegen, 1975, pp. 334-337). Nevertheless, Paul Bunyan rapidly became a symbol of the North Woods, probably nowhere as strongly as in Minnesota, which eventually had numerous roadside monumental statues of Paul, Babe the Blue Ox, and other Bunyanesque phenomena (Marling, 1984).

A special color photograph section in the 1935 *National Geographic* article contained, photos of the dramatic beauty of Split Rock Lighthouse and of Gooseberry Falls on Lake Superior's "Rock-bound North Shore," canoes in racks along a lake, a fish catch at Lake Winnibigoshish (Minnesota is a sportsman's paradise.), and summer sports at Plantagenet Lake:

"Minnesota's chief contribution to scenic America is its more than 11,000 sky-blue, tree-fringed lakes. Sylvan vistas from porticoes of palatial hotels and shaded camp sites in the 'Land of Lakes' delight thousands of pleasure seekers annually" (Smith, 1935, color photo I, after p. 288).

This important article in one of America's most widely read publications ended with some musings on the meaning and the images of Minnesota.

".... What will a stranger find to carry away with him, and treasure, after a journey into this sheaf-shaped land?

"Will it be the cry of the loon? The string of frost? The scent of the bright prairie rose? Or the taste of wintergreen leaves plucked from where they shine glossy against the brown pine needles?

"Or perhaps it will be the memory of peace long sought, found in a canoe, drifting on the sky-blue water" (Smith, 1935, p. 318).

1950S-1960S: MINNESOTA'S GREAT FISHING IS EMPHASIZED

Minnesota has long had a strong reputation for good fishing and for widespread participation in fishing. Ron Schara of the *Minneapolis Tribune* suggested that "Fishing is what we're about." He indicated in the late 1970s that nearly half of the state's residents fish and that nearly one-half million "visiting fishermen from all corners of the world annually seek out our sky-tinted waters. No other state attracts such angling hordes" (Schara, 1978, p. 1).

By the 1950s, the themes of scenic beauty and recreational opportunities, especially fishing, were well ingrained in the image of Minnesota. A cartoon advertisement by the Minnesota tourism bureau in a 1956 *National Geographic* portrayed three images of "Amazing Minnesota": "a mountain of butter," a century of the tourist trade, and fishing. It was the "Biggest Fishing State": "Fishermen buy more fishing licenses in Minnesota than in any other state...and [have] a lot of fun using them!" (Minnesota Tourist Information 1956).

A report based on a major state mail survey of vacationers in 1955 showed that scenery and

fishing were the two strongest attractions to Minnesota for vacationers. In this survey, of approximately 1500 comments, ten to one were favorable regarding Minnesota vacations (Minnesota Department of Business Development 1956).

A few years later, another survey, this by the Minnesota Arrowhead Association, indicated several facts about visitors to northern Minnesota: 1) most visitors were from the Midwest (Minnesota 30%, Illinois 20%, Iowa 18%, Indiana 6%, Missouri 5%, Nebraska 4%, other 18%); 2) more than 88% represented return visits; 3) the beauty of the scenery was what people like best; 4) most bought fishing licenses (91.5% of Minnesota residents, 82% of non-residents) (Minnesota Arrowhead Association, 1961?).

Advertisements occasionally appeared in the 1960s in national magazines, such as *National Geographic*, *Town and Country*, *Holiday* and *Redbook*, promoting vacations in Minnesota or, in the case of the railroads, travel through Minnesota. Of course, many other places also advertised, sometimes quite heavily, in the same publications; numerous ads appeared for Michigan, South Dakota and Wisconsin. An example of a Minnesota ad was in the March 1960 issue of *National Geographic*. Accompanying a photo of a family on the rocky shore of a pine-edged lake was the following proposal:

"This year treat yourself and your family to a relaxing, wholesome vacation in Minnesota -- and enjoy the treasure of nature's own vacationland.

"Golf, canoe, sight-see, and enjoy the many fine outdoor recreations you'll find at Minnesota's thousands of friendly resorts. Let your work-worn nerves relax and faded appetites be rejuvenated as you play and sleep in Minnesota's invigorating, cool, fresh air. Explore via 11,000 miles of modern highway the deep forests, the hidden lakes, and magnificent

scenery" (Minnesota Tourist Information, 1960).

1970S - EARLY 1990S: MINNESOTA RECEIVES NATIONAL ACCLAIM AND TOURISM EXPANDS

The 1970s and 1980s were a time of expansion of tourism information and activities in both amount and scope. Though material connected with arts activities and city life was significantly enlarged in tourism information during the period, the major themes of scenery, fishing and outdoor recreation remained primary, especially for the northern half of the state. These themes also continued to be among the most widespread and treasured of Minnesota images. Furthermore, several articles in major general interest publications portrayed Minnesota as a highly desirable place.

A piece which appeared in Western Airlines' "Western's World" was so exuberant in its praise that the state tourism bureau used excerpts in a full-page fold-out ad in *National Geographic* in 1972. The author, travel writer Robert McDermott, wrote glowingly of the North Woods with its impressive lakes and trees, canoe routes, animals such as the moose, beaver and deer, and fish:

"Minnesota rates as one of the continent's most outstanding fishing regions, attracting anglers from throughout the U.S. Lakes from one end of the state to the other are famed for muskie and northern pike, great fighting fish that challenge even the master, as well as for lake trout and bass."

Perhaps the crucial statement of the article/ad was that the "Minnesota lake country is of a primeval, almost embarrassing beauty, a land empty of people" which draws people "back year after year to spend a few days or weeks as someone other than their 'normal' selves." (McDermott, 1972).

The Time Cover Story: "The Good Life in Minnesota"

The long-term promotional image of Minnesota as a lake oriented vacation

paradise was given a strong boost in 1973 with the August 13th cover of *Time* magazine. There was youthful, rugged Governor Wendell Anderson, on a lake fishing trip, holding up a nice-sized northern pike and grinning broadly. The cover story was entitled "The Good Life in Minnesota". The article included more than two dozen photographs, one third of which dealt with fishing or lakes, primarily in the Twin Cities. Of the natural environment, the authors had much to say that was, if not always totally accurate, quite positive:

"Much of the mood in Minnesota has to do with the comparatively unspoiled land. ... Below the Canadian border stretch vast expanses of forests and lakes, a region of shaggy and pristine beauty. Timberwolves roam there. Moose can be seen feeding in the clearings. Sometimes a bald eagle is spotted atop an enormous pine."

The outdoor nature of much of Minnesota's population was emphasized; no matter what the season, Minnesotans were said to have outdoor pleasures -- hunting, snowmobiling, ice fishing, cross-country skiing, and, of course, life on the lakes.

"On summer weekends, the traffic moves bumper-to-propeller out of the Twin Cities toward what has become a Minnesota index of the good life--the 'lake up north' " (Morrow, *et al.*, 1973, pp. 32-22).

National Geographic: Minnesota's Waters and Wilderness are Wonderful

Another major article in the mid-1970s played heavily on these themes. "Minnesota, Where Water Is the Magic Word," a *National Geographic* paean to Minnesota spoke of the many achievements and artistic opportunities as well as the problems of the state and the characteristics of the population. But on nearly every page is mention of nature, whether lakes and streams, forest wilderness, or outdoor recreation -- "geography and water impose upon the state an image that has as much truth as poetry."

Minnesota people were said to take pride in their cultural amenities, but also in "their state's rugged outdoor image. On radio and TV they are often reminded of it by the haunting voice of the loon, Minnesota's state bird, which inhabits its wilderness lakes." Political leaders such as Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale and Wendell Anderson all spoke of their love of the outdoors. The fight to save and to restore the North Woods wilderness was discussed by several individuals, most notably Sigurd Olson, the writer of lyrical books about ecology and the border lake country and "patron saint of the Minnesota wilderness" (see Olson, 1972, 1982). No one reading this article could fail to come away with an image of Minnesota as a place of lakes, forests, beautiful scenery, all of which was accessible and appreciated by the state's people (Boyer, 1976).

Regional Tourism Efforts Emphasize Outdoor Recreation and Scenic Beauty

State tourism and regional development organizations began greater promotion of tourism beginning in the late 1970s. Some material was produced at the state level, some at the level of large tourism regions and some by chambers of commerce. Eventually, many appealing features of the state were exhibited in booklets, maps, short brochures, magazine and television advertisements, special information pamphlets and guides, and the *Minnesota Explorer* newspaper, published three times a year by the Minnesota Office of Tourism.

Recent tourism booklets in Minnesota tell of regional history and cultural heritage, but frequently have emphasized the appeal of natural landscapes and recreational possibilities in various places (see, for example, Southern Minnesota Tourism Association, 1985; Minnesota Office of Tourism: Southern, 1991; Bemidji Area, 1984; Minnesota Office of Tourism, Northcentral/West, 1991; Minnesota Office of Tourism, Northeastern, 1991).

In northern Minnesota, the fishing and boating pleasures are emphasized even more than in other parts of the state. The cover of the *Minnesota Heartland 1985 Tour Guide* is

a painting of a pine-and-birch-fringed lake (Figure 2). On the shore are a log cabin and dock; in the water are swimming loons and a boat holding a fisherman and his faithful dog. This image was obviously meant to stand for much of what the region had to offer. The region, which at that time extended from Lake of the Woods on the Canadian border in the north to Stearns County (in central Minnesota) in the south, does have many attractions but the overwhelming image portrayed was of a fishing paradise. This theme carried through the whole 56-page booklet, augmented by historical information and ideas for golf, hunting, skiing, boating, and other pleasurable pursuits (Minnesota Heartland, 1985).

Minnesota Is Portrayed As Having A "Theater of Four Seasons"

Seasonal variety has been emphasized much more in recent years than earlier in the century. The seasons in north central Minnesota were portrayed in the following manner a few years ago:

Summer is said to be "a magical season"; "Fishing is in full gear. Beaches are lined with sunseekers. Nature lovers take to the wilderness trails. All the recreational hot spots of the region are alive with people who know a secret ... summer is something special in Minnesota."

"Autumn begins with the rustle of gold-tinged leaves. Flocks of migrating geese and other waterfowl dot the northern horizon. The air is fresh and crisp, and the skies brilliantly clear."

"Winter ... for some [is] a time to sit in front of a crackling fire and sip hot chocolate. For others, it means outdoor activities galore. Snowmobilers, skiers, skaters, sledders, and snowman builders, one and all rejoice in the opportunities winter brings ... From fiery

sunsets to crystal-clear starry nights. From the laughter of children frolicking in the snow to the whispering silence of a snow-covered forest, winter is a wonderful time in our region" (Minnesota Office of Tourism, Northcentral/West, 1911).

Ideas of winter in Minnesota as harsh and long, with bitter cold, deep snows, slipping on ice, inability to start cars, etc., are of course not included!

Minnesota's Arrowhead Region Is Portrayed As Wild and Spectacular

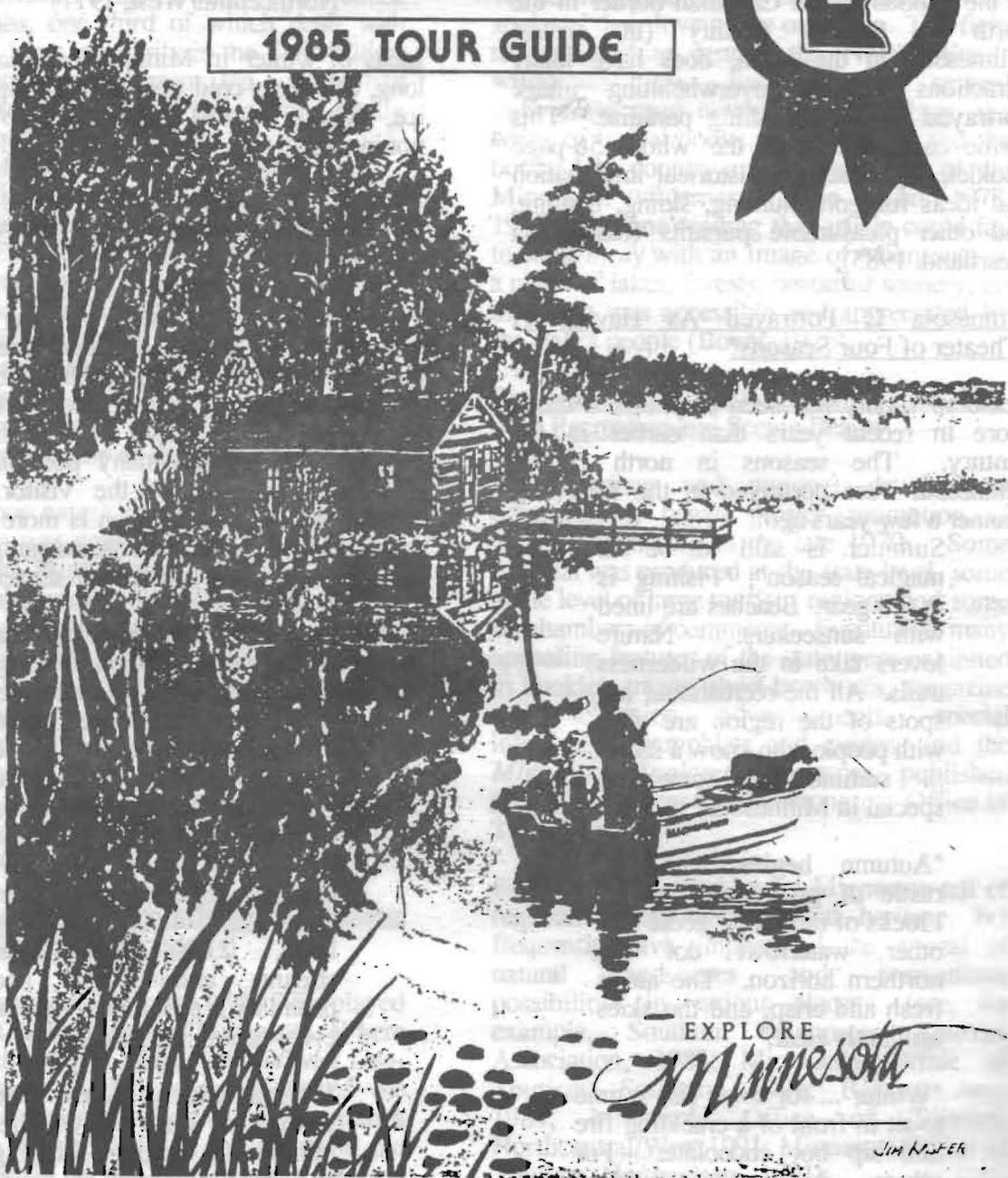
With many of the state's greatest resorts, including those around Brainerd, Alexandria, Park Rapids, Bemidji and Walker, and several areas of surpassing beauty, the Northcentral West region could -- and did -- claim much of scenic appeal and many possibilities of outdoor recreation for the visitor. The Arrowhead Northeast region is more rugged, more oriented toward wilderness camping and canoeing and to the spectacular scenery along Lake Superior's North Shore. The opening passages of the 1991 official travel directory for this region indicate much about its appeal and also about its relatively remote location:

"From the pristine beauty of the natural surroundings to the friendliness of its people, the Arrowhead region has been a favorite vacation destination for over 60 years. ...the Arrowhead region encompasses more than 4,000 sparkling lakes, 2,000 crystal-clear streams and rivers, and promises a panoramic view at every turn in the road..."

"It is an area of forests and mountains, water and wildlife, mining and logging, shipping and shopping, plus an abundance of opportunities for swimming and sailing, hiking and biking, fishing and hunting, camping and canoeing, skiing and snowmobiling."

MINNESOTA Heartland

1985 TOUR GUIDE



EXPLORE
Minnesota

JIM KAUFER

Figure 2. Cabin by the Lake

Once again, water-based sports, especially fishing, were emphasized. Lakes and streams were said to be so full of good fish that "Anglers pulling in lunkers by the boatload feel like 'they've died and gone to sportsmen's heaven.'" Many other pleasures were to be had in the region, including the culture and entertainment of Duluth and the historic, scenic and economic landscapes of that city and of the Mesabi Iron Range. But the North Woods wilderness and the Lake Superior shore's rocky beauty are what appear as the essence of the region (Minnesota Office of Tourism, Northeastern, 1991).

Minnesota Continues To Be Portrayed As A Place Of Special Natural Appeal

Through all of these publications in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, Minnesota appears as a land of natural diversity and special appeal. Because so much of Minnesota's economy, especially in the North, is based on tourism and recreation and because there is a genuine link between much of the Minnesota population and the "outdoors," one can see over and over again an image of Minnesota as a place of beautiful lakes, of appealing streams and of great fishing almost everywhere. A second image, tied to the first in several respects, is of Minnesota as the north country, a place of great forests, of wilderness and wildlife, of a special type of natural majesty.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION: THE NATURE-BASED IMAGES OF MINNESOTA ARE PERSISTENT AND IMPORTANT

Each of us has a set of images, real or imagined, of places around the world. These images can be the result of personal travel and experience, formal education, portrayals in books, magazines, television and movies, advertisements and promotional tracts, and/or conversations. Certain images tend to become dominant in society often because they are well-based in reality, because they are somehow appealing, and also because they are chosen to be emphasized over and over again in popular media and in efforts to stimulate tourism or some other economic or social development. Minnesota has several

strong images, the two most dominant of which seem to be 1) cold climate and 2) a combination of tall pines, beautiful lakes and great fishing. The first is not particularly positive, although today promotions emphasize winter as a wonderful part of the Theater of Four Seasons. The second image is ideal for tourism promotion.

Tourism generally has been viewed as a benign, pleasant set of activities and a positive economic stimulus. Efforts to promote tourism in Minnesota have been significant since the 1920s and have accelerated in recent decades. This recent period is the same time when most Americans have had greater mobility and more disposable income, when resource-extractive industries, such as iron ore mining and forestry, have been transformed and/or diminished, and when many people have become more aware of and appreciative of natural environments. Popular periodicals have been part of some of these trends and, in discussions of Minnesota, writers often have emphasized the natural beauty and recreational opportunities of the state.

These themes, then, despite some variations in treatment and emphasis, have been persistent images of Minnesota over many decades. The strongest images of tall pines, abundant beautiful lakes, and great fishing do tend to distinguish Minnesota from its neighbors to the south and west and to make it a place of vacation appeal for many people in those places. To the east, Wisconsin and Michigan have similar though not exact appeal; people from those places might be less likely to visit Minnesota, though parts of northeastern Minnesota are much more "wild" than and different from any parts of the other two states. For many people around the United States, Minnesota is more associated with cold, lakes, and northern forest than are Wisconsin and Michigan, though all contain these elements. The images portrayed in promotional advertisements and in popular information sources derive from and then reinforce images held by individuals; they feed each other. Many aspects about Minnesota's land and life could have stood out, but the North Woods images form the foremost positive component of Minnesota's regional identity. These dominant images of

Minnesota are appealing and persistent partly because they suggest cleanliness, healthfulness, wholesome pleasure, and a certain separation from the mundane in addition to indicating unusual natural beauty. The images are important because they are shared by a great many Minnesotans and by others when thinking of the state. Minnesota has drawn on and expanded these deep-seated images in many ways. It is always very highly ranked in national environmental protection and participation studies, a clear reflection of images and values. Minnesota has been a pioneer in environmental protection efforts (e.g., water pollution control, wetlands protection, acid rain legislation, environmental review, the Environmental Rights Act, aggressive enforcement of federal environmental rules). It is the first-ranked state in sales of fishing licenses per capita, in the number of recreational watercraft per capita, and in the number of snowmobiles per capita. Two great water-based wilderness regions, Voyageurs National Park and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, have been protected through governmental decree in response to public desire. Even people who do not actively participate in outdoor activities or visit parks and scenic regions often hold dear the images of Minnesota as a special place of lakes and northern forest (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 1991).

In this article, I have illustrated one aspect of regional identity, as portrayed through popular and promotional writings. Images such as those discussed give shape to our ideas about place, ideas we share with others in our society. Collective images are powerful, frequently long-lasting, and can contribute to persistence of as well as transformation in regional geographies.

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