

A NATIONAL PARK ?!

In 1891 the Minnesota Legislature established Minnesota's first state park at Lake Itasca. In that same year the Legislature petitioned President Benjamin Harrison to set aside extensive still-pristine lands across northern Minnesota for a national park. This park proposal passed through an arduous political process over the next decade, reaching a peak between 1897 and 1902. It failed to realize the national park that some had hoped for, but did establish the Minnesota Forest Reserve that had lasting effects on forestry across the nation. In 1908 the Reserve became the Minnesota National Forest, later renamed the Chippewa National Forest.

This accomplishment was particularly remarkable because it required balancing the interests of several contentious groups. These groups included:

- the conservationists who sought to protect the wilderness from exploitation,
- the lumber companies who sought to utilize the commercially valuable timber,
- the settlers who sought to earn a living from the land once the trees were removed,
- the Indians who resided on well-timbered reservation lands proposed to be included in the national park,
- the social reformers who sought to treat the Indians fairly and give them opportunities for full citizenship, and
- the state and federal governments who sought to clarify their responsibilities in ensuring the public good.

A compromise was reached in 1902 among these groups. The national park idea, while not yet clearly defined, was set aside in favor of a "forest reserve" to test the emerging principles of long range scientific forest management. Page Morris, US congressman from Duluth, sponsored a bill that proposed the nation's first forest reserve to be established by congress (rather than by Presidential proclamation) and assigned responsibility for its management to the US Bureau of Forestry. This act elevated that agency from a small information office to an administrative department and for the first time gave it the responsibilities of long range planning and development, i.e. the designing, testing and implementing of forestry management principles. The Minnesota Forest Reserve thereby became a laboratory for comprehensive forestry management and the foundation of a comprehensive national resource management plan.

As lumbering in northern Minnesota accelerated in the late Nineteenth Century and the end of the trees was in sight, conservation was becoming a more serious concern - especially under President Theodore Roosevelt's leadership. Conservation was part of the moralistic fervor at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. This included the rights of women and laborers, the breaking up of trusts and industrial monopolies, and the clarification of government responsibility for the common welfare. In this revolutionary

environment, conservation emerged in Minnesota as an effort of unlikely collaborators: environmental activists, business leaders, and government officials who sought to secure an ongoing supply of forest products and other natural resources considered essential for the nation's economic prosperity. Conservationists in Minnesota were civic minded visionaries who sought to use the authority of government to promote the efficient development and judicious use of the nation's resources. In their opinion, the rapid depletion of forest resources elevated conservation to one of the nation's most urgent issues.

Lumber executives supported scientific forest management because it offered a legitimate way to control the supply of timber and thereby maintain prices over the longer term. The existing incentive was to cut as much wood as possible, which flooded the market and depressed prices. Working with government to conserve supplies and stabilize prices, lumber companies could realize long term profitability. Rising demand and diminishing supplies made conservation profitable for the lumber interests.

Some of the most extensive stands of red and white pine were on the Leech Lake Reservation, and lumbermen cast covetous glances toward them. But to acquire reservation timber, title to the land was necessary. Federal policy was to gradually disperse Indians onto individual homesteads of 160 acres per family. Under provisions of the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, native people were expected to engage in agriculture and become self sufficient. In 1891 the allotment was reduced to 80 acres per family to assure some land for every family on the reservation. This was expected to leave a surplus of land that could be sold, with the proceeds credited to the tribe. It was believed by its supporters that the land allotment would soon convert the Indians to "models of good citizenship". In retrospect, the allotment scheme was one of many federal actions that undermined Native American culture and authority. It did not offer the same kind of support system available to white settlers, and therefore failed to integrate native people successfully into the dominant Euro-American culture.

In an effort to clarify the intent of the Dawes Act and secure for the Indians the benefit of timber harvesting, the provisions of that Act were modified by the "Nelson Law" in 1897, which allowed only Indians to remove "dead and down" timber on the reservation. The good intentions of this amendment backfired, however, when Indians were persuaded to sell their logging permits to others who burned forest lands in order to create "dead and down" timber, then selling the timber to large buyers.

This practice brought an outcry from conservationists, social reformers, lumbermen, businessmen, the Department of the Interior, and Minnesota Congressmen. Christopher Andrews, Minnesota State Fire Warden, condemned the practice of deliberate burning as illegal, destructive and dangerous. The evidence and support for amending this flaw in the Nelson Law increased, but agreement on how that could be done did not. Amidst the controversy the national park idea gained support. This proposed that the entire Leech

Lake Reservation be included within an extensive “park”, the intent being to allow Indians to live on land administered by the federal government.

The Minnesota controversy received national attention when Chicago sportsman John S. Cooper organized a rail trip at the peak of Fall colors for about one hundred Congressmen and other dignitaries in October 1899. Railroad magnate James J. Hill provided the transportation and Minnesota lumberman Thomas Shevlin entertained the tourists when they returned via Minneapolis. Following the triumphant excursion, Cooper felt optimistic that his proposed four million acre playground (i.e. “park”) for fishing and hunting would become a reality. In its September 30, 1899 edition the St. Paul Pioneer Press had confidently predicted that “the park project is already an assured fact”.

The Minnesota Federation of Women’s Clubs (MFWC), under the leadership of Florence Bramhall, undertook the cause and organized an extensive public relations effort in support of a comprehensive “forest reserve”. Politically astute, Florence Bramhall knew that the four million acre park proposal was excessive and not realistic because it denied access to valuable timber. She felt that businessmen and lumbermen would form strong opposition, along with settlers, who sought to remove the trees and develop the land. Mrs. Bramhall labeled the national sportsmen’s park as a Chicago promotion, and called the alternative conservationist “forest reserve” proposal a Minnesota project. The MFWC offered a scaled down proposal of 489,000 acres and descended on Washington to confer with President Roosevelt, Secretary of the Interior Ethan Hitchcock, the commissioner of public lands, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and various congressional committees. The proposal that was finally adopted called for a forest reserve of 225,000 acres to be based on scientific forestry management principles suggested by Herman Haupt Chapman, Superintendent of the North Central Agricultural Experiment Station in Grand Rapids, and placed under the supervision of the US Forestry Bureau.

Settlers and small businesses in northern Minnesota felt that a park (as perceived by Cooper) would stifle further economic development. They wanted more settlers to establish themselves in the north and they actively encouraged new residents. Most of those who came were struggling entrepreneurs and homesteaders who owned small farms and businesses. They were suspicious of the motives of those who promoted the “park” and the “forest reserve” and could see little real distinction between the two. They perceived trees as an export commodity and a resource to build and heat their homes. With the landscape cleared of trees, they could cultivate crops and pasture their cattle. Those who wanted to preserve the forest, they believed, were just impractical idealists. Speculators and pioneers had staked out their claims ahead of organized settlement, anticipating an economic boom. Prosperity would come, they believed, when the Nelson Law (with its imperfections) was enforced and the trees and Indians were gone.

The concept of a “park” or “forest reserve” symbolized a class struggle. In general,

northern Minnesotans regarded the park movement as the brain child of southern Minnesotans (i.e. Twin Citians) who were meddling with territory that belonged to northerners. Rumors abounded, with some calling the park proposal the shrewdest con game ever contrived. Among the contending parties and interest groups, there was very little face to face dialogue, debate, or attempts at negotiated settlement - just a continuous flow of rumors and misinformation - and the local press helped very little in overcoming the controversies. According to historian Newell Searle, some northerners “probably feared that their local economy would become dependent on providing services to wealthy tourists. This carried with it implications of servile status, antithetical to the aims of the area’s independent and single minded settlers”.

Proponents of federal management based principles of scientific forestry, believed this would secure an ongoing logging industry. They anticipated that tourists would bring money to help stimulate and diversify the local economy, benefiting everyone. Furthermore, poor soil conditions made agriculture a marginal economic activity as compared with the rich prairie soils of western and southern Minnesota. But the locals remained unconvinced and vowed to demonstrate that cutover lands were suitable for intensive and sustained agricultural production. Homesteading the cutover lands, they believed, would bring thousands of settlers who would purchase essential goods and services from local merchants, which in turn would stimulate the growth of communities to serve the settlers. And if the cutover lands should not immediately be profitable, settlers could find seasonal work in lumber camps during the transitional period from logging to agriculture and permanent settlement.

Repeated tests and careful observations at the experiment station in Grand Rapids generally confirmed the judgment that northern pine soils were inferior in fertility and long term productivity to prairie and hardwood forest soils. Crops, especially vegetables, might produce well for several years, but the infertile sandy soils would soon become exhausted without intensive fertilization. When inexperienced persons purchased this marginal land from speculators at high prices and on a mortgage, failure was inevitable, according to Chapman.

The only persons who benefited from the milieu of misinformation and poor communication were the real estate speculators who bought up cut over lands for as little as twenty five to fifty cents an acre and resold them to eager settlers for five to fifteen dollars an acre. Few settlers had good information on the cost and difficulty of clearing stumps and tilling the poor soil, in addition to the expected hardships of frontier life. Descendants of some of those courageous, persistent, self sufficient settlers remain on the land today - but most succumbed at least a half century ago. Chapman deplored as “absolutely conscienceless” the tactics and misrepresentations real estate speculators used to dispose of their land, indenturing honest settlers to a life of hardship and poverty. With the many contending perspectives, Minnesota’s congressional delegation was immobilized and attempts to amend the Nelson Law were deferred.

Perceiving the national significance of an anticipated showdown, Gifford Pinchot, Chief of the US Forestry Bureau, appointed Chapman in January 1901 to help construct a compromise solution. Chapman's communication with Cooper was not fruitful, but Andrews and Mrs. Bramhall enthusiastically supported Chapman's initiative. Together they developed a forestry management proposal on a much smaller scale than the vast and vague proposal put forth by Cooper and friends. Chapman's proposal was acceptable to Morris, who then called together representatives of the disagreeing factions who were able to reach consensus. Pinchot drafted the final version of the bill and Morris introduced it in Congress on Feb. 3, 1902 .

The bill provided for a reserve of about 225,000 acres and specified that the US Bureau of Forestry would supervise all reserve lands. On ten sections (6,400 acres) the Bureau could establish whatever experimental logging practices it thought necessary. The remaining timberlands were open to logging of all merchantable trees excluding five percent of the mature timber that was to remain uncut for reforestation purposes. The federal government retained title to the land. Lands were open to settlement and certain scenic points and islands in Cass Lake and Leech Lake were set aside for park purposes. President Roosevelt signed the bill into law on June 23, 1902 and the Minnesota Forest Reserve became a reality.

Reaction to the Morris Act was widespread and nearly unanimous. The lumbermen liked it and respected its provisions, sportsmen were generally accepting of it, and the MFWC celebrated the victory. The news media predicted prosperity for logging towns on or near the reserve. Prospective settlers arrived seeking land. Native Americans were relieved that the issue of timber marketing was finally settled. Everyone wanted some of the credit. Only the unscrupulous real estate speculators were disappointed.

The prosperity expected was slow to come, and some Morris Act modifications were made in 1908 opening more land for farming and increasing the timber left for reforestation from five to ten percent. The Minnesota Forest Reserve was declared a success and renamed the Minnesota National Forest. The name was changed to the Chippewa National Forest in 1928 to concur with its common, but unofficial nickname. The soils proved to be as inferior as the North Central Experimentation Station had anticipated and as a result much land was forfeited for delinquent taxes and gradually added to the National Forest, its boundaries being extended northward and eastward in 1933 to encompass the Jessie Lake watershed.

This decade-long struggle represented constructive politics at its finest, achieving an acceptable solution and creating the Minnesota National Forest, the first established by an act of Congress.

Note: Credits for this article go to Newell Searle, who did much of the research when a

graduate student in history at the University of Minnesota. Findings were published in Minnesota History in the Fall of 1971.