

Land of the Cradle of Waters – 1938

Narrator: The repeatedly expressed desire of many Minnesotans to mark appropriately the source of the Mississippi River resulted almost half a century ago in the creation of the first state park in that north-central commonwealth. Lake Itasca State Park was established in 1891. Slow, steady progress, severely handicapped by lack of funds, has added 16 other state-administered recreational areas to the list, until Minnesota has acquired the nucleus of an outstanding state park system. Careful, intelligent administration of the splendidly selected areas at hand, rather than the size and number of the areas, has been responsible for the important place in the national lineup which the Minnesota state park system has assumed. The state and her citizens were ready when the Emergency Conservation Work Program – administered in the parks by National Park Service, Department of the Interior – made possible the help, with money and Civilian Conservation Corps labor, which had so long been needed. New parks, long planned, are being brought into being. Minnesota is not only state park conscious, but state park enthusiastic.

The Mississippi River, Father of Waters, discharges at its mouth about 900 billion cubic yards annually. With this little trickle in Lake Itasca, it begins its long trek to the sea. In its lower stretches, the Broad River had become important in the lives of the white settlers before the middle of the sixteenth century. Not until 1832, about 300 years later, was its actual source discovered by a distinguished American explorer, ethnologist, and author, who had dedicated his life to research dealing with this interesting country and its even more interesting native inhabitants and customs. This memorial tablet to Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who sought out and marked the actual source of the mighty stream destined to become a vital factor in the development of the United States, is one of the most interesting landmarks in Lake Itasca State Park. Think of it: a cup of water picked up here is abruptly checked on a journey of 2,546 miles to the Gulf of Mexico, which it has just begun.

State park development, under National Park Service supervision, adheres strictly to the policy of combining healthful outdoor recreation with effective education, the policy which has made the American national park so important as a government adjunct. In this Land of Ten Thousand Lakes, each state park means a lot more than is apparent on the surface. Thousands of people attend pageants, staged regularly throughout the summer in many of these parks, to impress upon visitors the historic and economic background of each area. Some of the most popular of these pageants are presented at Lake Itasca, one of the best known state parks in the United States. The pageants, dealing with the early development of this portion of the state, have to do chiefly with the activities of the Indians and pioneering white settlers, who made fur trading the leading industry long before Minnesota's broad fields were ready for the production of grain and dairy products, and before the valuable mineral deposits in her mountain ranges were discovered.

The arrival of trappers, both white and Indian, at the stockaded trading posts, where the furs were assembled for commercial distribution, was an event of importance not only in a business but in a social way. With these hearty wanderers came most of the news of the outside world. Socially, these gatherings at the post provided opportunities for the development of the necessary ties of friendship between the white men and the Indians. The commercial success of the early fur trader was almost entirely dependent upon the amount of respect and confidence he was able to inspire in those with whom he was obliged to do business.

Indian women, the home builders of their race in a very literal sense of the word, tell a very important part of the story. In those days, too, homes were not established through their mere material

construction. They had to be protected, for there was plenty of conflict. The administration of justice was simple: trial of the offender was participated in by all those who offended, whether white or red. Execution of the verdict was swift, requiring only a sturdy arm and a sturdier heart. And even in situations like this, there were mothers, wives, and sweethearts to mourn. Reenactment of weddings of the period are frequently incorporated. The visit of a possible officiating clergyman to any of the stockades was always an event.

Not so many miles from Lake Itasca on the Canadian border, American flags fly in friendly harmony with the British Union Jack. At the village of Grand Portage nearby on the shore of Lake Superior, one may read an unchanged page in this absorbing history which pageants and state parks elsewhere seek to recall. In and out of the rich trapping country north of the mighty lake, fur traders passed through this little village by canoe to and from this old pier. Between the village and Fort Charlotte, another settlement nine miles north on the border, they carried canoes and cargo to avoid impassible falls and rapids in the Pigeon River, which runs along the Canadian border and into Lake Superior. Here was the *grand* (big, long, or difficult) *portage* (or carry), an almost superhuman task performed regularly by heroic men, white and red, in the development of a colorful industry. It was rough, rugged country in those early days, and it hasn't changed much since.

This museum is on the Pigeon River [...]. It doesn't look much like the Museum of Natural History or the Smithsonian Institute. Some of the citizens of the community choose to live very much as they lived when the torturous mountain trail of the Grand Portage was a busier artery of traffic. Space requirements would seem to have changed considerably. Maybe the teepee has a couple of mezzanine floors. Electric range salesmen haven't made much progress. Types in [...] gave a strong appeal for the many tourists who have learned that the trip to this very tip of the Minnesota arrowhead is well worth their while. Its historic landmarks are stimulating, its scenic beauties gorgeous. The younger generation clearly show the effects of civilizing agencies, which are moving much faster year by year.

Official records have shown an attendance of more than 50,000 at Lake Itasca State Park during recent summer seasons. Emergency Conservation Work improvements there have included the construction of a new administration building and garage. Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees merely assist skilled labor in this type of work. Cabins built in this locality in early days were particularly sturdy and substantial. New ones being built for the accommodation of park visitors are in strict conformity with those historic ones. They give evidence of that kind of skilled workmanship which will always delight the man who works with tools, and surely they are permanent in their construction. Conveniently located freshwater outlets and a modern sanitary system have been installed. Necessary water towers are of the same heavy, rustic construction as the cabins.

From observation towers and other points of vantage, impressive vistas of the 34,469 acres in the park may be had. Itasca is the largest of Minnesota state parks. There are stretches of shimmering water on which trim little pleasure craft glide. And along their shores, Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees are clearing out the undergrowth and doing other [...] landscaping jobs to make them more attractive. Lakes in the park serve a useful purpose in providing waterways over which timber used in construction may be floated. This is a fortunate circumstance, for the handling of logs as heavy as those necessary for the old timers' cabins would be extremely difficult otherwise. The truck hauls are never very long.

Scenic is the second largest of the Minnesota state parks, comprising 1,632 acres. It is situated southeast of Big Fork in Itasca County. Sandwick and Coon are the principle lakes within its borders. Here also additional cabins are being constructed with Emergency Conservation Work funds and Civilian

Conservation Corps labor. The workmanship by skilled artisans locally engaged, as well as by Corps enrollees, is of the best. Camping is very popular in this park, and besides cabins there are well-ordered campgrounds for those who prefer to live under canvas. The lakes abound in fish. A well-appointed recreation hall is a part of the camp setup for the Conservation Corps boys assigned to the Scenic Park area. It is the center of the social, recreational, and educational life of the camp.

Everyone has seen plenty of young Americans in the distinctive uniform of the Civilian Conservation Corps. The work they are doing in rehabilitating a country and themselves is better known than is the economic influence of the movement of which they are a part. Throughout the nation, more than a million young men have been enrolled; more than 40,000 have come from Minnesota. As of October, 1935, these Minnesota enrollees had sent back to their declared dependents in widely scattered communities in the state \$2,012,665 to help keep the home fires burning.