



A WINDING ROAD and a sign at the entrance to the park (above) invite the visitor into Forestville. Below, the Root River flows through the woods in this early view, taken long before the area was made into a park.



FORESTVILLE

The Making of a State Park

Roy W. Meyer

IN THE DECADES since the end of World War II, a couple of developments have exerted a profound influence on our thinking with regard to state and national parks. The population explosion, together with the increased leisure time available to large numbers of our people, has led to a need for greatly expanded recreational facilities. At the same time, our developing sense of the interrelatedness of nature and man has made us more aware of the need to preserve fragments of our remaining natural and scenic heritage. Yet our interest in preserving historic sites and buildings has not diminished, and it has become increasingly evident that such preservation is not compatible with large-scale recreational use.

The result has been, on the state level, that park planners have been tending to separate the three functions — recreational, natural, and historical — and to classify units of the park system according to their primary purpose. In Minnesota this concept of park use has led to the evolution of three general types of unit. The parks (and their smaller brothers, the waysides) still attempt to serve the public both as recreational areas and as nature preserves, though with steadily growing

difficulty. A few units have been designated "state recreation areas" to signify that their function is almost wholly that of providing day-use and week-end outdoor recreation. And the state monuments, as in the past, are oriented primarily toward the preservation and interpretation of historic sites.

The ideal park, perhaps, would be an area having both natural and historical significance, while being large enough to serve a recreational function compatible with its preservationist purpose. In southern Minnesota, Forestville State Park, a 2,500-acre tract of hardwood forest in Fillmore County, most nearly approximates this model. Because of its triple function and because its establishment in 1963 climaxed an unusually long struggle, Forestville affords an instructive case history in the process by which a state park comes into being. Moreover, its development since it was created illustrates some of the challenges to be met in preparing a tract of land for intensive public use without seriously impairing its ecological integrity. Finally, the future plans and prospects for the park suggest the dangers that threaten even the best conceived attempts to set aside for posterity valuable natural and historic preserves.

Minnesota's state park system is one of the oldest and, on the whole, one of the best-managed in the nation. It traces its origins to 1889, when the legislature set aside the Camp Release site near Montevideo for a monument commemorating the site's associations with

Mr. Meyer, an English professor at Mankato State College, has written The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century, History of the Santee Sioux, and numerous book reviews and articles for Minnesota History.



FORESTVILLE and surrounding towns and villages are indicated on this map of southeastern Minnesota. Also shown are forests, rivers, and other parks in the region, along with urban centers and county and state boundaries.

the Sioux War of 1862.¹ In the next forty years, or up to the eve of the Great Depression, some twenty-six parks and monuments were established. Although a disproportionate number of these were small sites commemorating events related to the Indian uprising, Itasca State Park and a few other natural or scenic areas were included, notably Interstate (originally called Dalles of the St. Croix and established in 1895), Minneopa (1905), Jay Cooke (1915), Sibley and Whitewater (both 1919), and Scenic (1921).²

In the early years these areas were administered unsystematically, usually with the aid of local committees. Until 1925 all but Itasca and Sibley were under the nominal jurisdiction of the state auditor; Itasca was administered by the state forester, Sibley by the game and fish commissioner. For the next six years they were all administered by a conservation commission composed of the commissioners of forestry and fire prevention, game and fish, and lands and timber. Then, in 1931, a five-man conservation commission was established and the parks placed under the jurisdiction of the Division of Forestry. Four years later, under pressure from the federal government, a separate Division of Parks was created, and in 1937 the five-man commission was replaced by a commissioner of conservation, an arrange-

ment that still operates. (In 1971, the Conservation Department's name was changed to Department of Natural Resources.)³

In Minnesota, as in other states, the parks were at first conceived mainly in terms of public recreation. Al-

¹ Minnesota, *Laws*, 1889, p. 520-21. The state park system had begun in name, though not in fact, four years earlier, when, on March 9, 1885, an act was passed "to authorize the selection, location, and appropriation of certain lands in the County of Hennepin and State of Minnesota for a State Park. . . . The proposed park was to embrace Minnehaha Falls, but when the appraisal of lands had been completed, the 1889 legislature found itself without funds to purchase them. The city of Minneapolis then offered to advance the requisite sum and to maintain the park. See *Laws*, 1885, p. 117-21; 1889, p. 183-85, 509-10; Isaac Atwater, ed., *History of the City of Minneapolis, Minnesota*, 1:412-13 (New York, 1893); Theodore Wirth, *Minneapolis Park System, 1883-1944*, 49, 51 (Minneapolis, 1945).

² Minnesota Department of Conservation, "The Minnesota State Park and Recreational Area Plan" (mimeographed), (n.p., 1939), 63; *Laws*, 1895, p. 379-82; 1891, p. 137-39; 1905, p. 443-44; 1915, p. 517-18; 1919, p. 572-73; 1921, p. 525-26; 1969, p. 2197-98.

³ "State Park Plan," 63; *Laws*, 1925, p. 756-73; 1931, p. 206-11; 1935, p. 619-21; 1937, p. 422-26; John Dobie, *The Itasca Story*, 112 (Minneapolis, 1959).

though the preservationist ideal was strong in the thinking of Jacob V. Brower and the others who tried to save Itasca from the lumber companies, park planning elsewhere appears to have tended dangerously toward the amusement-park concept. One gets the impression that not only was the administration of the parks pretty haphazard, but there was no underlying philosophy to guide planning.

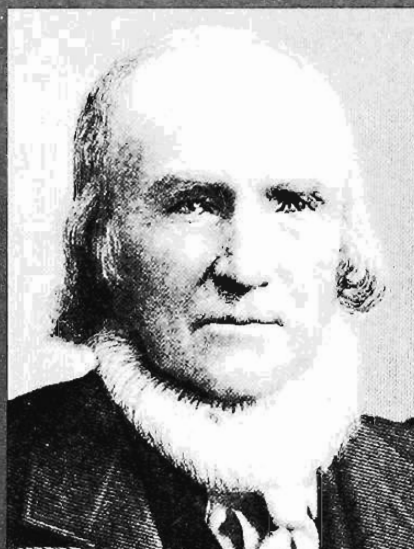
The National Conference on State Parks, held in Des Moines in 1921, provided some guidelines, but it was only in the 1930s, when Civilian Conservation Corps labor and that of the Works Progress Administration became available, that park planning entered its "modern" phase. The Division of Forestry made one study in 1934, followed by another, carried out with the assistance of the National Park Service, in 1938. The latter investigation, the results of which were published in 1939, offered recommendations for expansion of existing parks (or, in a few cases, transfer to local agencies) and proposed several new areas that might be acquired. In essence, this study remained the principal guide for park planning until the late 1950s, when another survey was undertaken. The 1959 study brought more recent thinking to bear on the subject of state parks and provided the underpinning for subsequent expansion, exemplified especially in a major piece of legislation passed in 1963, which created a flock of new parks and authorized additions to several of the older ones.⁴

The availability of labor in the 1930s was not the only reason for the rapid growth of Minnesota's park system during that decade. By that time the public had begun to realize that our natural environment was not indestructible - something that conservationists had known for a long time. Hence there was emphasis on the need to acquire key tracts of relatively unaltered forest land, such as the Nerstrand Woods in Rice County and the Meighen woods at Forestville. Neither of these was acquired then, but other areas of somewhat similar type, such as Beaver Creek Valley near Caledonia and Camden near Marshall, were added to the park system.

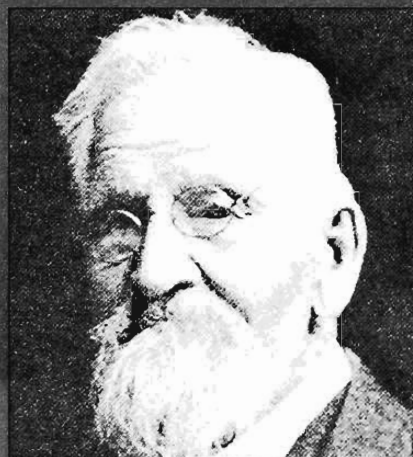
Although the Forestville site was attractive because of its natural values, from the beginning the advocates of a park there stressed the need to include the abandoned townsite of the pre-Civil War village of Forestville with its old brick store building. And much of the development of the park since its establishment has been centered on the old village and its historic significance. Therefore some background information on the genesis,

⁴Freeman Tilden, *The State Parks: Their Meaning in American Life*, 3-4 (New York, 1962); Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Research Commission, *Parks and Recreation in Minnesota* (Report no. 12), 1965, p. 2. Tilden offers definitions of "state park," "state monument," and "state recreation area" on p. 11-12.

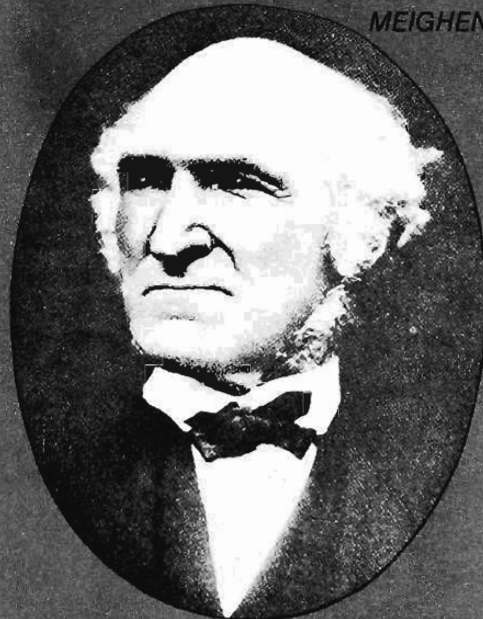
WILLIAM J.
MEIGHEN



ROBERT M.
FOSTER



FELIX
MEIGHEN



growth, and decline of the town is necessary to an understanding of the park's importance as a setting for the interpretation of late nineteenth-century Minnesota history.

THE TREATIES of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota in 1851 opened the Forestville area to white settlement, which began the following year even before the treaties had been ratified. The firstcomers found there the three essentials of pioneering: wood, water, and good soil. A heavy growth of hardwood timber along the south branch of the Root River and its tributaries, extending well back from the streams, provided building materials, fence rails, and fuel. The river itself afforded potential millsites, both for sawmills to exploit the lumber resources and for gristmills to grind the wheat that would soon be growing on the rich prairie land that spread over much of western Fillmore County.

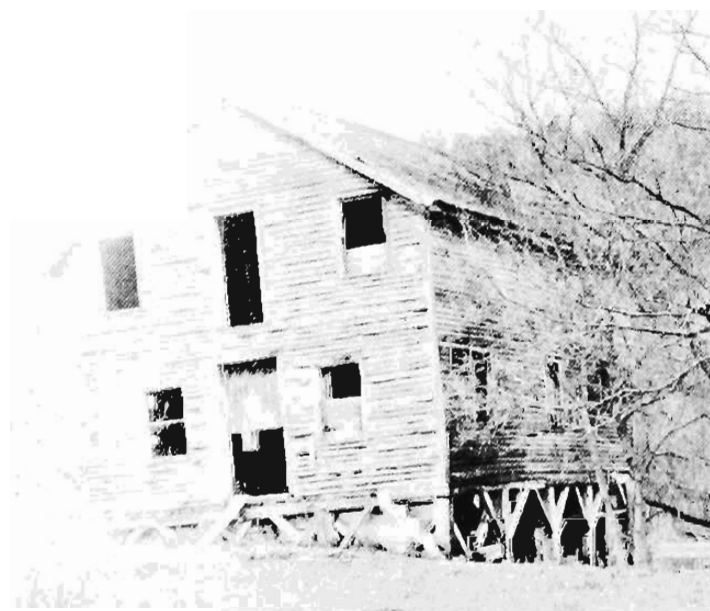
Although not among the first arrivals (many of whom sold out and moved on), the people most closely associated with Forestville in its years of growth were Robert M. Foster, who came in the spring of 1853, Forest Henry, for whom the town was named, and Felix and William Meighen, boyhood friends of Foster, whose sister Felix had married. Felix Meighen probably accompanied Foster on his first visit to the area, but he quickly returned to Galena, Illinois, where they were then living. Foster remained, however, and his letters to Felix, now on file in the museum housed in the Forestville store, provide a glimpse of the excitement on the Minnesota frontier in the 1850s. Having bought out an

earlier settler and taken up claims for himself and the Meighens, Foster in the late summer of 1853 brought in a stock of goods and, in a double log building, opened a store that autumn under the firm name of Foster & Meighen. Business was good the following winter, people coming from as far away as the Zumbro River, fifty miles to the north. He even traded with the Indians for venison and furs until a competitor at the nearby settlement of Carimona threatened to have him arrested for trading without a license.⁵

Meanwhile Forest Henry had also arrived and, in conjunction with his brother-in-law, purchased and completed a sawmill, to which they soon added a gristmill. By the end of 1854 two more stores were about to open, and a tavern was also in business and reported by Foster to be paying better than anything else. A note of urgency runs through Foster's letters. The country was filling up, and the claims he had made for the Meighens were threatened; they had better put in an appearance themselves, especially since William's services as a surveyor were needed for the laying out of a townsite. They

⁵ Edward D. Neill, *History of Fillmore County*, 500, 592-95, (Minneapolis, 1882); Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, comp., *History of Fillmore County, Minnesota*, 1:333 (Chicago, 1912); Foster to Felix Meighen, July 10 and September 20, 1853, February 5 and June 19, 1854, Meighen Papers, owned by Forestville State Park. Since the Meighen Papers are divided, some being in the manuscripts division of the Minnesota Historical Society and some in the Forestville State Park museum, subsequent citations will specify the location by the parenthetical reference (MHS) or (FSP).

THE GRISTMILL built by Forest Henry was evidence of some economic importance for Forestville until after the Civil War. The mill ceased operation in 1880, fell into ruin by 1900, and was washed away by a flood in 1917. It "took french leave," wrote Martha E. Meighen Healy to Thomas Meighen. Below: An unidentified man stands before the first Forestville school, built in 1857, the same year that a fine brick building replaced the old log store.



followed his advice and left Galena on May 8, 1855; the town of Forestville was laid out that year. With the acquisition of a post office on October 16, the village was fairly launched.⁶

Forestville reached the peak of its prosperity in the later 1850s, when it boasted at least two stores, two hotels, two sawmills, a gristmill (with its necessary adjunct, a cooper shop), a distillery, a tavern (perhaps run in connection with one of the hotels), a chair factory, and a wagon shop. In 1857 Foster and the Meighens replaced the original log store with the fine brick building that is today the principal ornament of Forestville State Park. In the same year a brick schoolhouse was built. The village was important enough to be a contender, along with Carimona and Preston, for county seat in

1856. A remote, isolated frontier settlement in its first years, Forestville had since been designated a way station on the Burbank stage line from Brownsville to Manakato and later on the St. Paul-to-Dubuque line. Relying on the recollections of Felix Meighen's son Thomas J., born in 1855, an Austin newspaper writer tried in 1935 to reconstruct the scene and mood of Forestville when it was a stage stop:

"The stage coach station stood just beyond the Meighen store but it was to patrons of the store, seated at evening upon the shaded east porch of the store that the first thrill of the coming of the Dubuque northbound coach was given when they heard the blast of the coachman's horn winding through the hills and beheld the six-horse galloping team plunge through the shallow waters of the ford or in the later years come thundering across the bridge to halt at the vehicle's first regular stopping place north of the Minnesota border."⁷

Although less important than Carimona, briefly county seat but now also a ghost town, Forestville undoubtedly enjoyed a certain economic importance in the pre-Civil War years, when farmers brought their grain from a wide area to the gristmill there, and some of this prosperity lasted for a time after the war. Still, failure to obtain the county seat and changes in transportation routes — especially being by-passed by the railroads — brought the same decline in fortunes that was suffered by so many other towns projected in the early and speculative days of settlement. By 1878 the only businesses remaining in Forestville were the Meighen store, from which Foster had withdrawn a decade earlier, Henry's gristmill, and probably a blacksmith and wagon-repair shop. Two years later the mill ceased operation, and, although several proposals to reopen it were considered in subsequent years, the evidence indicates that it remained silent thereafter. It had fallen into ruin by 1900 and was finally washed away by a flood in 1917.⁸

The Meighen store, managed after 1878 by Thomas, survived all other forms of business activity in Forestville by many years. Though said to be operating at barely a living profit in 1878, and no doubt injured by the discontinuance of the post office on June 30, 1902, the old brick store kept its doors open until 1910. But Thomas Meighen had entered the banking business and moved to Preston by then. Deciding that he had insufficient time for the declining rural mercantile trade, he finally, according to tradition, quietly locked up the building one May evening, leaving its stock intact.⁹

What that stock was, how and where it was purchased during more prosperous years, and some indication of what life in Forestville was like are all discoverable in the voluminous personal and business records kept by

⁶Foster to Meighen, June 19, July 24, and December 3, 1854; William Meighen to Felix Meighen, March 13, 1855; memorandum book kept by Felix Meighen, Meighen Papers (FSP); [Judson] W[ade] Bishop, *History of Fillmore County*, 27-28 (Chatfield, 1858); Fillmore County, Register of Deeds, Plat Book A, p. 8, 19. Forest Henry and his partner, William Renslow, laid out the part of Forestville lying south of the river on April 19, 1855. Although "North Forestville," the part laid out by Foster and the Meighens, was probably platted about the same time, the plat on file at the Fillmore County Register of Deeds Office is dated October 24, 1858. It is evidently a copy made by the Deputy County Surveyor, Judson W. Bishop, whose marginal note comments, "The certificates accompanying this plat are so mutilated on the original record that they cannot be copied entire."

⁷Neill, *Fillmore County*, 593-95; Curtiss-Wedge, *Fillmore County*, 1:99, 333-34; R. C. Emery, "Pioneer Store is Sentry of the Past," in *Austin Daily Herald*, April 6, 1935, p. 8 (magazine section) (quote); "The Forestville Gazette: A Journal Devoted to Literature and News," February 1, 1878, Meighen Papers (FSP). This is the only surviving copy of a handwritten newspaper prepared by Felix Meighen's daughter Martha and a friend. Though devoted mainly to local gossip, it does contain a detailed historical sketch of Forestville with some claim to accuracy since the information was presumably obtained from the founders of the community. Partial support for the identification of Forestville's businesses is found in the 1860 and 1870 Census Population Schedules: Minnesota, National Archives Record Group 29, Microcopy T7, roll 126, and Microcopy T132, roll 4.

⁸Neill, *Fillmore County*, 594-95; *Wykoff Dollar Weekly*, May 31, 1878, p. 1; George W. Wilson to [Thomas J. Meighen], December 23, 1883, April 14 and 23 and June 2, 1884; Sam Kaucher to T. J. Meighen, June 8 and 25 and July 9, 1888; Martha E. [Meighen] Healy to T. J. Meighen, July 1, 1917, Meighen Papers (FSP). There is a picture of the mill, taken about 1900, in the *Preston Republican*, November 1, 1934, section 3, p. 3.

⁹Emery, in *Austin Daily Herald*, April 6, 1935, p. 8; J. L. Bristow, fourth assistant postmaster general, to Forestville Postmaster, May 21, 1902, Meighen Papers (FSP). Meighen apparently moved into Preston during the third week of April, 1905. See A. W. Thompson to T. J. Meighen, May 23, 1905, Meighen Papers (FSP). Thompson, then deputy auditor of the state, was the owner of the house to which Meighen moved, and this note is a bill for the rent.

the Meighens, father and son, and preserved after their primary usefulness was over. In Thomas' diary one can read of the parties, dances, sleigh rides, church services, and other activities that occupied the leisure time of the Meighen family and their friends, and of the spring breakups, the summer storms, the first frosts of autumn — all conditions with a direct and important bearing on the lives of rural Minnesotans. Occasionally there is a more personal insight, as when the young Thomas reveals something of the feeling for nature that led him to protect the Meighen woods for decades when he might have lightened his tax burden by selling them off: "As I write am listening to the first whiperwill [*sic*] song of the season."¹⁰

Twenty years old when this entry was written, Thomas Meighen was still in his teens when he began to make trips to Chicago to purchase stock for his father's store. Wholesale houses and commission merchants there and in St. Paul and La Crosse, Wisconsin, were the principal sources of the stock. Butter, eggs, and poultry received in trade from local farmers were shipped to Clifford & Maxfield's in St. Paul and to Thomas Hogan in La Crosse, where they did not always arrive in perfect condition. Some hint of what the store carried is contained in a letter from a local customer in 1873. After complaining that the violin string he had bought had broken before he had it half tuned up, he went on to order half a pound of smoking tobacco, half a pound of chewing tobacco, fifteen cents' worth of foolscap, five cents' worth of clay pipes, and a box of paper collars.¹¹

These were relatively ephemeral goods. When the Austin newspaperman wrote his account, a quarter-century after the store had been closed, only the more durable items had survived. It is a wonder that any of them did. As the article explained, "If some visitor who is a guest of Mr. Meighen professes more than usual interest in some article of ancient merchandise the object is likely to become his as a souvenir but not for pay." Despite his assurance that "the old stock of the store shows no visible depletion," there obviously had been a serious loss down through the years. By the time the state finally obtained possession of the building and an inventory of its contents could be made, an employee of the Division of Parks was forced to write, "Present contents are the dregs of a once well stocked store. Fifty-six years of 'liquidation' have intervened."¹²

IT IS DIFFICULT to say when interest in developing the Forestville area as a state park began. As early as 1903 people were aware of the value of the woods that the Meighen family had so carefully protected. A writer in the *Wykoff Messenger* commented that nature had not been sacrificed to farming profits; Thomas J. Meighen owned a tract of 1,200 acres, he said, adding, "it is due to his careful management that its natural beauties have

been preserved." Public discussion of the park idea seems not to have begun, however, until about thirty years later, when Meighen himself advanced the proposal. In May, 1934, he wrote to Frank Yetka, secretary of the conservation commission, intimating that he would like to sell all or part of his land to the state for park purposes. Yetka's response was lukewarm, but Meighen continued his efforts by visiting the Division of Forestry offices and urging his case in person.¹³

Later that year Harold Ostergaard of the Forestry Division visited the Forestville woods and reported back in terms highly favorable to the park idea. "My inspection showed," he wrote, "that most of this timber tract has exceptional qualifications for park purposes, consisting of dense hardwood forests, spring fed creeks, steep limestone cliffs, springs and possibly some caverns." He suggested that only some 500 to 700 acres, including the river valley and the bluffs, be acquired for park purposes. Meighen fully recognized, he said, that the state was in no position to pay what the land was worth but was anxious to have a park created and would be satisfied to be reimbursed only in part for the value of the land and timber. Although Ostergaard confessed that he had no idea what Meighen would ask, he suggested that \$75 an acre would be a fair price for the portion of the property that he wished the state to acquire.¹⁴

Newspaper publicity, both in a special issue of the *Preston Republican* late in 1934 and in the *Austin Daily Herald* article the next year, contributed to an increased interest in the Forestville woods about that time. Udert

¹⁰Diary entries for January 31, February 2, 5, 8, and 15, March 7 and 28, May 7 (quote), 1875, Thomas J. Meighen and Family Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹¹Curtiss-Wedge, *Fillmore County*, 2:1013; Thomas J. Meighen to Joseph F. Meighen, May 3, 1876, Thomas Hogan to Felix Meighen, August 30, 1876; John W. Hill to Thomas J. Meighen, April 10, 1873, Meighen Papers (MHS).

¹²Emery, in *Austin Daily Herald*, April 6, 1935, p. 8 (quote); memorandum from Kenneth B. Sander to Udert W. Hella, director, Division of Parks, John Martin, assistant director, and Milton E. Krona, parks planner, March 8, 1967 (quote), in files of the Division of Parks and Recreation, Department of Natural Resources, Centennial Office Building, St. Paul. Future citations to documents in this depository will be identified by the abbreviation DNR.

¹³*Wykoff Messenger*, July 9, 1903, [p. 4]; Ina Isaacson to T. J. Meighen, May 18, 1934, and Frank Yetka to T. J. Meighen, June 27, 1934, Meighen Papers (FSP); *Preston Republican*, November 1, 1934, section 3, p. 1, 3. The assumption that Meighen proposed the transfer of some of his property to the state is an inference based on the tone of the replies to his letter of May 17, 1934, which has not been found. Yetka says he will call on Meighen if he has an opportunity to make an inspection this summer.

¹⁴Harold Ostergaard, "Excerpt from Report to Conservation Commission," November, 1934, in Department of Conservation, Commissioner's Correspondence, Box Di-H, 1949-50, Forestville Woods Area folder, Minnesota State Archives.



THOMAS J.
MEIGHEN

W. Hella, director of the Division of Parks, wrote in 1956 that the park idea had been seriously considered in 1935, "when attempts were made to purchase the property utilizing state relief agency funds on the basis that the development of the area for recreational use would provide an outlet for relief labor" in Fillmore County. Thomas Meighen died in 1936, however, and his heirs, according to Hella, asked more for the land than the state was prepared to pay. Hence nothing came of the scheme at that time.¹⁵

The parks and recreation study made in 1938 recommended the acquisition of 600 acres somewhere on the upper Root River, in the Spring Valley vicinity. Although they are not mentioned by name, the reference is obviously to the Forestville woods. In an article two years later on projected state parks, Harold W. Lathrop, then director of the Division of Parks, listed the Meighen

woods as one of fourteen areas under consideration for park status. He thought that they "would serve a definite need and fit well into the state park system." In a letter to a Preston resident, he said that if it had not been for the economy program endorsed by the 1939 legislature there would have been a chance of having the woods established as a park then. William L. Strunk, commissioner of conservation, had investigated them not long before and was said to be interested in acquiring them.¹⁶

A note of urgency appeared in the discussion of the woods in the early 1940s, when an eighty-acre tract of timber was cut by the owner, Joseph F. Meighen, son of Thomas Meighen. Although he and other owners deplored the necessity for cutting the timber, "prohibitive taxes," they claimed, left no alternative. Even then, however, they were willing to sell the land to the state at \$50 an acre — less than they could get from those who wished to log it off. Local citizens, concerned about the fate of the woods, tried to interest the University of Minnesota in buying them for use as an outdoor biological laboratory. They were informed that the university had no money for such a sizable purchase. Inquiries addressed to the Division of Forestry brought much the same response, together with the suggestion that local people press for legislative action to establish a state park. This was late in 1941. United States entry into World War II shortly thereafter put a halt to any further action for the next several years.¹⁷

Agitation for a park at Forestville resumed in 1947, when the Fillmore County Sportsmen's Club and other local organizations, as well as individual citizens, became active in its support. Lud Gartner, editor of the *Preston Republican*, was one of the promoters of the park and made his newspaper an organ of publicity for the cause. In April, he headlined an article: "Why Not? A State Park at Forestville." In it he pointed out the urgency of the case, inasmuch as logging, admittedly on a small scale, was once more going on, and the woods, which everyone had assumed would always be there, might soon lose the character that had long made them of interest to state park officials. The Department of Conservation favored the park proposal, and it was thought, erroneously, that the state had money available for the purchase of the woods.¹⁸

Although this proposal came too late in the legislative session for the introduction of a bill to create a state park — and such a bill probably would not have passed anyway — about this time the Conservation Department began considering an alternative method of acquiring the land. In 1941 the state, wishing to obtain a tract of woodland in Rice County, had entered into an arrangement with the federal government by which the United States Forest Service agreed to buy the land and exchange it for state-owned land within the external boundaries of the Superior National Forest. Four years later,

¹⁵Hella to Mary E. Healy, October 10, 1956, in DNR.

¹⁶"State Park Plan," 128; Harold W. Lathrop, "Bring the Parks to the People," in *Conservation Volunteer*, October, 1940, p. 27 (quote); Lathrop to Mrs. Wesley Jones, May 3, 1940, in DNR.

¹⁷Mrs. O. Aamot, Mildred Engstrom, and Minnie and Fern Zimmerman to Henry F. Schmitz, dean of the School of Forestry, University of Minnesota, August 15, 1941 (quote); Fern Zimmerman to William L. Strunk, commissioner of conservation, September 20, 1941; Henry C. Weber, director, Division of Forestry, to Fern Zimmerman, September 30, 1941, in DNR. See also undated letter (signature illegible) in DNR, stating that Meighen had netted about \$6,000 from the timber cut at this time and that he intended to continue cutting. The writer of this letter points out that, although about a thousand acres could be obtained from Meighen, additional tracts would be needed to protect the scenic values of the area.

¹⁸*Preston Republican*, April 24, 1947, p. 1.

when a nucleus had been acquired, the legislature passed a bill establishing Nerstrand Woods State Park in eastern Rice County. When a park was authorized in Wright County in 1947, it was expected that the same device would be used to obtain the necessary land. Although it had not been successful there and only partially so at Nerstrand Woods, Conservation Commissioner Chester S. Wilson now proposed that it should be tried at Forestville.¹⁹

During the two-year interval before the next legislative session, state officials made at least two visits of inspection to the Forestville woods — in June, 1947, and December, 1948. On both occasions Commissioner Wilson, Parks Director Lew E. Fiero, and others, were impressed with the woods as a potential state park. Selective cutting by Meighen and other owners had not seriously damaged the integrity of the site. But instead of a park of 1,000 to 1,200 acres, as had been proposed earlier, Fiero now recommended one of some 720 to 800 acres.²⁰

The next step was to introduce a bill in the 1949 legislature calling for establishment of a park at Forestville. This was done on January 24, when state Senator John A. Johnson of Preston and fellow Senators Werner E. Wuertz and Helmer C. Myre introduced a bill drafted by the Parks Division and patterned after the Wright County park bill of the previous session. While the bill was making its tortuous way through committees, proponents of the park in Fillmore County issued a four-page brochure entitled "Preserve the Scenically Beautiful Forestville Woods" and containing the recommendations of Director Fiero and Commissioner Wilson, as expressed in a letter to Senator Johnson. Whether the leaflet influenced any members of the legislature is uncertain, but the bill passed the senate on March 16 and the house on March 29 and was signed by Governor Luther W. Youngdahl on April 4.²¹

The bill in its final form called for "the establishment, maintenance and control of a state park in Fillmore County" not to exceed 850 acres, the lands to be acquired through exchange with the federal government. Parks Division officials did not expect that the land acquisition plan would be consummated very soon, but they believed that legislative action would "serve to restrain the general public from cutting the valuable timber from the area." They were correct in assuming that the land exchange program would not be effected for a while, but they were overoptimistic in supposing that timber cutters would be deterred by the passage of a nominal act by the legislature. Before long, reports began reaching Commissioner Wilson that timber was being logged. He had to reply to citizens' complaints by saying that there was nothing to do but ask the owners to desist and hope that the cutting was only selective and would not damage the forest.²²

The fact is that the land exchange scheme was defective on at least two counts. The most serious was that the appropriations received by the United States Forest Service were insufficient to enable it to buy the desired lands, either at Forestville or in Wright County. The second was that these lands were so much more valuable than the cutover lands in northern Minnesota which the Forest Service wished to acquire that the exchange would have had to be on a ten-for-one basis. The Land Exchange Commission would have been reluctant to proceed with the trade on this basis, even had the Forest Service been able to do so. As a result, the whole intention of creating a state park at Forestville was frustrated. Wilson tried without success to get action for a congressional appropriation; the Korean War, which broke out in the summer of 1950, diverted appropriations from domestic agencies like the Forest Service to the armed forces. Nor was the Minnesota legislature any more receptive than it had ever been toward an outright appropriation. Senator Johnson remarked in 1953 that he had been so pessimistic of success that he had not attempted to introduce such a bill that session. Although local people continued their agitation, nothing came of it. Thus matters dragged on through the 1950s and the early 1960s.²³

FOR A TIME in 1955 and 1956 it looked as though the state might be able to acquire the bulk of the Meighen property through tax forfeiture. Taxes on these lands had been delinquent since 1949, and if not paid by September, 1956, they would become forfeit. The situation was complicated by legal action then pending on the part of one of the Meighen heirs against another. Apparently the delinquent taxes were paid shortly before the dead-

¹⁹ Ken Morrison, "A Report on Nerstrand Woods," in *Conservation Volunteer*, March 1943, p. 29-30; Lathrop, "Our Newest State Parks," in *Conservation Volunteer*, July-August, 1946, p. 32; *Laws*, 1945, p. 234-35; 1947, p. 615; Wilson to John A. Johnson, April 25, 1947, in DNR.

²⁰ *Preston Republican*, June 19, 1947, p. 1, June 26, 1947, p. 1, December 23, 1948, p. 1; Fiero to Wilson, January 12, 1949, in DNR.

²¹ Fiero to Wilson, January 17, 1949; "Preserve the Scenically Beautiful Forestville Woods," n.d.; Fiero to Johnson, February 10, 1949, in DNR; Minnesota, *Senate Journal*, 1949, p. 106, 887, 1498; *House Journal*, 1949, p. 1441-42; *Preston Republican*, February 24, 1949, p. 1.

²² *Laws*, 1949, p. 469-70; "Forestville Area — Advantages," memorandum dated March 1, 1949 (quote); Wilson to Clarence Schwanke, secretary, Fountain Sportsmen's Club, December 31, 1951, in DNR. It is worth noting that the original park authorized in 1949, though less than half the size of the present one, included some tracts of land that have not been incorporated into the park as established in 1963.

²³ *Minneapolis Star*, December 7, 1955, p. 16; Hella to Healy, October 10, 1956; Wilson to John H. Zilch, May 1, 1953, in DNR.

line, and another chance to acquire the Meighen woods went glimmering. No further action was taken for several years.²⁴

By 1963 conditions seemed more propitious, and the legislature was invited to consider Forestville State Park as part of the important bill that finally emerged as the Omnibus Natural Resources and Recreation Act of 1963. Both a general bill and individual bills were drafted by the Parks Division and introduced in the legislature in January. The individual bill calling for the establishment of Forestville State Park was introduced in the state senate on January 31 by Senator Lewellyn W. Larson. In its original form it was called "A bill for an act to establish a new state park located in Fillmore County to be known as Forestville state park, giving the commissioner of conservation power to acquire said lands by gift, purchase, or eminent domain and transferring any tax-forfeited land within the park boundaries to the commissioner of conservation." This was later superseded by the general bill, introduced February 21 by Senator P. J. Holand, calling for the establishment of thirteen new parks and additions to sixteen existing ones. In this form the bill became law on May 20.²⁵

Perhaps the most important feature of the Omnibus Act was that it provided appropriations for the parks to be established or expanded. So far as Forestville was concerned, the sum of \$122,000 was set aside for the purchase of lands, with an additional \$20,865 for capital improvements. Since the estimated value of the land had now risen to \$100 an acre — double what had been asked for it in the 1940s — even this generous support by the

legislature would buy only half the acreage envisioned for the park, which had been given external boundaries enclosing an area of 2,440 acres. The intention was first to acquire some 600 to 800 acres, including the store and the rest of the Meighen homestead, now owned by Mrs. Earl M. Dempsey, a daughter of Thomas Meighen. Work would then begin on restoring the old store and putting in roads, a picnic area, campgrounds, utilities, and service buildings.²⁶

Because of the large number of parks established by the Omnibus Act and the limited staff available to carry out appraisal work, land acquisition proceeded slowly for the next couple of years. Especially was this so when, as in Mrs. Dempsey's case, the owner lived in another part of the country (a suburb of Boston, Massachusetts). Although there was really nothing excessive about the length of negotiations, considering how long the park was expected to remain in public ownership, local advocates saw the delay as another in a long series of frustrations that had balked their efforts to establish the park. Hence they sought a quicker way to acquire the needed lands. The original Forestville State Park bill introduced by Senator Larson had provided for land acquisition by condemnation, but this provision had been deleted from the final Omnibus Act. Now Senator Larson undertook to restore it by means of a bill introduced on February 19, 1965. Eventually a bill was passed permitting the state to exercise the right of eminent domain in three parks, including Forestville, and action to that end was initiated late in 1966.²⁷

In the meantime, Joseph Meighen had signed an option for the sale of his large tract of 916 acres, and another 205 acres had been acquired from John Vander Zande. Together with Mrs. Dempsey's 464 acres, this gave the park a sizable nucleus of 1,585 acres, including the store and the land desired for campground and picnic areas. Other tracts, including small enclaves within the state-owned land, have been acquired since then, but the park has not yet reached the statutory limit of 2,440 acres. Moreover, the 1969 legislature provided for the inclusion of two additional tracts, totaling well over 150 acres, on the eastern periphery of the park. When all the desired land has been purchased, therefore, the park will amount to more than 2,600 acres.²⁸

Even before the land acquisition program had made much progress, the Parks Division had begun planning for the development of Forestville State Park. Recognizing that the park would serve three basic functions, the planners gave simultaneous attention to developing the historical, natural, and recreational potentialities of the area. If any one aspect was given precedence, it was the restoration of the store and townsite. The intention was to mark the long-abandoned streets and restore the building to its condition in the 1857-to-1885 period.²⁹

Detailed examination of the site and an inventory of

²⁴ Carl Kohlmeier to George A. Selke, commissioner of conservation, December 15, 1955; Selke to Kohlmeier, December 19, 1955; Gordon S. Lundberg to Selke, December 14, 1955, and March 23, 1956; Lundberg to Charles V. Michener, Fillmore County auditor, August 30, 1956; Lundberg to Selke, September 11, 1956, all in Forestville Woods Area folder, Minnesota State Archives.

²⁵ *Senate Journal*, 1963, p. 180 (quote), 402; *Laws*, 1963, p. 1350, 1363; *Preston Republican*, April 11, 1963, p. 1, and June 6, 1963, p. 1. The Omnibus Act is found in *Laws*, 1963, p. 1343-63.

²⁶ *Preston Republican*, February 6, 1964, p. 1; *Laws*, 1963, p. 1359; "Profile — Forestville State Park," undated document in DNR.

²⁷ Hella to Glenn Domino, president, Cedar Valley Conservation Club, February 1, 1965; Hella to Senator Lewellyn W. Larson, February 9, 1965; Ray Matson, supervisor, land acquisition division, to Carl Kohlmeier, September 9, 1966; memorandum from John Martin to Krona, April 25, 1973, in DNR; *Laws*, 1965, p. 1280-81. Eminent domain proceedings were authorized also in the case of Frontenac and Grand Mound state parks. See also *Senate Journal*, 1965, p. 335.

²⁸ Paul Durbahn, "Forestville State Park to Start Development in Spring," in *Spring Valley Tribune*, September 15, 1966, section 2, p. 1; Matson to Kohlmeier, September 9, 1966, in DNR; *Laws*, 1969, p. 1638.

²⁹ Undated Parks Division prospectus [1967?], in DNR.

FORESTVILLE STORE, its white pillars and roof extending over a wood sidewalk, probably looks much as it did in 1857. The family lived above the store and in the two-story section to the left of the business. At right are two views of the interior. The center picture shows some of the tools used on farms or in homes — storage crocks, lamps, cooking utensils, and a newfangled gas-burning stove — about 1894 — bearing the name “Quick Meal.” At far right is a nickel-plated coal-burning stove. In the foreground is a saddle; at left, in the glass case, are bolts of imported cloth; above are drums.



the store's contents began early in 1967. It was then that Kenneth B. Sander of the Parks Division discovered that the store contained the “dregs” of a once voluminous stock. Judging from the three-page typewritten inventory drawn up later, even the “dregs” were impressive. Although some of the contents were of modern vintage, the investigators found such antiques as sidesaddles, a horse's straw hat, ox yokes, a spinning wheel, a Civil War drum, phonograph records and horn, a tin box containing the post-office records, and a wealth of other items that had somehow survived Thomas Meighen's openhanded generosity over the years. The profusion and variety of patent medicines led to a decision to center the display about that feature. The Minnesota Historical Society owns and has supervision over the contents of the store.³⁰

The reconstruction of Forestville envisioned by some of the Parks Division's planners would have tended toward the grandiose and, if carried out, would have approached the garishness of an amusement park. With the notion of reconstructing the town à la Lincoln's New Salem in Illinois, they proposed taking visitors around the site in stagecoaches. It is probably fortunate that sober second thoughts — or the legislature's failure to provide support — have put the quietus on this kind of development, more appropriate to a privately owned tourist trap than to a state park. But the efforts to repair the store and to investigate thoroughly the history of the site were all to the good. Since some of the buildings erected in the 1850s survived only a few decades, difficulties were encountered in determining their exact locations.³¹

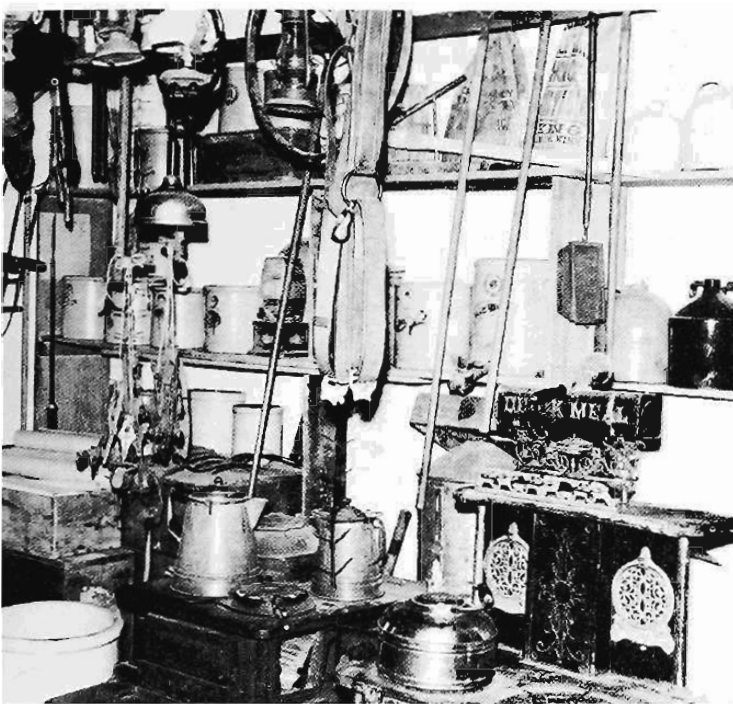
While restoration work on the store was going on and attempts were being made to find the locations of the gristmill, distillery, and other buildings, the park was also being readied for the accommodation of visitors. A picnic area was developed along the south bank of the Root River, just upstream from the store and on the opposite side of the river. A campground was laid out somewhat farther upstream and on the left bank. Initially, it was equipped with nineteen campsites; planning called for a possible expansion to as many as 200 sites. Trails were laid out through portions of the woods, largely along the route of former logging tracks. Some of these were cleared of underbrush so that snowmobilers could use them in the winter. Much of the work in the first couple of seasons was done by men over fifty-five, working as part of the “Green Thumb” program. The park was opened to the public at the beginning of the 1968 park season, though the formal dedication did not take place until May 21, 1972.³²

AFTER NEARLY THIRTY years of intermittent work by local citizens and state officials, Forestville State Park was finally established. It might be supposed that, once the appropriate legislation had been passed and the

³⁰ Sander to Hella, *et al.*, March 8, 1967; inventory of store contents, in DNR; Ruth Rogers, “A New Park Opens in Area,” in *Winona Sunday News*, May 12, 1968, p. 18A.

³¹ *Rochester Post-Bulletin*, April 4, 1968, p. 12; undated prospectus, in DNR.

³² *Rochester Post-Bulletin*, April 4, 1968, p. 12. There was also a scheme to dam up a stream and create a small lake. See



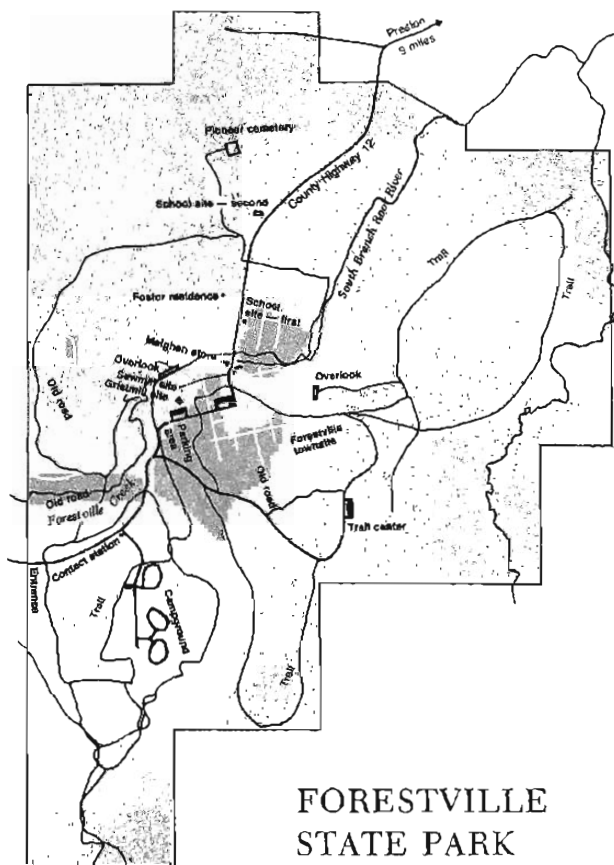
necessary land acquired, the woods it was intended to preserve would be safe for all time. Such was not the case, however. Like so many other natural, historic, and archaeological sites, the Forestville woods have been threatened by the ubiquitous United States Corps of Engineers. In 1966 a proposal was advanced for two flood-control dams on the Root River, one near Lanesboro, another just west of Preston. The latter, if constructed according to plan, would inundate much of the park and adversely affect the trout streams on which much of its recreational value depends. Conservation Commissioner Wayne H. Olson protested immediately, as did concerned individuals in the locality. Since then the danger has receded in the face of citizen and Parks Division opposition. Still, one hesitates ever to pronounce a Corps of Engineers plan dead, and Forestville may not be secure even yet.³³

Actually, the chief danger to the park may come, as in so many other cases, not from extraneous forces like

the Corps of Engineers but from the very people for whom it was created, and not from the minority of vandals but from the sheer numbers of ordinary park users, each one of whom contributes, if only slightly, to the gradual erosion of park values. For many years now the National Park Service has been trying to adapt to present conditions the intent of the congressional act that created the system in 1916. In the language of the act, the "fundamental purpose" of the national park system is "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the

Preston Republican, February 6, 1964, p. 1; and "Profile — Forestville State Park," in DNR. About a year after the dedication of the park, the Forestville townsite was added to the National Register of Historic Places. See press release, office of Congressman Albert H. Quie, of Minnesota, April 30, 1973. A "Fine Arts Festival" was held at the park on May 19. It was intended to be the first in an annual series. See *Rochester Post-Bulletin*, May 21, 1973, p. 17.

³³ Olson to J. R. Calton, chief, basin and project planning branch, engineering division, Department of the Army, St. Paul District Corps of Engineers, May 24, 1966, in DNR; Roy W. Meyer interviews with Milt Krona, April 22, 1971, and Carl Kohlmeyer, May 21, 1972.



FORESTVILLE
STATE PARK

enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." How can "enjoyment" for increasing millions of visitors be provided in the parks without impairing them for the "enjoyment" of future generations? What is "enjoyment," as that term applies to the experience the park visitor may be expected to have? Is it roughly synonymous with "recreation"? If so, how can recreation be reconciled with preservation? Or, as Director Russell W. Fridley of the Minnesota Historical Society asked recently, "how does one preserve a pleasuring ground?"³⁴

The problem may be either more or less acute in the state parks, depending on what criteria one uses. They are assuredly smaller than the national parks, and a greater proportion of their total area receives heavy use. On the other hand, most of those in Minnesota (except for some in the northern part of the state) are ecologically less fragile than the western parks with a thin soil covering and little rainfall, and the natural communities they are intended to protect are seldom if ever unique. Forestville has not yet suffered the heavy use of such older parks as Whitewater, so the problem has not had to be faced squarely as yet. Although the park seems crowded on the first day of the fishing season, the visitor can usually escape the throngs by hiking along the ten miles of marked trails that wind through the woods. But if the exponential increase in park use that has been going on since shortly after World War II continues, it is only a matter of time — and not much of that — before protection of the park from its users will replace development for those users as the main business of its supervisory personnel. One indication that the park planners are thinking along these lines is the fact that plans for campground size have been scaled down significantly. They would like to see private campgrounds in the vicinity siphon off many of the campers who might otherwise congregate in the park.³⁵

If Forestville does not yet exemplify the problems of park overuse, it does illustrate the rather chaotic manner in which parks have commonly been created and in which the state park system itself has evolved. Often the initiative has come from citizens' groups who wanted a local recreation site given the prestige of state park status and have worked through their legislators to bring about the desired end. The intrinsic merits of the area under consideration have usually been outweighed by community sentiment. In a few cases, land has been given to the state for use as a state park. Although the Parks Division has probably never accepted such a gift if the site was wholly unworthy of park status, changing concepts of what a state park ought to be have led to a reappraisal of certain parks that came into existence in this fashion in earlier years.

The detailed studies that began in the 1930s were

intended to inject an element of rationality into park planning and to place the initiative in the hands of professionals. This approach may have reached its climax in the most recent such study, called "Project 80" and described as the "most comprehensive statewide inventory of significant natural, historic and scientific resources to date." Using computers to manipulate the mass of data collected, Project 80 set up eleven categories of state lands, defined the function of each, and then attempted to determine the most appropriate classification for each of the present state parks, waysides, recreation areas, and monuments. Other areas considered for inclusion in the system were also inventoried and classified as to their potential. If the recommendations of Project 80 were to be adopted, the term "state park," defined somewhat more narrowly than in the past, would be applied to only twenty of the present units of the park system; the rest would be reclassified as recreation areas, historical areas, scientific and natural areas, trail waysides, or rest areas. Some units, whose use is mainly local, would be turned over to county or regional jurisdiction.³⁶

Although one may be justifiably skeptical of the value of a computer analysis as the basis for judgments ultimately subjective — and Parks Division officials have serious reservations about the recommendations contained in Project 80 — the philosophical basis underlying the report reflects a view of the park concept more in keeping with the realities of the 1970s than the attitudes that prevailed during the decades in which the Minnesota park system acquired its present contours. For one thing, there is an explicit recognition of the incompatibility in many cases of preservation and recreation. The study points out that, unfortunately, "it is not always possible to combine preservation and some outdoor rec-

³⁴United States, *Statutes at Large*, 39:535; Russell W. Fridley, "Yellowstone to Voyageurs: The Evolution of an Idea," in *Minnesota History*, 42:70 (Summer, 1972). Roderick Nash states the case well: "The problem is that dams, mines, and roads are not the basic threat to the wilderness quality of an environment. People are." See *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 264 (New Haven, 1973). The complexity of the issue is suggested by Lawrence C. Merriam, Jr., who remarks in a recent article, "A complete cure for the ills of the park system requires resolution of the recreation/preservation conflict, and the solutions to that problem generate more problems of their own." See "The National Parks System: Growth & Outlook," in *National Parks and Conservation Magazine*, December, 1972, p. 12.

³⁵Roy W. Meyer interview with Krona.

³⁶Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and State Planning Agency, *Minnesota Resource Potentials in Outdoor Recreation* (Project 80), [1971], p. 21, 23; *Rochester Post-Bulletin*, September 9, 1971, p. 21 (quote). The last recommendation has apparently been rejected by the Division of Parks and Recreation. See *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, July 23, 1972, p. 14A.

reational activities on the same site" and foresees that "Conflicts in use [will] become more frequent and less desirable as population and leisure time increase."³⁷ The solution — admittedly not a wholly satisfactory one — is to separate units of the park system according to their dominant function and thus relieve the more fragile and valuable ones of the growing pressure from people bent on recreational activities of a potentially damaging kind.

Another novel feature of the thinking behind Project 80 is a de-emphasis on scenery as the primary or sole criterion in selecting park sites. In a section titled "Minnesota's Major Landscape Regions," the new viewpoint is summarized:

"Scenic beauty is too often given a disproportionately high value in selecting State Parks. While

³⁷Project 80, p. 20–21.

³⁸Project 80, p. 63.

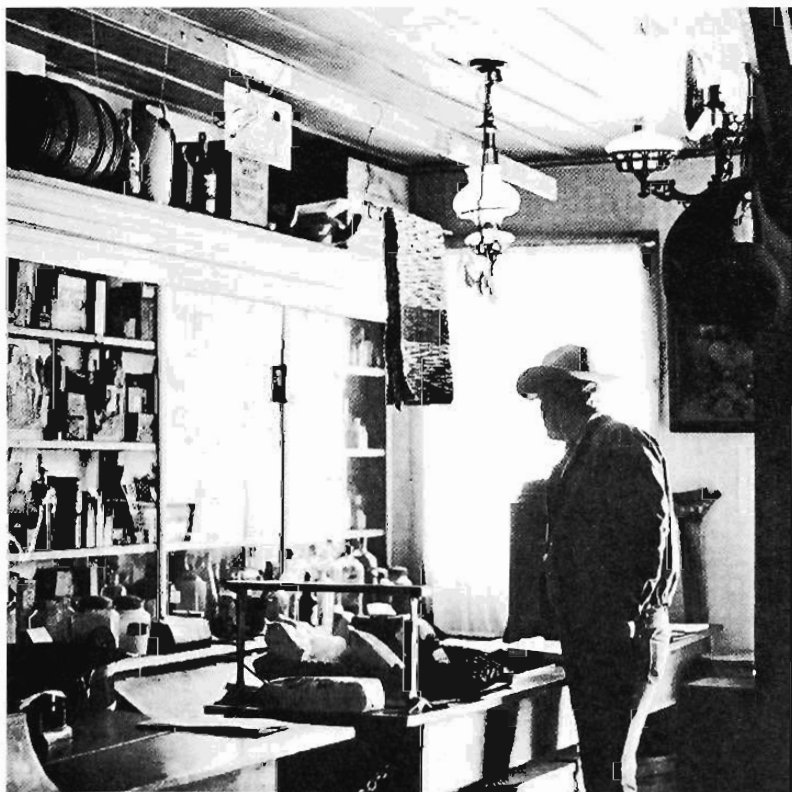
THE PHOTOGRAPHS on page 82 (top), 92, and 93 are by Roy W. Meyer. The portraits on pages 85 and 89 are from Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, comp., *History of Fillmore County, Minnesota*, 2:840, 960, 1010, and 1012 (Chicago, 1912); the photograph of the gristmill on page 86 is published through the courtesy of Forestville State Park. The photograph on page 95 is by Virginia L. Rahm. Other photographs are in the society's picture collection. The maps on pages 84 and 93 are by Alan Ominsky.

breathtaking scenery is inspirational, nature has created a wide variety of interesting scenes. Rather than emphasizing scenic beauty per se, the emphasis should be placed on portraying, interpreting, and providing for recreation in this variety of natural scenes."³⁸

In line with this thinking, the state parks should represent a variety of landscape types, usually the best examples of each and the ones least impaired by the impact of white settlement. Thus the hardwood forest of south-eastern Minnesota would be represented by such parks as Forestville, Carley, Beaver Creek Valley, and Whitewater, the last three illustrating types of stream dissection not found at Forestville.

Forestville State Park fares quite well when the newer concept of the state park is applied to it. Though scenically attractive, its rolling hills in no sense match the rocky streams of the North Shore, with their waterfalls and tumbling rapids. It is, however, representative of a landscape region, still possessing much of its original integrity, thanks to the protection afforded by Felix and Thomas Meighen to their great tract of woodland down through the years. If the people of Minnesota, acting through their legislature and their Department of Natural Resources, will that it shall be so, it can remain one of the state's natural and historic treasures, "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

THE PROFUSION of patent medicines, left on the shelves when Thomas Meighen locked up the store, attracts the attention of a contemporary visitor.





Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).