





My Minnesota

Minnesota—the Star of the North, the 32nd State, Land of 10,000 Lakes—turns 150 on May 11, 2008. Its 86,938.87 square miles, 79,610.08 of them inland water, make it the twelfth-largest state in the nation. For the past century and a half, its boundaries have enclosed a diverse mix of native people and immigrants. Its official symbols include the loon, the lady's slipper, the blueberry muffin, and a host of other flora and fauna.

So, what is Minnesota? A place on earth? The sum of its geography, climate, and history? A state of mind? Suspecting that each Minnesotan would have a unique answer to this question, we invited some well-known citizens to tell us what Minnesota means to them. Their responses, which appear alphabetically below, only whet the appetite for more. To share your Minnesota, visit www.mnhs.org/myminnesota.



MINNESOTA MAP AND PHOTOS OF MINNESOTA © ISTOCKPHOTO.COM





Sam Cook I thought that my quintessential slice of Minnesota might be a spit of granite in canoe country, a leaning white pine and a strand of smoke rising from a camp down the lake. I mean, you can still drink water right from the lakes up there. And just last summer, a wolf waded into Wind Lake to watch as my son and I paddled past. Not bad.

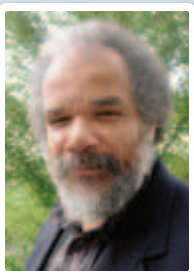
But then I thought about leaning into a big nor'easter hurling 15-foot waves at the lakewalk in Duluth. Or stepping outside a farmhouse in Lac qui Parle County on an October morning, listening to a great horned owl signing off and pheasants cackling over the new day's possibilities.

Then again, it might just be a July night on Burnt-side Lake out of Ely, the heavens perforated with stars. You're standing at the end of the dock, superheated by the sauna, anticipating your imminent leap into the lake. Then you're in the air, and the unseen water takes you in, and the little bubbles are tickling your face, and you surface under the Big Dipper.

Wait. How about the first glimpse of that 31-inch walleye on Saganaga Lake last spring? Or the butter-scotch glow of lantern light from a wood-heated tent at winter camp? Or the syncopated panting of a team of sled dogs running down Cherokee Lake under a half moon?

I close my eyes. I smell the campfire. I hear the wingbeats of a loon overhead.

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Sam Cook is an outdoorsman and writer for the Duluth News Tribune.



William D. Green I recently spoke on the state of the Minneapolis public schools. I had prepared some notes, only to discard them as I approached the lectern. I didn't know what I was going to say, living what many people would consider their worst nightmare: standing before room of people, speechless and naked. Let me assure you, I was neither. My mind was quite clear, and the words that came were strangely familiar. My previous "professional self" and present "professional self" had come into alignment.

We only imagine we choose the place where we are bolted to the earth, where geography becomes internal.

I began by telling about a senior seminar I taught years ago on Minneapolis during the Progressive Era. I told how most of the students proposed writing in conventional areas of historical interest—politics, labor relations, women's rights, immigration—and how I was skeptical when one student wanted to write about football. Consenting (almost daring him to make my day!), I waited to see what he'd do.

This was when I learned about the Minnesota vs. Michigan game of 1903 when the Little Brown Jug tradition was born. More important: I learned that after the Gopher victory, newspapers praised the heroism of four young men who played in the backfield—a Jewish American, an African American, a Native American, and a German American. Their cultural and racial differences and their ability to work victoriously as a unit epitomized the grandeur of the American Ideal. True, the depiction was sentimental as hell, and it was only a football game played within the sobering national context of xenophobia, imperialism, labor strife, and racism. But that was part of the point for me: Even then our community, with all of its prejudices, could at least consider that diversity did not inherently threaten unity. The larger community, *because* of the differences of those young men, embraced them as its own.

Warming to the theme, I took the audience back to 1869, when the Minnesota legislature enacted a law that denied state funds to any school district that segregated kids on the basis of race. Then we went back to 1848, a year before Minnesota became a U.S. territory, when missionary Thomas Williamson, in his efforts to start a school, requested aid in finding a teacher who had no problem teaching children who were "Cree and Chipewewa, Swiss, French Canadian, English, and even some with African blood."

Today, there are nearly 90 languages spoken in the

Minneapolis school district. Nearly 70 percent of the pupils are students of color, and nearly 30 percent go home to families who don't speak English. On the other hand, the city is predominately white, and over 80 percent of the households have no kids in any school—public, private, parochial, or charter. Yet these same households passed three referenda to provide resources to educate schoolchildren whom they never knew or saw.

Simply put, it was and remains to be our legacy to teach every child who comes through the door, because by merely being here, they become our own. It is what we've always done. It is within our communal DNA. This is my Minnesota, the one I want to continue to believe in.

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William D. Green is superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools and associate professor of history at Augsburg College, on leave.



TOM SAND

Bill Holm We only imagine we choose the place where we are bolted to the earth, where geography becomes internal. It is chosen for us long before the sperm and egg introduce themselves to each other and invent us.

My connection to Minnesota is the northwest quarter of section 32 of Swede Prairie Township, Yellow Medicine County. My father, Bill—born in 1906—farmed there until his death in 1966. His father, Sveinn, farmed there until his early death in 1909. His father, Johannes, built the ramshackle old farmhouse on top of the hill facing the north wind in 1885, just after emigrating from east Iceland. The house still stands, though no Holms live there. His 1885 barn was torn down last year.

I arrived in 1943, one month too late to be midwifed into the world by my grandmother, Ingibjorg. I slept in the northwest bedroom until I left for college in 1961. Part of me, I suppose, still sleeps there, looking out past the raggedy box elder tree a few feet from the window at a six- or seven-mile swath of northern prairie. You enjoy an amazing long view from even a small hill in a flat place. The tall grass was mostly gone, subdued by the plow and the Homestead Act; now, only farms a half-mile apart are separated by fields of wheat, corn, flax, oats, hay, and a few sloughs. Crows gathered in the box elder tree, sometimes a screech owl. Pheasants cried out

in the night. In winter, the view was white. During blizzards, the bare branches thrashed against the frail window in the north wind.

As a boy, part of me hated that farm; I longed for the world of poetry, ideas, Mozart, and it never occurred to me that this was not my only true place on the planet. My great fear was that it circumscribed the entire universe and that I couldn't ever escape it. I could and I did—at least externally—though now that I am old and all those people are long dead, it strikes me that the universe could certainly have done worse than to be circumscribed by Bill Holm's farm in Swede Prairie Township.

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Bill Holm is a poet, essayist, and author, most recently, of Windows of Brimnes: An American in Iceland (Milkweed Editions, 2007).



ANN MARSDEN

Kevin Kling I believe we're each drawn to a geography, whether it's a mountain, an ocean, or a desert. For me it's the prairies and lake country of Minnesota. My brother is the same. He stays home for vacation and says, "I'd go somewhere, but where?"

We tend not to be a flamboyant people—the weather takes care of our need for extremes. Oftentimes fashion must give way to survival. We're very private about our feelings. I've told people from out of town, "Don't worry if you sit next to a guy and he doesn't talk to you for four hours. It has no bearing on how he feels about you. He may be your best friend."

We're not as steeped in tradition as the East Coast and lack the elbowroom of the West. We're perfectly placed: not what was or what will be—we are what *is*. One of our indigenous languages, Anishinaabemowin, is about 80 percent verbs. Things aren't called by what they do or have done. They're called by what they're doing. Just right.

Most of all, I love our sense of humor. It's like the weather in that it doesn't seem funny at first. Like the extroverted Finn who stares at the tops of *your* shoes.

One time I was ice fishing up north—it must've been ten degrees, at best. Suddenly a family reunion broke out on the lake. Volleyball, horseshoes, a picnic. I stood there pulling perch off a hook, watching this family party down. It was brilliant.

In 1987 I was at game number two of the World Series at the Metrodome. I wondered if a Minnesota team would ever win. All those years cheering for the Vikings, I thought I should get a foam hand with two fingers raised. The guy next to me was eyeing the huge stadium. I asked, “You ever been in a place this big?” “No,” he says. “If there was a deer on home plate I wouldn’t even shoot it. Too far to drag back.”

I’ve overheard some great ones over the years. Two old duffers talking about loving Minnesota; finally one says, “Yeah, when you freeze paradise it lasts a little longer.”

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Kevin Kling is a storyteller, playwright, performer, and regular contributor to National Public Radio’s All Things Considered.



Walter Mondale Minnesota means everything to me. Joan, my family, my ideas, my ideals, my love of community, my belief in justice and decency, and my optimism—all began and are rooted here. For nearly 80 years,

wherever I have been, Minnesota’s been my foundation and my home.

Minnesotans believe in community, and part of community is being generous toward people, even if you don’t know them. In small towns like Heron Lake and Elmore, I was given the opportunity, courtesy of other Minnesotans, most of whom I did not know, to go to good public schools. I still remember Hubert Humphrey speaking about social justice at a Farm Bureau picnic on a farm outside of Fairmont. It changed my life. I decided to seek a public life while studying at our superb University of Minnesota law school.

The other part of being Minnesotan is that you can leave, but you can always come back and have a home. In all of those years of national politics and in international diplomacy, through every victory and disappointment, being a Minnesotan—having a foundation of honesty and decency and public service—helped me live a life I would never have thought possible.

I believe that, citizen for citizen, Minnesota is America’s most progressive, educated, sophisticated, internationally minded state. We have a history of progressivism, creativity in politics, and fair-mindedness that we should all learn from and be inspired by. Those of us who have

benefited in the past from these qualities should count our blessings and pledge to provide the next generation with the opportunities our own forebears gave us.

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Walter Mondale’s long public career includes being state attorney general, U.S. senator, vice president, and ambassador to Japan.



Mee Moua My Minnesota is a lazy afternoon fishing for sunfish off the dock at Beaver Lake, walking the trails of Battle Creek Park, meandering through the turns of the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary, and enjoying my four-year-old daughter as she picks up dried leaves for her “collection.”

My Minnesota is the Mississippi River and the 10,000 lakes that gave me the joy of watching my seven-year-old son bring in his first 12-inch bigmouth bass.

My Minnesota is playing in the rain on a warm August afternoon with the “cul de sac cousins,” floating paper boats, and building a “rock and dam” to keep the boats from going into the sewer drain.

My Minnesota is the deep burst of laughter that inevitably ensues when people ask me how Hmong people came to be in Minnesota and I tell them, with a straight face, that it is due to our long tradition of ice fishing.

My Minnesota is breakfast meetings at the Little Oven, coffee meetings at the Swede Hollow Cafe, lunch meetings at Samai Asian Restaurant, and dinner take-out from the taco truck.

My Minnesota is loving green-bean hot dishes, slurping pho on University Avenue, and sinking into food coma with deep-fried Minnesota walleye and the spicy meat sauce from Peking Garden.

My Minnesota is the dragon boat races at Lake Phalen, the Lantern Lighting Festival at Como Park, Taste of Minnesota on Harriet Island, the State Fair, and the July 4th Soccer Festival at McMurray Field.

My Minnesota is the changing of the seasons, the sun and snow, the lakes and the parks, the tastes and the sounds from all these places, and the wonderful people that I see and meet and have come to call friends and neighbors in these places and through these shared experiences.

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Mee Moua is a Minnesota state senator (District 67).



Jim Northrup I see my Minnesota through the windshield of a 1964 Corvette Sting Ray convertible. How I came to acquire the beautiful classic sports car is a long story that can be shortened to one word. Casino.

The Black Bear Casino bought and then offered the Corvette to its customers in a drawing. When someone won a jackpot or a bingo game, they were issued a car-drawing ticket. The car sat on display inside the casino for three months.

On the night of the drawing, my wife wanted to see if they were going to call her name. I wanted to stay home because no one ever wins those drawings. I had seen the drum that held the tickets: looked like at least 50,000 names in there.

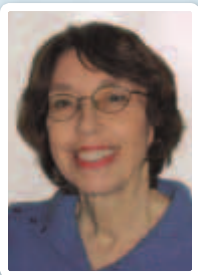
I got a call from the casino—it was my cousin telling me Patricia had won the car. I went to the casino thinking, “Now I have to win a jackpot to pay for the insurance.”

When I got to the casino it was easy to find my wife. She was the only one in the crowd of thousands that was still jumping up and down some 20 minutes after the drawing.

Together we looked at the car. I hung an eagle feather from the rear-view mirror and got behind the wheel for the first time.

That was seven years ago, and I have seen most of my Minnesota through the windshield. My wife is afraid to drive it, so I have to.

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Jim Northrup is a radio commentator and award-winning author of Walking the Rez Road and the syndicated column, “Fond du Lac Follies.”



Cheri Register What I miss when I am away from Minnesota, or as time pushes me farther from my childhood in Albert Lea:

- Puffy cumulus clouds resting on a single plane of light
- The craggy profiles of bur oak trees atop glacial moraines
- Leeriness toward profit hoarders and mansion dwellers
- The chatter of livestock- and grain-market reports on the radio
- Civic pride in splendid schools, repaired roads, parks,



- and libraries, the gifts of progressive taxation
- Elderly women named Ardis, goddess of the growing season in Old Norse
- Co-op elevators on the skyline
- The Farmer-Labor legacy in DFL
- Dakota, Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk
- Redwing blackbirds back on their cattail perches in April—my birthday candles
- Migrant accordions from Crystal City, Texas, pumping dance music out over Albert Lea
- Up north fishing, then riding gape-mouthed along the slag heaps and open pits of the Iron Range
- Tense, round o’s and velar l’s and r’s
- Multiple Jim Jensens and Mai Vangs
- Stunning varieties of African physiognomy and the subtler spectrum of Nordic types
- Minnesota Nice, a non-confrontational etiquette meant to keep descendants of Vikings from killing each other
- “With” as an adverb, like Scandinavian “med”: “Are you coming with?”
- A body of water in walking distance
- Smoke-free air and poop-free sidewalks
- The Loft, small presses, grants for writers, and a literary culture that *could* secede from the national marketplace
- No mistaking “route” for “root”
- The tart-sweet ecstasy of the fall’s first Haralson
- KFAI volunteer radio and live music at the Cedar Cultural Center
- Gauging the weather by the sound snow makes underfoot
- A collective sense of possibility

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Cheri Register is a sixth-generation Minnesotan and author of Packinghouse Daughter: A Memoir and other books.



Ali Selim My Minnesota resides in Cairo, Egypt, Paris, France, and other places far and away. I travel frequently, for long periods of time, and get to know Minnesota best when I am gone.

My Minnesota is not about heat or cold or humidity. Not the Twins winning the World Series or the Vikings winning nothing. It's not about the mosquitoes or the Lutherans or the State Fair. It's the strange little details that never leave and always remind you who you are.

My friend David moved from Minnesota to Los Angeles a quarter-century ago and hasn't returned since. When I visit him he tells me, absentmindedly over and over, that the thing he thinks of most often is sitting in lectures at the University of Minnesota, tipping his feet so the soles faced each other, and watching the snow melt out of the waffle treads, getting soaked up by the carpet and making Rorschach-like art forms that he could stare at for hours.

And I agree.

Minnesota is picturesque, enchanting.

David married a French woman, and I attended his wedding in Paris. The bride's brother took us out for dinner one night to a real European five-star restaurant. Each place setting had five forks, four knives, six spoons, and an array of other culinary apparatus for which we didn't have names back home. David told his new brother-in-law that if we had that much silverware in Minnesota we would invite more people.

And I agree.

Minnesota is practical, generous.

Though I was the best man at David's wedding, his in-laws have only vague recollection of me. They, like my relatives in Egypt, communicate by constantly talking in

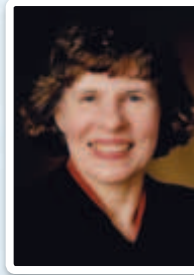
unison. I was the one who didn't say (as) much, but they remember my presence.

How could I disagree?

Minnesota is quiet, powerful.

I am reminded of Minnesota always, but perhaps that is because my Minnesota resides in my heart.

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Ali Selim is a writer and director whose 2005 film Sweet Land received the Independent Spirit Award.



Esther Tomljanovich In Minnesota's 150th year, and my seventy-sixth, I find myself reflecting on my life's journey from childhood poverty to the highest court in Minnesota. That journey was made possible in large part by the Minnesota community college system.

Growing up in rural Itasca County during the Great Depression could have been dreary and hopeless. There were no jobs and no money. Our home had no electricity, no running water, no telephone.

The one-room country school at the edge of the Iron Range was spartan, but a committed teacher and the tiny library offered a glimpse into a different world and the realization that with education and hard work, life could be better. In an era before college loans, the inexpensive, accessible community colleges made hope real, extending the possibility of higher education to people who would otherwise never have gotten one.

Itasca Community College gave me the confidence to believe that "even a woman" could become a lawyer and succeed in the 1950s—and the confidence to enroll at St. Paul College of Law, where I could work by day and attend law school in the evening.

Many years later, sitting in my cherry-paneled chambers in the Judicial Center overlooking the State Capitol in St. Paul, I realized I would never have made my journey without a community college. These schools have enabled isolated and poor students to escape hopelessness and poverty and to succeed and excel. For this, as we celebrate 150 years of statehood, we owe Minnesota a profound debt of gratitude.

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Esther M. Tomljanovich served as a Minnesota Supreme Court justice from 1990 to 1998.

My Minnesota is a continuous creation and contingency of seasons and families.



Gerald Vizenor My Minnesota is a continuous creation and contingency of seasons and families. My memories are forever prompted and interconnected by cultures of the fur trade and the civilizations of American Indians.

The Progress, for instance, was a weekly newspaper published by my Native ancestors more than a century ago on the White Earth Reservation. I am inspired by the courage of the editor, and the news stories created a singular sense of presence and liberty, a privy assurance to consider a career as a writer.

During my research on treaties more than 40 years ago at the Minnesota Historical Society, a reference librarian directed my attention to bound volumes of *The Progress*, first published on March 25, 1886. The masthead declared the newspaper was dedicated to a “Higher Civilization: The Maintenance of Law and Order.” I read news stories, editorials, and notes by and about my relatives at White Earth. The editorials countered federal policy and the notion of absence, sustaining instead a personal source of enlightenment, civilization, and historical presence.

The Progress was founded by Augustus Hudon Beaulieu, the publisher, and Theodore Hudon Beaulieu, the editor. They were directly related to my paternal grandmother, Alice Beaulieu Vizenor, and my father, Clement Vizenor. Reading the newspaper that afternoon at the Minnesota Historical Society was truly inspirational, a moment that lasts in my stories and memory. *The Progress* has provided a sense of historical presence and “higher civilization” in my Minnesota.

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Gerald Vizenor is an educator, series editor, and prolific author of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.



Dan Wilson My Minnesota is the place to end a rock and roll tour. I’ve been coming back to the Twin Cities from the road for a long time, and it has always made sense to have a big homecoming gig at the end of the trip. The band is hottest after a long

stretch, and where better to be hot than at home?

For me, Minnesotans are the scariest audience, and



the best. The hometown crowd contains friends, relatives, and fans who’ve seen me and my bands many times, and so I feel a powerful pressure to deliver for them. But it’s not only that. Minnesota rock crowds don’t loosen up easily. I’ve teased them that after a particularly exciting gig, maybe they go home, turn on the kitchen light, sit down at the table, and quietly whoop to themselves. On the other hand, if they say, “Whoooo!” at the end of a song, or a set, you know you’ve damned well earned it. Once they get over that threshold, the joy just floods onto the stage.

I once finished a set in Toronto feeling completely defeated. People stood with their arms crossed, watching and politely clapping after each song. It seemed like an indifferent reaction: in other words, a disaster! Afterwards, the promoter was jubilant. “They loved you!” he said, and proved his sincerity by booking us back again.

I thought this was very funny, and I told the story of the reserved Canadian crowd many times, until a musician friend from California said, “Dan, don’t you realize that fans in your hometown are exactly like that? They stand with their arms crossed, they watch attentively, they don’t go crazy until the very end. Then everyone says they loved it. And that’s if you’re lucky.”

Well, when my Minnesotan fans cheer, I do feel lucky.

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Dan Wilson, a recording artist, songwriter, music producer, and member of Minnesota bands Trip Shakespeare and Semisonic, is best known for the hit single “Closing Time” by Semisonic and “Not Ready to Make Nice,” by the Dixie Chicks, with whom he won a 2007 Grammy Award for Song of the Year.



For sesquicentennial events, see www.mnhs.org/exhibits/mn150/ and <http://www.mn150years.org/>