MINNESOTA is the home not only of the Main Street of Sinclair Lewis but also of many other people's Main Streets. Whether in a tiny, insulated hamlet, or a medium-sized town, or a bustling metropolis, Main Street (or some other name like it) is part of everyone's memory. It is a focal point in a community, a place where people congregate to work, shop, play, eat, mingle, hold a parade, exchange views, gossip, take a stroll, have an art exhibit or an auction, or take in a movie. A number of Minnesota Main Streets are now on view, in the form of an assortment of sixty-five photographs, in an exhibit starting in mid-August and running through October at the Minnesota Historical Society. Members of the society's educational services division put together the exhibit by selecting the photographs from among hundreds in the society's audio-visual division. Notable within the collection are pictures by nationally known nineteenth-century photographers like John Runk, H. J. Jacoby, William H. Illingworth, and Joel E. Whitney. Many others were either taken or collected by Edward A. Bromley.

In conjunction with the exhibit, Minnesota History herewith publishes six pages of Main Street photos. Some are in the show and some are not, but all are in the MHS audio-visual division. The pictures in the exhibit and on these pages illustrate both the remarkable similarity and striking diversity of Main Streets. Shown in various stages of towns' growth, some reveal...
BEMIDJI'S THIRD STREET could not yet boast of a road in 1897 when this photograph was taken, one year after the village was incorporated. Several animals, including bear cubs, roam unconcernedly among the onlookers. Lake Bemidji can be seen in the background.

only a few frame buildings fronting on a rutted dirt road, while others boast impressive buildings and grand hotels on busy avenues. Some towns never did grow; others boomed and then declined; yet others sprawled into the adjacent landscape to become unwieldy megalopolises.

The most famous Main Street of all is in Sauk Centre. Success first came to Sinclair Lewis with the publication in 1920 of his novel by that name, thrusting fame — or notoriety — onto the novelist's home town after which "Gopher Prairie, Minnesota" was modeled. Mark Schorer, in *Sinclair Lewis* (Minneapolis, 1963), a pamphlet that followed a much longer biography of Lewis, wrote: "When *Main Street* appeared, plunging literary America into a rare and heated controversy, it seemed that nothing like it, with its shrill indictment of village life, the middle class, provincial America, had been published before. . . the prevailing view was that of Friendship Village, and it was this view that *Main Street* abruptly and perhaps forever ended."

HORSE-DRAWN VEHICLES, including a street cleaner, abound in this photograph of Washington and Nicollet avenues in Minneapolis in 1886. The Nicollet Hotel stands where the well-known old Nicollet House was.

THREE GENTLEMEN, various buggies and wagons, and a hayrack can be seen on Main Street in Red Wing in this photograph taken about 1870. Barn Bluff is in the background.
TAYLORS FALLS nestled among the hills and along the riverbank, much as it does today, in this 1885 view of the town taken from the Wisconsin side of the St. Croix.
NORTHFIELD APPEARED to be holding a festival on the day that this photograph was taken, and people are "all dressed up."

STILLWATER'S FAMOUS courthouse, the first in Minnesota, looms above the town (top, right) where it still stands. The building on the left is the now defunct Central School. Elam Greeley built Minnesota House (below, right) in 1846 for a residence; in 1848 it was turned into a hotel. Anson Northup built St. Croix House (far left) in 1848.

THE MOST FAMOUS Main Street of all — in Sauk Centre — as it looked about 1925, just a few years after Sinclair Lewis' book was published.
ST. PAUL as seen from what the caption rather misleadingly calls the “Summit Avenue elevation.” Twin-steepled Assumption Church at the bottom still is a familiar sight, but it is no longer clear from what “summit” the picture was taken.

THIS UNDATED picture of Moorhead is one of a series entitled “Scenery on the Northern Pacific Rail Road.” Knappen House can be seen in the background.

ST. PETER looked like a raw frontier town in this 1868 photograph.
A NUMBER OF INHABITANTS of Reads Landing came out to have their picture taken in about 1882. Located on the Mississippi River opposite the mouth of the Chippewa River, the town was a flourishing commercial and transportation center for many years.

A FEW BUILDINGS, some horses, buggies and wagons, and probably most of the inhabitants of Kenneth were in this photograph, taken about 1900.

FERGUS FALLS MERCHANTS, along with a few onlookers, proudly posed in front of the G. W. Radatz grocery and bakery in this undated picture.