"WE ARE NOW fighting the battle of our lives. Probably the most serious problem in the history of Star Island confronts us," wrote Professor Christian A. Ruckmick to fellow residents of the Cass Lake island in March, 1937. He was exhorting members of the summer community to act as the fight over the building of a road and bridge onto the island reached its climax. The story of this struggle and the fate of Star Island, which lies partly in Cass County and partly in Beltrami County, provide an early northern Minnesota example of the forces that come into play when competing interests, represented by local leaders, entrepreneurs, government agencies, and summer visitors maneuver to determine land-use issues. Contributing to the dispute was the fact that the local economy was increasingly dependent on tourism and the federal government, especially on the Forest Service.¹

The 1,163-acre island has historic significance as the site of an Ojibway village on its northeastern point, a town that may have been wiped out in the smallpox epidemic of the 1890s. Wild rice storage pits, agricultural and building site clearings, and trails to the lake shore could still be seen there recently, as could shards of pottery from the prehistoric people of the Blackduck culture who lived there earlier. Henry R. Schoolcraft camped in 1832 near the village of his guide, Ozawindib (Yellow Head), who led him to the source of the Mississippi in nearby Lake Itasca. Schoolcraft described the place as "an assemblage of wigwams, built ... without right angled streets [with] a public square, or rather, an open grassy spot, where councils and dances are held, and the ceremonies of the wabeno and medicine society performed. ... the whole circular opening, constituting a town plat, is surrounded with forest, to shelter them, in summer and winter. Gardens are variously located, and generally without fences, as there are no domesticated cattle." The total population during his visit was 157, and it rarely exceeded 200 or 250.²

Christopher C. Andrews, Minnesota's first fire warden and one of the state's earliest advocates of multiple forest usage, first saw Star Island in 1898. He helped persuade conservationists and the Minnesota Federation of Women's Clubs to work toward preserving the island.

¹The author and the editors wish to thank Stanley A. Johnson, Chippewa National Forest Historian, for his interest and assistance on this article. Ruckmick to members of the Star Island Protective League, March 10, 1937, in Chippewa National Forest (CNF) Papers, Cass Lake. For more on the area's history, see Robert Grant Utley, Tales of the Old Home Town (St. Cloud, 1976), a compilation of his columns in the Cass Lake Times, and Carol Russell, ed., In Our Own Backyard: A Look at Beltrami, Cass and Itasca Counties at the Turn of the Century (Bemidji, 1979). Parts of this article appeared in The Loon (1982), an annual mimeographed newsletter published for summer residents of Star Island.

²Here and below, see William W. Folwell, A History of Minnesota, 4:253–261 (Reprint ed., St. Paul, 1969); Henry R. Schoolcraft, Narrative of an Expedition to Itasca Lake . . . in 1832, 33 (New York, 1834). At first the national forest "was administered jointly by the Forestry Bureau, General Land Office, and Bureau of Indian Affairs. After Indian claims were finally settled in 1923, the Forest Service assumed full jurisdiction," according to Newell Searle, "Minnesota National Forest: The Politics of Compromise, 1898–1908," in Minnesota History, 42:244 (Fall, 1971).

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LAKE WINDIGO stretches nearly three-quarters of a mile in the east-central part of Star Island.

As a result of his interest and the work of the women's clubs, Congress in 1908 set Star Island aside as part of the Minnesota National Forest, later (1928) the Chippewa National Forest. Development of the new national forest quickly became an important issue for residents in the little Cass County town of Cass Lake on the mainland. Local people saw agriculture and logging as most necessary to the young town's commercial development; the possible benefits of a national forest seemed distant and undefined. Some Cass Lakers, however, believed that as logging diminished the new national forest would bring tourists with money to spend in the local community. New commercial enterprises would be needed to serve those people from the Twin Cities and elsewhere who wished to enjoy the woods and lakes. By about 1917 the Cass Lake Commercial Club was actively promoting the area, and the town began to bill itself as "The Permanent Home of the Pine." It was inevitable that individuals and groups would soon differ about the kinds of commercial development that could best serve both tourists and area residents whose livelihoods depended on the community and the fledgling forest agency. A perusal of the history of Star Island's development between 1919 and 1938 allows us to study the concerns and interests of the individuals and groups involved, including those who made decisions about future land use, as well as the processes by which they reached their decisions.

In 1909, one year after Congress had acted to include Star Island as part of the new national forest, the United States Bureau of Forestry issued one of the first recreational residence permits in the nation to a Cass Lake man, Frank L. Gorenflo, for a lot on the south shore of the island. Some three years later a summer hotel had been built on the same shore; within the next four years, Minnesotans and people who came from as far away as Kansas and Nebraska rented and built on nearby lots. These summer residents were generally middle- or upper-middle-class business or professional people, some of them teachers from the University of Minnesota. By 1916 the island's summer residents had formed an association known as the Star Island Protective League and elected Mathias N. Koll (also the executive secretary of the Cass Lake Commercial Club) as its first president. The Bureau of Forestry maintained a ranger's cabin on the island as a fire precaution, and a girls' camp opened on the southeast shore during this period.

Some of the land on the island continued to be held as Indian allotments after the transfer of Star Island to the national forest. Thus, although the forestry agency controlled most of the land, it did not administer all of it. The northwestern point of the island, some ten yards from the north shore of Cass Lake, was held by an Ojibway woman, May dway cumig oke, as was the site of the Indian village on the northeastern corner. Close to
Schoolcraft’s 1832 camp. The southeastern corner, also held under an allotment, was sold to a white man, Alfred J. Starr, in about 1912.5

Other individuals were also interested in purchasing and developing land on Star Island. By 1920 four men had bought jointly from Sho bah aumig oke some 63 acres along the north shore of the island, including the entire northeastern point. They planned to sell lots to prospective summer residents. The investors were William T. Cox, state forester from 1911 to 1924; Michael J. Thornton, later state surveyor; L. F. Johnson, a district forest ranger stationed at Bemidji; and Frank Suitor, a genial Cass Lake businessman who tried his hand variously at hotel management, newspapering, sales, lumbering, and road building. Since their portion of the island was not so accessible to tourists as were the southern and eastern shores, the investors decided that a road should be built along the north shore of Cass Lake, with a connecting bridge across the narrow water gap of some 30 feet between the mainland and the marshy northwestern corner held in the Ojibway woman’s allotment. The other part of the plan involved a road along the north shore of the island to the northeastern point, where, they reasoned, many lots could be sold; it might also run toward those cottages already constructed on the south shore.6

In order to advance the idea of a road, two petitions addressed to the Cass Lake Commercial Club, probably written and circulated by Suitor, asked that a bridge be erected across the narrows and that the club “take such necessary action as will influence the U.S. Forestry Department and other proper authorities to construct such bridge and road way.” The petitions suggested that a road and bridge would stimulate the construction of a large, modern hotel and increase the island’s summer population by ten times.7

The Cass Lake Commercial Club met on June 30, 1919, to consider the matter. Following a lengthy discussion, the local bank president moved the matter be tabled. Immediately after an affirmative vote, the meeting was adjourned. Most Star Island summer residents opposed the road and bridge, and the businessmen’s vote was three to two against endorsement. But feelings ran high, and the Cass Lake Times reported in its next issue that “the real fireworks of the year were set off when a petition signed by 53 business and professional men of the town was presented to the club asking that action be taken toward getting a bridge over to Star Island. Some pretty hot stuff was passed back and forth. Some probably got theirs burnt a little when they took some.” During and after this meeting some of the men who had signed the petitions changed their minds and publicly announced their opposition to such a plan.8

5 Interview with Mary Starr Wagler and John Starr, July 20, 1976, in NCMHC. C. E. Knutson to Regional Forester, Milwaukee, June 17, 1937, CNF Papers; Book of Deeds, no. 54, p. 517, in Beltrami County Treasurer’s office, Bemidji.

6 Interview with R. C. Utley, August 20, 1977, in NCMHC; on Cox and Johnson, see Minnesota Department of Conservation, Division of Forestry, “A History of Forestry in Minnesota,” a 1965 report in Forestry Division, Department of Natural Resources, St. Paul. On Thornton, see St. Paul Pioneer Press, July 29, 1951, sec. 2, p. 12; on Suitor, see, for example, Cass Lake Times, May 9, 1918, p. 1, June 2, 1921, p. 1.

7 Petitions to the Cass Lake Commercial Club, June 19, 21, 1919, in Mathias N. Koll Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.


MOST ISLANDERS summered on the south and east shores of Star Island, as the map at the left shows. The forester’s cottage, pictured about 1918, still stands on the south shore.
THE FIRST Star Island Hotel burned down about 1912.

What were the reasons local people opposed or supported the road and bridge? Some commercial club members believed that such a road, running as it would along the north shore of the lake to the island, might encourage summer residents to take their trade to the larger town of Bemidji rather than to Cass Lake. Others were concerned because the club had recently built a city dock that most islanders and visitors used to travel between the island and Cass Lake, where they bought supplies. The dock was leased by P. M. Larson and his sons, and Larson, who had arrived in Cass Lake in about 1904 as school superintendent, was an influential voice in the community and in the commercial club. Shortly after the club vote, Larson announced that regular launch service would be available to Star Island.⁹

All was quiet on the road and bridge issue, at least in the commercial club minutes and the weekly Cass Lake newspaper, until fall, when an article noted that a final road report on the sparsely settled section on the mainland where the road would meet the bridge had been filed by Ten Lakes Township with the Beltrami County recorder. It reported that “The Ten Lakers feel that they are entitled to their part of the summer resort business, and they are going after it.”¹⁰ Apparently nothing further came of this effort.

In February, 1920, investor Michael Thornton’s wife Mary Ruth obtained title to 63.30 acres on the north side of Star Island; between February and July this land was equally divided among the Thorntons, Cox, Johnson, and Suitor. Each paid Mrs. Thornton $805.02, bringing the total cost of the property to approximately $3,200, or some $50.00 an acre. The legal description of the property made no mention of a road.¹¹

Prosperity had arrived on the island and elsewhere in the forest by 1921. The Cass Lake Times reported that 200 applications for cottage sites were on file in the office of the Minnesota National Forest supervisor. During the summer new additions and cottages were completed on the southern and eastern shores of Star Island, and the United States Postal Service approved a water mail route to the island and other nearby resorts and cabins. P. M. Larson’s son, Maurice, was appointed mail carrier. The commercial club dock added stalls where summer visitors could leave their cars while they were in residence on the island. Arguments over a road to the island were renewed, with the issue summarized by the editor of the Cass Lake newspaper.¹²

“Every year brings new ideas for the development of the summer business here and among other things is the renewal of the talk for a road onto the island at the narrows. This proposition was brought up several years ago and fought out at a meeting of the commercial club and defeated by ballot. Nothing daunted, exponents of the proposal went to work and had a road laid out on the island and at that time the remark was made that ‘if we can get a road on the island and a road to the narrows, Hell can’t stop a bridge from going in.’ The proposition has its friends and its bitter enemies and the outcome of the agitation remains to be seen. The friends of the road claim that once a road is put to the island that the business brought in would soon justify their position, while enemies of the road claim that the insular attraction would be lost by the building of a highway on the island.”

The next summer the Cass Lake Times reported that a road had been laid out on the mainland to the narrows, and a bridge from the narrows onto the island, but that no funds had been appropriated for either one. Concerned islanders passed resolutions protesting a road at their annual summer meetings in both 1922 and 1923. They were able to keep in touch with the issue because their new president, Andy W. Johnson, was a Cass Lake

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⁹ Utley interview, August 20, 1977; interview of Utley by Stanley A. Johnson, December 8, 1951, tape in author’s possession; Cass Lake Times, July 17, 1919, p. 53.
¹⁰ Cass Lake Times, October 2, 1919, p. 1.
¹¹ Abstract of Title to Lots on O’Neil Point, No. U-1403, June 27, 1939, Campbell Abstract Company, Bemidji, CNP Papers.
¹² Here and below, see Cass Lake Times, February 24, August 4, September 22, December 8, 1921, all on p. 1.
city council member (and later mayor), who had a summer place on the island. The league's secretary-treasurer was Al J. Hole, cashier and later president of the First National Bank of Cass Lake.  

WITHOUT A BRIDGE or a road, the four north-shore investors were not able to realize the profits they had hoped for from their Star Island property in the decade following their 1920 purchase. Only one family, the Andersons of Oklahoma City, owners of a large cotton brokerage and other enterprises, bought and built on land purchased from Suitor, the local entrepreneur. During this same period, however, the Forest Service was able to lease its lots on the southern, eastern, and western shores, and a small resort was built on the southwest point, facing Cass Lake and its city dock. During this time, Suitor, still a proponent of the road and bridge idea, had the land held by the partners platted, showing streets and alleys in the plan. He then acquired land from the Indian allotment on the island side of the narrows "for right of way use only." Still the road and bridge did not materialize, probably because both the investors and the county lacked the necessary funds. But by 1931 the group was ready to try again. At least two of the investors, probably Johnson and Suitor, approached the Beltrami County commissioners, who subsequently voted to direct the county engineer to "proceed, from force account, to construct a bridge across the narrows between Star Island and the Main Island."  

Immediately Andy Johnson, still president of the island association, and Al Hole circulated word of this action to members of the Star Island Protective League. They also sent a telegram to the nearest War Department office, in St. Paul, since they believed that agency's permission was needed to erect a bridge. (The Mississippi River, flowing through the lake, was classified as navigable water, and an earlier bridge over Pike Bay at the south end of the lake had been approved by the War Department.) Johnson and Hole asked island residents to protest by letter, and some of them did write to the War Department, the Chippewa National Forest supervisor, the Department of Agriculture (by which the Forest Service was governed), and the Department of the Interior, then in charge of Indian affairs and thus the Indian allotment land on the island.  

Lester B. Shippee, a University of Minnesota history professor and an east shore lessee of the Forest Service, wrote forcefully: "There is no good which will be served by anyone through the erection of the bridge; none of the people who have cottages on the island wish it, indeed they are unanimously opposed to such a thing. The only use to which it could be put would be to bring a certain amount of transient tourist traffic from the mainland to the island. This would necessitate automobile roads on the island and spoiling one of the few relatively untouched places in the state. A bridge would not in any way tend to increase the well-being of the permanent residents of the region. The only town which is situated in such a way as to cater to the needs of the summer residents is Cass Lake and there is ample boat service to and from the island to supply the people who make their summer homes there."

Johnson and Hole next wrote Sixth District Congressman Harold Knutson, who had been their Republican representative since 1917; he was a friend of P. M. Larson and of Matt Koll, whom he had successfully nominated to be postmaster in Cass Lake. Knutson, a Wadena resident, had purchased land on the north shore of Cass Lake at Koll's instigation and was a frequent visitor to the area. A powerful member of the House, he served for a time as chairman of its Ways and Means  

LOOKING EAST and south (opposite page) at the village of Cass Lake, photographed about 1919
Committee and as Republican party whip. Johnson and Hole, though concerned about Cass Lake business interests, wrote to Knutson as protective league officers, noting that "this is very important in order to save the beauty spot of the U.S."\(^{17}\)

Knutson, always assiduous in responding to constituents' concerns, promptly contacted the regional forester's office in Milwaukee, asking if the Beltrami County commissioners needed permission from either the forestry agency or the War Department in order to construct the bridge. It was at this juncture that the Forest Service formally entered the fray. In correspondence between the regional and national offices, it determined that plans would have to be submitted to the War Department. However, agency officials learned that even if the bridge were built, the road, where it might run on national forest land, would require Forest Service approval. This the service would not give, because "as long as there is such strong objections to the road and good reasons for not building it, we can see no reason why the Forest Service should not oppose the building of a road on Star Island."\(^{18}\)

James M. Walley, Chippewa National Forest supervisor, responded to the regional forester. "The matter of a bridge across the Narrows... has been up several times before," he wrote. "It appears that the business men of Bemidji are jealous of the business which the Cass Lake merchants derive from the users of Star Island, and that by building a road across to the Island, the Bemidji merchants will be able to share in this business. It is also understood that the owners of the land on the point of Star Island have had it surveyed out into summer home lots and considerable politics was involved in the approval of the bridge and road by the County Commissioners. The Beltrami County Board has been informed by the people of Cass Lake that the Forest Service is opposed to the construction of any road to the Island and that permission would not be given to the extension of a road over National Forest land. The local people feel that as long as Representative Knutson is in Congress, that authorization will never be granted for the construction of the bridge. This will be a dead issue, at least until the next session of Congress."\(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\) Cass Lake Times, April 15, 1928, p. 1; Minneapolis Tribune, August 22, 1933, p. 1; Johnson and Hole to Harold Knutson, February 26, 1931, CNF Papers. Knutson was known for his political longevity and his isolationist foreign policy stance; see Barbara Stuhler, Ten Men of Minnesota and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1968, 54-75 (St. Paul, 1973).


\(^{19}\) Walley, memorandum to regional forester, March 23, 1931, CNF Papers.
And so it was. No more was said, at least in print, about the road and bridge controversy in 1931; however, when the Star Island Protective League held its annual summer meeting, Harold Knutson was the guest of honor.20

DESPITE this reprieve, island residents continued to express concern about the issue. Individual league members wrote to their own representatives in Congress asking them to vote against any bill for a bridge that might be submitted in the future. Islanders circulated a petition protesting the road, and J. E. M. Thomson, of Lincoln, Nebraska, reported to his congressman that 97 per cent of the summer residents had signed it.21

When Star Island residents went to their annual meetings in 1934 and 1935, they discussed the road issue again and passed strong resolutions opposing the bridge. One islander, speaking of the accomplishments of the league's welfare committee, said, "Were it not for this League, and particularly for the activities of a few members ... there would be a bridge from the mainland to the Island. If Star Island is to remain a genuine Island in every respect, then a strong active League is essential." By this time it had become customary to invite prominent guests to the meetings and to present a program of diverse entertainment in the evening. The 1934 program, which was typical of other years as well, included "an informal address by P. M. Larson, the sage of Cass Lake, who characterizes himself as a sea captain"; flute and banjo selections; and a talk on birds given by Mrs. R. H. Wells of Minneapolis. "Mrs. Wells spoke only of the birds that had been seen on Star Island and around Cass Lake, and gave imitations of many of their songs."22

The next action on the bridge question was apparently a move by the state of Minnesota to assume ownership of Star Island, but this was quashed in 1936. Promoters of the north shore did not give up, however, and began to lay plans to push a bridge bill through Congress in 1937. The first clear indication that the issue was alive again came in the form of an article in the Bemidji Daily Pioneer. A report on the February Beltrami County commissioners' meeting stated that the commissioners would request permission from the War Department to construct a bridge across the narrows. Three weeks later, Democratic Representative Richard T. Buckler, who represented the Bemidji area, introduced a bill into the House of Representatives through the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce. His proposal requested that federal authority be granted to Beltrami

County in order "to construct, maintain, and operate a free highway bridge across the narrows." The *Bemidji Daily Pioneer* reported that the bridge "has been approved and denounced by residents of [Bemidji and Cass Lake] and once before was kept from completion. It is expected that the project will go through this time."

Once again it was time to alert island league members and others who might oppose the road. Ruckmick, a lessee of the Forest Service on the west shore, sent out the first appeal. As chairman of the league's general welfare committee, he asked all members to write to the War Department and to their representatives. Others joined in the battle. The *Cass Lake Times* reported that "Vigorous protests against the building of a bridge connecting Star Island in Cass Lake with the mainland have been filed with Congressman Harold Knutson. Protests have been made by the Chippewa National Forest, the Star Island Protective League, The Cass Lake Commercial Club, and the Junior Chamber of Commerce. All feel that it would destroy the individualism of Star Island to make any connection with the mainland. Star Island is one of the beauty spots of Minnesota." In an accompanying article, editor R. Grant Utley wrote that he believed leaving Star Island as an island would bring more business to Cass Lake than making it a peninsula, adding that practicality, not sentimentality, was the reason the paper opposed the bridge.

MEANWHILE, in Washington, Congressman Knutson followed the issue behind the scenes. On March 8 he wrote to the Chippewa National Forest supervisor suggesting that the latter communicate local views on the problem to appropriate Washington forestry officials. Responding to this request on March 13, the regional forester, Lyle F. Watts, wrote to the chief of the United States Forest Service to oppose the legislation, saying "A bridge across to Star Island would destroy the very thing that we have been protecting for the last thirty years."

Letters and telephone calls then began to fly back and forth between government departments and individuals involved in the dispute. Local foresters forwarded letters of protest to their superiors. The acting secretary of agriculture, responding to an inquiry from the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, stated that the department did not believe it would be in the public interest to support the bridge bill. War Department personnel called the Cass Lake forestry office to ascertain ownership of land on the island. Informed of Forest Service opposition to the bridge, they responded that they would have to report that such a bridge would not interfere with navigation in the area.

Ruckmick then wrote to the islanders a second time. Pleading with them to write once again to their representatives, the Forest Service, the Department of Agri-
culture, and the House committee concerned, he de-
scribed the issues as he saw them.

"We have just licked the people who have tried to
put Star Island under State control," Ruckmick re-
minded them. "That matter has been closed. But
apparently the same forces, namely the commercial in-
terests at Bemidji are behind the present move. They
want to civilize our Island and to commercialize it to
their own profit. I have information from several
sources that there is scarcely one chance in a million
that the franchise will be granted and that even if it were
granted there would be even less chance of the PWA
[Public Works Administration] loaning money to build a
bridge. In addition to the bridge there is talk of con-
structing a public road around the shores of the Island.
While we have this assurance that the proposal will very
likely be blocked, the game will not be won until the last
inning is played.

"We cannot rest in our efforts until this matter is
settled," he warned. "In my correspondence with Con-
gressman Knutson who is our best friend I have pointed
out five definite reasons for voting down this bill.
1. Under the supervision of the Forest Service we built
our summer homes on this Island because it is an
island. We want to get away from cars and the clamor
of commerce. We want to enjoy the natural beauty of
a place which has been kept in its pristine attractiv-
ness and enjoys this reputation beyond compare in all
the north country.
2. We want to preserve this Island from all the hazards
of fire and depredation which would happen if the
Island were connected to the mainland. Remember
that the bridge and road would be open for long
periods when we are not there to take care of the
Island.
3. The Island is now accessible to the general public by
ferry service.
4. The natural flora and fauna are kept in their original
state by our appropriate committees. These natural
attractions would rapidly disappear if the bridge were
built.
5. Under present conditions our families are safe at any
hour of the day or night.

"Obviously I cannot fight this battle alone," he said.
"In my correspondence with Congressman Knutson who is our best friend I have pointed
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state by our appropriate committees. These natural
attractions would rapidly disappear if the bridge were
built.

5. Under present conditions our families are safe at any
hour of the day or night.

"Obviously I cannot fight this battle alone. There is
money and aggressiveness on the opposing side."

The next day Ruckmick sent a copy of his latest
appeal to C. E. Knutson, Chippewa National Forest su-
pervisor. Both Ruckmick and Donald McCarthy, an
east-shore renter, suggested that the Forest Service buy
the privately held land on the north shore as a means to
ending the dispute. McCarthy had written directly to
Thornton about his interest in the north shore property.
Replied Thornton: "Some twenty odd years ago I pur-
chased 62 acres of land on O'Neil Point. I now
want access to my property by road and bridge. I have
paid taxes on my property for twenty years and I think
you will admit that I am entitled to it. I am not the only
one interested in the bridge project. The owners of at
least $25,000 worth of property on this point realize that
their investment is a total loss without access to it by
road and bridge."

Thornton continued, "How any man or body of men
can honestly and fairly protest a project that in no possi-
ble way could interfere with their interests is more than
I can understand. They certainly are going a long dis-
tance out of their way to injure an innocent party.
Apparently they never heard of the 'good neighbor poh-
cy."

"The proposed bridge and road could not . affect
that part of the Island controlled by the association," he
asserted. "There is a large swamp separating their end of
the island from ours . . . the expense of building a road
across it would be prohibitive. If the Federal Gov-
ernment could be induced to repurchase O'Neil Point
from the present owners it would be an OUT for all of us
from this bound to be controversial subject. I had
great hopes for O'Neil Point at one time but experience

27 Here and two paragraphs below, see Ruckmick to Star
Island Protective League members, March 10, 1937.
28 Here and two paragraphs below, see Ruckmick to C. E.
Knutson, March 11, 1937, McCarthy to C. E. Knutson, March
6, 1937; M. J. Thornton to McCarthy, n.d. — all in CNF
Papers.
BOATS, such as these photographed in the 1920s, provided the only transportation from the mainland to Star Island. It has taught me that without access by bridge it is practically worthless.”

Following the introduction of the bridge bill and the flurry of letters it provoked, Representative Buckler held a meeting with M. L. Wilson, acting secretary of agriculture. Wilson then asked the head of the Forest Service to investigate the matter and report on the position the department should take on the legislation proposed. In July forester W. L. Dutton was sent on a three-day field trip to Cass Lake, Star Island, and Bemidji. He reported on ownership and land use inside the forest boundaries, and on his conversations with Bemidji businessmen to whom Congressman Buckler suggested he talk. During his visit Dutton stayed at the Cass Lake resort owned by Suitor, and he took the opportunity to discuss the issue with him. “Mr. Suitor believes there should be a bridge and a road and is frank to admit that one of his reasons is to increase the value of property so that he and other private owners could realize on their early investment in property on Star Island,” Dutton wrote. “He is not openly agitating the road because of business reasons. In other words, Mr. Larson, the present boat concessionaire assists Suitor in obtaining guests for his resort.”

When Dutton discussed the road dispute, particularly the question of the right of way across the old Indian allotment at the narrows, with Indian agency officials in Cass Lake, he discovered that the staff was divided on the issue. Mark L. Burns, a local Ojibway mixed-blood who was superintendent of the agency, and others opposed the road; the agency officially opposed it as well. Assistant Superintendent Joseph Monks spoke in favor of the road, as did Dr. Z. E. House, a white doctor at the Cass Lake Indian Hospital. House stated candidly that he was interested in the outcome because he owned property on the island.

In Bemidji Dutton found that few of the men he interviewed had any “pronounced opinions on the bridge and road question.” While Bemidji citizens might favor the bridge for trade and tax reasons, he thought that as a community they were “not actively sponsoring the bridge because of the desirability of maintaining reasonably harmonious trade relations with the village of Cass Lake.” Nor did he think the Forest Service was catering to wealthy citizens despite the summer home colony on the island. Only half of the island cottages had running water and sanitation facilities, he reported, and the cabins were “as a rule unattractive and out of keeping with advanced ideas of summer home architecture.” The average cost per cottage, Dutton learned, was somewhere around $1,000. He concluded, after talking to people on both sides of the issue, that those who were most active in the fight for the bridge had either financial or political interests at stake; he suggested, after studying the situation, that the Forest Service should continue to pursue its policy of maintaining Star Island in its isolated condition as an island and a semi-wilderness area.

Dutton’s adverse recommendation was supported by the Department of Agriculture. Despite further inquiry by Congressman Buckler, the bill to build a bridge never came out of committee. In 1938 most of the privately held 50-foot lots on the north shore were optioned for purchase by the Forest Service at approximately $54 per lot. This action virtually ended the great bridge controversy. And by the spring of 1939, Ruckmick, writing as editor of the protective league’s new magazine, was able to report that “The ghost of the bridge is now laid, never, we think, to rise again.”

Footnotes:
30 Dutton to Clapp, July 13, 1937, p. 4, 7, 8, 10.
31 Congressional Record, 75 Congress, 1 session. Index, 793. Wilson to Buckler, [October, 1937]; Leslie S. Bean to CNF supervisor, April 22, 1938, both in CNF Papers. Ruckmick, ed., Star Island Loon, 1939, p. 2, Star Island History Collection, NCMHC. As this issue went to press, the Forest Service was considering commercial logging to thin parts of the island.
LOOKING BACK at the issue some 44 years later, it is possible to trace the long process by which individuals and groups interacted with one another in order to achieve their ends. We can determine who made the decisions and observe the consequences of their actions. Although the outcome was favorable to those concerned with wilderness preservation or conservation, the dispute was decided on the basis of local business interests supported by federal political power. Cass Lake businessmen, seeking to protect local trade in the belief that an island would prove more attractive to tourists than would an extension of the mainland, prevailed over the four entrepreneurs and Bemidji business interests. And in this they were allied with the Forest Service. They also had the support of Congressman Knutson, who wielded more power in the House than Buckler did, although the Democrats were in office. Furthermore, the Department of Agriculture, as parent agency of the Forest Service, not only had funds for land purchase at its disposal during the Great Depression, it also had a greater political stake in the outcome than did the War Department, which could not have been especially concerned about a 30-foot bridge in northern Minnesota.

The issue of the bridge was a delicate matter for area residents. In small neighboring towns, it was and is important to maintain cordial communications for business and social purposes. Thus men and women who stood on opposite sides of the question were careful to carry on business as usual; little information was made public about the real trade issues. And, with a majority of commercial club and local personages such as the bank president, mayor, and former school superintendent in opposition, it would have been difficult to mount much public support for the road and bridge among friends and neighbors.

The Star Island summer community, while active in its opposition to the bridge, probably did not greatly affect the final outcome. Generally middle- or upper-middle-class people, they would have been astonished at ranger Dutton’s appraisal of their summer cottages. They were proud of their association with the island. Representing the progressive philosophy of conservation and preservation of natural resources, they saw themselves as caretakers and protectors of the island forest and voiced concerns about sharing their paradise with outsiders. They benefited most directly from the final decision, however, since the island has remained reasonably remote from the general public.

In retrospect it appears that the final outcome was most affected by the Forest Service. Its views toward development of the forest and the island were remarkably consistent throughout the controversy. Then, as now, they espoused multiple use within the forest boundaries but proposed to maintain the island as an isolated area. Though it was not apparent at the time, settlement of the bridge issue helped determine the future development of Star Island and other portions of the Chippewa National Forest. Other, more accessible recreation areas were subsequently planned and developed by the Forest Service for tourist use on the mainland. The Ojibway village is gone, and many of the great pines were downed by the tornado of 1940, but neither bridge nor road threatens the island solitude. Only the summer homes on the periphery would look unfamiliar to Schoolcraft were he to camp there today.

A CONTEMPORARY aerial view of Cass Lake and Star Island