

# Postscripts



*Sisters Ida, Helmi, and Elma Marsyla and cousin Anni Haapaja, 1918, probably before the big fire. The photograph was taken by sisters Martha and Nellie Nelson, who had a studio in Crosby. (Courtesy of Helmi M. Niemi)*

**T**he Fall, 1983, issue of *Minnesota History* contained an article by Francis M. Carroll and Franklin R. Raiter on relief efforts in Cloquet following the devastating forest fires that swept through northeastern Minnesota in 1918. The fires killed more than 450 people, injured or displaced 52,000 others, and destroyed 38 communities. Carroll and Raiter went on to write the first in-depth study of this tragic event in *The Fires of Autumn: The Cloquet-Moose Lake Disaster of 1918*, published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press in October, 1990, the 72nd anniversary of the outbreak of the fires. Going into a second printing almost immediately, the book prompted some readers to share their own family fire stories. Deborah Swanson, an editor at the MHS Press, was instrumental in collecting these stories, from which she compiled this account.

Vera Mathson of White Bear Lake was intrigued by the book's use of the 1975 recollections of Fred Maki, who as a courageous 14 year old had driven an automobile packed with refugees through the burning countryside near Automba. Abandoning the car after it caught fire, Fred spent the night of October 12, 1918, hiding from the flames in a culvert with an unidentified "young girl from Crosby." Mrs. Mathson recognized the "young girl" as her late mother-in-law, Ida Marsyla Mathson. Fred and the 12-year-old girl had survived the night and separated in the morning without learning each other's names. They were not to meet again for 65 years.

After Vera Mathson contacted the MHS Press, other members of the family contributed their own memories of Ida's story. Ida's daughter, Marilyn Holmvgig, of Aitkin, wrote:

A good family friend, Mrs. John Mattson, had come the day before the fire to get Ida to live with their family for the winter, because her husband would be gone working in the woods and, with three small children, Ida would be a companion as well as watch the little ones while Mrs. Mattson milked cows and did outside chores.

When the fire came, Fred Maki was just ahead of it in a car and stopped to pick up the Mattson family and Ida. He tried to outrun the fire but couldn't. He stopped the car, and everyone jumped out and ran. My mother had seen Fred go into this culvert, and not being able to see the rest of the people, she followed him. She said it was so dry, no water anywhere, and flames flew into the culvert. She remembered scratching her fingernails off trying to dig dirt to rub on her skin and cover her hair with to protect herself from the flames. During this time Fred said, "We're going to burn," and she told him, "God's not going to let us burn." The next morning, Ida was almost blind from the smoke. Arvid Peaura came by, found them, and took my mother to his home for two weeks to recuperate. Her eyesight was still gone, so the Peauras had to feed her. (It did return.)

The next day, Ida's dad [Hiski Marsyla] went looking for her, but was turned back by military personnel who were letting no one into the area. It was two weeks later when word got through that Ida was alive and with the Peaura family. Ida also suffered lung damage from the smoke and as a result had severe asthma in later years.

*Ida's older sister, Helmi Niemi, Cromwell, added*

*that Ida had gone to stay with Mrs. Mattson in her place, as she did not want to leave her pregnant mother, Senia Marsyla. Senia gave birth to a son, Leonard, on the very day that the fires passed through the Automba area. (The Marsylas, a large Finnish-American family, lived in Crosby, which was not in the path of the fire.) After she recovered, Ida did not return to the Mattson family.*

*Many years later, Ida met Fred Maki again, when Helmi arranged for the two fire refugees to see each other and reminisce. The Moose Lake Arrowhead Leader of October 11, 1983, related:*

For 65 years, Fred Maki has been wondering who was the young lady that was with him in the culvert the night of the fire. After moving to the apartments in Cromwell, he met another tenant, Mrs. Helmi Niemi and related his fire experience to her. Imagine Fred's surprise when Helmi informed him the young lady was her sister Ida.

*By then Ida had married Omer Mathson, a miner, with whom she had four children: Vera's husband, Robert; John, of Coon Rapids; Charlene Blood, of Silver Bay; and Marilyn. Primarily a homemaker, Ida died in December, 1987, at the age of 81 in Sartell, 69 years after the terrible fires of autumn.*

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## Book Reviews

### **Everyone's Country Estate: A History of Minnesota's State Parks.**

*By Roy W. Meyer.*

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991. 358 p. Cloth, \$34.95; paper, \$19.95.)

ROY MEYER has done an admirable job of breaking ground in this important and largely overlooked aspect of Minnesota's history. In the development of Minnesota's state parks one can see many of the themes of our recent past: growing affluence reflected in the demand for recreation, the rise of environmental awareness, rural versus urban politics, and local interests in conflict with a powerful state bureaucracy.

The author has chosen a straightforward, chronological approach, tracing the history of every (and I mean *every*) unit in the state park system in the order in which the legislature created it. Each park has its own thumbnail history that is grouped with others into chapters reflecting a particular period in park development. Many readers, especially those who frequent the parks and are looking for a quick history of their favorites, will find this aspect of the book useful.

The problem with this technique is that it results in a somewhat superficial treatment of park development. There

are repeated instances in the book, especially where the creation or expansion of a park met strong local opposition, in which the author begins to go beyond the bare outlines of "what happened when" and get to the feelings and motivations of the people involved—only to stop short. For example, antagonism over the proposed expansion of Beaver Creek Valley Park grew so heated that one farmer defined DNR (Department of Natural Resources) as "Damned Near Russia." This bluntly eloquent statement implies a great deal about popular attitudes toward government in general and hints that there may have been more going on than opposition to a park. Yet the author moves briskly on to the next one on the list without picking up this tantalizing thread.

Some may also find the author's treatment of the various parks to be uneven. For example, there are six pages of text on the development of Camden Park, admittedly an interesting account from both an ecological and political perspective, yet only two pages are devoted to St. Croix State Park, one of the largest and most important. One can understand the reasoning in Meyer's approach. To have written an in-depth history of each park, as the author admits in his introduction, would have been an overwhelming task and created an unwieldy book. One has to wonder, however, why he did not choose to



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