

Palisade Head, Lake County



WHEN YOU DRIVE ALONG Minnesota's North Shore on scenic Highway 61, you're traveling on top of and alongside one of the most awe-inspiring events in the geologic history of the United States. Starting 1.1 billion years ago, the earth's crust began to open up along a horseshoe-shaped zone that extended from northern Minnesota southwest to Kansas and southeast to Lower Michigan. The 1,200-mile rift was caused by a plume of magma from the earth's mantle that flowed upward, outward, and into the surrounding rock. Today, Lake Superior fills part of the deep basin created by the rift, and millions of years of erosion have exposed the igneous rock formed from magma and lava flows.

One of the most spectacular of these exposed geologic formations is Palisade Head, a towering mass of reddish-gray rhyolite that resulted from a nuclear-like explosion of lava. Located approximately three miles east of Silver Bay, Palisade Head rises nearly 350 feet above Lake Superior. It is a commanding feature on the lakeshore: on a clear day, the Apostle Islands, 30 miles away, can be seen from its top.

Palisade Head has long been a destination for sightseers and photographers—and getting there became easier when Highway 61 along the North Shore was completed in 1924. The looming formation has also drawn film producers; it was the location for the dramatic final scene of the 1993 thriller, *The Good Son*. And the vertical joints created when the



Looming above Lake Superior, about 1875 (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

lava cooled makes Palisade Head one of the most popular and challenging rock-climbing destinations in the Upper Midwest.

—Steven R. Kinsella

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Sources: James D. Miller et al., *Archean to Anthropocene: Field Guides to the Geology of the Mid-continent of North America* (Boulder, CO: Geological Society of America, 2011); "Palisade Head," *Zenith City Archive*,

zenithcity.com/zenith-city-history-archives/minnesotas-arrowhead/palisade-head/; Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/tettegouche/narrative.html; *The Good Son*, final scene, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOkElauqna4.

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