

# *Minnesota Open Space History*

## *Steel Rail Epoch Parks 1870 – 1920*

(Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth)

Minnesota's settlement pattern was created during the steel rail epoch. Major urban centers developed in several locations: the largest waterpower site in the central United States (St. Anthony Falls), the head of navigation on the Mississippi River (St. Paul), the head of the lakes port and key transshipment point for rail cargo to the west coast (Duluth), and other river ports such as Stillwater and Red Wing.

Major park systems were developed for each of these cities. Those systems were based on a basic two-park-pattern: neighborhood parks to provide green space every few blocks and large parks for use by all city residents and visitors. The large parks created in this epoch gave us the basic structure for the regional park systems of today. Como Park in St. Paul, and Theodore Wirth Park and Chain of Lakes Park in Minneapolis are examples of these early regional parks.

## *Automobile Epoch Parks 1920 - 1970*

(Minnesota State Park System, Metropolitan Regional Park System)

Starting in the 1920's Minnesota, and the rest of the nation, entered a new era of urbanization. The high-density neighborhoods of the Steel Rail City, which depended on streetcars and trains, were surrounded by a lower density city (suburbs) designed to accommodate cars, freeways, office parks and shopping centers. This era also saw rapid development of high amenity areas within a one half day driving distance of major centers with second homes and resorts, primarily for weekend and vacation use. In Minnesota this was concentrated in the development of the lake regions. The most intensive development occurred in the Brainerd lakes area where; larger lakes, clear water, sand beaches, wooded shorelines, and pine trees were closest to the Twin Cities.

Two types of large parks were developed during this period to satisfy the growing need and demand for land preservation and development, the State Park system and the Metropolitan Regional Park system. The State Park system was modeled after the national parks and attempts to preserve, for recreation in a natural setting, each major ecological landscape of Minnesota and unique natural features. Itasca State Park is the most well known of these facilities. The original State Park System<sup>8</sup> also designated a Recreation State Park that was designed to expand the Metropolitan Regional Park concept into rural Minnesota, but this program was not implemented.

In the 1960's the Hennepin County Parks System heralded the start of the Metropolitan Re-

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<sup>8</sup> See Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Act of 1975 Minn.Stat. 86A.01-86A.11. See also 1981 Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Recreational State Parks 0368B Effective March 11, 1981.

gional Park System which focused on maintaining representative landscapes of the seven county metropolitan area. Construction and enhancement of this system is ongoing, and the Metropolitan Council in conjunction with related cities and counties is charged with creating, and maintaining, the complex of large parks and reserves, which serve the Seven County Area. This system has matured to become high quality, heavily used facilities, averaging about 1000 acres in size, which offer varied outdoor recreation experiences in a natural setting. A national parallel to this system is the Cook County Forest Preserves surrounding the Chicago Metropolitan Region.