

Wild

Country

Still

A little-known land deal protected a rushing northern river—and turned out to be one of Minnesota's great conservation achievements.

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THE CLOQUET RIVER is wild northern country. I had seen the proof—long-armed, lofty white pines shedding orange needles on black satin waters tinged by bog tannins; white-throated sparrows heralding spring with echoes of “*Oh-Sweet-Can-ada*”; a pearl-green walleye plucked from a deep swirling pool below rifles and rubble.

At Alden Lake I consulted the map and saw squiggly red lines as the river continued south. From the bow of the canoe, I spied gurgling water and jagged rocks—rapids.

“Should we get out and scout this thing?” I asked John Helland, who sat in the bow of another canoe.

“Willard Munger was in his 80s when he shot these rapids. We ought to be able to handle it,” he replied.

Munger, an environmental champion in the Minnesota House of Representatives from 1955 until his death in 1999, paddled







Today's *Cloquet River* was previously called the **Rapid** tion in 1823. The Cloquet has 15 sets of Class I, II, and III whitewater

this stretch of the upper Cloquet in the early 1990s on a canoe trip with other legislators. He was in the process of convincing them that this pristine river was worth protecting.

Helland worked at the Capitol as a researcher for Munger's policy committee as Munger lobbied to get the deal done in 1997: a land purchase that transferred ownership of 22,600 acres along the Cloquet, Whiteface, and St. Louis rivers from Minnesota Power to the Department of Natural Resources.

This past May, Helland was aboard a canoe flotilla headed down the Cloquet on a three-day trip from Brimson to Highway 53. Joining him were me, photographer Layne Kennedy, and two other men who sat at the negotiating table on the land deal—Tom Houghtaling, retired land and water supervisor for Minnesota Power, and Steve Mueller, retired DNR water recreation coordinator.

For Helland, Mueller, and Houghtaling, this trip was a chance to see what they helped accomplish. It was a deal done without fanfare. The media trumpets didn't blare when the papers were signed and 150 miles of wild northern river frontage were protected. And yet it could have been heralded as one of the state's great conservation achievements—the preservation of pine forests and raging waters in the headwaters of the St. Louis River, the largest U.S. tributary to Lake Superior.

Put-In. We had launched our canoes a day earlier from Bear Lake Road, about 30 miles due north of Duluth. The first five miles were flat water, but then the action got going with Class I and Class II rapids (whitewater difficulty is rated on a scale from easygoing I to unrunnable VI). On his map from an 1823 expedition, Major Stephen Long marked this



River, according to a map from Major Stephen Long's expedition, along its course from Indian Lake to the St. Louis River.

as the "Rapid River," and it seems a more apt name than "Cloquet," as it was later called on Joseph Nicollet's map (probably for a French fur trader). We would encounter 10 sets of whitewater (mostly Class I and II, with a couple of Class IIIs) on our 50-mile trip.

All Class II and III rapids on the Cloquet have optional portages marked with signs, which I appreciated since I had little whitewater experience. Seven of our eight-man party opted to schlep gear overland on the first two Class IIIs. Mueller, our most experienced paddler, ferried each of the empty canoes through roiling waters.

But the portaging ate up afternoon daylight. We made our first camp just six miles from put-in, which was seven miles behind where we'd planned to be on night one. So the next morning, Mueller paddled ahead to scout upcoming churners.

We could save time by shooting the rapids.

"The water's high, so she looks pretty passable!" he yelled to our boats from shore, beside a sign that depicted a broken canoe and said DANGER RAPIDS 300 YARDS.

As the water quickened, the Class II rapids appeared. Kennedy and I steered our canoe toward an opening in the line of frothing white foam. But we missed a bit to the left, kissed a rock, and took on water in a standing wave.

"Paddle! Paddle! Paddle!" Kennedy shouted from the stern.

We squirted through the wave and threaded a field of slick, black rocks looming on the water's surface like alligator heads. Landing at the next campsite, we bailed out the canoe and got out to eat lunch. The adrenaline rush of the rapids was soon forgotten as we munched crackers and cheese beneath a canopy of red pines whispering in the wind.



The lower *Cloquet River* flows today much
Minnesota Power in 1995 established minimum-flow standards
in spring when many

Mueller laid out the river map on a picnic table. “Next up,” he said, “Alden Lake.”

Ring of Cabins. Before loggers arrived, Alden Lake was ringed by enormous red pines. It was the site of the largest single pine cut in Minnesota history—33 million board feet from a square mile. Today the lake is ringed by cabins. And though it’s rumored to be a great place to catch walleyes, the lake has

no public access. The nearest access is a canoe put-in five miles upriver.

On Alden, we paddled along a shoreline of lawns and docks for the first time in two days, a stark reminder of what was at stake on the Cloquet River a decade ago. Since the walleyes weren’t biting, we hurried through to the rapids that Munger had shot in his 80s.

The final two miles to our second night’s campsite were a lazy float. No cabins here,

The Other **Big Deal** on the Cloquet



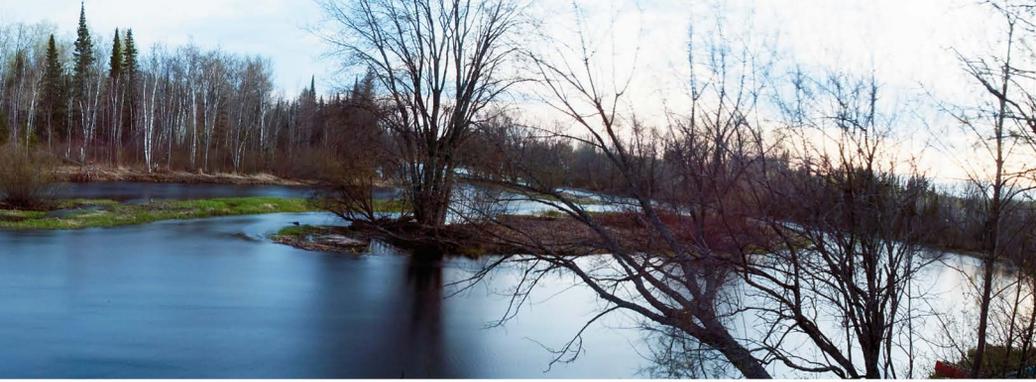
From 1915 until 1995, Minnesota Power operated the dam at Island Lake Reservoir primarily for power generation. That meant holding back water in spring to refill the reservoir, which was completely

opposite from the hydrologic cycle—spring is naturally the time when snowmelt causes the lower Cloquet to gush, and it’s also when fish move upstream to spawn.

In 1995 Minnesota Power’s

hydroelectric license for the dam was due for renewal by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. A new law required equal consideration for natural resources and power production in issuing hydroelectric licenses. The DNR petitioned the commission to establish minimum-flow requirements on the lower Cloquet to restore the river ecologically. The DNR sought to manage the reservoir and river downstream as a system.

The new springtime flows



like it did in presettlement times. A new hydroelectric permit for
for the river, which resulted in higher water levels
fish are **spawning**.

just a pine and balsam curtain on the shore-
line. I trolled a Rapala behind the canoe and
caught a pike just as we glided into camp. As
the bow nudged ashore, Mueller held up a
stringer with another pike and a walleye—
we had enough for a fish supper.

Campfire Story. Bits of balsam pitch crack-
led and popped in the campfire as Helland,
Houghtaling, and Mueller sat down on a

revitalized the lower Cloquet
fishery. Walleye and smallmouth
bass habitat increased signifi-
cantly. Angler Jerry Acker, who
belongs to the Arrowhead Fly
Fishers club, says the fishing on
the lower Cloquet got better.

“Before [the new minimum
flows], the fishing was OK. After
FERC, it was quite good,” says
Acker. “There are brown trout
up to 7 or 8 pounds in [the lower
Cloquet] now. People go to Mon-
tana looking for fish like that.”



log to tell an after-supper story—the tale of
keeping the Cloquet wild.

“I told Steve, we’re going to be selling a lot
of this land. And if you guys don’t like it, you
should buy it,” recalled Houghtaling, the re-
tired Minnesota Power land manager.

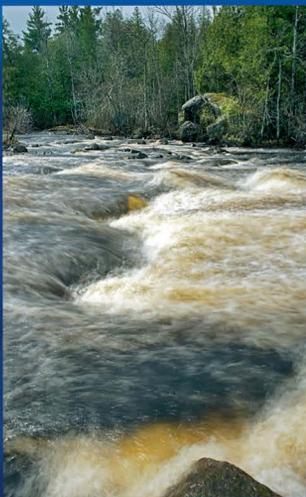
Minnesota Power had acquired the land
along the Cloquet, Whiteface, and St. Louis
rivers from logging companies in the early
1900s. It was a boom time for hydroelectric
plants, and the land held great power-gener-
ation potential. Eventually the St. Louis Riv-
er Hydroelectric Project became the largest
hydropower operation in Minnesota, with
five reservoirs and four power plants.

But Minnesota Power did not need the
land along the upper St. Louis and its two
main tributaries to generate hydropower. In
1990 the company announced plans to sell,
starting with a tract along the St. Louis River
sold to a developer. Local people immedi-
ately objected to the idea of a subdivision
along this intact riparian corridor.

In 1991, citizens banded together to form
the St. Louis River Board and develop a plan

50 miles down the Cloquet

A three-day float down the Cloquet River from Brimson to Highway 53 included 10 sets of whitewater rapids; two fish dinners featuring pike, walleye, and channel catfish; and a spectacular rainbow on the final night.





for protecting the three rivers from development. The board's plan recommended the public purchase of 22,000 acres along the rivers. Minnesota Power agreed to stop selling its lands and wait until a buyer came forward. The company even bought back the tract it had previously sold to the developer.

Then Munger got involved.

"Willard cared about the St. Louis River because he lived on the St. Louis River," said Helland, as he edged closer to the fire.

Munger had tried in the late 1970s to get the upper St. Louis and the Cloquet designated as state wild and scenic rivers, but his proposal got shot down due to local opposition. In 1993 he went back to the Legislature to craft a plan for funding the acquisition. Mueller was tapped to represent the state in haggling a purchase price with Minnesota Power.

"We'd offer \$260 an acre, and Steve would come back with \$212," said Houghtaling, laughing and looking at Mueller. "He was a darn good negotiator."

The final price was \$5.5 million, with \$4.35 million of the state's purchase funded in three stages with Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources money in 1993 and bonding funds in 1994 and 1996. The other \$1.15 million was gifted in a Minnesota Power donation, bringing the final price paid by the state to \$193 per acre.

"Today that land would cost around \$1,000 an acre," Houghtaling said.

Despite the magnitude of the deal, there were no big headlines, just mentions in a few newspapers.

"Willard Munger never had press releases, never talked about his achievements. He didn't have press conferences," said Helland, looking deep into the campfire's flames. "He

was all about caring for the environment, all about the seventh generation."

The Way Out. The next morning we broke camp and paddled to Island Lake Reservoir—8,000 acres of open water that divides the upper and lower Cloquet. There we met a furious headwind and white caps. Fortunately, we had just a short paddle to the public access, where we loaded our gear into trucks for a short drive over to the lake's outlet and the lower Cloquet.

The final leg of our trip was flat and easy for the most part. We made camp early in the afternoon with plenty of time left for fishing, which proved fruitful—three walleyes and a 25-inch channel catfish. With heaping plates of fried fish, we sat in camp chairs on a ridge overlooking the river, front-row seats for a parade of brooding dark thunderheads marching to the north. The storm steered clear of us, and the setting sun sparked a magnificent rainbow. No grace was said, but we all felt something.

"We are all so fortunate to be able to paddle this river, and to be here tonight," said Helland. "We're so fortunate to have this river in the public domain."

We felt less fortunate the next morning, when we awoke to snow flurries and a biting wind. Winter had reawakened and was howling up the river. The final two miles were a continuous stretch of rapids, mostly Class I, but with rogue rocks looming and ready to dump us and our gear into bone-chilling waters.

The Cloquet River is wild northern country—still. 

 www.mndnr.gov/magazine Take a multimedia tour of the author's Cloquet River trip.

 Plan your canoe trip at www.mndnr.gov/watertrails.

