

# DISCOVER ITASCA

SERIES

## Itasca State Park: Pride Of Minnesota

**L**ake Itasca and Itasca State Park offer some of the finest scenery to be found in Minnesota.

This park is popular not only because of its beauty, but because of its year-around tranquility. It is a place where people can relax in peace and quiet and enjoy the outdoors. The songs of birds or the call of the loon can be heard during the day. At night, barred owls and the whip-poor-wills add their melodic calls to the rustling sounds of the wind.

The colors in the park are cool. The lake is a soft green, the trees present all the shades of forest greenery. An evening spent fishing on Lake Itasca and observing birds and animals that come to bathe and drink is a delightful experience.

Itasca State Park has not always been tranquil. Its past includes a violent history that continued to be harsh and bloody until recent times. For many years, a Sioux Indian village was located at the north end of the lake until the Ojibwe drove the Sioux out of northern Minnesota in 1750. The Ojibwe used the area

for hunting and trapped and lived there only for short periods of time.

The first white men to reach Itasca were fur traders who camped there and bought furs from the Indians for low prices. Their operations were so diligent that fur animals, such as beaver, were practically eliminated from the area. The traders knew the lake by the French name, Lac La Biche, which means Elk Lake. Apparently they did not realize that it was the source of the Mississippi River.

For hundreds of years after white men came to Minnesota, Lake Itasca went unrecognized as the source of the Mississippi. Traders and explorers did not suspect the source was south of the northern-most reach of the river.

### Mississippi Headwaters Discovery

In 1832, Schoolcraft was able to travel directly to Lake Itasca only because he had an Indian

guide who knew exactly where the river started and that the infant Mississippi flowed north, not south. For 50 years after Schoolcraft's visit, Lake Itasca was considered the true source of the Mississippi. Then in 1881, Glazier visited the headwater region and claimed it was not. He maintained that the lake above Itasca, now called Elk Lake, was the ultimate source of the Mississippi River. This lake he named Glazier Lake.

A dispute started that raged violently for 25 years. A number of official and unofficial surveys were conducted to settle the point. In 1832, Schoolcraft's defenders attempted to prove that Elk Lake was a bay of Itasca. In 1891, Glazier returned with a small army of newspaper men to substantiate his claim. During the debate Jacob Brower showed that the whole basin was the ultimate source, but the waters were not united into a river until they flowed out of Lake Itasca.

In 1891, after many years of struggle on the part of Brower and other interested persons, Itasca State Park was established. Even after the bill was passed, the park existed only on paper. Brower, the first park superintendent, worked without pay, without funds, and with very little support to make the park a reality. Much park land and timber remained in private hands until 1918. Some land purchases have been made since 1950.

The first park superintendent received no pay and the second received very little, but he was allowed to clear 20 acres of land to raise food for his family.

A few years after the park was

established, two men were hunting on the west side of the lake, even though hunting there was illegal. One man was shot and died immediately. Some people thought it was a hunting accident, others thought it was murder. The man who did the shooting was acquitted by the local courts, but the unfortunate incident started a violent local feud that persisted for 30 years.

Shortly after 1900, several logging companies moved into the area and built a dam on the Mississippi River. The dam backed up water in Lake Itasca and in the surrounding swamps. Friends of the newly formed Park tried to stop the destruction of timber, but the logging companies were more powerful and won out. By 1903, the lake was full of logs

waiting to be floated down the river.

An early park superintendent cut down all trees on some State land and sold the logs to a lumber company from Brainerd. One logging superintendent attempted to blow up all beaver dams around Elk Lake in order to get enough water to drive his logs. The local warden intervened in time to save the lives of the beaver. During 1919, the last of the large scale logging operations in the park was completed. In 1922, a big fire - the last serious fire in the park - threatened Douglas Lodge from the southwest.

Fish and game populations in the park have come in for attention, too. Poachers have always tried to sample the game and fish by illegal means.

Fortunately, game wardens were on the job and caught many. The deer were protected so thoroughly from hunters and wolves that they ate themselves out of habitat by consuming most of the suitable food plants.

In 1945, the Park was opened to deer hunting and the deer herd was reduced to a point where it was no longer a threat to the young conifers of the area.

Despite logging damage, beautiful stands of virgin pine remain in the park. During the last 40 years, the Park has healed its wounds. Today, more trees grow than when the Park was established. Moreover, Lake Itasca probably has more fish of greater variety than it did when Schoolcraft first arrived in 1832.

Itasca State Park has many claims to fame. It is the oldest Minnesota State Park; it is the headwaters of the Mississippi River; and it has some of the oldest and largest stands of Norway and white pine in the state. Minnesota citizens must be thankful it survived the battles of pioneer days and proud of its place in modern recreational living.

**This leaflet was prepared by the Minnesota State Park Interpretive Program. Original article written by John Dobie. Front page photograph provided by Barry Prichard.**

