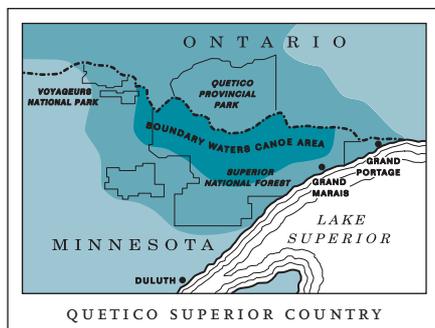


Wilderness News

FROM THE QUETICO SUPERIOR FOUNDATION SUMMER 2009



The Quetico Superior Foundation, established in 1946, encourages and supports the protection of the ecological, cultural and historical resources of the Quetico Superior region.

"I have found that people go to the wilderness for many things, but the most important of these is perspective. They may think they go for the fishing or the scenery or companionship, but in reality it is something far deeper. They go to the wilderness for the good of their souls."

— Sigurd F. Olson, *The Meaning of Wilderness*

Wilderness News

Published by the Quetico Superior Foundation

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A view of Fall Lake, photo by Timothy Eaton.

PROTECTING A SCENIC ENTRANCE TO THE BWCAW

Fall Lake Property on the Edge of the Boundary Waters to be Protected

An 11-acre parcel of land on Fall Lake outside of Ely, Minnesota, will be protected thanks to the joint efforts of the landowners, the Forest Service and the Trust for Public Land (TPL). Located just across the lake from a Forest Service public campground and boat access, the parcel sits on the edge of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. With 550 feet of sandy shoreline and the potential to be subdivided into two lots, its proximity to a boat access on a motorized lake made it ripe for development when the out-of-state landowners decided to sell.

Together with the Forest Service, they approached TPL for help protecting the land. TPL will acquire the property this summer through its Northwoods Initiative, a program that works to protect lands in

northern Minnesota, northern Wisconsin and Michigan's upper peninsula. Using funds from the program's Northwoods Land Protection Fund, TPL will act as an intermediary, holding the land until the Forest Service can secure funds to acquire the property in 18 to 24 months.

According to Shaun Hamilton, the TPL representative managing the project, the procurement of this land represents an opportunity to protect and maintain a scenic entrance to the BWCAW. The process has also led to the identification of twenty acres adjoining the Fall Lake property and abutting the BWCAW that will likely be secured during the summer of 2010, protecting the wilderness character of more than 30 acres of land in total. □

Emerald Ash Borer Reaches Minnesota

What the insect could mean for the Quetico Superior Region

By Charlie Mahler, Wilderness News Contributor

When emerald ash borers, the bright green invasive insects that have decimated ash trees across the southern Great Lakes region, were discovered in Houston County and St. Paul, Minnesota this spring, resource managers and tree owners in southern Minnesota shifted into high gear in attempt to contain the formidable pest. In northern Minnesota, too, far from current infestations, foresters and land managers are bracing for the seemingly inevitable

spread of the insect to their part of the state, where the vast majority of Minnesota ash trees grow.



Emerald ash borer. Photo courtesy Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, www.forestryimages.org.

To slow the spread of emerald ash borers into the Superior and Chippewa National

Forests, U.S. Forest Service officials have announced rules restricting the transport of firewood from other states and from infested regions of Minnesota. Any firewood brought into the forests must be purchased from certified firewood vendors. In Canada, authorities discourage the transport of firewood, but have not imposed mandatory

continued on page 3

Wilderness News Update: Namakan River Dam Project

By Alissa Johnson, *Wilderness News Contributor*

The Spring 2008 issue of *Wilderness News* covered a proposed dam at High Falls on the Namakan River west of Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario. A project with environmental impacts on both sides of the border, the Ojibway Power and Energy Group (OPEG) is preparing to release its Environmental Assessment as part of a proponent-led approval process. Here, we look at what “proponent-led” means, how environmental groups on both sides of the border have united to oppose the dam and how the public can stay informed and involved in the project’s outcome.

Proponent Led System

According to Canadian law, the proposed Namakan power project is subject to a proponent-led approval process. Dale Gilbert, Environmental Project Coordinator with OPEG partner The Chant Group is overseeing the Namakan River Project. He explained that instead of the government to dedicating extensive time and money to assess potential projects, the onus lies with the proponent to arrange and pay for impact studies and compile a Class Environmental Assessment to provide a high level picture of the dam’s environmental impact.

This sounds straightforward, but it is worth noting that Canada’s legal definition of “environment” casts a broad net. Air, land and water—what many typically think of as the environment—comprise the first category out of several that must be taken into account. A report must also consider plant and animal life (including human); social, economic or cultural consequences for affected community; buildings or structures; and even results like vibration or noise. When the report is submitted for approval, the director of the Environmental Assessment Approvals Branch will evaluate the overall balance of all of these potential impacts, stopping the project, requesting individual assessments (further studies regarding particular aspects of the project) or letting the project proceed.

According to Gilbert, anticipating what can stop a project is a hard thing to predict.

Balancing the Big Picture

“For the Namakan River project, it is a balance of benefits and adverse effects. It is a challenge to answer what would stop the project because politically, we don’t know what the government is looking for,” Gilbert said.

He can hypothesize that the passage of the Green Energy Act suggests the Canadian government is interested in the development of more green energy. And in this project in particular, the potential benefits for indigenous communities—in generating jobs and an economic boost for the Lac la Croix First Nations communities—will likely play a role in the project’s approval process.

“The Government has an understanding or agreement with the Lac la Croix First Nations to improve the social and economic conditions of their community. On a scale of positive and negative, that would be weighted very heavily,” Gilbert said.

It’s a potential impact that no one takes lightly. In May of 2009, seven Minnesota and Ontario organizations joined Voyageurs National Park Association in sending a joint letter to Canadian and U.S. officials opposing the dam based on the aesthetic and environmental consequences for the region.

They cited concerns regarding the alteration of the “historical character of the Namakan River, a traditional fishing ground for First Nations and part of the trade route of the Voyageurs” and impacts on “the migration and spawning cycles of the river’s sturgeon fishery (a Species of Special Concern in Ontario and Minnesota) as well as potentially impairing water quality throughout the Lake of the Woods and Rainy River watersheds.” Yet as they



High Falls on the Namakan River. Photo courtesy of Rainy Lake Conservancy.

raised their concerns, the group also addressed the needs of First Nations Communities, requesting that the assessment process consider alternatives to the dam that provide comparable or greater benefits.

“We are sensitive to the challenges First Nations communities face with limited opportunities for economic development. If we raise concerns we really need to think about alternatives,” VNPA Executive Director Cory McNulty recently shared with *Wilderness News*.

With proponents and opponents alike acknowledging the complexities of the project’s reach, OPEG has made efforts to implement the environmental assessment process in a way that allows them to be fully addressed.

Making Room for Discussion

“Because this is a sensitive issue, we decided to offer a longer period of time for comments,” Gilbert said. OPEG is working to produce a draft report by the end of July or early August, followed by a 60-day public review period. Documents will be made available at libraries and Ministry offices in Thunder Bay, Fort Francis and other communities, as well as online on OPEG’s web site. In addition, open houses will be held for public comment and discussion. OPEG will then have 30 days to compile and document feedback, revise the environmental assessment and, if necessary, revise the project plan before submitting it for an additional review period of 30-days. This review will be open to the public and the government, after which the document will be finalized and sent to the EAAB for approval. Gilbert anticipates that it will be October before the process is complete.

International Approach

Understanding this review process and determining the best way to address concerns has perhaps been the biggest challenge for environmental groups like VNPA and those who signed onto the letter. Used to working directly with government agencies, groups on both sides of the border have worked together to identify the appropriate officials to contact and avenues of communication. On one hand, it has been a unique opportunity to build upon relationships formed through the Heart of the Continent Partnership, an organization dedicated to building connections and shared understanding among stakeholders of all viewpoints in the Quetico and Boundary Waters region. McNulty acknowledges that there is a distinct advantage to working as a group.

“There is more knowledge in groups. I feel uncomfortable with my knowledge of the process [in Canada]. I can take a leadership role on this side [of the border] but have to rely on [Canadian groups] for their knowledge,” McNulty said.

Yet as responsive as officials have been to the letter, VNPA and others are being directed to share their views directly with OPEG as soon as possible. Because OPEG is required by law to respond, voicing them early will help ensure that they get addressed in earlier drafts of the report. As McNulty prepares to pass on the concerns expressed in their original letters, other organizations like Quetico Superior Foundation are formally declaring their opposition to the dam as well.

In the meantime, groups in favor of and against the dam await the draft of the environmental assessment, hoping that—for the sake of the project and its environmental, social and economic consequences—the review period will be one of active discussion to determine the best outcome for all involved.

Quetico Superior Foundation Formally Opposes Namakan Dam

Jim Wyman, president of the Quetico Superior Foundation, recently released this statement regarding the Foundation's decision to take a formal position on the proposed dam at High Falls on the Namakan Dam.

On June 5th, 2009 the Board of the Quetico Superior Foundation voted to formally oppose the proposed dam at High Falls on the Namakan River. The Quetico Superior Foundation has always attempted to understand and report all sides of an issue in the region. In some cases, we do find it necessary to take a formal position. In coming to this decision the Board reviewed all available data, and we chose to oppose this project only after fully discussing the data at our most recent meeting. We agree with a number of other organizations and individuals in opposing this project because we feel that permanently altering the Namakan River would effect spawning cycles of the lake sturgeon in the area. We also believe that the relatively small amount of power that would be generated does not justify the irreversible impact to the river.

– Jim Wyman, Quetico Superior Foundation

For More Information on the Namakan River Project:

Ojibway Power and Energy Group
<http://www.opeg.ca>

Canadian Environmental Law Information
http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90e18_e.htm

Voyageurs National Park Association
<http://www.voyageurs.org>

Past *Wilderness News* Coverage of the Namakan Dam
<http://www.wildernessnews.org>

▶ [Find More Online:](#)

[Stay up-to-date on the Namakan River Dam Project, the Emerald Ash Borer, threats to the wilderness, success stories and more:](#)
www.wildernessnews.org

continued from page 1

restrictions outside of the quarantine areas where outbreaks have occurred. Infestations in Canada have so far occurred well to the east of the Quetico Superior region.

Emerald ash borer populations expand slowly on their own, but relocation by humans can cause the bug to quickly establish itself in new areas far beyond its natural frontiers. Slowing unintended transport of the bug is the main defense against the spread of the pest, which has no natural predators in North America. All species of ash—of which, black, green, and white are native to Minnesota—succumb to the ash borer damage.

The insects, first noticed in Michigan in 2002, have destroyed ash trees from Maryland to Wisconsin. Once established, the insect—originally native to eastern Russia, northern China, Korea, and Japan—can cause 100% mortality to ash trees. A female ash borer lays eggs on the bark of an ash tree in summer. A white-colored larva emerges and burrows into the bark, where it eats the living wood and cuts off the vessels that carry water and nutrients between the roots and the leaves. After the larva morphs into a pupa and exits the tree through a signature D-shaped hole, the damage is done. Trees typically succumb to the damage in two to three years.

The Ash of the North

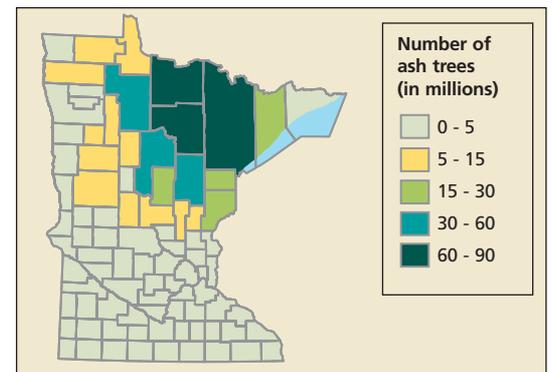
Black ash, the primary ash species in the Quetico Superior area, inhabits wet, lowland areas with mucky, mineral soils. While not particularly abundant in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness or Quetico Provincial Park, black ash forests account for 540,200 acres of Minnesota's forests – roughly half the acreage of the BWCAW, by comparison. The tree comprises 50% of the state's lowland hardwood forests, with a range extending from the Mason-Dixon Line north to western Ontario and east to Canada's Maritime Provinces. Black ash typically grows in wet areas, near streams or poorly drained, often seasonally flooded areas. St. Louis, Itasca, and Koochiching Counties boast the thickest ash forests in Minnesota—each county has more than 60 million ash trees.

“Ash is a minor component of a lot of our native forest communities,” Minnesota DNR forest ecologist John Almendinger told *Wilderness News*. “It's not like you're going to drive up to your cabin and see 20 miles of dead ash trees. These communities on the average occur in fairly small inclusions in other forest types.”

“[The damage] is going to be very dispersed through the forests,” he continued. “There's no huge landform or place where it's almost all ash trees. So it's going to be holes here and there in the forest canopy where ash trees are gone. If you add up the acreage of all those little holes, it's about a half-million acres.”

The Minnesota DNR identifies two ash-dominated forest types in its native forest classification system—the Northern Wet Ash Swamp and the Northern Very Wet Ash Swamp.

“These are places on the land where, if this critter is as virulent as advertised, all the trees are going to die,” Almendinger predicted. “In one of



Ash tree distribution in Minnesota. Sources: StarTribune.com, U.S. Forest Service.

those communities, the wet ash swamp, other trees will come in, almost certainly. The very wet ash swamps, to be honest, right now we can't generate ash on them very successfully.”

Almendinger expects balsam poplar to populate the wet ash swamps likely to be decimated by emerald ash borer. In very wet locales—places with standing water in spring and summer, rather than seasonally—he expects alder or cat-tail swamps to replace ash.

“Ash has been suffering from natural decline in northern Minnesota in the past few years,” Almendinger said, attributed to climatic and environmental factors. “And, it's all in that one community – the very wet ash swamps. My best guess as an ecologist is that, whether its emerald ash borer or you cut them all down with a chainsaw, it's not going to be forest anymore.”

Forests Without Ash, Swamps without Forests?

The advent of emerald ash borer offers a lot to ponder. Almendinger wonders, on one hand, if the insect will survive Minnesota's harsh winters. “They haven't lived through a Minnesota winter yet,” he noted. “I know we've got global warming and all this other stuff, but you know what, Minnesota winter is pretty nasty. And if these things have to over-winter as adults, they may not make it.”

Noting that the spread of emerald ash borer seems more aggressive to the east, west, and south, he also wonders if the placement of black ash within a boreal matrix of tree species will slow the insect. He wonders, too, if some part of the black ash genome might offer resistance—just as some elm trees resist Dutch elm disease. Almendinger also questions what effect the potential loss of a quarter-million acres of very wet ash forest will have on biodiversity.

“A great deal of the biodiversity in northern forests really focuses on these wet ash holes,” he noted. “Almost all the amphibians in upland habits are linked to them. All these ash swamps in the spring are a constant succession of frogs. You can take a quart jar out there in the spring and get half-water, half-polliwogs. There may be some species that will totally abandon [the sites], if the trees aren't there.”

Only time will tell just how devastating emerald ash borers will be in the northern forest. Likewise, what effects the projected loss of ash trees will have on the ecology of the small wetlands where ash now make their home is something only the advance of time—and a small green insect—can answer. □

New Director at Friends of the Boundary Waters

The Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness recently welcomed Paul Danicec as director. Paul shared his thoughts on the state of the wilderness and the Friends' role in protecting it with *Wilderness News*.

WN: Can you refresh readers on the mission and history of Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness?

The mission of the Friends is to protect, preserve and restore the wilderness character of the BWCAW and the Quetico-Superior ecosystem. We were founded in 1976 specifically to pass legislation that would protect the area as wilderness for the value of wilderness. That legislation passed. Since then the organization has worked to protect, preserve and restore through advocacy and education. Over the years, the Friends have worked to prevent increased motor use, destructive logging practices on the border of the wilderness, increased road building in roadless areas, increased air pollution and habitat destruction for local wildlife.

The Friends also takes a long term view on building the next generation of wilderness stewards so is active in education activities and collaboration with the Forest Service to create volunteers to help rangers and combat non-native invasive species, sponsor programs that raise awareness of the value of wilderness, create wilderness curriculum for young students and immerse inner city youth in the wilderness through high quality, conservation oriented canoe trips.

WN: What are the top three concerns facing the health of the BWCAW today?

Copper/nickel mining should be on everyone's radar as a most serious threat to the BWCAW and the Quetico-Superior ecosystem as we know it. Just Google "Acid Mine Drainage" if you don't believe me. This industry has yet to prove it can operate a mine without creating water pollution. And there are 32 exploratory permits for these types of mines running up to within a mile of our wilderness in the Kawishiwi, Bald Eagle and Isabella Lakes areas. Mines in this watershed would most likely create disastrous pollution and even exploratory projects would impact the wilderness character.



Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness director Paul Danicec with his son, Ahser.

The spread of roads and destructive practices like unregulated OHV and ATV use. You may be surprised if you look at a map of the forest and how many roads are already there. We are working to make sure that the impact of any projects on wilderness character of the BWCAW gets properly addressed.

The spread into the Superior National Forest of non-native invasive species is a large one. Unlike many other national forests and wilderness areas, we are ahead of the game here though we are starting to see some of these species. We have a real opportunity to work with the Forest Service and other groups to keep the BWCAW free of these destructive species. This ties into climate change as well – which is a whole 'nother kettle of fish!

WN: The Friends sometimes has a reputation for relying on lawsuits and legislative action as an advocacy tool. Would you like to speak to this?

We spend much more day to day time on collaborative efforts such as science-based advocacy, volunteer programs that support wilderness, the Heart of the Continent Partnership and regular constructive meetings with Forest Service leaders, MPCA and other agencies. In those interactions we have candid, informal conversations in which we speak for wilderness character and folks who use and love it. These are great forums to work on management issues and be a respected player at the table. Hopefully, this work has prevented legal action without compromising the highest level of wilderness protection for the area. The Friends will use any tool to protect and preserve the wilderness character of the BWCAW and a legal action is only one of those tools. A suit is the last course of action we would choose to take. There would have likely been lots of work done beforehand.

Though we are the only advocacy organization solely focused on the BWCAW, we are part of a bigger conservation effort that includes many groups. Our goal is to seek a collaborative approach wherever we can.

For more information on the Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, visit www.friends-bwca.org.

▶ Find More Online: www.wildernessnews.org

Read Paul's full interview at www.wildernessnews.org, including his personal vision for the Friends, his thoughts on the evolution of BWCAW management debates and how the BWCAW is being used by visitors today.

Listening Point Foundation Introduces Young Paddlers to the Legacy of Sigurd Olson

The Listening Point Foundation (LPF), dedicated to continuing Sigurd Olson's legacy of wilderness education, is reaching out to young paddlers. Recognizing that most canoeists familiar with the writer tend to be of a "certain generation," as Foundation president Alana Johnson puts it, LPF is developing and supporting outreach projects that target wilderness canoe camps and middle and high school age students. According to Johnson, the goal is to introduce two generations unfamiliar with his writing to his unique understanding of the wilderness experience.

The first project launches this summer in partnership with YMCA Camps Menogyn, Widjiwagan and Du Nord. The camps will receive copies of the DVD, "The Wilderness World of Sigurd Olson" and a small booklet of selected writings, discussion questions, and journaling and activity suggestions. Camp leaders will be encouraged to use the booklet to conduct readings and discussions out in the wilderness setting. The hope is to create a direct connection between their experiences and Sig's writings.

With additional funding, a second project will build on the momentum by providing camps with a copy of Sig's first book, *The Singing Wilderness*, along with discussion questions and activities. According to Johnson, the book was chosen because it is "all encompassing as to why we do this and why [the wilderness] touches us spiritually."

LPF has also supported the efforts of board member and Northland College professor Clayton Russell (Ashland, WI) in his efforts to develop middle school and high school curriculums based on Sig's writings. LPF will help broaden the curriculum's reach by distributing it through the LPF web site this fall.

To learn more about LPF outreach or show your support for the Foundation's efforts, visit www.listeningpointfoundation.org.



Meet Frederick Winston, President Emeritus of the Quetico Superior Foundation

By Alissa Johnson, *Wilderness News* Contributor

In 1964, Fred Winston, Wilderness News editor, received an inquiry following the newsletter's inaugural publication:

"I can see that there are many sides to Minnesota's wilderness problem. But which side are you on? What are you trying to prove?"

It was a reasonable question: wilderness had indeed become a problem in Minnesota. The inclusion of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in the Wilderness Act of 1964 was so controversial that it was included with exceptions. Whereas the Act halted commercial development in the fifty-three other wilderness areas it created, development in the BWCA was left to the Secretary of Agriculture and a special committee to determine—emotional and contentious public meetings and public debate ensued. In such a climate, the idea of unbiased coverage from an organization vested in the region's wilderness character was almost unfathomable; surely there was an ulterior motive.

There was, it turned out. But not the kind this reader might have expected. The editor responded to this "rather pointed, but natural, question" in the next edition: "The only way to arrive at an equitable solution of any problem is first to listen to all facts and all opinions of all sides. This, at least, is what we are trying to prove." It was the conclusion to a half-page article that thoroughly outlined the history of the Quetico Superior Foundation and the editorial position of *Wilderness News*. This complete attention to detail and commitment to unbiased news coverage would come to characterize the publication—and would hardly come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the newsletter's editor and sole writer, Fred Winston.

Fred was a mainstay of *Wilderness News* and the Quetico Superior Foundation, of which he served as a long-time president. How long? In his own words, "a long time." One might expect a man so careful about detail to immediately recall the exact number of years he served at the organization's helm, but there is one quality that Fred Winston possesses in excess of thoroughness: humility. For Fred, his tenure at QSF is less something to laud and simply a matter of fact.

To many, Fred's involvement in the Quetico Superior Foundation might appear to be a natural succession in family history. During the 1940s, Fred's father, the late Frederick Winston, was part of the "group of outdoor-minded Minnesotans," as Fred called them in his 1964 article, to create "this tax-exempt, non-profit organization . . . for the general purpose of advancing science and education [in] that part of America defined by the watersheds of the Rainy and Pigeon rivers of the United States and Canada. In Canada the area embraces Ontario's Quetico Provincial Park; in the U.S. Minnesota's Superior National Forest." It was a natural fit for Fred's father, whose involvement in regional developments began during the 1920s; he joined activist Ernest Oberholtzer and the Quetico Superior Council in preventing the damming of the Rainy Lake watershed and working to create an international peace park in the border lakes region. (As Fred grew up, well-known and outspoken wilderness advocates like Oberholtzer and northwoods writer and activist Sigurd Olson were regular fixtures in family life). Oberholtzer even visited at Christmas, and the family made visits to his retreat on Mallard Island.

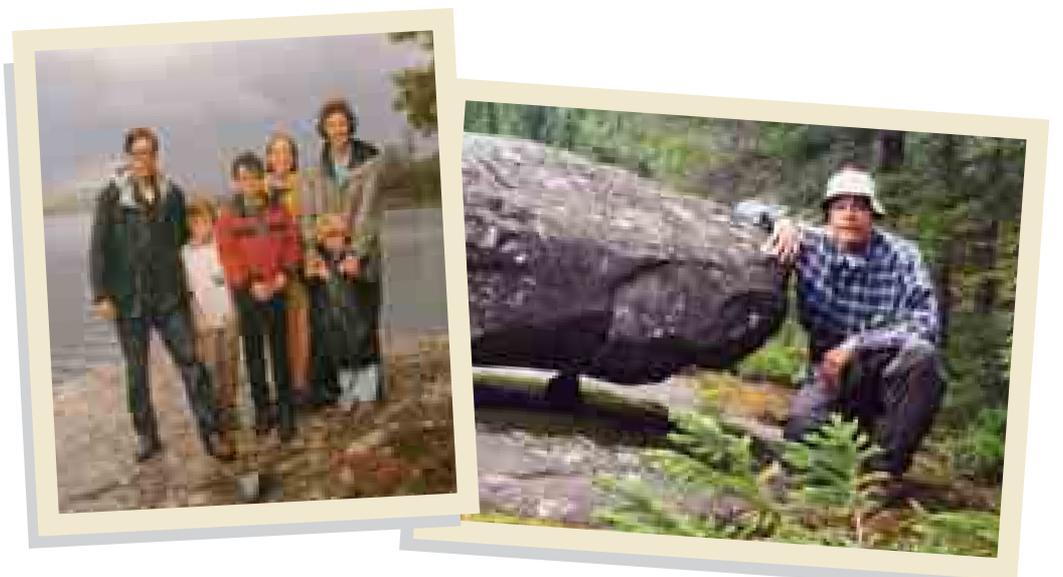
But for the younger Fred, taking the helm at the Quetico Superior Foundation and editing *Wilderness News* was not about family legacy or grand purpose. Today, reflecting back, he attributes his involvement to living in Minnesota, rather than moving away as his siblings did—as he puts it today, "the fact that I was here"—and a passion for canoeing that grew throughout his adult life. To Fred, it was simply a natural byproduct of engaging with the world around him. Or rather, engaging in the world around him with his family. For Fred is quite matter-of-fact when he attributes his continued interest in canoeing and the border lakes region to the fact that his wife, Eleanor, was passionate about canoeing as well.

Eleanor grew up hiking and horseback riding through the woods of Long Lake, Minnesota, just down the road from where the couple lives now. She loved noticing all the changes in the woods from season to season and year to year, including "every little tree that falls." According to Eleanor, her first canoe trip in the Boundary Waters opened up a whole new world to explore. She and Fred returned annually, taking their kids from the time they were very young, and over the years continuing to visit family friends of old, like Frank Hubacheck, one of the Quetico Superior Council's original members, at his place on Basswood Lake, stopping by Sigurd Olson's writing shack after canoe trips, and visiting Mallard Island. The couple continues to paddle the BWCAW nearly every September, and it is this family tradition that both Eleanor and Fred credit for their ongoing passion for the issues impacting the region.

"Because we continued [canoeing] it helped us stay interested If you're not actively using the [wilderness] it's harder to stay involved." And issues there have been. Fred's tenure at QSF and writing for *Wilderness News* gave him the opportunity to cover everything from the fallout from the 1964 Wilderness Act to the mining ban debates during the 1970s and the eventual passage of the Boundary Waters Wilderness Act of 1978 to the 1999 blow-down. Though he speaks lightly of his role, he strove to present all sides of a story and remain neutral, staying true to the words he wrote in 1964:

"It is the management of this unique strip of geography . . . which is now causing so much sound and fury. Some say it should be managed more intensely. Some say it should not be managed at all. Some favor logging and mining there. Others would permit more resorts, more roads, more mechanized transportation. Still others would block off the region to all but the paddling canoeist, the plodding hiker. We believe these voices crying in the wilderness should all have a fair hearing."

Like most interested groups, the Foundation wants to hear the testimony and weight the evidence before passing judgment. He carried black and white film with him whenever he traveled to gather photographs for the newsletter, and through his careful attention to detail created the foundation for the publication that is *Wilderness News* today. Yet nowhere did Fred's name appear in a byline, other than the masthead, and nowhere did he insert his opinion, other than, perhaps, to assert that *Wilderness News* should not have an opinion as his article did so eloquently. He strove to provide a trustworthy voice that shed light on the issues facing a region he happened to visit and care deeply about. To appreciate his example and imagine the possibilities if everyone stayed so active in the places they visited—well, that is a refreshing point indeed.



Above: Fred, Eleanor and the kids on a family trip to the Boundary Waters. Above right: Fred and Dolmen stones near Lake Lujenida. Photos courtesy the Winston Family.

Wilderness News

Summer 2009

Protecting a Scenic Entrance to the BWCAW	I
Emerald Ash Borer	I
Namakan River Dam Project.....	2
New Director at Friends of the Boundary Waters.....	4
The Legacy of Sigurd Olson.....	4
Meet Frederick Winston	5
Book Review: Overburden.....	6

www.queticosuperior.org

Book Review

Overburden: Modern Life on the Iron Range

By Aaron Brown

Published by Red Step Press

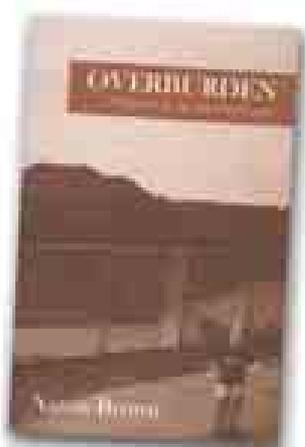
(2008, 239 pages, \$16.95 Softcover)

Reviewed by Alissa Johnson

Maybe you've done it, too. You know—driven right by Mine View in the Sky in Virginia, Minnesota on your way to Ely. It looked sort of interesting, but you were headed to the wilderness. You were ready to get there! Maybe you, too, passed towns with names like Babbit and Embarrass and wondered how they got names like that, chuckling as you thought: "Embarrassed about what?" Thanks to Minnesota author Aaron Brown, who explores the Iron Range in *Overburden: Modern Life on the Iron Range*, a collection of his essays, columns from the *Hibbing Daily Tribune* and commentaries from public radio station KAXE, we can correct our errant ways.

A fifth generation Iron Ranger, Brown defies convention. Nearing thirty, he is, as he puts it, "far past the age when most educated young people are, in our culture, supposed to leave [the Iron Range] for big cities and suburbs." Yet he stays, supporting his family in a radically different way than the generations of miners before him. Living under the shadow and inspiration of their overburden—"piles where the mines dump their unused earth"—he is uniquely situated to understand the history and culture of the Iron Range and contemplate its significance in the "modern" world.

Though many of his essays are whimsical



(most anyone who has visited northern Minnesota will appreciate the futility of setting up a bug tent in relentless winds), Brown does not shy away from complexities. He finds legitimate beauty in the mining landscape. He explores openness to change (and sometimes lack thereof) as he contemplates the future of the Iron Range, and he acknowledges the benefits of this regional stubborn streak. And he does it all with a self-deprecating wit and sarcastic humor that make you laugh out loud. Like when a young Aaron Brown believed that then presidential candidate Michael Dukakis' limo would pass in front of the junkyard where he and his family lived and worked, convinced the secret service would take a less public route to Dukakis' speaking engagement:

"I was eight, but oddly knowledgeable in this area, having used an encyclopedia to appoint small toys to positions in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of a federal government I carried around. (I recall being disappointed that so many Congressional and Supreme Court seats were held by twelve-for-a-dollar expressionless pink dinosaur erasers, but I had no idea how close to reality I had come)."

It is moments like this that lend *Overburden* its authenticity. Through the prism of life's small moments, like putting the kids to bed and the work-a-day routine (whether that's donning a hard hat or, in Brown's case, sitting at the computer in his bathrobe), Brown explores the Iron Range through its stories. It is a fitting way to honor the spirit of a region where whole towns moved with the mines, miners actually dueled in the middle of Hibbing in the not-so-distant past, and where change is suspect but Senator Paul Wellstone was embraced.

Overburden leaves a lasting impression of a complex place that is much more than a space between the Cities and Up North. Brown reminds us that though the height of mining has passed, the Iron Range has not.

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