

From Hope to History, From Dream to Reality

By Greg Seitz, VNPA Board Member

In the 80 years between when a national park was first proposed in the Kabetogama Peninsula area in 1891 to the day in 1971 when President Richard M. Nixon signed the legislation authorizing the creation of Voyageurs National Park, citizens battled to preserve the area for no motivation other than to see its wild beauty safe for future generations.

"It was only because we had wonderful people like Elmer Andersen, Sigurd Olson and Conrad Wirth, that the Park was created," says author and historian Dr. Fred Witzig. "You didn't have people from the East Coast saying we should have something there... [park advocates] really believed in it because they lived up there."

No sooner had Voyageurs National Park been proposed than it became obvious that park advocates needed to organize if they had any hope of seeing their vision become a reality. Voyageurs National Park Association (VNPA) was that organization.

In the early 1960s, Martin Kellogg was working with Lloyd Brant, then the public relations staff of the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, on the Committee of Tourism and Outdoor Recreation. Kellogg called Andersen, who had recently lost his bid for re-election by a close margin, and asked him if he had any thoughts on developing outdoor recreation in the state. "Yes, I do," Kellogg recalls him replying. "There should be a Wild and Scenic River designation for the St. Croix River and there should be a national park up there in northern Minnesota on the Kabetogama Peninsula."

Andersen's recommendations were included in the committee's overall proposal, which the Chamber of Commerce adopted unanimously. Kellogg believes that the reason Andersen was so ready with his recommendation because of the influence of Judge U.W. Hella, who later went on to become the director of the state park system. "In the 1940s," Kellogg says, "Hella was sent to look at a proposal to put a road on

the Kabetogama Peninsula. He went up there and looked it all over and said 'No, this ought to be a park.' And when Elmer Andersen was elected governor, Hella told him about the idea."

Working Together

Once word of the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce's proposal reached International Falls, locals Judge Mark Abbot, Wayne Judy and George Eslinger contacted Kellogg and said, "We hear you're in support of this park," Kellogg recalls them saying. "We've heard about it too and we'd like to join in some way to promote it."

In Washington, D.C., National Park Service Director Conrad Wirth (a native Minnesotan), convinced that the Kabetogama Peninsula area was worthy of a park after touring the region by boat one day in 1961 with Andersen and others, supported the proposal. In Minnesota, long-time activist and organizer Rita Shemesh tirelessly worked to gather support for the Park from PTAs, American Legion organizations, sportsmen's and gardening clubs and other citizen groups around the state.

As Martin Kellogg describes it, it was Elmer Andersen who had originally voiced the idea in the 1960s of a national park on the Kabetogama Peninsula to other influential Minnesotans, and who, upon seeing the breadth of the people who expressed interest in working to create the Park, suggested the formation of VNPA.

And so VNPA was born 40 years ago. Kellogg was elected treasurer, Tom Savage was elected secretary, and Judge Ed Chapman of International Falls was elected president. The group had plenty of work to do. The challenges that faced park advocates were formidable. Opponents were many, well-funded and vocal.

Earlier Efforts to Preserve the Area

Before Judge Hella visited the region and concluded that it deserved national park status, Ernest Oberholtzer's Quetico-Superior Council had worked in the late 1920s to preserve the entire border lakes region, in both Canada and the United States. They had seen much success with the creation of the Superior National Forest and similar designations in Ontario, but the Kabetogama area had eluded their efforts.

The failure to protect the Kabetogama region was most notable in the 1930s, when the government was forced to pass on opportunities to purchase private lands held by the Minnesota-Ontario Paper Company and others, and available Depression-era tax forfeit lands. At the time, local politicians rallied constituents against the idea of federal ownership of the lands and a state law was passed prohibiting the state from selling land to the federal government.

Even after the land seemed to slip from their grasp, Witzig says Olson, Oberholtzer and others held on to hope that the "voyageurs highway" could someday be preserved and returned to the state it was in when the French-Canadian *voyageurs* had traveled from Grand Portage to Rainy Lake and points beyond.

The decades of dreaming and work culminated in the 1960s, when the Park proposal finally built up widespread support.

VNPA Founding Board Members:

Original board members named in articles of incorporation on May 5, 1965:

Governor Elmer L. Andersen
Judge Edwin P. Chapman
George Esslinger
Wayne M. Judy
Samuel H. Morgan
Glenn W. Ross
Lloyd L. Brandt
Martin N. Kellogg
Thomas C. Savage

Board members added Aug 5, 1965:

Sigurd F. Olson
Roger Preuss
George O. Ludcke
James W. Wilkie
Julius F. Wolff
Norman H. Baker
Sherwood O. Berg
Charles Doell
Judge Levi Hall
Nobel Shaddock
Arthur Tomlinson
Raymond A. Haik

Many residents of the area around the Park didn't like the idea of their "backyard" being handed over to the federal government; and despite the advocacy of northern Minnesota residents such as Abbot, Judy and Eslinger, the battle for Voyageurs National Park was frequently portrayed as locals against outsiders, northern against southern Minnesota, rural against urban.

Some of those perceptions could have killed the Park before it even got to Congress, but the voices of a few courageous local citizens in the International Falls area were essential to bridging the divisiveness.

"People like Wayne Judy took a terrible beating, and there were others like him," says Witzig. "But they spoke up anyway because they all knew that there were people who wouldn't speak up and they gave voice to them."

Judy and other citizens saw that their "backyard" was not to be taken for granted, and that by advocating for the Park they were advocating for the beautiful lake region to be preserved so that future generations of people from their hometowns and from all over the country could come to love it too.

People have been battling for that same thing for those same reasons ever since.

The Park Today

Challenges still face VNP and the Association. Simple awareness of the Park and what it offers has been a continuous challenge. As Witzig says, "The Park has a lot of things, but the very thing that preserved the whole area, its isolation, is still there." Many people in Minnesota aren't even aware that a national park with the same standards of excellence as Yellowstone and Yosemite exists in the state.

Many of those who originally opposed creation of VNP have since tried to lessen the degree of protection the Park enjoys. In the years since its inception, there have been lawsuits about property, water rights, federal jurisdiction, snowmobiles and other issues.

But today, there are reasons to be hopeful. As the Duluth News Tribune noted in an article earlier this year ("Not Just a Walk in the Park," Jan. 22, 2006), "For the first time in recent memory no lawsuits are pending against the Park. No one is demanding the Park be dismantled. No rallies are scheduled to protest park regulations on snowmobiles, wolves or waterbikes... Some folks say this relative peace came, in large part, because of the new sheriff in town [Kate Miller, recently-appointed Superintendent of VNP]." It is a sentiment that many others have echoed.

"Kate Miller is a marvelous person to be in charge up there... She's been working on this sort of thing for a long time," says Witzig.

The same reasons to hope for a positive future for the Park are good reasons to recommit to Voyageurs National Park Association and its goals: the capability of a passionate group of citizens to effect change.

In his remarks at VNPA's 40th anniversary celebration on Jan. 26, Martin Kellogg affirmed that there is still and will always be a vital role for the Association in the preservation of the lakes, woods, and wildlife of Voyageurs National Park:

"After the Park became established, there was a general thought by some people that we really didn't need this association any more and that the Park Service would take care of the Park. I wasn't so sure of that. One year I called upon Sigurd Olson to come to a meeting of the VNPA and he came and gave a talk, a talk that was just outstanding... Sigurd Olson said there is no piece of land that is natural or wilderness that is safe. And it is not safe just because there is a park established. There is no end to the number of people that will think that land should be something else. Wilderness should be a timberland or so forth."

"That Park can not remain a park, nor can the BWCA remain a wilderness, by virtue of it being under the Forest Service or the National Park Service. It will only remain protected ... if citizens like you and me will do something about it in some organized way that comes to the table."

- Many thanks to Dr. Fred Witzig, Martin Kellogg and Jim Hudson