

**MNDOT HISTORIC ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT  
STRUCTURES INVENTORY**

BK-DLC-157  
CS 0302  
Detroit Lakes Overlook

<b>Historic Name</b>	Detroit Lakes Overlook	<b>CS #</b>	0302
<b>Other Name</b>	Scenic Overlook of Big Detroit Lake	<b>SHPO Inv #</b>	BK-DLC-157

<b>Location</b>	SW side of TH 10 .25 mi NW of the jct of CSAH 54 and TH 10	<b>Hwy District Reference</b>	TH 10 4A 47.2
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<b>City/Township County</b>	Detroit Lakes, City of Becker	<b>Acres</b>	3
<b>Twp Rng Sec</b>	138N 41W Sec 1 139N 41W Sec 36	<b>Rest Area Class</b>	4

<b>USGS Quad</b>	Detroit Lakes	<b>SP #</b>	0302-19
<b>UTM</b>	Z15 E285460 N5186920		

<b>Designer</b>	Minn Dept of Highways (MHD)	<b>SHPO Review #</b>	99-0357
<b>Builder</b>	Minn Dept of Highways (MHD) Olson, Axel		

<b>Historic Use</b>	Roadside Parking Area	<b>MHS Photo #</b>	013529.17-24 013557.01-03
<b>Present Use</b>	Roadside Parking Area		

<b>Yr of Landscape Design</b>	1988	<b>MnDOT Historic Photo Album</b>
<b>Overall Site Integrity</b>	Moderately Altered	
<b>Review Required</b>	Yes	

<b>National Register Status</b>	Not Eligible, see Statement of Significance
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<b>Historic Context</b>	
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**List of Standing Structures**

Feat#	Feature Type	Year Built
01	Overlook Wall	1957-58
02	Marker	1996
03	Marker	1996

NOTE: Landscape features are not listed in this table

<b>Fieldwork Date</b>	07-20-97
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<b>Prep by</b>	Gemini Research Dec. 98 G1. 18
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<b>Prep for</b>	Site Development Unit Cultural Resources Unit Environmental Studies Unit
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<b>Final Report</b>	Historic Roadside Development Structures on Minnesota Trunk Highways (1998)
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■ BRIEF

The Detroit Lakes Overlook, also known as Scenic Overlook of Big Detroit Lake, is located on the northeastern shore of Detroit Lake within the city of Detroit Lakes near the eastern city limits. The site is located on the western side of T.H. 10 about .25 miles northwest of C.S.A.H. 54.

■ STANDING STRUCTURES

**Overlook Wall.** Built 1957-1958 (foundation by Minnesota Department of Highways, upper part "by others"). The principal structure on the site is a long, curving overlook wall constructed on a narrow strip of land between T.H. 10 and the northeastern shore of Detroit Lake. The wall is built of coursed pink, red, and gray split granite rock on a concrete footing. Some of the rocks are split fieldstones or lake boulders, while others appear to have been rough cut from larger chunks. Many of the stones are about watermelon-sized. The wall is several hundred feet long (the plans specify about 400') and about 20" tall. It is anchored with approximately 50 piers that are about 30" square and project above the wall about 5".

The overlook wall has three lookout bays -- a semicircular bay near the wall's midpoint and two 18'-wide rectangular bays that are located about 90' from the wall's ends. Two pedestrian openings have been cut into the wall flanking the semicircular bay. In 1988 a poured concrete cap was added to the wall and piers. The wall is lined with a 5'-wide poured concrete walkway and a concrete curb which are original.

A geological plaque on a lectern-style granite marker was mounted on the wall within the semicircular lookout bay in 1960 by the Geological Society of Minnesota cooperating with the Department of Highways. The text of the plaque addresses glacial lakes. A black metal historic marker on a metal pole was placed in the southern rectangular bay in 1996 by the Minnesota Historical Society and the Becker County Historical Society. The seals of the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Minnesota Historical Society appear below the text. The text of the marker addresses the Woods Trail. A headstone-like gray granite marker was placed in the northern rectangular bay in 1996 by the City of Detroit Lakes and the Becker County Historical Society. The text of the marker addresses the history of the city of Detroit Lakes. (See marker texts at the end of this document.)

■ OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND PLANTINGS

A 1988 poured concrete walkway curves around the lakeside of the semicircular bay. There are four permanent metal benches along the walkway. Six modern lightpoles are also located (about 200' apart) along the lakeside of the wall. The wall is located several feet from the shoreline and separated from the riprapped shore by a strip of grass.

The site includes an asphalt-paved, pull-off drive that widens into a parking area. The parking area is separated from T.H. 10 by a long, narrow (2'-wide), asphalt-paved, curb-lined island.

There is a picnic area south of the wall and a boat launch area north of the wall. The picnic area has an asphalt-paved parking area and three portable picnic tables. The boat

launching ramp has an asphalt-paved parking area (also about 40' by 80'). The picnic area and the boat launch area are linked to the wall by asphalt-paved walkways.

The topography is flat. The site is planted with grass and deciduous trees and shrubs (such as potentilla, evergreens, and juniper). A low continuous planting of new shrubbery is located along the lakeside of the wall. (There are no plantings or grass on the parking area side of the wall.) There are large shade trees lining the shore. Scattered throughout the area are deciduous trees and a few evergreens, most planted in 1992. (Small signs indicate that these trees were planted on Arbor Day, April 24, 1992, by fifth grade classes from Lincoln, Roosevelt, Rossman, Holy Rosary, and Washington schools.) No original planting plan has been located.

#### ■ **SETTING**

The site is located on the northeastern shore of Detroit Lake, within the city limits of Detroit Lakes (near the eastern city limits). It is bounded on the northeast by T.H. 10 and an approximately 15'-high railroad trackbed east of the highway, and on the south by the lakeshore. South of the site is a residential area separated from the wayside rest by a row of lilac bushes and a metal fence. North of the site is a Holiday Inn and other businesses.

#### ■ **INTEGRITY**

##### **Alterations**

The wall appears to have been built according to plan.

When the wall was built the site was located one mile southeast of the city limits, but the city limits have since grown to encompass the site. As the traffic volume on T.H. 10 has increased, the once-quiet overlook has become a well-used parking area located close to a noisy, busy highway.

The geological marker was added to the wall in 1960. The boat launch area was apparently added between 1961 and 1964. In 1988 the wall was repaired and rebuilt in places, a poured concrete cap was added, the semicircular sidewalk was added, benches were added, the lakeshore was riprapped, and the site was re-landscaped. The pedestrian openings at the semicircular lookout bay were created recently, probably in 1988. The metal and granite markers were added in 1996.

In general, the site retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. However, the integrity of design is compromised by cap on the overlook wall, benches, semicircular sidewalk, and lightpoles.

##### **Notes on Condition**

The wall is in fair to poor condition. The wall has been re-mortared several times and the cement cap is not uniform or level. The cement is chipped and cracked on several of the piers and the mortar joints are cracking. The mortar work around the metal geological plaque in the bay is in poor condition and has been poorly repaired. Several piers are pulling away from the wall.

■ **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The current wall was built in 1957-1958 as part of a 1.79-mile-long road construction project. The plans were approved in July of 1956. The plans state that the "upper portion of wall to be constructed by others", while the poured concrete footing was laid by the Department of Highways. District 6 engineer Bob Kotaska indicates that the stone mason was Axel Olson, still a Detroit Lakes resident.

The Mn/DOT plan room has also located a set of earlier plans for a different wall that was apparently not built. The plans were for a 1,200'-long roadside development project to be built "in cooperation with the Work Projects Administration" (S.P. 0302-02). The 1956 plans do not mention a previous wall on the site, and the county historical society found no references to a pre-1956 wall. Also, the Mn/DOT Site Development Unit's Olson photo albums (which serve as an ad hoc inventory of roadside development projects) do not include the wall.

The Geological Society of Minnesota added a geological marker to the wall in 1960. By 1961, the Roadside Development Division records indicate that there were three fireplaces, two toilets, and drinking water at the site. By 1964 there were picnic tables and a boat launch, but apparently no water, fireplaces, or toilets. The 1988 alterations to the site were constructed in cooperation with the Detroit Lakes Regional Chamber of Commerce Beautification Committee's Prairie-Woodland Landscape Project. Material costs were \$18,000. Markers were added to the wall in 1996 by the Minnesota Historical Society and the Becker County Historical Society, and by the City of Detroit Lakes and the Becker County Historical Society.

■ **PREVIOUS SHPO REVIEWS**

A Section 106 review was conducted in late fall of 1998 (1999 federal fiscal year) in preparation for a Mn/DOT project to rehabilitate the geological plaque at the Detroit Lakes Overlook (SHPO Rev #99-0357). The review occurred while this Mn/DOT Historic Roadside Development Structures Inventory was underway, and a draft version of the inventory form was submitted to the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) as part of the review. In a letter to Allyson Brooks (Mn/DOT) dated Nov. 10, 1998, Britta L. Bloomberg (MHS) concurred with the Inventory's draft recommendation that the property is not eligible for the National Register (Bloomberg 1998). The documents that chronicle this Section 106 review contain a few items of correspondence.

■ **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The Detroit Lakes Overlook is a roadside parking area with a simple highway pull-off site design. It was developed in 1957-1958 by the MHD. Detroit Lakes Overlook is one of 37 stone overlook walls in this inventory.

This property has been evaluated within the historic context "Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960." It is recommended that the property is NOT ELIGIBLE for the National Register under this historic context because it does not meet the context's registration requirements (particularly the 50-year age criterion) and because it has lost integrity due to alterations.

■ **OTHER COMMENTS**

This property may require further evaluation for potential archaeological resources.

The wayside rest is heavily used by motorists. T.H. 10, a four-lane highway, is very busy. Although the pull-off entrance road is clearly marked, the site is difficult to access because of the traffic volume.

The text of the geologic marker is not specifically associated with the site of the wayside rest. The text of the 1996 MHS-BCHS metal marker is specifically associated with this site and uses the words "right through this location." The text of the granite marker uses the words "one mile to the right of this location."

■ **REFERENCES**

Bloomberg, Britta L. (MHS). Letter to Allyson Brooks (Mn/DOT). Nov. 10, 1998.

Kotaska, Bob [Mn/DOT District 4, Detroit Lakes]. Telephone interview. March 1998.

Site plans. Minnesota Department of Transportation, St. Paul.

■ **ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND TEXT OF MARKERS**

The lake and city of Detroit Lakes were named by a French missionary who wrote of "detroit" -- the French word for a strait or narrows. The area was known as Detroit until 1927 when the name was officially changed to Detroit Lakes. The Woods Trail, one of a series of Red River oxcart trails used between about 1830 and 1870, cut diagonally through the Detroit Lakes area. Detroit Lakes was a half-way point and resting point on the trail between Fort Snelling and Fort Gary at Winnipeg. Detroit Lakes was named the county seat when Becker County organized in 1871. The first village election was held in 1881. The city charter was adopted in 1903.

**Text of Geological Marker**

"The Lakes of Minnesota"

"The great ice ages that began about 1 million years ago, were characterized by the advance and the recession of huge ice sheets over vast areas of North America. These continental glaciers, originating in Canada, moved southward, scraping up mantle rock and soil which was dropped in central and southern Minnesota to produce plains and irregular belts of hills. Most of Minnesota's 10,000 lakes lie in such deposits and trace their origins directly or indirectly to glaciation.

"In the rugged surface that extends from Detroit Lakes to Alexandria, where glacial action was particularly vigorous, the lakes are irregular in outline. Elsewhere they may be round, long, wide, narrow, big, little, sun-warmed or ice-cold; shallow and sandy or rocky and deep; mucky and weed-fringed or clear as crystal; with or without islands, inlets, bays, sand bars, beaches, or cliffs. Taken together they give Minnesota a water area greater than that of any other state. Many exhibit landscapes of unusual beauty, but all, regardless of location

or character, add to Minnesota's most valuable mineral resource -- Water." Erected by the Geological Society of Minnesota, in cooperation with the Department of Highways, State of Minnesota 1960.

**Text of Metal Marker**

The marker has a map on the top. The text reads:

"The Woods Trail Through woodland and prairie, along river banks through sloughs, the mixed-blood American and Canadian buffalo hunters, called metis, blazed trails with their oxen and squeaky-wheeled wooden carts. They carried buffalo robes and pemmican from their homes along the Red River of the north to market in St. Paul, and then carried supplies back again. The heyday of the complex network of Red River trails lasted from about 1820 to 1872, when the first railroad reached the Red River at Moorhead.

"The northern most of the Red River trails ran through forested stretches along a portion of the 400-mile route. It was known as the Woods Trail and passed right through this location. The name was an exaggeration, since only the section from Detroit Lakes to Crow Wing was wooded. South from Pembina the trail crossed the Red and ran along the east bank through low savannah, dotted with willow, and onto a high and treeless prairie. It followed deep ridges of Glacial Lake Agassiz on the eastern border of the Red River Valley, entering the forest at Detroit Lakes. The trail proceeded along the Otter Tail and then the Leaf and Crow Wing Rivers to the east until it reached an important stopping point, the village of Crow Wing, which also lent its name to the trail. From there the Crow Wing trail made its way over sandy prairie on the east bank of the Mississippi to Sauk Rapids, where it merged with the Middle Trail, which took a more southerly route toward the Mississippi River, for the rest of the distance to St. Paul.

"Erected by Minnesota Historical Society and the Becker County Historical Society in 1996."  
[Seals of Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Minnesota Historical Society]

**Text of Gray Granite Historic Marker**

"Detroit Lakes the City with a Past"

"This lake and the city located on its northern shores received its name from the French word Detroit, meaning a narrow place in the lake and, in this case, referred to the bar which divides Little and Big Detroit Lakes today. This can be seen about one mile to the right of this location where a sandbar (now covered by water) separates the two lakes. Even today boats must use a marked a channel to pass between Big and Little Detroit Lakes. The story is told of the French priest who was traveling through the country and camped for the night on the north shore of what is now Detroit Lakes. In plain site of where the long outline of the bar was glimmering in the setting sun the Father exclaimed, 'See what a beautiful Detroit.'

"The first building in Detroit Lakes was a home built by Donald McDonald, just west of where the Pelican River enters Detroit Lakes, in 1854. When the Northern Pacific Railroad reached this area in 1871, it stopped at a small group of buildings that at that time was called Tyler's Mound, located on the eastern edge of today's city. This is the humble beginning of the city of Detroit, Minnesota, which retained that named until 1926 when it

was changed to Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, to avoid increasing postal confusion with Detroit, Michigan.

"The 'Lady of the Lakes,' one of many steamboats to use Detroit Lakes in the 1880s, would pick up vacationers and visitors near this very site who had disembarked from Spain, that came from Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Chicago. It would take them to Detroit and onto Shoreham, Minnesota, which is located approximately 2 miles southwest of this site on the Pelican River.

"Many of the early settlers who came to this area were civil war veterans coming to claim their 160 acres of homesteaded land. The village of Detroit was named the seat of Becker County in 1877 and was incorporated as a village in 1881."

"Erected by the City of Detroit Lakes and the Becker County Historical Society 1996"