

**MNDOT HISTORIC ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT
STRUCTURES INVENTORY**

BL-BJC-109
CS 0416
Lake Bemidji Overlook Walls

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|---|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| Historic Name Other Name | Lake Bemidji Overlook Walls | CS # SHPO Inv # | 0416 BL-BJC-109 |
| Location | East side of TH 197 at Mississippi River | Hwy District Reference | TH 197 2A 115.3 |
| City/Township County Twp Rng Sec USGS Quad UTM | Bemidji, City of Beltrami 146 33W Sec 16 Bemidj W; Bemidj E Z15 E358700 N5258500 | Acres Rest Area Class | 3.6 NA |
| Designer | Nichols, A R, Consult Land Arch | SP # | 24-54 (TH2) 0416-13 0416-31 |
| Builder | Minn Dept of Highways (MHD) | SHPO Review # | |
| Historic Use Present Use | Roadside Parking Area Roadside Parking Area | MHS Photo # | |
| Yr of Landscape Design | 1937 | MnDOT Historic Photo Album | |
| Overall Site Integrity | Moderately Altered | | |
| Review Required | Yes | | |
| National Register Status | Not Eligible, see Statement of Significance | | |
| Historic Context | Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960 | | |

List of Standing Structures

| Feat# | Feature Type | Year Built | Fieldwork Date |
|-------|----------------|------------|----------------|
| 01 | Overlook Wall | 1937 | 09-18-05 |
| 02 | Overlook Wall | 1937 | |
| 03 | Overlook Wall | 1937 | |
| 04 | Dock | Ca. 1985 | |
| 05 | Bridge/Culvert | 2003 | |
| 06 | Other Feature | 2004 | |

Prep by
Gemini Research
Jan. 06 G1. 115

Prep for
Site Development Unit
Cultural Resources Unit
Environmental Studies Unit

NOTE: Landscape features are not listed in this table

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Final Report | Historic Roadside Development Structures on Minn Trunk Hwys (1998) Supplement |
|---------------------|--|

▪ **BRIEF**

The Lake Bemidji Overlook Walls consists of a 950'-long roadside development project on the eastern side of T.H. 197 (Paul Bunyan Drive) just south of downtown Bemidji. The property is located on the western shore of Lake Bemidji and contains three stone overlook walls, Bridge 04022, a metal fence, a fishing pier, and several other elements.

▪ **STANDING STRUCTURES**

Overlook Wall A. Built 1937 by the MHD. Overlook Wall A is the northernmost of three identical stone overlook walls, each of which has a semicircular bay that projects toward Lake Bemidji. Overlook Wall A stands near the northern end of the site. Like the others, it is built of split granite boulders laid in a random rubble pattern. The wall of the structure is about 18" thick and about 2' tall on the inner (western) side. There is a 5'-wide flagstone walkway along the inner side of the wall. The rest of the "floor" of the overlook is paved with concrete that abuts the flagstone. The concrete is an original design element. (For additional wall measurements, see Overlook Wall C below.)

Overlook Wall B. Built 1937 by the MHD. Overlook Wall B is the central unit of three overlook walls. It stands about 150' south of Overlook Wall A. For design details, see Overlook Wall A above. For measurements, see Overlook Wall C below. Overlook Wall B has been altered with the installation of a piece of blue steel sculpture (dating from about the 1990s) that stands within the semicircle. The sculpture resembles a lighthouse and is mounted on a 3'-square treated wood base. A plaque affixed to the wooden base reads "Lighthouse. Kathy Gustafson, \$2,500, sponsored by Dr. Doug Williams DDS."

Overlook Wall C. Built 1937 by the MHD. Overlook Wall C is the southernmost of the three overlook walls. It is 38' long (north to south), with a semicircular bay that is 12' deep. The stone wall is 18" thick. Measured at about the midpoint of the semicircle, the wall is 2' tall on the inner (western) side and about 6' tall on the outer or lake side. Overlook Wall C does not have an inner flagstone walkway like walls A and B, but does have a concrete floor. (It is presumed the flagstone walkway has been removed.) For other design details, see Overlook Wall A above. Overlook Wall C does not appear on the original plans (S.P. 2-4-54) and may have been added to the project after the plans were drawn. It appears to be the same age as Overlook Walls A and B and to have been built by the same craftsmen.

Fishing Pier. Built circa 1985 by the City of Bemidji, Mn/DOT, and MnDNR. A simple wooden fishing pier is located about 200' south of Overlook Wall B. It projects into the water near the point where the Mississippi River flows into Lake Bemidji. A nearby wooden sign (standing just south of Overlook Wall B) reads "Lake Bemidji Fishing Pier, a cooperative project between City of Bemidji, Minnesota Department of Transportation, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Funds Donated by Knute Hultman." The current fishing pier replaces a previous fishing pier at approximately the same location.

Bridge 04022. Built 2003 by Mn/DOT. Included within the site is the northbound bridge of a pair of bridges built to carry T.H. 197 over the Mississippi River. They were built in 2002 and 2003 when T.H. 197 became a divided highway at this location. (The 2002 bridge, Br. 04024, is out of the site boundaries.) Bridge 04022 replaced a previous bridge (Br. 5316) which had been built in 1934 at approximately the same location.

Fence. Built 2004 by Mn/DOT. A steel fence runs along the shore in the southern half of the site (between Overlook Walls B and C). The fence is about 800' long, about 5' tall, and painted black. It has several rectangular bays that project toward the lake. It was built by Mn/DOT as part of S.P. 0416-31.

■ OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND PLANTINGS

According to the original plans, the MHD roadside development project originally landscaped both sides of the highway (also called Paul Bunyan Drive) from Second Street on the north, extending 1.2 miles to the south. For the purposes of this inventory, the following property boundary has been defined: bounded by the eastern T.H. 197 curblin on the west; by the water of Lake Bemidji on the east; by a line about 10' north of the northern edge of Overlook Wall A on the north; and by a line about 50' south of the southern edge of Overlook Wall C on the south. The rest of the original project area has been altered considerably and therefore is not within the boundaries for the purposes of this inventory.

The Lake Bemidji Overlook Walls are located on a narrow piece of land between Lake Irving on the west and Lake Bemidji on the east. The Mississippi River flows through this land (and through the site) between the two lakes. The topography of the site is generally flat, with elevation dropping as one moves eastward.

In addition to the Standing Structures listed above, the site's features include:

Gravel Footpath. May predate the 1930s. A narrow gravel footpath travels along the lakeshore below (east of) Overlook Walls A and B.

Boat Launch. May predate the 1930s. A gravel boat launch is located on the shore immediately below (east of) Overlook Wall A. It is accessed from the south end of Paul Bunyan Park's parking lot.

Boulevard. Built 1934 by Mn/DOT. A 5'-wide grassy boulevard or verge is located between the bituminous bike path and the T.H. 197 curb. The original plans for the site specified that it be 6' wide.

Fire Hydrant. Date unknown. A fire hydrant stands about 30' south of Overlook Wall B.

Parking Area. Built circa 1995 by City of Bemidji (poss. with Mn/DOT). The southern edge of Paul Bunyan Park parking lot juts into the northern end of the site boundaries as defined above. The parking area is bituminous and curbed. It is located just a few feet away from Overlook Wall A.

Concrete Sidewalk. Built 1985 by Mn/DOT. A 6'-wide, approx. 200'-long concrete sidewalk travels from the southern edge of Overlook Wall B southward to the fishing pier on the lakeshore. The sidewalk was built by Mn/DOT as part of S.P. 0416-13.

Riprapping. Installed pre-1985, 1985, 2004, most by Mn/DOT. The lakeshore is riprapped along the entire length of the site with boulders, as well as some discarded concrete pieces (which are near Overlook Walls A and B). Some riprapping was installed by Mn/DOT in 1985 (S.P. 0416-13). Much of the riprapping was installed by Mn/DOT in 2004 (S.P. 0416-31) (Swenson 2004; "Native" 2004-2005).

Signs. Installed circa 1985-2004 by Mn/DOT. The site includes about five signs, two of which stand very close to Overlook Wall B. The signs are the following: 1) a blue Mn/DOT sign reading "Tourist

Information” stands about 15’ north of Overlook Wall A; 2) a Mn/DOT sign reading “History Center/Museum and Historic Great Northern Depot” stands about 6’ south of Overlook Wall A; 3) a wooden MnDNR sign about the fishing pier (see Fishing Pier above) stands about 5’ south of Overlook Wall B; 4) a Mn/DOT stoplight advance-warning sign stands about 15’ south of Overlook Wall B; and 5) a Mn/DOT traffic island advance-warning sign stands about 150’ south of Overlook Wall B.

Streetlights. Installed circa 2003 by Mn/DOT. Within the property boundaries are about 8-10 streetlights on the eastern side of T.H. 197 that were installed circa 2003. (There are additional streetlights of a different type on Bridge 04022.) The original plans drawn by Nichols called for streetlights on both sides of the highway north of the bridge.

Bituminous Bike Path. Built 2004 by Mn/DOT. A 12’-wide bituminous bike and walking path travels the length of the site. The path was built by Mn/DOT as part of S.P. 0416-31, replacing a previous concrete sidewalk. Nichols’ original design for the site specified installation of a 5’-wide concrete sidewalk at about this alignment, leaving room for a 6’-wide grass boulevard. The sidewalk that Nichols specified was likely replaced when Mn/DOT installed a sidewalk at this location in 1969. The current bituminous path abuts the western edge of the three stone overlook walls, just as the concrete walk abutted the edges of the walls in the original plans. The bituminous bike path is part of a growing Bemidji trail system (“Native” 2004-2005; Swenson 2002).

Plantings. Installed 1937 and 2004 by Mn/DOT. The original plans specified the planting of about 400 trees and several hundred shrubs. The specified trees included red cedar (quantity 55), Colorado spruce (58), red pine (35), silver maple (63), Carolina poplar (81), Lombardy poplar (27), Wisconsin weeping willow (37), and American elm (72). Most of the trees were to be planted in naturalistic groups on both sides of the highway. However, on the western side of the highway north of the bridge, the plans specified a regular (rather than naturalistic) street tree pattern of American elms spaced about 60’ apart.

The specified shrubs included Pfitzer juniper (34), Savin juniper (10), Mugho pine (12), Tartarian maple (445? number unclear on the plan), coral dogwood (220), morrow honeysuckle (950), sweet mock orange (410), smooth sumac (125), garland spirea (200), and Persian lilac (125). The shrubs were to be planted in naturalistic groups on both sides of the highway.

The plans specified four types of ground cover: Kentucky blue grass, red top, Dutch white clover, and domestic rye.

Few, if any, of these original plantings remain. There is currently turf grass between T.H. 197 and the bituminous bike path, as well as immediately below (east of) Overlook Walls A and B. (There is rock riprapping rather than turf immediately below Overlook Wall C.)

Today the property has very few mature trees. They include a multi-trunk ash standing about 3’ from Overlook Wall A, a mature ash located midway between Overlook Walls A and B, and two elms and an ash south of Overlook Wall C. Mature volunteer shrubs (e.g., 6’-8’ tall) are growing along the lakeshore north of the Mississippi. Native shoreline buffer vegetation and about 20 young deciduous trees (ash, oak, etc.) were planted in 2004 east of the bituminous path (between the path and the water’s edge) between Overlook Walls B and C (“Native” 2004-2005).

One newspaper source indicated that new benches were to be installed along the bituminous path in 2005 (Swenson 2004). The benches were not on the site in Sept. 2005.

■ **SETTING**

The site is located within the city of Bemidji. It is surrounded by Paul Bunyan Park on the north, Lake Bemidji on the east, and T.H. 197, commercial buildings, and Lake Irving on the west and south. More city park land extends northward up the shore north of Paul Bunyan Park. West of the current highway's alignment is the Nymore Bridge, a reinforced concrete bridge (built in 1916) that marks the highway's pre-1934 alignment. The Nymore Bridge was listed on the National Register in 1989 and now carries a local street.

The focal point of Paul Bunyan Park is a pair of mammoth statues of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, both listed on the National Register. The statues were built in 1937, the same time the roadside development project was built. Among the park's other key features are a small amusement park (possibly dating from the 1930s but altered), a hip-roofed concession stand (circa 1978), and the Bemidji Tourist Information Center (which opened in 1995). At the west edge of the park (close to the highway) is the remnant of a small tourist information building built by the WPA in 1934, the year the highway was realigned at this location. (It was called "Bunyan House" and later the "Fireplace of States Building." This hexagonal building had a stone basement and log walls. The remnant stone basement has been converted into a storage shed and look-out platform with a sculpture. The building's impressive stone fireplace was moved eastward and incorporated into the 1995 Tourist Information Center when it was built.) Among the park's other features are two polygonal picnic shelters (dates unknown), playground equipment (recent), and a low stone-edged planting bed (circa 1934). The landscape near Paul, Babe, and the 1995 Tourist Information Center was altered circa 1995 with native shoreline plantings, a water feature, a large expanse of reddish concrete pavers, etc. The park's bituminous, curbed parking area was built circa 1995 and is located at the south end of the park, immediately north of Overlook Wall A.

■ **INTEGRITY**

Alterations

The property retains integrity of location and workmanship. However, integrity of design, materials, feeling, and association have been compromised by the loss of original vegetation and by the alteration and addition of several features including the southern part of Paul Bunyan Park Parking Lot (circa 1995) which adds an expanse of modern bituminous very close to Overlook Wall A, the fishing pier (circa 1985), the concrete sidewalk to the pier (1985), the lighthouse sculpture on Overlook Wall B (late 1990s?), Bridge 04022 (2003), new streetlights (circa 2003), the bituminous bike path replacing a concrete sidewalk (2004), the long steel fence (2004), and native shoreline plantings (2004).

The integrity of setting has been altered by Paul Bunyan Park's bituminous parking area (circa 1995), by the addition of Bridge 04024 (2002), by the fact that T.H. 197 from the Mississippi River southward has been rebuilt as a divided highway (2003), and by other changes. The 2002-2004 Mn/DOT alterations were part of a \$12 million, multi-year project to improve T.H. 197 south of Bemidji's downtown. The final paving of the highway at this location was done in 2004 (Swenson 2004).

Notes on Condition

While they were originally very well built, the stone overlook walls are now in poor condition with missing stones, failing and broken mortar joints, etc. Some loose stones are lying near the walls. The

site's plant materials are in fair to good condition. Most newer elements including the highway bridge, bike path, and fence are in good to excellent condition.

■ HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The project was built in 1937 by the Minnesota Department of Highways as a 1.2-mile roadside improvement of T.H. 2 (now T.H. 197) (S.P. 2-4-54). The north end of the project was Second Street, and the project extended southward a little more than a mile. The development occurred soon after the MHD realigned the highway at this location (1934) and paved it with concrete (1936). The concrete Nymore Bridge (1916) west of the site marks the pre-1934 highway alignment.

T.H. 197 at this location was originally numbered "2". Highway 2 was an important federal east-west route across the northern tier of states, as well being a state highway.

The original plans for the roadside development project were signed by A. R. Nichols (Consulting Landscape Architect), Harold E. Olson (Engineer of Roadside Development Division), and four other Mn/DOT officials: C. W. Lilly, [illegible name], O. L. Kipp, and J. T. Ellison. Ellison's signature is dated October 15, 1935 (S.P. 2-4-54).

The southernmost overlook – Overlook Wall C – does not appear on the original plans and was apparently added to the project after the plans were drawn. (Field-alteration of MHD roadside development plans was not uncommon in the 1930s.)

A. R. Nichols was the principal consulting landscape architect for the Roadside Development Division and was one of Minnesota's most prominent and prolific landscape architects. Harold E. Olson was the founding head of the Roadside Development Division and led the division for more than 30 years (Granger et al 1998).

The Roadside Development Division often joined forces with federal agencies such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to built roadside projects of this type during the Depression (Granger et al 1998). In the case of the Lake Bemidji Overlook Walls, however, federal relief labor was apparently not used. There are no references to such labor in the highway department records that Gemini Research examined, and a December 31, 1937, article in the *Bemidji Sentinel* which reviews the year's construction work in the city mentions the roadside development project, but not in the section of the article in which federal relief work is discussed.

The *Sentinel* article provides a brief description of the project and observes that it "gives Bemidji one of the most attractive highway entrances to any city in Minnesota" ("Work" 1937).

The following year, in 1938, the MHD Roadside Development Division also landscaped some triangular parcels of roadside about 3,000' or 4,000' south of Overlook Wall C. This work was near two intersections: T.H. 197 and Wood Avenue and T.H. 197 and Central Avenue (*Annual Report* 1938).

The Lake Bemidji Overlook Walls were developed at the same time as several other early auto-tourism-related amenities were built along the Lake Bemidji shore. These elements included a log tourist information building (1934), a fishing dock, a recreational building (ca. 1937), foot paths, stone retaining walls along Lake Boulevard (ca. 1937), statues of Paul Bunyan (1937) and Babe (1937), etc. Several were built by federal relief agencies. They were among many federal relief projects built in Bemidji during the Depression.

Bemidji residents began building auto-tourism amenities around 1910. These facilities and structures were concentrated especially on the Lake Bemidji shore at Diamond Point (near the Bemidji State University campus), along Lakeshore Blvd., and in Paul Bunyan Park and adjacent land (Amble 1996: 37-40).

■ **PREVIOUS SHPO REVIEWS**

There apparently have been no previous SHPO cultural resource reviews of the property.

■ **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The Lake Bemidji Overlook Walls were built in 1937 by the Roadside Development Division of the Minnesota Department of Highways. This property has been evaluated within the historic context "Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960." While original elements such as the three stone overlook walls remain relatively intact, several changes to the site have resulted in a loss of the historic physical integrity necessary for National Register eligibility. It is recommended that the property is not eligible for the National Register due to alterations.

As part of its evaluation, Gemini Research considered historical associations between the MHD's roadside development and the construction of Paul Bunyan, Babe the Blue Ox, and other auto-tourism-related elements along Lake Bemidji. Research suggested that the city parks and structures along the lake are a collection of elements that were not planned, designed, or built as part of a coordinated effort (although many were built by federal relief labor). Gemini found no direct links between the highway project and the city improvements, although they may exist. Gemini looked at the possibility of an historic district that might encompass MHD and city park land, but concluded that Paul Bunyan Park (the parcel nearest the Overlook Walls property) has lost the historic physical integrity needed for National Register eligibility.

If it is learned that the Lake Bemidji Overlook Walls were built by federal relief labor, they will be associated with the statewide historic context entitled "Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota." The property is unlikely to be eligible for the National Register within that context, however, due to alterations. The property is also associated with another statewide historic context, "Tourism and Recreation in the Lake Regions, 1870-1945," and is likely ineligible for the National Register within that context for reasons that include the physical alterations. The Lake Bemidji Overlook Walls property may require further evaluation for potential archaeological resources.

■ **OTHER COMMENTS**

This stretch of highway originally fell within MHD Control Section (CS) 0407 (T.H. 2). That control section was eliminated in 1982. The site is now in CS 0416 (T.H. 197).

A photo of one of the stone overlook walls is featured on the City of Bemidji's "Parks, Open Space, and Trail System Plan" web page.

T.H. 197 is fairly busy past the site. The traffic is traveling about 35-40 miles per hour.

■ REFERENCES

Amble, Rosemary Given. "Tools of Bemidji's Industry: Tourism." In *Bemidji: First City on the Mississippi. Bemidji Centennial, 1896-1996*. Bemidji: Bemidji Book Committee, 1996.

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■ ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Bemidji

The name "Bemidji" is derived from the Ojibwe word "Bay-may-ji-ga-maug" meaning "lake with cross waters," referring to the crossing of Lake Bemidji by the Mississippi River at this location. This crossing was home to a large Ojibwe community just before Euro-American settlement. Three large Ojibwe reservations – Red Lake, White Earth, and Leech Lake – are located nearby.

The town was settled by Euro-Americans in the 1890s and became a logging and sawmill center populated by Ojibwe, French Canadian, Scottish, Irish, Polish, Scandinavian, German, Finnish, and Icelandic people, many of whom worked in the timber industry. Many men logged during the winter and worked in sawmills during the summer. In 1920 one of Bemidji's sawmills was the second-largest in the nation (*Bemidji* 1996:46). The Great Northern Railway arrived in 1898 and the Soo Line in 1910.

Beginning in the 1910s, the town of Bemidji developed a considerable tourism industry, offering 400 fishing lakes nearby, as well as hotels, resorts, parks, and other amenities.

Bemidji State University was founded in 1919 as a state normal (teachers training) school. It now has a 90-acre lakeshore campus and 5,000 students.

Today, Bemidji's population is about 12,000.