

INTRODUCTION

. . . It is becoming more and more imperative to provide turnouts, overlooks, and roadside parking areas where the tourist may rest and enjoy the scenery with full degree of safety. . . . These roadside areas, when carefully planned and developed, can be convenient, restful, and impressive. They become an asset to the traveling public -- A. R. Nichols, 1940.

This inventory of historic roadside development structures was conducted by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) in 1996-1998. The project was a joint venture of Mn/DOT's Office of Technical Support (Site Development Unit and Cultural Resources Unit) and Office of Environmental Services (Environmental Services Unit).

The primary purpose of the study was to identify roadside development properties on current Mn/DOT right-of-way that are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Understanding the cultural significance of these resources will help Mn/DOT make informed decisions regarding their rehabilitation, improvement, or replacement, and will streamline Mn/DOT's environmental review process.

This study examined roadside development properties on current Mn/DOT right-of-way that contain pre-1961 standing structures -- that is, permanent, above-ground buildings, structures, and objects. (The study did not inventory landscapes without structures, or archaeological features such as burial mounds and oxcart trails.) A total of 102 properties were included in the inventory. The largest group of inventoried properties was built during the 1930s and early 1940s, which were formative years for the Minnesota Department of Highway's Roadside Development Division. These sites include scenic overlook walls, stone picnic tables, interpretive markers, small bridges, and other features that were designed to provide highway safety and beautification while blending with, or enhancing, their natural setting. Many sites were planned to provide the users of Minnesota's trunk highways with safe places to rest, eat, and stretch their legs during the drive. Small bridges and culverts were built as functional structures that also enhanced the scenic qualities of the highway. Historical and geological markers were erected to make the traveling experience more informative, and overlooks and small parks were built to provide public access to some of Minnesota's most compelling scenery.

The photographs in this report do not fully convey the universal appeal of many of these structures, or the beauty of their settings. Many of the sites were designed by Arthur R. Nichols, one of Minnesota's most important early landscape architects. Many represent excellent examples of the "National Park Service Rustic Style," a movement in American architecture and landscape design that produced appropriately-scaled, well-crafted structures of stone, concrete, and log that were designed to harmonize with the environment, rather than to dominate it.

INTRODUCTION

Many of the properties were built during the difficult days of the Depression by unemployed Minnesotans who sought work through such federally-funded programs as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Not only did these properties fulfill the objectives of roadside development, but they are the legacy of a broad public effort to reduce poverty by providing meaningful work for the unemployed and, at the same time, invest in needed public facilities that would serve future generations.

Today, decades after they were built, most of the roadside development properties in this inventory are still used, appreciated, and admired by thousands of travelers each year. The combination of Rustic style design, rare craftsmanship, and, for many, New Deal origin makes these publically-owned resources a distinctive collection that is historically significant and increasingly rare in the state. Most properties are still under the stewardship of Mn/DOT's Site Development Unit and Districts.

About half of the 102 properties in this inventory were determined to be eligible for the National Register. Many of the remaining properties, even though they do not meet the relatively strict National Register criteria, nonetheless possess compelling historical and architectural qualities that should be taken into consideration by Mn/DOT when making future management decisions.

During the next several years, Mn/DOT anticipates that many of its historic roadside development facilities will require repair, rehabilitation, improvement, or possible removal. Many have received little repair and maintenance and are in poor condition. Some are located on sections of trunk highway that are now so busy that access to the sites is difficult. It was the goal of the current project to cost-effectively inventory and evaluate the properties so that both immediate decisions and long-range plans will be based on accurate information and a good understanding of the significance of the sites.

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