



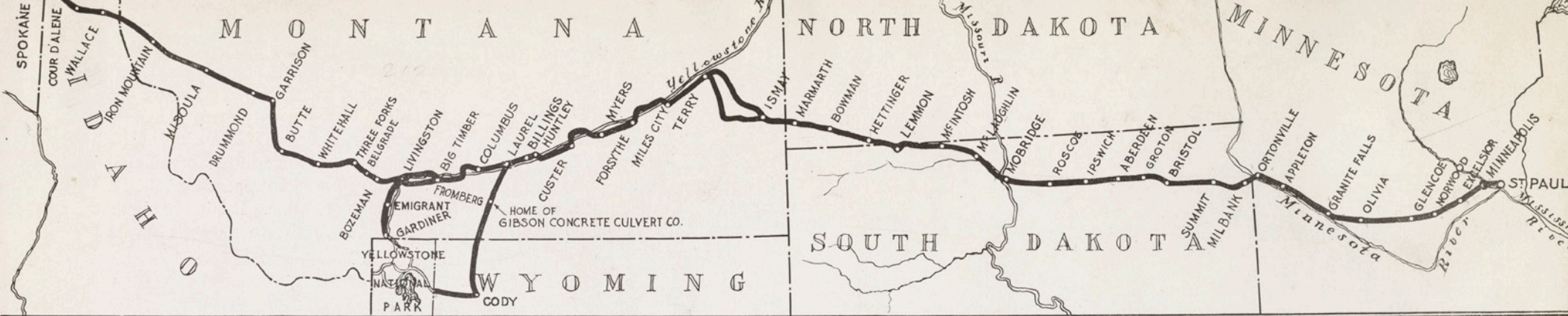
# Yellowstone Trail

## Cultural Heritage Tourism Master Plan

Prepared for Renville County Historical Society & Museum  
in association with Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota

**August 1, 2022**





Minnesota Historical Society

The map above, and those that appear on pages 17, 21, 24, 26, and 28, are from the *First Year Book of the Twin Cities-Aberdeen-Yellowstone Park Trail*, published in 1914. They represent the most accurate routes of the early Yellowstone Trail.

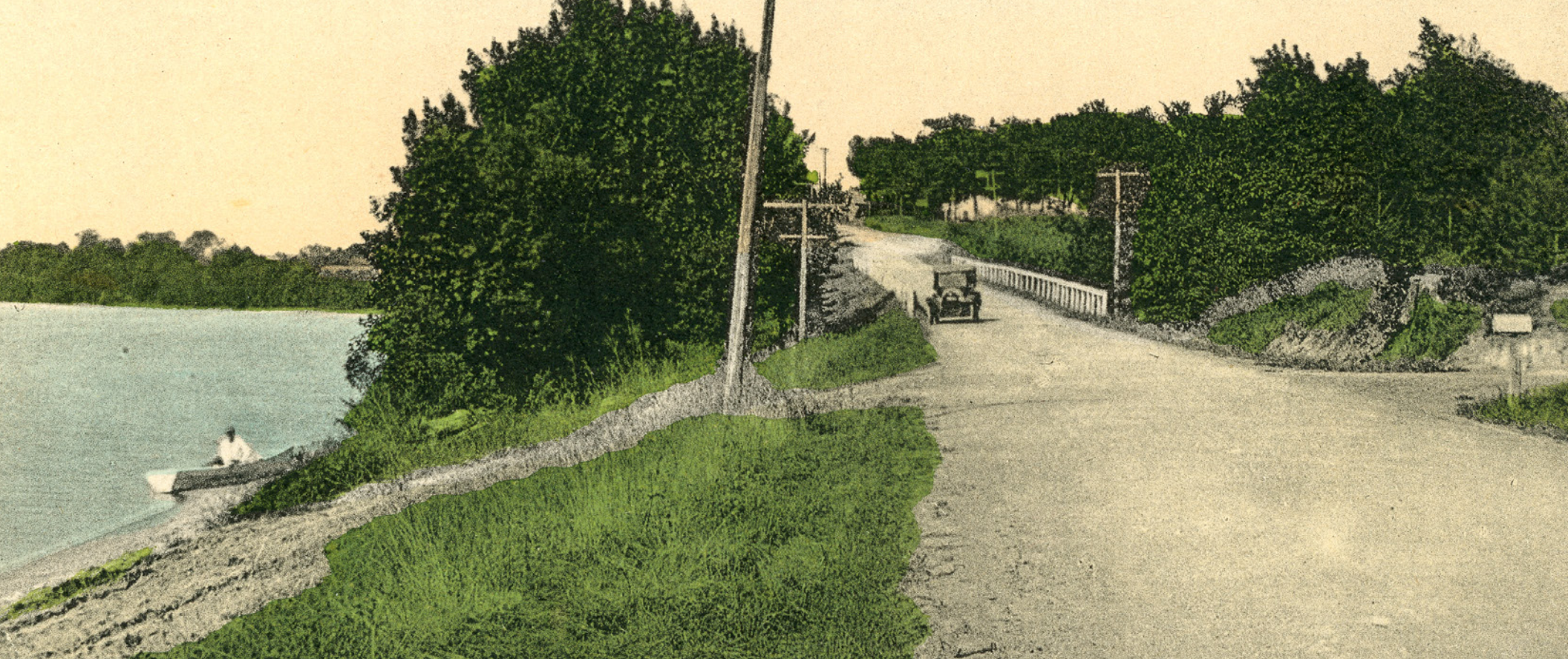
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This publication was made possible in part by the people of Minnesota through a grant funded by an appropriation to the Minnesota Historical Society from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund. Any views, findings, opinions, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the State of Minnesota, the Minnesota Historical Society, or the Minnesota Historic Resources Advisory Committee.





*Yellowstone Trail near Waconia, 1910s.*

Carver County Historical Society

## Introduction and Summary

This Cultural Heritage Tourism Master Plan sets out a vision and strategy for building awareness of, and drawing audiences to, the cultural heritage assets along the original route of the Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota. From west to east, this route started at the South Dakota border in Ortonville and connected with US212 at Granite Falls. It continued along US212 to Norwood Young America, where it picked up MN5, passing through the western suburbs of the Twin Cities into downtown Minneapolis. From St. Paul, it followed what is now the I94 corridor to the St. Croix River at Lakeland. The cultural heritage assets described in this plan include historic sites and museums, arts venues, natural features and landscapes, and events and festivals. Given the focus on tourism audiences, this plan highlights the places where travelers can stop, see, and experience history where it happened.



Much of the state's Yellowstone Trail corridor today is unrecognized and underserved by tourism outlets. The sites and stories are there but remain in the shadows. The process of mapping the cultural heritage assets along the Trail has been a foundational step in bringing new awareness to the history and culture of this region. Information from cultural asset mapping has been integrated with historical research and community input to identify marketing opportunities that will benefit individual communities and promote the Trail as an appealing road-trip experience. Reviving the Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota is a major objective of the overall master-planning vision; reviving the Yellowstone brand might be just as important.

The goals and activities that have emerged from this partnership have been laid out in a five-year implementation plan, with critical emphasis on increasing the visibility of the Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota and all of the features and destinations that make it an appealing road-trip experience. The great challenge here is in marketing the drive when so much of the traveling public is set on destinations. Through websites and possible travel apps or printed guides, the partner organizations can lead travelers to specific locations and reward them with site-specific views back in time, surprising stories, and share-worthy experiences.

#### **YELLOWSTONE TRAIL PLANNING PARTNERSHIP**

More than a hundred years ago, the first Yellowstone Trail planners managed to establish a coast-to-coast auto route in less than 10 years. Through grassroots organizing, they accomplished their goal by encourag-



*Founding of the Yellowstone Trail Alliance of Western Minnesota, Buffalo Lake, 2018.*

ing local communities and individuals to work cooperatively toward a grand, common vision. This cooperative strategy distinguished the movement from most other auto-trail and highway initiatives of the same time period. Today, it provides a new model for developing a cultural heritage corridor along the original Trail through Minnesota.

Following the lead of the original Yellowstone Trail Association and its antecedents (1912–1930), a partnership of historical societies has brought together a wide coalition of interested people and organizations to develop this Yellowstone Trail Cultural Heritage Tourism Master Plan. The group set out to establish a hub-and-spoke network for the purpose of collecting information and identifying cultural heritage assets

along the Minnesota portion of the Trail. At the core of the network are five partners, each of which enlisted the participation of organizations at various locations along the route. Those groups and organizations in turn provided contacts with many individuals who provided local knowledge and site-specific stories. The five core partners are:

- ➔ Big Stone County Historical Society & Museum, Ortonville
- ➔ Chippewa County Historical Society, Montevideo
- ➔ Renville County Historical Society & Museum, Morton
- ➔ Carver County Historical Society, Waconia
- ➔ Washington County Historical Society, Stillwater





*Alliance member Patrick Moore speaking at “Connecting Communities along the Yellowstone Trail,” Granite Falls, 2019.*

This partnership is led by Renville County Historical Society & Museum in association with Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota (YTMN), an emerging not-for-profit heritage organization. YTMN began as the Yellowstone Trail Alliance of Western Minnesota, holding its first meeting in January 2018. It was formed with the intent of coordinating historic, cultural, and recreational assets between Trail communities. The initial group included eight cities, from Granite Falls to Buffalo Lake. Just as the original Yellowstone Trail grew when new communities asked to join, so has YTMN. In 2019 the remainder of the western communities from Ortonville to Montevideo also began participating. Within the

timeframe of this master planning process, YTMN has expanded its scope to include communities along the entire Trail route, from Ortonville to Lakeland.

YTMN and the five partner organizations have fostered a relationship with the national Yellowstone Trail Association (YTA). Through the “Yellowstone National Trail Initiative,” the YTA aims to coordinate and amplify the efforts of all 13 states included in the Trail. The longer range vision, of which this master plan is a part, describes a national heritage tourism trail that would feature the panorama of American history, from coast to coast, including Yellowstone National Park.



*This contemporary image was adapted from a 1930s map of the Yellowstone Trail.*





*This 1915 photograph of Main Street in Hopkins, shows the yellow marker on a telephone pole (left), a reassuring sign for travelers following the Yellowstone Trail.*

Hopkins Historical Society

## A Brief History of the Yellowstone Trail, 1912–1930

It all started with a 26-mile stretch of road between Ipswich and Aberdeen, South Dakota. Led by local businessman Joe Parmley, a group of motivated citizens decided that if they wanted a good road through their communities, they'd have to build it themselves. This, town-by-town, grassroots approach set the Yellowstone Trail apart from other cross-country roads taking shape in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>1</sup>

In 1912, the federal government had limited authority to fund the construction and maintenance of local roads, except for an unconnected collection of military and post roads—those used for Rural Free Delivery. Likewise, few states provided for road building, or for naming and marking routes. If a rural community wanted a road, its citizens had to build it and keep it graded. This system generally met expectations, especially since most goods



and people moved by way of railroads, not country roads. With the increasing popularity and affordability of automobiles, however, the demand for better roads also grew. More importantly, auto travelers and the communities that served them wanted roads that connected the places people wanted to go.

### From Coast to Coast

*An automobile relay race, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, is being run over the Yellowstone trail this week. Hon. M. J. Dowling of Olivia will drive the relay from Glencoe to that place. The first lap was started at Plymouth Rock on Monday, and according to the schedule the racers will pass through Glencoe, Olivia, Hector, etc., in the evening of September 7th. The relay car carries a small American flag and the Yellowstone trail pennant mounted on a light staff.*

— *Willmar Tribune*, September 6, 1916

Driving in ruts, dust, and mud aggravated many travelers, perhaps none more than Joe Parmley. Always the energetic instigator, Parmley gathered a group of civic leaders who quickly committed to making improvements on the road between Ipswich and Aberdeen, South Dakota, and extending the route west to Mobridge on the Missouri River. As word got around, other towns and counties joined in and before long, road enthusiasts were talking about an extensive network of cross-country roads that connected towns and people over great distances. The idea of a “great national highway” across the northern tier of states was taking root. Before long, road enthusiasts were talking about “A Good Road from Plymouth Rock to Puget Sound.”<sup>2</sup>

The Twin Cities–Aberdeen–Yellowstone Park Trail Association was established in October 1912, its main purpose being to advocate for a single highway from the Twin Cities to Yellowstone National Park. The group’s strategy was to build a coalition of members along the proposed route who would promote the Trail feverishly and lobby county governments to support the project.

The sales pitch included better roads between communities and promised a flood of new tourists—traveling by automobile, seeking interesting destinations, and always in need of services. The Association was supported by membership dues—individuals, towns, and cities—and fueled by the energy of local supporters, each looking after their own communities, together establishing a multi-state highway.<sup>3</sup>

The first years of the Association were spent doing the hard work of locating the route and upgrading the roadbed of the Twin Cities to Yellowstone route. The Trail roughly followed the Milwaukee Road tracks and made use of existing roads to the greatest extent possible, some already paved in gravel, others little more

than paths along western foothills. Following the Trail during these early years meant navigating frequent turns and intersections, all of which had to be marked, boldly and accurately. Chrome yellow was the chosen color, painted on fence posts, lamp posts, telegraph poles, rocks, and anything else that seemed permanent. Seeing a yellow band around a pole let drivers know they were on the right road, and large stone or concrete markers painted with arrows make it clear which way to turn to remain on the Trail. A standard logo was adopted in 1914, consisting of a yellow circle with an arrow pointing the way to Yellowstone. This appeared consistently on road signs as well as the Association’s letterhead and all publications.

By 1915 the Association had shortened its name to Yellowstone Trail Association, agreed to extend the Trail west to Seattle and east to Chicago, and formally adopted the motto “A Good Road from Plymouth Rock to Puget Sound.” Increasingly, the Association’s efforts turned to promotion, aiming to fulfill the promise of this good road. Frequent races, rallies, and road-tour adventures garnered attention from newspapers and made the Yellowstone Trail synonymous with high-speed travel. Within just a few years of its founding, the Trail was developing a public brand.

The Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 was a turning point in the development of a national highway system. By assisting states with funding for road construction, the Act was a positive response to years of lobbying for better roads across the country. The wildfire of enthusiasm that established the Yellowstone Trail was burning



in other good-roads organizations as well. With new funding, these established routes saw transformative improvements, establishing new state agencies and operations that would eventually make the Yellowstone Trail Association, and others of its kind, obsolete. But for the next decade, the Association was riding high and expanding its influence and services to travelers.<sup>4</sup>

Michael J. Dowling (1866–1921), auto dealer and political representative from Olivia, Minnesota, played an outsized role in bringing the Association to greater prominence. He served as president from 1917 to 1918, during which time he oversaw the extension of the Trail to the East Coast and led the charge to popularize the Trail, helping make it a household name in every region it served. Losing his two feet, a forearm, and the fingers on one hand to freezing while stranded in a blizzard at the age of 14, Dowling went on to become a businessman, an advocate for disabled children, Speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives 1901–1903, and candidate for Governor in 1919. Today he is best remembered as a valiant promoter of the Yellowstone Trail. His many newsworthy road trips brought attention to the route and demonstrated the fun and adventure of cross-country automobile touring.<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1920s, the Association and its members were a considerable political force, exerting pressure on townships, counties, and state houses to increase funding for roads. They had also become an effective marketing machine, dedicated to serving tourists and driving traffic into its members' communities. They published and gave away maps, guides, and brochures



*Michael J. Dowling (sixth from right with a beard), showing off the “Good Road” trophy awarded to Renville County, about 1910.*

to travelers all along the Trail. Even in the 1920s, cross-country road trips could be arduous adventures. To encourage more people to hit the road, the Association eased the challenge by giving away up-to-date maps and information about amenities—from places to eat and camp to garages that could tend to the unavoidable breakdowns experienced on even the shortest road trip. They established “Travel Bureaus” in major cities and helped smaller communities set up tent bureaus where volunteers handed out maps and offered advice and directions. From the travelers perspective, this was a welcomed service. From the community’s perspective,

this was economic development. Over time, businesses latched onto the Yellowstone Trail brand, trading on the name and its positive image. Countless repair shops borrowed the Yellowstone name, along with hotels, cafes, and campgrounds.

In reflecting on the end of the Yellowstone Trail Association, historians Alice and John Ridge suggest that the trail “had been an idea born out of a necessity that was ending.” Indeed, after years of grassroots organizing, aiding auto tourists, and lobbying for public funds to build and maintain roads, the Association had signifi-



cantly influenced the development of a national highway system. Through incremental steps, the federal government, and state agencies, were taking on more and more of the responsibility for providing the driving public with good roads that took them to the places they wanted to go. In 1925 the confusing system of named highways and trails, painted poles, and arrows came to an end when the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Public Roads and the American Association of State Highway Officials formulated a standardized numbering system for the country's network of roads and highways. Until then, only a few states had numbered their roads, more often for logistical reasons than for helping travelers get from here to there.<sup>6</sup>



*Walter Lang, owner of the Yellowstone Garage, Brownton, about 1951.*

The Yellowstone Trail Association closed its doors in 1930. But this didn't erase the hundreds of yellow signs and markings across the country. It didn't cause businesses to drop the Yellowstone name. And, in communities across the northern tier of states, people continued calling their highway the Yellowstone Trail for years to

come. In Minnesota, the most permanent vestige of the Trail was set into law in 1959 when US212, from Edina to Ortonville was designated the Yellowstone Trail.<sup>7</sup>

## The Yellowstone Trail Today

Today's publicly funded roads and highways are defining elements in almost every American landscape. They are so much a part of daily life that it's hard to imagine a time without them. By reviving the stories of the Yellowstone Trail, cultural heritage groups are encouraging the driving public to stop along these highways and take a closer look at the historic sites, landscapes, and roads, and explore some of the changes that trails like this brought to communities across the state and country. Much like the original Yellowstone Trail Association did a century ago, today's organizations are promoting tourism and increasing awareness of the defining places and stories that are always just around the next corner.

At the national level, a new [Yellowstone Trail Association](#) was formed in 2003. Its purpose has been to raise awareness of the historical Trail, preserve its legacy through research, and promote heritage tourism through events and outreach. It has become the most important source of publications on the Trail's history. In recent years, a few states along the Trail have seen the formation of groups with similar objectives. Among the more active of these groups is the Yellowstone Trail Alliance of Western Minnesota (now [Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota](#)), which was formed in 2018. Inspired by the cooperative vision of the original Association, this



*Yellowstone Trail cigar box, Milbank, SD, about 1920.*

group includes individuals and representatives from historical organizations and municipalities across the state. Just as the original group built a network of members along the Trail, the Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota (YTMN) includes active partners all along the route, from border to border. By supporting and promoting sites and activities in many locations, they are building awareness of a connected experience for travelers along the 200-mile route. Also, recognizing the economic value of their local cultural heritage, the partners see the potential for community-development outcomes not unlike those envisioned by the original Yellowstone Trail Association.

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7. *Minnesota Statutes*, 161.14, Subdivision 9.





*Once part of the original Yellowstone trail, this section of road near Excelsior still bears the name, 2022.*

Scott McGinnis, Excelsior-Lake Minnetonka Historical Society

## Interpretive Plan for Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota

This Interpretive Plan is a joint effort of five cultural heritage organizations in association with Yellowstone trail of Minnesota. At this point, the cooperative partnership has agreed to develop an overarching interpretive plan and a set of shared goals developed specifically for the partnership.



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## Mission

An organization's mission expresses its fundamental purpose and says where it will direct its energy.

*To promote a destination corridor that includes communities from Ortonville to Lakeland through the celebration, revitalization and development of arts, cultural, historic and recreational assets along the Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota. Through promotional events and media, the YTMN aims to awaken the affinity between travelers and the historic places they see and hear about along today's Yellowstone Trail.*

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## Vision

An organization's vision is a forward looking statement that evokes an image of the positive changes it believes are possible for the communities of its region. It points to the enduring value of the organization to the people it serves.

*The historic Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota—revived as a collaborative partnership and driving route—gives travelers new ways to see the communities along their journey—as a string of connected destinations, each with its own stories and attractions. Through widely distributed interpretive media, cities and towns along the Trail will pique the interests of travelers, resulting in more stops and longer stopovers. Over time, more communities will see the value of the Yellowstone Trail, furthering its reach and deepening its influence between states from coast to coast.*



## Audiences

These are the groups and individuals the organization must serve in order to advance its vision and mission. Characteristics of these audiences, such as age, who they're traveling with, interests, leisure choices, etc. help indicate the ways they are likely to engage with the offerings along the Trail. Potential audiences for the YTMN break into two groups:

### 1. TRAVELERS ON THE YELLOWSTONE TRAIL

*Vacationers, festival attendees, and people visiting friends and family*—These groups and individuals make up the primary audience for Yellowstone Trail promotional materials, destinations, and related activities. While this audience has not been surveyed specifically for the purposes of the Yellowstone Trail, studies over the past 10 to 20 years, some by the University of Minnesota Tourism Center, provide useful insights about these travelers—who they are and why they're driving through southwestern Minnesota. These studies describe a traveling audience that is generally of retirement age with grown children, white, and financially well off. Typically, they are traveling for leisure and some are traveling to visit friends and relatives.

Conversations with the area's Convention and Visitor Bureaus will provide more updated information and reveal emerging trends, such as an increase in younger families with children, more diverse travelers, or more people visiting the region for outdoor recreation, including RV camping.



*Island Days regatta parade, Bird Island, 2021.*

**Local residents**—With a focus on tourism, it's easy to overlook the people who live and work in the communities along the Trail. Building awareness of the cultural heritage of these places, and the activities that support that heritage, can help strengthen community identity and promote the idea that these are great places to live.

**School Age Groups**—Students and their families make up an important subset of the Trail's local audiences. Cultural heritage destinations along the Trail, including museums and historic sites, already attract school-age children from nearby schools and home-school groups. This audience will likely increase when offered

a wider range of programs, such as day camps for out-of-school learning and site-specific activities including heritage camping, agricultural programs, and merit-badge activities for scouts. Reaching teachers and school administrators with program opportunities that meet the state's academic standards presents an ongoing challenge for historic sites and museums.

### 2. COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

**Partner/member organizations**—The work of the YTMN relies on the involvement of committed partners along the Trail. The organization must serve their interests and keep them engaged through frequent communications and regular gatherings.



**Employees and elected officials of towns and cities along the Trail**—These individuals will make use of YTMN resources and look to the organization as a clearing house for all things related to the Yellowstone Trail.

**Experience providers**—These are the civic organizations, business owners, and local boosters who create the festivals, prepare and sell the food and drink, and host the programs, plays, and tours that travelers stop for. The Yellowstone Trail gives them one more way to market their offerings.

## Interpretive Themes

These statements or phrases say what a place is about. For the Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota, these themes say what the destinations along the corridor are about and hold the stories for each place.

### OVERARCHING INTERPRETIVE THEME

**Connecting Communities**—When the Yellowstone Trail was first envisioned in 1912, its organizers selected a group of geographically aligned towns and cities and

connected them into “The best long road in the world.” Today’s YTMN takes that one step further, involving many of the same places in ways that support and benefit a wider corridor of communities aligned by their cultural heritage and recreational offerings.

### SUPPORTING THEMES

**Town Spirit**—Travelers might not feel the energy of a community until they’re invited to step out of their cars and into a special event, historic site, or place to eat. Once they do, these places are no longer anonymous intersections on the highway. These are the places people call home.

**The Richest Farmland Around**—Much of the human landscape that travelers see while driving through southern Minnesota can be traced back to the area’s great expanse of fertile soils and abundant water. The Yellowstone Trail draws an ecological transect across the state, starting with hardwood forest in the east through oak brushlands, prairie wetlands, upland prairies, and finally the floodplain forests of the Upper Minnesota River Valley. These deep natural resources have attracted generations of agricultural innovators, developing new crop varieties, from apples to corn, and new methods for conserving the land.

**Momentous Geology**—The natural beauty of the prairies, lakes, and rivers along the Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota is the result of a combination of geological events that only happened here. These landscapes hold stories that will change how people think about each scenic vista they see along the Trail.



*Yellowstone Trail through Renville, 1940s.*

Renville County Historical Society



**Great American Road Trip**—By making Yellowstone National Park the signature destination of this trail, the original organizers were clearly making an appeal to those early motorists eager to see America. Enjoy the drive, the real destination is in the journey. Today's Trail carries much the same attitude about travel and the chance discoveries of new sights and stories.

## Audience Engagement Strategies

These are the ways that YTMN will engage and motivate travelers to explore the Trail's cultural heritage, from one community to the next. These strategies will be employed in all media—from trail signs and websites to live programs and museum exhibits.

**Conversation and Storytelling.** These are among the most powerful ways to draw visitors into the cultural heritage of a place and its people. The stories and images that get people asking questions and talking with one another will become the most highly prized assets of experience providers along the Trail. "I was there when it happened . . ."

**Accessible Locations.** These are the curbsides, overlooks, parks, and structures that visitors can access comfortably. Ideally, these locations are compelling, attractive, and welcoming, providing specific views into history where it happened. "You're standing on the very spot where . . ."

**Then and Now Set-ups.** High quality historical images that represent the same views that people see to-



*Renville County Artisan and Farmers Market, 2021.*

day prompt visitors to zoom between the present and specific moments from the past. Finding details in old photos that reveal change over time can be as fun as mastering a puzzle.

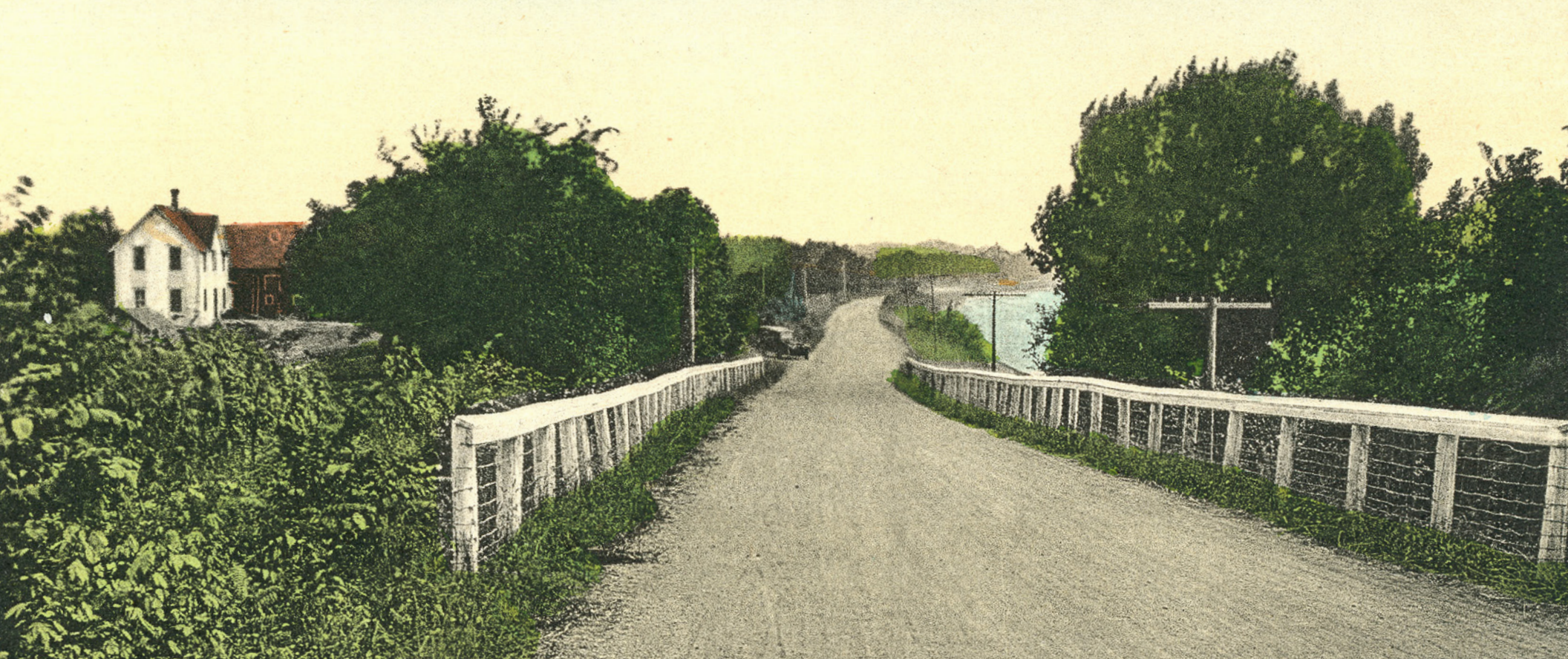
**Consistent and Welcoming Wayfinding.** Through various marketing elements, travelers at every stop along the Trail will know that they have joined a kind of tour that promises a range of worthwhile experiences. "So, what's next on this Trail?"

**Places for Nostalgia.** While not every visitor will have personal memories of the places and events along the Trail, nostalgia for times past can be a strong motivator for deeper explorations into a community's cultural heritage. Visitors' own memories of ethnic traditions and popular culture can also spark conversations and

storytelling among friends and family. "Did I ever tell you how we used to . . ."

**Connected Attractions.** Visitors enjoy collecting experiences, especially when they know there's a fun take-away at the end. Passport programs are a good example. One small way the YTMN could engage travelers in this kind of experience would be to highlight specific artifact collections in museums along the route—a different collection every year. Collaboratively, a group of museums would all agree to exhibit examples of one type of artifact—wood carvings, quilts, postcards, etc. Travelers interested in quilts will be prompted to stop at every museum promising an exhibit of quilts, then record their accomplishment with a photo op. "Quilts don't interest me, but I'll be by next year for the wood carvings."





*Along the Yellowstone Trail, near Waconia, Minnesota. Postcard, 1910s.*

Carver County Historical Society

## Cultural Heritage Assets on Today's Yellowstone Trail

A traveler crossing Minnesota on the original Yellowstone Trail drove through a diverse range of landscapes and cultural regions. The changes from one region to the next—each distinguished by scenery, geology, land use, and human history—are readily observable even today, especially if travelers are alerted to those differences along the way. This interpretive mapping of cultural heritage assets organizes the sites and features along the Trail in ways that connect them to each other, to the landscapes, and to the broader historical trends that link past and present.



## West to East

The Yellowstone Trail got its start in the West, on a section of road near Aberdeen, South Dakota. From there it expanded east to the Twin Cities, while also connecting to Yellowstone National Park. In its early years, the Trail was seen as an invention of the West that only later linked up with the eastern seaboard. In their newly published guide to the Yellowstone Trail, historians Alice A. and John Wm. Ridge start their state-by-state inventory of sites and features in Seattle, WA, in many ways going against the conventional east to west trajectory of American history. It's in this spirit that this mapping of assets starts at the South Dakota border and heads east. It's also worth noting that Minnesota, roughly around Granite Falls, marks the midway point of the Trail as it crosses the continent.<sup>8</sup>

## Five Segments of Minnesota's Yellowstone Trail

Drawing on the interpretive value of the changing landscapes across the state, this mapping of cultural heritage assets is divided into segments, each representing a distinct region and grouping of communities connected by shared histories and geographies. The segments are:

1. **Upper Minnesota River Valley**—*Ortonville to Granite Falls*
2. **Prairie Farm Towns**—*Granite Falls to Norwood Young America*
3. **Edge of the Big Woods**—*Norwood Young America to Excelsior*
4. **Twin Cities**—*Excelsior to Woodbury*
5. **River Towns and Crossings**—*Woodbury to the St. Croix River*

The original Yellowstone Trail route was laid out in ways that best served auto travelers and the communities linked together by the Trail. Bringing travelers into each town or city along the route was an important economic objective—providing amenities to travelers while promoting local commerce. This is why the original Trail seldom skipped Main Street and why YTMN aims to guide travelers into communities wherever possible along the route.

The route taken by the Trail across Minnesota has changed many times over the years, no more significantly than in 1959, when the Yellowstone Trail designation was officially assigned to U.S. Highway 212. Today's maps show a much different route than that of the original Trail. U.S. 212 diverges from the earlier route at two points, between Ortonville and Granite Falls and between Norwood Young America through Minneapolis and St. Paul to the St. Croix River. Most notably, US212 ends/begins at the intersection with US169 in Edina. These differences continue to confuse history-minded travelers and have fueled years of debate about the actual route.<sup>9</sup>

The YTMN partners have made no strict rule regarding the inclusion or exclusion of sites and features in this mapping. With travelers in mind, the partners who know each region offered guidance for each stretch of highway, sometimes including sites that are a 15-minute drive off the trail. Decisions were often influenced less by geography and more by thematic relevance, such as connections to famous people, industries, military activity, town baseball, etc.





# 1. Upper Minnesota River Valley—Ortonville to Granite Falls

Along this 70-mile stretch of the Yellowstone Trail, travelers move back and forth between upland prairie farmlands and the wooded and rocky Minnesota River Valley. Visitors experience a landscape scoured for millennia by glaciers and wide torrents of water, exposing some of the oldest bedrock on Earth and leaving behind extensive wetlands bustling with wildlife. Taking the occasional turnoff, travelers can see great migrations of water birds and many historic river and railroad towns. This segment of the Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota features the highest density of parks and nature areas and, in recent years, has gained recognition for its destination arts events. The Upper Minnesota Valley Economic Development Commission has established robust interpretive and promotional initiatives that mesh well with the mission and objectives of YTMN, especially those organized under the National Scenic Byways program.

**Marsh Rainbow Arch Bridge, Ortonville**—This 1920 concrete bridge spans the Minnesota River near its headwaters. Now part of a walking trail, it once carried Yellowstone Trail drivers across the Minnesota.

**Paul Bunyan's Boat Anchor, Big Stone County Museum, Ortonville**—The museum's signature artifact is a large granite sculpture, built as a symbol of the ancient glacial River Warren—but is better known as Paul Bunyan's boat anchor. Other highlights include a Muskegon-Golden Bantam boat and the Charles Hanson North American Wildlife Collection, featuring more than 500 preserved and mounted specimens of waterfowl from across the Americas and the world.

**Big Stone Lake State Park, Ortonville**—This is where the Minnesota River starts. From here downriver to Manka-



*Main Street Ortonville, 1920s*

to, travelers see a distinctly riverine landscape where the water flows over rocky patches eroded from the oldest exposed bedrock on Earth. The Bonanza Education Center features exhibits on the natural history of the Lake.



**Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge, Odessa**—Operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service since 1975, the refuge includes more than 11,000 acres in Big Stone and Lac qui Parle Counties. It has become a favorite destination for watching migrating waterfowl. An Auto Tour Route is open from early spring to late fall.

**Odessa Village Jail, Odessa**—Jails like this one built in 1913 were a common site in small towns during the early years of the Yellowstone Trail. When someone was arrested in Odessa—typically for drunkenness or petty crimes—this is where they landed. The structure was condemned in 1945 and has remained vacant since. It is not open to the public.

**Arv Hus Museum, Milan**—This museum, with its density of artifacts and photographs, is the best place in town to get the full history of Milan and its surrounding area.

**Lac qui Parle Mission, Watson**—The mission was founded in 1835 and became a site for Christian missionary work with the Dakota people. It was here that the first Dakota language dictionary was written, and part of the Bible was translated into that language for the first time. The original building was abandoned in 1854, after the mission's relationship with the Dakota deteriorated. In 1941, Lac qui Parle was designated a state park, and the Works Progress Administration reconstructed the Lac qui Parle Mission building that stands today. It is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society and managed by the Chippewa County Historical Society.

### **Pežihutazizi K'api, Upper Sioux Community**

Named for “the place where they dig for yellow medicine,” the Upper Minnesota River Valley has been the homeland of the Dakota Oyate (Nation) for thousands of years. In 1851 four bands, or Council Fires, of Dakota signed treaties with the United States, relinquishing all of what is now southern Minnesota—more than 24 million acres. After the treaties were ratified in 1853, nearly all Dakota living in this region were removed from their homes to a reservation here on the Minnesota River. Following the removal, the United States failed to fulfill the obligations of the treaties, leaving many Dakota to starve. Desperation caused by the broken treaties led to the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. In the punishing aftermath of the war, 38 Dakota men were hanged, and the governor of Minnesota ordered the complete removal of Dakota from the state. Despite these actions, some Dakota managed to remain in the region and others eventually returned. Today's [Upper Sioux Community](#) was established in 1938, when 746 acres of original Dakota lands in Minnesota were returned to the Dakota people.

The entire length of the original Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota was built on Dakota homeland. Where it follows the Minnesota River from Ortonville to Granite Falls, the Trail passed by many Dakota cultural sites, some with connections to the [US-Dakota War of 1862](#). In collaboration with Minnesota Historical Society, the [Minnesota River Valley National Scenic Byway](#) and its partners have developed and disseminated extensive interpretive resources on these sites and the historical landscapes of this Dakota homeland. Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota—through well-established relationships between the Byway and the heritage organizations working in the Upper Minnesota River Valley—will seek opportunities to link its interpretive guides and maps to the existing resources of the Byway, connecting travelers to Dakota stories and places.

**Lac qui Parle State Park, Watson**—Watson calls itself the “Goose Capitol of the World”—for good reason. In the spring and fall, it's a stopover destination for migrating water birds, including thousands of Canada geese. Lac qui Parle is a French translation of the name given to the lake by the Dakota, who called it Bde leda<sup>17</sup>, “little talking lake.” At times, when ducks and geese cover the

lake, the chorus of honking and quacking sounds as if the lake itself is talking.

**Milwaukee Road Heritage Center, Montevideo**—Started by a local group of railroad history enthusiasts, the Center focuses on preserving the legacy of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad, commonly

remembered as the Milwaukee Road. Among its collections are an extensive model railroad, a 200-ton crane, a 1935 heavyweight baggage/express car, a 1940s streamlined baggage car, a 50-foot-long flatcar, a Milwaukee Road caboose, a Touralux sleeper named “The Mount Rushmore,” and a 600-horsepower diesel-powered switch engine built in 1939. The Center’s signature feature is a fully restored 90-foot-long turntable, built in 1913. It was used by the railroad to move steam locomotives in and out of a 26-stall roundhouse.

**Historic Chippewa City, Montevideo**—This late 1800s village has been recreated from 24 historic buildings, including a one-room schoolhouse, authentic log cabins, a millinery shop, blacksmith shop, general store, and an 1880s church. The 20-acre, parklike setting features a town square and bandstand gazebo. It is operated by the Chippewa County Historical Society and is an official Tourism Welcome and Information Center.

**Swensson Farm Museum, Montevideo**—Olof Swensson (1843–1923) was well known for his design and construction abilities, religious beliefs, writings, and political beliefs. After living in the U.S. for more than 20 years, Swensson was disturbed by the country’s political and economic situation. Being a man of action, Swensson wrote a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution and had it printed in 1892. The 17-acre farmstead, built between the 1880s and 1900s, includes a 22-room brick farmhouse, a fully restored timber-framed barn, a gristmill with hand-cut millstones, and a family burial plot. It is operated by the Chippewa County Historical Society.



*Granite Falls Suspension Bridge, about 2015.*

**Wegdahl Park, Wedgahl**—This county park sits on the Minnesota River and features camper cabins, a bike trail, picnic shelter and playground. There’s easy public access to the river, making it a popular destination for anglers and paddlers.

**Andrew J. Volstead House Museum, Granite Falls**—After an early career as a teacher and attorney, Andrew J. Volstead (1860–1947) stepped into political life becoming mayor of Granite Falls in 1900. He was then elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, serving from 1903 to 1923, becoming best known as the “Father of Prohibition.” In 1922 Volstead worked with Kansas

senator, Arthur Capper, to draft the Capper–Volstead Act, which aimed to protect cooperatives, effectively supporting their growth and influence in ways that are evident in today’s world of business and commerce.

**Granite Falls Footbridge, Granite Falls**—This 1935 pedestrian bridge was designed by Roebling & Sons Company—best known for the design and construction of the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City. As a true suspension bridge, the pedestrian roadbed is supported by a series of cables strung between towers rising up from the riverbed.



**Memorial Park, Granite Falls**—This city park, planned in the mid 1920s, was first dedicated in 1929, before it was completed. It wasn't completed until the 1930s,

when the federal Works Progress Administration provided the money and labor to get the job done. The Park's largest structure is a two-level shelter house,

built mostly of granite. Its upper floor formed a covered picnic area with a huge stone fireplace, electricity, and tables. The lower level provided space for the first local museum, which was housed here until the present county museum was built in 1967.

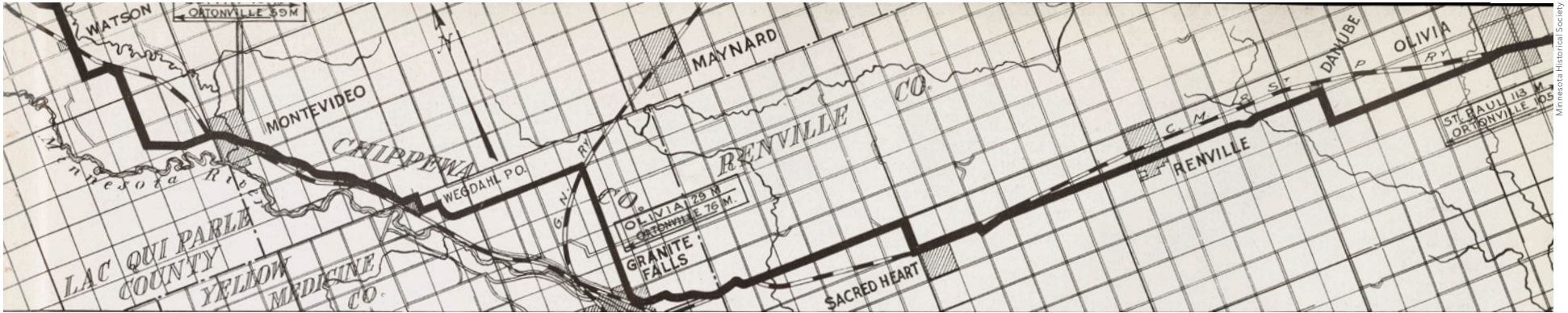


*Yellowstone Trail "Sociability Run," Granite Falls, 2019*

**Yellow Medicine County Museum, Granite Falls**—Nestled along the banks of the Minnesota River, the Yellow Medicine County Historical Society and Museum was founded in 1937, underneath the shelter in Memorial Park. The Museum hosts a number of Native American artifacts, Scandinavian heritage items, Civil War through the Gulf War memorabilia, and artifacts depicting everyday life in Yellow Medicine County. The Museum site sits near what is believed to be some of the oldest exposed bedrock in the world. Geologists estimate this bed of granitic gneiss was formed 3,800,000,000 years ago.

**Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls**—This recent addition to the area's museum offerings is home to an impressive collection of fully restored and operational aircraft and vehicles from World War II. The site includes three hangars (Trainer Hangar, Fighter Hangar, and Bomber Hangar), a WWII Quonset hut, and control tower. Its exhibits also feature fine artworks, bronze sculptures, interactive multimedia, and an ever-growing library. The facility is designed as a self-guided experience, giving a rare look into the lives and legacy of the Greatest Generation.





## 2. Prairie Farm Towns—Granite Falls to Norwood Young America

Heading east out from Granite Falls, the landscape flattens and farm fields reach for as far as the eye can see. Spaced roughly five to seven miles apart is a sequence of towns and small cities that grew up along the east/west route of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad, later known as the Milwaukee Road. Once a vast plain of tallgrass prairie and wetlands, the area has been transformed into some of the richest farmland in North America, if not the world. Travelers who take the time to stop and explore will discover a cultural heritage closely tied to agricultural innovation, military service, immigrant traditions, and local cooperatives. Unlike many highway routes, this stretch of MN 212 (the Yellowstone Trail) does not bypass the towns and cities it connects. Instead, it intersects the north/south main streets of each community, providing travelers a brief pause and an invitation to pull over and take in a story or two.

**Sacred Heart Area Museum, Sacred Heart**—Housed in a 1916 Lutheran church, the museum gives visitors a feel for this community's early settlement history and all the years between then and now. With a focus on local businesses, churches, families, organizations, military service members, and schools of the area, the museum's exhibits portray life in a small farming community that is connected to the bigger world by roads and railroads. The museum features one of the original cast metal Yellowstone Trail signs.

**Hotel Sacred Heart, Sacred Heart**—This center of town life opened in 1914, just a year after the Yellowstone Trail. Facing the Trail, not far from the Milwaukee Road depot, the hotel served both auto travelers and train passengers. It quickly developed a reputation for being the “best little hotel between the Twin Cities and Aberdeen, South Dakota, along the Milwaukee railway.” Local businesses and traveling salesmen set



*Train arriving from the east, Hector, 1946.*



*Rail lines and the Yellowstone Trail (U.S. 212) still running side by side, Olivia, 2022.*





*Hotel Sacred Heart on the Yellowstone Trail, 1910s.*

up here to sell their wares and services and the Harlem GlobeTrotters made Hotel Sacred Heart their home base when playing here and in nearby communities from the 1930s into the 1970s. It closed as a hotel in 1977 and was later converted into apartments. Today the building retains its historic integrity with an exterior that is largely unchanged and an interior that retains much of its original millwork and flooring. Currently, the building is under renovation as a multi-use facility, a portion of which will be restored as the original hotel. It is operated by the Sacred Heart Area Historical Society.

*Community Celebration: Summerfest (mid July)*



*A car club gathering on Main Street, Sacred Heart, 1910s.*

### **Song and Dance on the Prairie**

In 1905, after many years performing under different names and directors, Sacred Heart's village band reorganized as the Sacred Heart Military Band. As in many other communities along the Yellowstone Trail, people living in and around Sacred Heart could always count on at least one local band to entertain them on weekends and special events. Often dressed in snappy uniforms, bands played in park pavilions and marched in parades. Less formal groups of musicians played for dances and helped preserve the old-time songs fondly remembered by immigrant generations.<sup>10</sup>

As it does today, music provided an attraction, a reason to get in the car and head into town. In 1917, the businesses of Sacred Heart sponsored an "Automobile Day," inviting farmers into town for a day of lively entertainment and a chance to win a prize or two. The community celebrations travelers experience today have their roots in events like those of a hundred years ago, when locals took to the Yellowstone Trail for a fun day in town.<sup>11</sup>

That musical tradition continues just down the Trail a few miles, in Renville. A family band called Los Lobos Nortenos, performs at many community celebrations, draws large audiences regionally, and has performed internationally. They were the first Latinx band to play at the Minnesota State Fair in 2002. The Morales family began performing shortly after moving to Renville in the late 1990s. Their musical and family roots are in southern Texas and before that in Monterey and Tamaulipas, Mexico. Performing mostly in Spanish, they play a mix of Tex-Mex, Norteno, and more and more original compositions. Like the locals who took up a guitar or a coronet a hundred years ago, the Morales's have strong ties to the community, working and owning businesses in the area for decades.<sup>12</sup>



*Members of an automobile club in Olivia. Michael J. Dowling standing far right, about 1908.*

**Renville Museum and City Jail, Renville**—This 1880s building was once the school house where Michael J. Dowling (1866–1921) taught. Dowling was one the most energetic and productive boosters of the original Yellowstone Trail. This historic site is just one of several places connected to Dowling where travelers can see and visit along the Trail.

*Community Celebration:* Sugar Beet Days (early June)

**Danube Depot Museum, Danube**—Recalling the days when the railroad depot was the center of town life, this museum features artifacts and settings from Danube's

early settlement history. The depot was originally built in Danube, but was moved to Olivia for a few decades before returning to Danube near its original location. Currently, it's the centerpiece of a parklike setting at the edge of town near the railroad tracks.

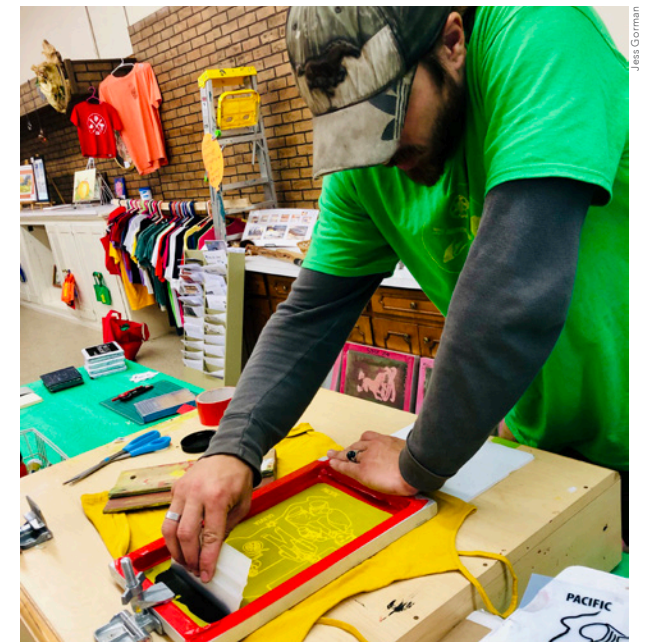
*Community Celebration:* Danube Fun Days (early July)

**Michael Dowling House, Olivia**—Michael J. Dowling (1866–1921) was a highly motivated citizen who found many ways to serve his community and country. Losing his two feet, a forearm, and the fingers on one hand to freezing while stranded in a blizzard at the age of 14,

Dowling went on to become a newspaper editor, businessman, advocate for disabled children, Speaker of the Minnesota State House of Representatives 1901–1903, and candidate for Governor in 1919. He may be best remembered as a tireless promoter of the Yellowstone Trail. Built in 1908, the house and barn are well preserved and currently in private ownership.

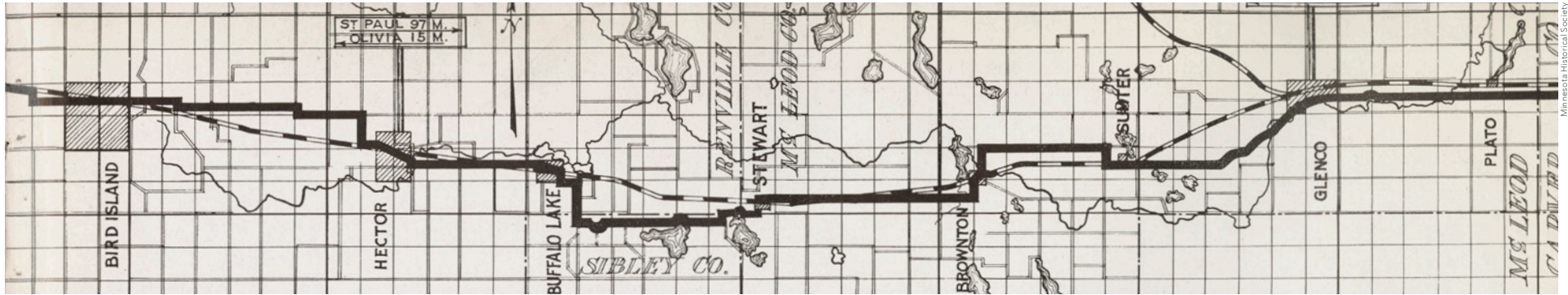
**Corn Sculpture Picnic Shelter, Olivia**—Arriving in town from the west, this giant ear of corn beckons travelers to stop for a few minutes and find out why Olivia is the Corn Capital of the World.

*Community Celebrations:* Olivia Farmer's Market (Thursdays); Corn Capital Days (late July); Fall Craft and Vendor Show (late November)



*Artist at "Follow the Yellowstone Trail," Olivia, 2019*





Minnesota Historical Society



Leta Jacobs, Design by Leta

*Renville County Artisan and Farmers Market, 2021.*



Leta Jacobs, Design by Leta

**The Cultural Centre, Bird Island**—The Centre and its programs provide a place that enhances socialization, art appreciation and thoughtful discourse. It achieves this through monthly art exhibits, music lessons, social gatherings, art classes, writing seminars, Story Shows, First Aid/CPR training, and more. Although this space is filled with activities, the Centre's aim is to be a soft place, a retreat, and an environment where pondering and inspiration are nurtured.

*Community Celebrations:* Island Days (mid June); Renville County Artisan and Farmers Market (Wednesdays); Renville County Fair (mid August)

**The Tinnies-Baker House, Bird Island**—Built in 1910 on the road that would become the Yellowstone Trail, this home is a classic example of a Craftsman bungalow. When the Cultural Centre purchased the property in 2017, much of the home was still in its original form. The Centre has plans to adapt the house for use as a writer-in-residence studio, complimenting the mission and vision of the organization.



Jim Roe

*Bird Island Farmers Elevator looking much like it did in the early years of the Yellowstone Trail, Bird Island, 2022.*





Minnesota Historical Society

*Entering Hector, on the Yellowstone Trail, 1940s*

**Hector Historical Center, Hector**—This Main Street resource center for the history of the people, schools, businesses, churches, sports teams, and veterans of Hector was built from photos, memorabilia, and historical documents donated by area residents.

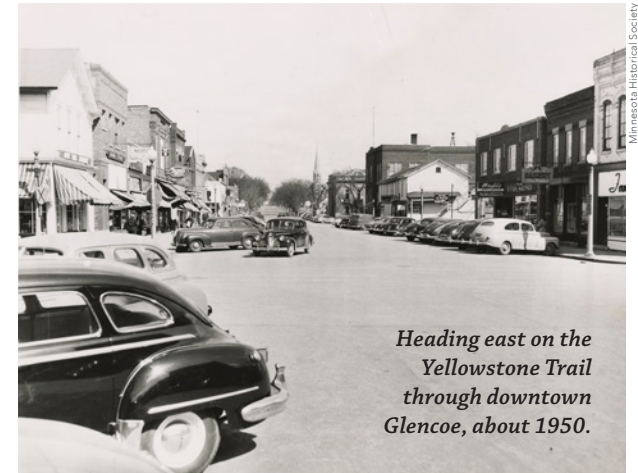
*Community Celebrations:* Corn Chaff Days (early July)

**R & S Snowmobile Museum, Hector**—

**Buffalo Lake**—

*Community Celebrations:* Buffalo Lake Farmers Market (Saturdays); Buffalo Lake Days (mid July)

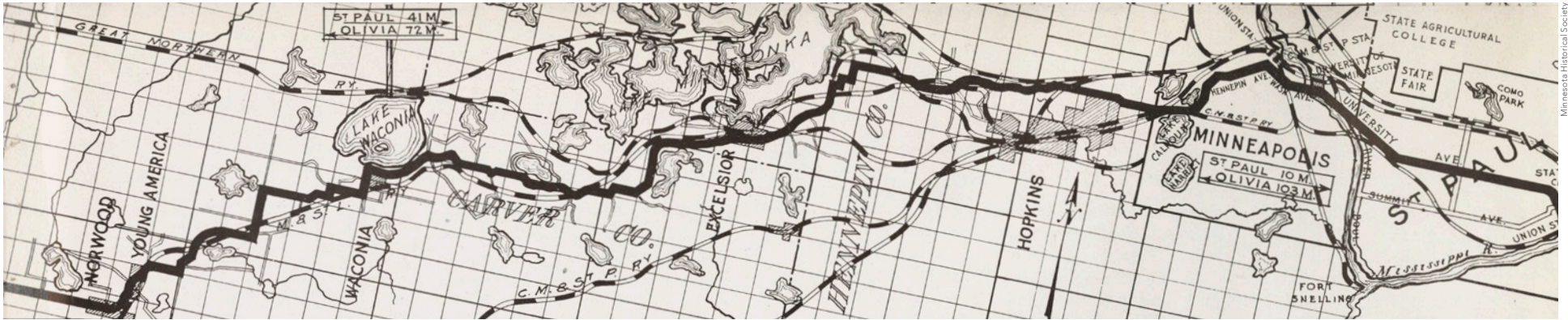
**Downtown Walking Tour, Glencoe**—Exploring the history of this county seat and early railroad hub starts by picking up a walking guide to the sites in and around downtown. The former high school is now called City Center. Here visitors will find an exhibit room managed by a group of local historians who have gathered photos, artifacts, and ephemera from the city's past. Other points of interest include the old jail (now a home) and the original depot, which is still standing but used for other functions.



Minnesota Historical Society

*Heading east on the Yellowstone Trail through downtown Glencoe, about 1950.*





### 3. Edge of the Big Woods—Norwood Young America to Excelsior

Coming in off the flat plains, travelers start to see a distinct change in terrain as they approach Norwood Young America. It's here that the Yellowstone Trail, as it's been marked since 1959, splits from the original Trail that followed MN5 and 7 into a region of rolling, tree-covered hills and scenic lakes. This segment of the historic Trail follows MN5 eastward into an area known for its early resorts, water recreation, and fishing. Its proximity to the Twin Cities made the region an appealing summer destination. Today, growing exurban communities are steadily filling in the croplands, while vineyards and orchards take the place of livestock and dairy farms.



*An excursion train arriving from Minneapolis, Norwood Young America, 1915.*



## Willkommen Heritage and Preservation Society, Norwood Young America—

**Andrew Peterson Farmstead, Waconia**—Swedish immigrant Andrew Peterson (1818–1898) settled near Waconia in 1855, building the farm that travelers see today on MN5. One aspect of Peterson's story that stands out from the millions of other immigrant stories is that he kept a journal from the time he left Sweden until the day before he died. Swedish author, Vilhelm Moberg, discovered Peterson's journals at the Minnesota Historical Society, and used them as a primary source for his fictional series, *The Emigrants*.



*Winter roads near Norwood Young America, 1915.*

**Carver County Historical Society, Waconia**—This museum and research center features five galleries with exhibit topics ranging from indigenous cultures of the region, the people and places of Carver County, and a historical tribute to the County's military veterans. Driving through downtown Waconia, visitors will see a series of yellow signs, marking the original route of the Yellowstone Trail through the city.



*Postcard, 1910s.*

**Carver Park Reserve, Victoria**—The Grimm Farm Historic Site is often called the birthplace of the Dairy Belt thanks to the successful seed saving practices of the Grimm family, which resulted in the first winter-hardy alfalfa in North America. The farm house is part of a restoration project aimed at returning the site to its original state.

Much of the original Grimm property is now Carver Park Reserve, acquired in 1962. The 1876 farmhouse is all that remains of the farmstead and was restored in 2001. The Andrew Peterson Farm and the Grimm Historic Site are separated by less than three miles and could one day be connected by bike and walking trails.

**Excelsior-Lake Minnetonka Historical Society Museum, Excelsior**—Where MN7 bends toward Lake Minnetonka it skirts a number of lakefront communities, including Deephaven, Greenwood, Shorewood and Excelsior. These places are the focus of the Society's museum exhibits and programs. The stories told through

images and artifacts include those of the Excelsior Amusement Park, early tourism on Lake Minnetonka, streetcars and steamboats, and the Onawa, a sailing vessel with a big reputation on Lake Minnetonka.

**Excelsior Streetcar Line, Minnesota Streetcar Museum, Excelsior**—The Twin Cities Rapid Transit system once reached from Lake Minnetonka in the west to Stillwater in the east. Here, near its western terminus, visitors can take a ride on a restored streetcar through historic Excelsior along a half-mile of track built on the former right-of-way of the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railway. The car stops at a car barn where passengers can see photos of hotels, trains, paddlewheel boats, and landmarks from the 1800s.



*Once part of the original Yellowstone trail, this section of road near Excelsior still bears the name, 2022.*





## 4. Twin Cities—Excelsior to Woodbury

Since the 1880s, the lakes district west of Minneapolis has been a desirable destination for vacationers and weekend revelers. It has also been home for many of the area's well-to-do. Originally connected to the city by rail service, the area gained regular commuter service when Twin Cities Rapid Transit reached Lake Minnetonka in the early 1900s. When it came time to designate the Yellowstone Trail through this area, those rail lines, and the communities they connected, influenced the choice of routes into downtown Minneapolis. In the early days, Minneapolis anchored the Trail—a starting and ending point, especially for travelers heading west. It made sense then to locate the Yellowstone Trail headquarters here. From 1918 to 1929, at various locations, the Trail Association organized services, published guides and maps, and lobbied state and federal agencies for better roads from their downtown offices.

The exact route of the Yellowstone through the Twin Cities and connected suburbs is not always clear and was changed often before 1930. From the west it roughly followed MN7 to the point at which it becomes Lake Street. From the intersection of Lake Street and Hennepin Avenue, travelers were directed into downtown



*The Yellow Trail Garage in Hopkins drew the attention of Yellowstone Trail travelers with yellow stripes on its gas pumps and overhead sign, about 1918.*



*The owners and mechanics of the Yellow Trail Garage, pictured here in 1924, built a successful trade with locals and cross-country travelers.*

along Hennepin. Leaving downtown, travelers crossed the Mississippi River and headed east on University Avenue eventually passing by the Minnesota State Capitol. Jogging this way and that drivers were brought to Hudson Road, the route now aligned with I94 from Woodbury to the St. Croix River.



**Hopkins Historical Society, Hopkins**—Its early place on a popular streetcar line and then on a major autoroute made this commuter suburb a familiar stopover for travelers heading west from the Twin Cities. This community archive and museum features memorable stories of families, industries, and events that have contributed to the area's rural/urban identity. Hopkins is well known for its Raspberry Festival—possibly the longest running continuous annual celebration in the state—and as a car town, a tradition that took hold during the first years of the Yellowstone Trail.

*Community Celebration:* Raspberry Festival (mid-July)

**Hennepin History Museum, Minneapolis**—Over the years this museum has sharpened its focus on urban people, institutions, and places throughout Hennepin County—drawing on stories, often untold, that help connect past events with life today.

**St. Anthony Falls Historic District, Minneapolis**—Almost any one of the bridges that crossed the Mississippi River east out of downtown would have provided com-



*Stone Arch Festival at St. Anthony Falls, 2009.*



*East bank of the Minneapolis milling district at St. Anthony Falls, 1910s.*

elling views of the Minneapolis Milling District. In the 1910s and '20s, travelers would have seen a gritty industrial complex known at the time as the Flour Milling Capital of the World. But even then it was touted as a top tourist attraction, largely because of St. Anthony

Falls. Today it is one of the most visited historic sites in the state. Home to several popular destinations, including Mill City Museum, St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam, and the Stone Arch Bridge, it is increasingly recognized as an important spiritual place for all Dakota people.



## 5. River Towns and Crossings—Woodbury to the St. Croix River

Leaving the urban centers of Minneapolis and St. Paul, travelers quickly cover this last leg of the Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota on I94. While today's freeway is relatively new—possibly the last section of I94 built in Minnesota—the route is one of the oldest in the state. Hudson Road was originally established about 1850, a territorial road carrying travelers from St. Paul to a ferry crossing at what is now Lakeland. Drivers on the original Yellowstone Trail took their leave from Minnesota across the Hudson Toll Bridge. Built in 1913, it was the first bridge across the St. Croix at this location.

### Washington County Historical Society, Stillwater—

The Historical Society operates several sites in and around Stillwater. The recently opened Heritage Center features exhibits and programs that focus on the Stillwater area, which today is a popular river-town destination for travelers in search of historic buildings, scenic views, and a wide range of amenities. Stillwater is a 15-minute drive north of the Yellowstone Trail route, yet it shares much history with the other St. Croix River towns near the Trail's crossing point into Wisconsin.



*East-bound travelers left Minnesota on the Hudson Toll Bridge, Lakeland, 1930s.*



*This toll booth marked the first stop on the Yellowstone Trail in Wisconsin, Hudson, WI, 1930s.*

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- 9 Vicki Albu, *The Yellowstone Trail in Carver County* (Chaska, MN: Southwest Corridor Transportation Coalition, December 2017), 5–6.
- 10 Sacred Heart Area Historical Society, *Sacred Heart: Town and Country* (Bang Printing: Brainerd, MN: 2008), 374–377.
- 11 Sacred Heart Area Historical Society, *Sacred Heart*, 389.
- 12 Scott Tedrick, "Renville Family Basking in 25 Years of Success," *Renville County Register*, July 8, 2021, A1–2.



*Muralists Olga Nichols (left) and Jess Gorman (right) painting the Yellowstone Trail logo on the abandoned Watson railroad depot, 2018.*

## Strategic Goals and Five-Year Implementation Plan

This master plan is a joint effort of five cultural heritage organizations in association with Yellowstone trail of Minnesota. At this point in the planning process, the partnership is guided by an overarching strategic and interpretive plan and a set of shared goals developed specifically for the partnership. As a separate organization serving a membership of cultural heritage organizations, the YTMN may take the lead on accomplishing many of the tasks outlined below.



## Strategic Goals

1. Increase and sustain awareness of the Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota through continuing programs and events in collaboration with partners.
2. Clarify the purpose and strengthen the identity of Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota as the partnership convener and state clearinghouse for Trail-related activities, initiatives, and promotions.
3. Position Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota, in collaboration with its partner organizations, as a regional resource for the cooperative redevelopment of rural communities based on cultural heritage assets.
4. Support efforts to raise the profile of the Yellowstone Trail nationally.

## Year 1 (July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023)

- A. Complete and disseminate the Tourism Master Plan through events, social media, and news formats.
- B. Support Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota in its adoption of a new organizational identity and structure, especially in regards to partnership roles and responsibilities.
- C. Develop and expand the existing website for Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota.
  - a. The expanded site will present various ways for partners to connect with travelers exploring the Trail its offerings, using zoomable maps, self-guided themed tours, and profiles of specific destinations and areas of interest. The site will engage potential visitors with a heavy emphasis on images that show what visitors can see and do at various stops along the route.
- D. Continue to sponsor and promote public programs in collaboration with Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota.
  - a. Since its founding in 2018, YTMN has hosted and sponsored many events intended to bring attention to the organization and celebrate the history of the Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota. Many of these programs have been the result of collaborations between partner organizations, which will continue while new ones are added.
    - i. Sociability Run—This annual event invites drivers to relive a day on the historic Trail, visiting heritage sites along the way, dropping in on community celebrations, and getting a bite to eat at local food and beverage establishments.
    - ii. Annual Gatherings of Partners—By bringing community collaborators and partners together for an evening, the YTMN helps strengthen connections between communities and promotes ideas for increasing civic participation all along the Trail.
- E. Produce and distribute an online newsletter (annual) for members and by request.

## Year 2 (July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024)

- A. Continue to sponsor and promote public programs in collaboration with Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota.
  - a. Community Theater—Live stage performances, written and produced locally, can highlight place-based stories from the past in ways that are especially relevant and meaningful to local audiences.
  - b. Passport Programs—These can be implemented in various ways. Like the National Park Service, the YTMN could offer booklets for collecting stamps at sites along the trail. Similarly, the current “wooden nickel” program provides a surprise reward and incentive to travelers for stopping at museums and other cultural heritage sites along the Trail.
- B. Continue to expand the existing website for Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota.
  - a. Website visitors will navigate the site through an interactive map or by selecting from subjects of interest,

town names, or location-based events calendars, with minimal reliance on text and highway map conventions. Where possible, the mobile-optimized site will be outfitted for use on location. When travelers pull into a town or historic site along the route they can access brief stories, images, and detailed local maps adapted to specific locations and views.

- C. Work with partner museums and organizations to exhibit Yellowstone Trail artifacts and stories.
  - a. Many of the history museums along the route have images and artifacts related to the early years of the Yellowstone Trail. For travelers alerted to Trail history, these exhibits could provide an extra incentive to visit area museums. Trail signs in public parks are another way to engage travelers in the history and remind locals about the interesting stories their streets, fields, and buildings hold.
- D. Develop and print a limited test run of guides and maps, supported through advertising.
  - a. Despite travelers' great appetites for digital information, there is still a strong demand for printed materials that serve as travel companions for people who like to mark up and dog-ear pages on their way to the next destination. Published products could include:
    - i. Maps of three to five segments of the Yellowstone Trail in Minnesota. Each map would include images and information for a selection of featured sites along with food and entertainment destinations.
    - ii. Five or six themed tours each of which will include detailed maps along with images and stories from featured locations.
- E. Develop a concept and raise funds to develop a mobile app for travelers on the Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota.
  - a. Downloaded from the YTMN website, a mobile app would provide access to much of the same content as the website. Additional interactive content could include in-depth on-location experiences, such as walking tours, digital passport programs using QR codes, or a Yellowstone Trail trivia game.
- F. Produce and distribute an online newsletter (bi-annual) for members and by request.
- G. Gather support from legislators toward National Trail (Yellowstone National Trail) designation in collaboration with the Yellowstone Trail Association.

### **Year 3 (July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025)**

- A. Continue to sponsor and promote public programs in collaboration with Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota.
- B. Refine and produce an expanded offering of guides and maps, supported through advertising.
- C. Develop and test a mobile app for travelers on Minnesota's Yellowstone Trail.
- D. Plan and prototype a concept for a multi-venue, Trail-long, themed exhibit. Working collaboratively, a group of museums on or near the Trail would all agree to exhibit examples of one type of artifact—wood carvings, quilts, postcards, etc. Travelers interested in quilts will be prompted—possibly through a passport-like booklet—to



stop at every museum promising an exhibit of that artifact, then record their accomplishment with a photo op. This could be a way to highlight specific, and sometimes unusual, artifact collections in museums along the route—a different collection every year. The exhibit could be organized by Trail segment or by a string of communities along the Trail.

- E. Produce and distribute an online newsletter (quarterly) for members and by request.

### **Year 4 (July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026)**

- A. Continue to sponsor and promote public programs in collaboration with Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota.
- B. Go online with a tested mobile app for travelers on Minnesota's Yellowstone Trail.
- C. Implement and promote a multi-venue, themed exhibit in five to seven locations along the Trail.
- D. Publish an expanded offering of guides and maps, supported through advertising.
- E. Produce and distribute an online newsletter (monthly) for members and by request.
- F. Promote YTMN as an operational model for other state chapters of the Yellowstone Trail Association (YTA).

### **Year 5 (July 1, 2026 – June 30, 2027)**

- A. Continue to sponsor and promote public programs in collaboration with Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota.
- B. Publish an expanded offering of guides and maps, supported through advertising.
- C. Produce and promote a second multi-venue, themed exhibit in five to seven locations along the Trail.
- D. Produce and distribute an online newsletter (monthly) for members and by request.



*Sacred Heart Auto Club, 1918.*

Sacred Heart Area Historical Society

## Appendix: Themed Tour Examples

The Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota partnership will pursue many ways to promote destinations and connect with travelers' particular interests and sightseeing objectives. Among the products YTMN expects to market—especially through guides and maps—are a series of themed tours, drawing on the connections between subjects of interest and sites along the route that hold related stories. The following examples are provided as an illustration of possible tours. Additional tours can be developed if the program is popular and resources become available. A tour currently in development focuses on agriculture and farming as seen from the Trail.



## 1. Following the First Roads

The earliest Yellowstone Trail route zigzagged its way along section lines between farm fields and down main streets. Today's travelers still have a few opportunities to drive portions of the trail that remain unpaved and a little remote. Even today, much of the Trail through western Minnesota takes travelers within blocks of historic main streets. And where it doesn't, drivers could be prompted to follow the old routes through towns. While in town, travelers might be challenged to compare current main street views to historic views and postcards (mobile access).

The original routes typically followed railroad lines that are still in use today. What was once the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul line, was later the Milwaukee Road, and is now used by the Twins Cities and Western Railroad (a woman-owned company based in Glencoe).

### POTENTIAL TURNOFFS AND SIDETRACKS

#### Ortonville to Granite Falls

The original routes through this area have been well documented by Yellowstone Trail historians, Alice and John Ridge. The Big Stone County Museum is a good place to start. Not far away is the Rainbow Bridge, which once carried Yellowstone Trail travelers across the Minnesota River toward South Dakota. The downriver stretch from here is well known for its bird migrations and wildlife watching, better of course when travelers leave the beaten path.

#### Granite Falls to Norwood Young America

The railroad is the thread that ties this long string of communities together. At several points along this stretch, travelers can jog north onto rural roads and experience a near-total immersion in one of the country's richest agricultural regions. Dropping southward into and crossing the tracks into towns and cities such as Olivia, Hector, and Buffalo Lake, travelers can get a feel for what it was like to arrive in town during the early years of the Yellowstone Trail.

#### Norwood Young America to Excelsior

Here's where eastbound travelers have to leave US212 if they want to follow the original Yellowstone Trail route. Following MN5, travelers have several opportunities to leave the highway and explore historic downtowns between here and the western suburbs of Minneapolis. Entering Waconia, visitors will find yellow signs marking the original route through town. And with one more turnoff into Lake Waconia Regional Park just outside of town, travelers can walk a segment of blacktopped road where the Yellowstone Trail once ran along the scenic lakeshore of Lake Waconia. Further down the Trail near Excelsior is another section of original Trail that looks and feels much like it would have a hundred years ago.

## 2. Trail of Visionaries

The history of almost any community includes the story of a local person who was driven by an idea of what the world could be. These are the people—sometimes nonconforming in their approach to life—who worked passionately toward a goal and are often the subject of a few interesting stories. Over the years, communities across the state have taken steps to preserve the homes and workplaces of notable individuals. Several of these historic sites are located on or near the original Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota. Some are open to the public on regular schedules, others by appointment only. A few are still in development and may not be open to the public for some time.

Connections to place. These sites appeal to visitors, in part, because they promise experiences in specific places where history happened. More than an exhibit or program, these sites provide a kind of history immersion that few other venues can.

### POTENTIAL SITES

#### **Karen Jenson Trestuen Garden Gallery, Milan Village Art School, Milan**

Karen Jenson (b.1935), a painter specializing in Norwegian rosemaling and Swedish dalamalning, created a home in which every room is a work of art, with beautifully painted furniture, fixtures, and surfaces.

In the early 1960s, Jenson and her husband purchased a fairly ordinary house and, with the help of identical twin contractors, Arvid and Aaron Swenson, she set about transforming the house into a masterpiece of design, color, and Scandinavian art—a culmination of her lifelong passion and her creativity. The house now includes a gallery, painting studio, master bedroom, Swedish bedroom, Norwegian bedroom, library, and Swedish-inspired kitchen. The home is surrounded by gardens, representing Jenson's other great passion, gardening.

The home is currently leased by the Milan Village Art School, which intends to acquire the property and integrate it into the School's program and public outreach.

#### **Olof Swensson Farm, Chippewa County Historical Society, Wegdahl**

Olof Swensson (1843–1923) was known for his design and construction abilities, religious beliefs, writings, and political beliefs. After living in America for more than 20 years, Swensson was disturbed by the country's political and economic situation. Being a man of action, Swensson wrote a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution and had it printed in 1892. During this same period, he also ran for Governor of Minnesota, unsuccessfully.

The 17-acre farmstead includes a 22 room brick farmhouse, a large, fully restored timber-framed barn, a gristmill with hand-cut millstones, and a family burial plot.

*“Fool or genius, man of wisdom or distorted vision? Those who knew Olof Swensson best believed he was a half century ahead of his time, those who knew him little, tended to brand him an unrealistic fool. Perhaps he was a little of both. History leans to the side of genius.”*



**Robert Bly Study, Lac qui Parle County Historical Society, Madison**

Robert Bly (1926–2021) was born in Madison. He left home for college and military service, and later returned to his family’s farm to raise his children and write. He was a poet, translator, activist, performer, literary editor, publisher, and Minnesota’s first Poet Laureate (2008). In 1999 he donated the building he used as a study while living on his farm. The study was moved to the Lac qui Parle County Museum along with the books and furniture once used by Bly. It was here that he wrote “Silence in the Snowy Fields” (1962).

*“The author of dozens of books of poetry and translation, Bly’s work is based in the natural world, the visionary, and the realm of the irrational.”*

—Poetry Foundation

**Andrew and Nellie Volstead House, Granite Falls**

After an early career as a teacher and attorney, Andrew J. Volstead (1860–1947) stepped into political life becoming mayor of Granite Falls in 1900. He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, serving from 1903 to 1923, becoming best known as the “Father of Prohibition.” In 1922 Volstead worked with Kansas senator, Arthur Capper, to draft the Capper–Volstead Act, which aimed to protect cooperatives, effectively supporting their growth and influence in ways that are evident today.

Nellie (1868–1918), born Helen Mary Osler in Forfarshire, Scotland, married Andrew Volstead in 1894. They met while she was serving as Yellow Medicine County assistant auditor. Nellie was especially drawn to political life, some say the driving force behind Andrew’s career. She was a recognized leader in the national Women’s Suffrage Movement. The Andrew J. Volstead house is a National Historic Landmark.

**Michael J. Dowling House, Olivia**

Michael J. Dowling (1866–1921) was a highly motivated citizen who found many ways to serve his community and country. Losing his two feet, a forearm, and the fingers on one hand to freezing while stranded in a blizzard at the age of 14, Dowling went on to become a businessman (Renville Star-Farmer, auto dealer and garage, banker), an advocate for disabled children, Speaker, Minnesota House of Representatives 1901–1903, and candidate for Governor in 1919. He may be best remembered as a promoter of the Yellowstone Trail.

Today, his house sits near the busiest intersection in Renville County, where US17 crosses US212, the Yellowstone Trail. Built in 1908, the house and barn/garage are well preserved and currently in private ownership. Conversations are underway to protect and utilize the site as a public resource. Should these conversations lead to a new life

for the house as a community resource, the site could be considered another attractive destination for locals and travelers on the Yellowstone Trail.

**Andrew Peterson Farm, Carver County Historical Society, Waconia**

Swedish immigrant Andrew Peterson (1818–1898) settled near Waconia in 1855, building the farm that travelers see today on MN5. One aspect of Peterson’s story that stands out from the millions of other immigrant stories is that he kept a journal from the time he left Sweden until the day before he died in Minnesota. Swedish Author, Vilhelm Moberg, discovered Peterson’s journals at the Minnesota Historical Society, and used them as a primary source for his Emigrants book series.

Peterson was a dedicated apple grower, at a time when there were few varieties that could withstand a Minnesota winter. His farm was one of the first research stations for what would become the University of Minnesota’s Landscape Arboretum. Since 2006 local volunteers and Swedish artisans have helped to stabilize and conserve the site’s historic buildings. Painstaking documentation by Peterson’s biographer and the previous owner have contributed significantly to this successful preservation project.

**Grimm Farm Historic Site, Carver Park Reserve, Victoria**

Wendelin Grimm (1818–1890), immigrated from Germany and in 1859 settled near Victoria. He is known for developing the first winter-hardy alfalfa. Starting with seeds he carried from Germany, he harvested seeds from the plants he grew on his new farm, one year to the next, always selecting the ones that best survived the previous winter. After 15 years of seed saving and replanting he achieved an alfalfa variety that surpassed all others. His plants provided the genetic material for almost all of the alfalfa grown today in North America.

Much of the original Grimm property is now Carver Park Reserve, acquired in 1962. The 1876 farmhouse—all that remains of the farmstead—was restored in 2001. The Andrew Peterson Farm and the Grimm Historic Site are separated by less than three miles and could one day be connected by bike and walking trails.



### 3. Veterans Memorial Trail

From its beginning in 1912 through to today, the Yellowstone Trail has been recognized for its deep connections with military operations and service. In 1916—appreciating the value of a transcontinental route for civil defense purposes—the Yellowstone Trail Association organized a coast-to-coast relay that carried a War Department message from Plymouth, MA to Seattle, WA in just 121 hours, a remarkable speed for auto travel at the time. Decades later, in 1994, Governor Arne Carlson signed legislation naming US212 in Minnesota the Minnesota Veterans Memorial Highway.<sup>13</sup>

In July 2021 the Military Vehicle Preservation Association sponsored a three-week convoy across the country. Between 50 and 70 historic military vehicles drove the Yellowstone Trail from Aberdeen, SD to Connault, OH. In Minnesota, the convoy drove the route from Ortonville to Stewart, where it headed north to circumnavigate the Twin Cities. In that same year, Olivia Eagle Scout, Dominique Claseman, took up the charge to build a memorial for the area’s veterans. Inspired by the many memorials he saw on a family road trip, Claseman developed a design and set out to raise \$12,000 to \$15,000 to build the memorial. Support from the community was resounding, eventually reaching more than \$75,000. The memorial will be located in Kubesh Park, across the street from the Michael J. Dowling house.<sup>14</sup>

#### Veterans Memorials along the Yellowstone Trail of Minnesota

- Dawson Veterans Memorial Park
- Flags of Honor, Appleton
- Veterans Memorial Plaza, Granite Falls
- Veterans Memorial, Granite Falls
- Memorial Park, Granite Falls
- Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls
- Veterans Memorial, Sacred Heart
- Veterans Memorial and Memorial Park, Renville
- Lyons Memorial Park, Bird Island
- Veterans Memorial, Buffalo Lake
- Veterans Memorial, Brownton
- Veterans Memorial, Glencoe
- Veterans Memorial, Norwood Young America
- Veterans Memorial, Mayer
- Gold Star Veterans Memorial, City Square Park, Waconia
- Veterans Memorial, Excelsior
- Veterans Memorial Park, Woodbury

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>13</sup> Alice A. and John Wm. Ridge, *Introducing the Yellowstone Trail*, 40–42; Minnesota Statutes, 161.14, Subdivision 30.

<sup>14</sup> *Renville Count Register*, April 2021.