





Minne Trails in the Land of 10,000 Lakes

Story and photos by Chuck Haney

Freshly-fallen autumn leaves of early October tatter under spinning wheels in motion as I click along, lost in “time trial” mode on a smooth, flat, and mostly empty section of bike trail in northern Minnesota. My train of thought is clear, and I am focused on pleasantly racking up the miles on a warm, sunny, and windy afternoon somewhere between Moose Lake and Duluth on the Willard Munger State Trail.

Minnesota is known as the Land of 10,000 Lakes, but for cyclists seeking great

that the trail opened, the economic light bulb went off and soon the small towns along the trail embraced it. At least that’s the way Dennis Suave, owner of Twin Ports Cyclery in Duluth, tells it.

The Munger Trail basically breaks down into a northern section of 15 miles from West Duluth to Carlton and a southern section from Carlton to the trail’s terminus in Hinckley. I hooked up with local college student Jason Hedlund, who is a member of the University of Minnesota Duluth

near sunset, replacing the warmth of a splendid cloudless day.

The southern section of the Munger Trail from Carlton to Hinckley traverses more open country interspersed with small lakes and bogs. The occasional dairy farm and small town add character to this trail segment. The area was at one time heavily wooded, predominantly with white pine. In the late 1800s, there were huge logging operations, and towns such as Hinckley thrived because they boasted a large timber mill. In September 1894, after an extremely hot and dry summer, several small fires ignited by cinders from passing locomotives combined and grew into a massive firestorm. The ensuing wall of flames burned over 300,000 acres and killed well over 400 people, destroying six towns in four short hours. Approximately 300 people survived by crouching in 18 inches of mud in nearby Skunk Lake, and over 100 survived by hiding in the town’s gravel pit. Three trains also came in, plucking up panicked residents and helping many more survive the fiery onslaught. And this was just the beginning of fire history in this area. Another even larger fire struck just 24 years later. This inferno was also caused by hot and dry conditions, lots of dried-out slash from timber operations, and sparks from passing locomotives. The 1918 Cloquet Fire was the biggest natural disaster in Minnesota history with 453 lives lost and 52,000 people injured or displaced. 38 communities were destroyed, and over 250,000 acres were charred. Again the railroad played a part in rescuing some of the survivors as conductors stoked the boilers to gain as much speed as possible with the flames licking at the cars as the train raced out of harm’s way. After the catastrophes, the area transformed from logging to farming as the charred soil was rich in nutrients. In the town of Moose Lake, I read a small memorial of the 1918 tragedy, and as I pedaled back along the very same rail bed, I couldn’t stop thinking about locomotives racing perilously against a wall of flames and the heroic efforts of those who went in to try and save as many people as possible. The irony of the tragedies also struck me. After all, trains started the fires, and it was those same trains that came to the rescue.

Next up, I traveled north of the main hub of the Duluth region to sample the Gitchi Gami State Trail. When completed it will run 86 miles from Two Harbors and Grand Marais while paralleling Highway 61 and hugging the scenic shores of its namesake,



Minnesota’s North Shore. *Palisade Head on Lake Superior in the golden light of evening.*

scenery, solitude, and lack of vehicles, it could well become known as the land of many bike trails. If you look at a map of the state with all of the bike trails included, it resembles the cracks spreading across my Montana windshield after one too many gravel-road excursions. Squiggly marks are etched across all of its regions.

The Willard Munger Trail is one of the oldest paved bike trails in the country. It was established in the early 1970s, and the trail officially opened for use in 1989. The trail’s 63 miles of pavement were at one time the longest stretch of paved bike trail in the U.S. It was named for a local state legislator, Willard Munger, who had a long and distinguished career in which he championed many environmental causes and pushed for abandoned railways to be converted into multiple-use trails. Like many rail-trail projects, locals first met the Munger Trail with skepticism and mistrust, thinking there would be increased crime. But, once the small general store in Finlayson ran out of candy bars by noon on the first weekend

cycling team, for a ride from West Duluth to Carlton. We began with a pleasant and gradual climb out of Duluth through stands of aspen and birch tinted with the bright yellow and gold of autumn in sections followed by dark greens of white, red, and jack pine trees. As we ascended on the former St. Paul and Duluth Railroad line, we rode through deep cuts in the rocks where you could just imagine a steam locomotive chugging by with its column of robust steam billowing skyward and a shrill whistle echoing through the canyon. There are occasional scenic glimpses through breaks in the trees eastward to Lake Superior harbor and the St. Louis River near Ely’s Peak. We encountered people walking on the trail and taking in the views near Jay Cooke State Park where a bridge crosses a gorge in the St. Louis River and a series of rapids churn and froth below. Too soon it was time to turn around and head back to Duluth. It was a quick spin on the return trip as the gradual descent made for easy pedaling. The autumn air cooled quickly



Among the brilliant colors of autumn. A cyclist enjoys an afternoon ride on Minnesota's Munger Trail.

Lake Superior. The term Gitchi Gami, translated from Ojibwa, means Big Sea Water and was made famous in "Hiawatha," the 1855 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem.

Starting from the parking lot at Gooseberry Falls State Park where trail pavement was first laid down in 2000, I pedaled north toward Beaver Bay, a distance of 14 miles. The Munger Trail runs straight and lacks any serious hills because it follows an old rail line. The Gitchi Gami, however,

bobs and weaves as it follows the rugged shoreline and Lake Superior's expanse of blue water. My favorite section was near Split Rock Lighthouse where rolling hills and curves glided past the peeling white trunks of birch trees and fantastic views of the lighthouse opened up. Built in 1910, the lighthouse just celebrated its centennial and was recently refurbished. Its location atop a craggy, (split) rock is *the* iconic image of the north shore of Minnesota, and taking the

tour through the interpretive visitor center is well worth the time.

The following day, I rode an out-and-back along a 10-mile section of the Gitchi-Gami that has been recently paved from Tofte to Lutsen with local Bill Blank. He told me that 13 years had elapsed from the trail's inception until the pavement we were pedaling on was put down in 2010. The trail is being put in gradually as work is being done on Highway 61, so it will be

Ireland – Connemara, Kerry, Causeway Coast, Dingle...

England – Cotswolds, Stonehenge, Bath, Mendips...

Scotland – Edinburgh, Borders, Fife, St Andrews...

Italy – Tuscany, Umbria, Sicily, Sardinia, Le Marche...

Spain – Picos de Europa, Costa Verde, Rioja, Asturias...

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Nuts & Bolts: Minne Trails

Spring and summer are pleasant with many wildflowers in the prairies and forest. My favorite time to visit Minnesota is autumn when the hardwood trees explode in vibrant hues. Late September is best for the reds of maple trees followed closely by the gold and yellow of birch and aspen in early October.

Precautions: These trails are non-motorized but multiple-use so expect to see people on foot especially near trailheads and small towns. Trails cross many intersections so use caution as the users are expected to stop and yield to crossing automobile traffic.

Resources:

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources: www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_trails
 Paul Bunyan Trail: www.paulbunyantrail.com
 Mesabi Trail: www.mesabitrail.com
 Willard Munger Trail: www.munger-trail.com
 Gitchi Gami Trail: www.ggta.org
 Minnesota Trails: mntrails.com
 Duluth information: visitduluth.com, (800) 438-5884

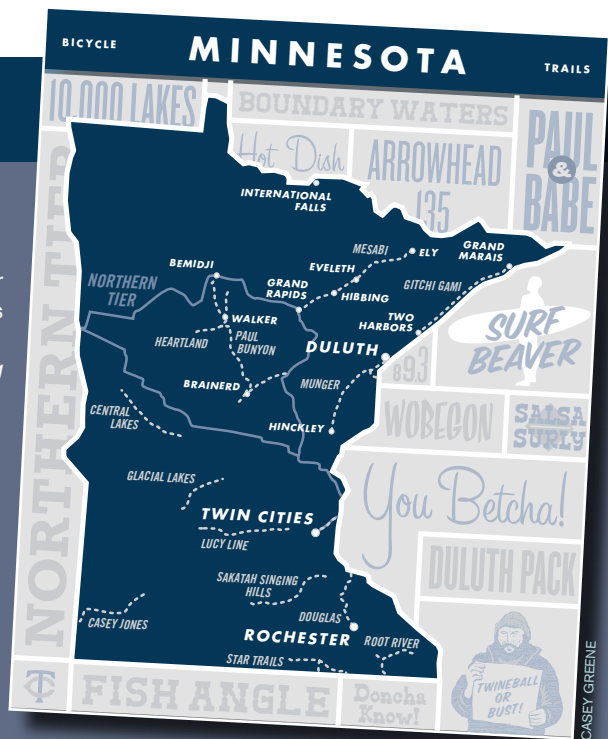
Minnesota Tourism: www.exploreminnesota.com, (888) 868-7476. Be sure to request all of their great cycling publications and brochures including *Explore Minnesota Biking Guide*.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation is planning to produce a new statewide bicycling map in 2011 so check www.dot.state.mn.us/bike/maps.html

Bike shops: Twin Ports Cyclery, twinportscyclery.com, (218) 624-4008.
 The Ski Hut, theskihut.com, (218) 724-8525.

Websites: www.bikeduluth.com, www.veloduluth.com

Organized rides: www.tourof saints.com/bike.tours



Camping:

Minnesota is blessed with an abundance of state parks, which make great places to camp while cycling the trails. Check out www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/reservations.html

some time before the entire trail is completed. For now, the option is to ride the highway and then veer off and ride the completed trail sections. If you're interested in a longer ride, Blank suggests riding north of the town of Grand Marais on wide-shouldered Highway 61 all the way to the Canadian border, a distance of 41 miles.

Near the small burg of Tofte, we rode past several open meadows that revealed 1,516-foot-high Carlton Peak, one of the most prominent peaks in the nearby Sawtooth Mountains. The reds of the maple trees had already fallen off in the higher elevations, but it was still tempting to ditch the bike and hike up the mountain summit along the popular Superior Hiking Trail. Interest in cycling is definitely gaining momentum along the North Shore. There are plans to build a new 10-mile singletrack mountain-bike trail near Tofte in 2011, and there is the annual organized Gitchi-Gami Trail Ride each August. Exciting plans are in the works to connect the Munger Trail with the Gitchi Gami by a series of trails and existing routes through Duluth.

Several hours inland from Duluth is the town of Grand Rapids with a population of around 8,000. It was named for the

rapids in the Mississippi River, which runs through town. The rapids, however, are now under water thanks to a paper-mill dam. Grand Rapids is your typical small Midwestern town with its county courthouse and well-laid-out streets, and it has always struck me as a division point where



Hey Babe! In Northern Minnesota, you will meet Paul Bunyan's faithful blue companion.

the eastern forests begin to dwindle and transition into the grasslands of the Great Plains. It is home to the western trailhead of the Mesabi Trail, another paved gem that when completed will travel all the way from the Mississippi River in Grand

Rapids to the Boundary Waters area in Ely. It will cover some 132 miles, connecting 25 communities along the route. By 2010, 115 miles were already paved and completed. The Mesabi Trail gets its name from Native American lore, which tells of a spirit that once held the area in the icy grip of the great North American glacier. I hooked up with local rider Scott Hall, director of a local morning radio show, and proceeded east out of Grand Rapids on ultra-smooth pavement. Riding with Hall quickly became a lesson in northern Minnesota history as he rattled off facts and stories about how iron-ore mining had shaped the region. Settlers had come in from many northern European countries in the early 1900s. Iron-ore mining once ruled this region, and the evidence is all around us in the small towns we cycle through. There's Taconite, a former company town named for the low-grade iron ore that was mined after the higher-grade ores were depleted, and the numerous quarries from open pit mines that are now filled in as deep lakes with their distinctive rust-colored cliffs.

One of the towns the Mesabi runs through is Hibbing, the hometown of such notables as musician Bob Dylan and former

sports stars Roger Maris and Kevin McHale. Author Vincent Bugliosi, the prosecutor in the infamous Charles Manson murder cases, also hails from this city of 17,000. In Eveleth you can visit the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame. One of the beauties of this trail is that there is a small town located every five to 10 miles so there are ample opportunities to have lunch, ice cream, or just check out small-town America in the Iron Range of Minnesota.

The fables of the Minnesota mythical lumberjack Paul Bunyan and his blue ox Babe run tall in these northwoods, so it is no surprise that one of the state's largest trail systems bears his name. Remember Sourdough Sam, the camp cook? He made flapjacks on a griddle so big it had to be greased by skaters with slabs of bacon tied to their feet. On the ex-Burlington Northern Railroad line, there are now 110 miles of continuous pavement on the Paul Bunyan Trail from Brainerd to Bemidji. This narrow strip of pavement passes by the shores of 21 lakes (just part of Paul Bunyan's work) and traverses a wide range of terrain ranging in character from flat and open to hilly and forested. The Paul Bunyan intersects with another fantastic trail, the 49-mile-long Heartland Trail in Walker.

My initial experience with paved trails came while visiting the headwaters of the Mississippi River at Itasca State Park near Bemidji back in the early 1990s. What a concept, I thought at the time, as I glided through the pine forest in the early morning with the park, the woods, and a little stretch of smooth pavement all to myself.

You are probably getting the picture. Minnesota is one progressive state when it comes to building bicycle trails. Having an avid cyclist in Congress didn't hurt. Former congressman Jim Oberstar was instrumental in securing funding to pave the many miles of trails. This is just a rough estimate, but when I added up all the mileage in the *Explore Minnesota Biking Guide*, I counted over 750 miles, and that number is growing every year. And there are many rail-trails in the southern part of the state as well along with wonderful secondary highways and county roads. Add in the vibrant cycling communities in the Twin Cities and Duluth and Minnesota is a "must ride" on any cyclist's wish list. **AC**

Chuck Haney is a longtime writer and photographer for Adventure Cycling Association and Adventure Cyclist. More about Chuck can be found at chuckhaney.com.

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