

The Almost-Built Canal

Linking Lake Superior to the Mississippi

By Dan McGuiness

The threat of Asian carp invading Lake Michigan through the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal is creating a lot of political and legal concern. The Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, in addition to enabling Chicago to use Lake Michigan water to flush its sewage down the Illinois River, also provides a shipping link between the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico via the Illinois and Mississippi rivers.

When the canal opened in 1848, little thought was likely given to the fact this canal would become a two-way freeway for invasive species like the

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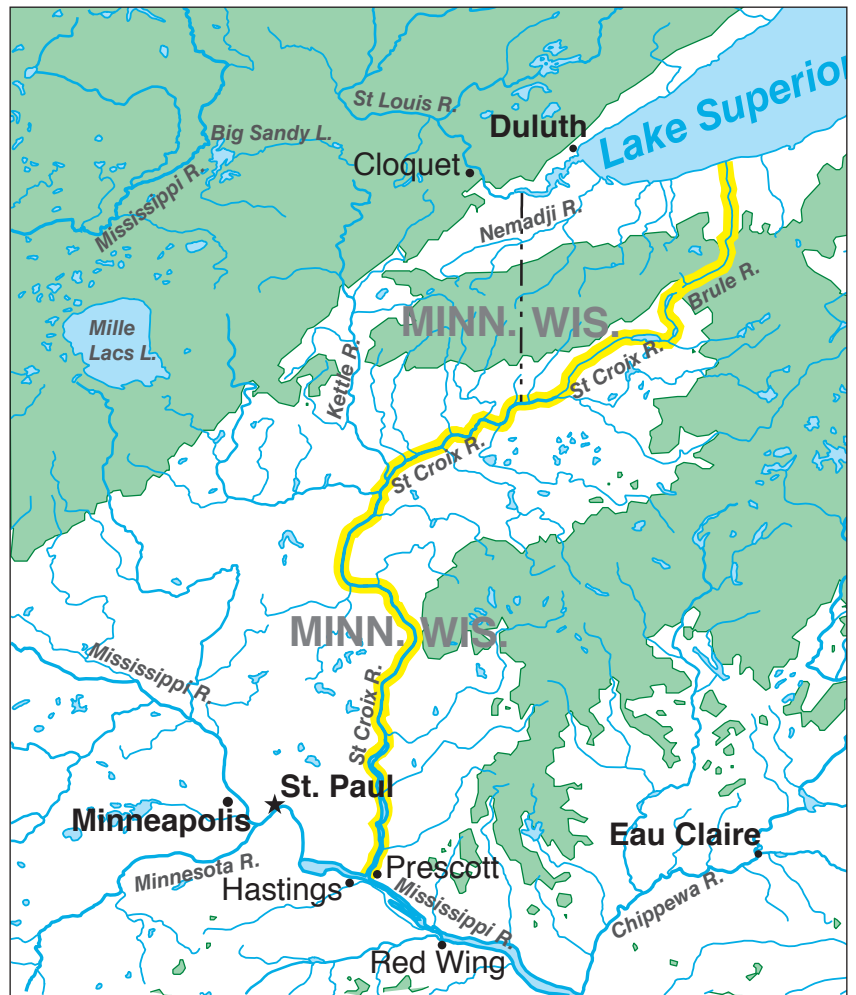
zebra mussel and the Asian carp. But now everyone, including the courts, elected officials, conservation groups and the shipping industry, are arguing over whether this canal should remain open.

We could easily be fighting this battle on two fronts, if local boosters had succeeded in the late 1800s on another Mississippi River tributary, the St. Croix River on the Minnesota-Wisconsin border upriver from Prescott, Wis. Both the Illinois and the

St. Croix Rivers had the potential to link the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River and beyond. But the geopolitics of the Illinois River and the St. Croix River corridors resulted in the former becoming a federally-sponsored commercial waterway and the latter becoming a federally protected Wild and Scenic Riverway.

Almost Built

America's Civil War had barely ended when politicians in Wisconsin and Minnesota turned their attention to "improving" the St. Croix River between the two states. In 1868, at the request of local boosters, the Army Corps of Engineers completed a report suggesting it might be feasible to create a shortcut from Lake Supe-



An Army Corps of Engineers study in the 1890s picked a canal linking the St. Croix and Brule rivers as the best route between Lake Superior and the Mississippi River. (The area marked in green is at higher elevations.)

rior to the Gulf of Mexico by digging a canal and building a series of dams and locks. Three alternative routes were proposed: One was a canal from Lake Superior via the St. Louis River to Sandy Lake in northern Minnesota then directly to the Mississippi River above the Twin Cities. The second was a route from Lake Superior up the Brule River, in Wisconsin, then across a height of land and down the St. Croix River to the Mississippi River at Prescott. The third alternative was a canal in Wisconsin via the Nemadji, Kettle and St. Croix rivers.

Ignatius Donnelly, a former congressman, was among the vocal boosters of settlement of the Midwest, and he saw the region's rivers as the first freeways of commerce — this prior to railroads.

The canal idea took a while to germinate, but early proponents made some headway when they got a bill through Congress on August 17, 1894, appropriating \$10,000 for a survey to determine which would be the best route for a barge canal to ship agricultural and industrial products mostly from Lake Superior down to the Gulf

of Mexico. The Corps studied the matter and came up with estimates for two routes: A route via the St. Louis River and Sandy Lake to the Mis-

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issippi River in northern Minnesota was estimated to cost \$10,575,715, and a canal using the Brule and St. Croix Rivers would cost an estimated \$7,050,000.

Both options had their problems. The St. Louis River-Sandy Lake option would require the Corps to also further “modernize” and maintain the Mississippi River above the Twin Cities and overcome the drop at St. Anthony Falls. The Brule-St. Croix

option would have to contend with the lack of water at the headwaters of the Brule. Both options would require an extensive system of locks and dams, dredging and maintenance.

Support generally fell on the side of the Brule-St. Croix route, but it was complicated. A system would need to be built to lift boats 767 vertical feet (either up the Brule or up the St. Croix, depending on direction of travel) through the use of 16 locks and eight hydraulic lifts. The proposed waterway (a combination of man-made canal and modified river corridors) would be 210 miles long, at least 80 feet wide and six feet deep.

In 1911 some 60 “prominent businessmen” attended a convention in Taylors Falls, Minn., to create the St. Croix River Improvement Association, established to lay plans to open and improve the St. Croix River for navigation and commerce. The group elected George H. Hazzard as its president, and Minnesota tax commissioner, James Armson, as vice president. Hazzard was also the first commissioner of the newly-established Minnesota Interstate Park, on the St. Croix

Walking the Height of Land

Earlier this year I revisited the area between the St. Croix headwaters and the Brule headwaters, hosted by Scott Peterson, executive director of Friends of the St. Croix Headwaters. I wanted to see, firsthand, how this “height of land” and the little St. Croix Creek were doing.

Scott and I trekked out with a bright sun above, but the thermometer registered -25° F. We decided to play it safe and go out for several short hikes rather than an extended trip. It was heartwarming, even at this temperature, to see the work that local landowners are doing to monitor the water quality, reduce erosion and runoff and take care of this place they love.

The two-mile Brule to St. Croix Portage Trail, now a National Historic Landmark, has been used for centuries to travel between the Mississippi River and

Lake Superior, even though a plaque says it was “discovered” in 1680 by a European explorer. As we followed the trail along St. Croix Creek, we looked for the legendary pond that flows both ways

I walked with a true reverence for this place that, thankfully, has been preserved.

— one end feeding the Brule and the other end the St. Croix.

The silence on the day (except for the squeak of our boots on the packed snow) was appropriate. I walked with a true reverence for this place that, thankfully, has been preserved. Here it is not so much a river as a conifer swamp of mature white cedar, balsam fir and



The St. Croix River near its headwaters near Solon Springs, Wis., would have become a straightened and deepened barge canal instead of this meandering stream had the waterway been built. (Dan McGuiness)

spruce, with occasional pockets of black ash and alder. Freshwater springs are evident and walking the creek bed risks getting wet feet, something that I can't even imagine on a day like this. I plan to return to this quiet spot in the spring to watch birds and see the creek flow. 🌊



Left: The Dalles of the St. Croix, the L-shaped turn in the St. Croix gorge near St. Croix Falls, Wis., and Taylors Falls, Minn., was a popular subject for stereoscopic images in the late 1800s. (Wikimedia Commons)

Below: Excursion boats offer tourists scenic trips on the Dalles. George Hazzard campaigned for the state parks on both sides of the Dalles, each named Interstate State Park. On the Wisconsin side, the Dalles became a State Natural Area in 1980. (National Park Service)



River. According to the *Hudson Star-Observer* of October 5, 1911, "Every effort will be made to hurry the matter to completion."

In 1912 the Corps again studied the project. Railroads already linked the Great Lakes and Mississippi. The decades of logging on the upper St. Croix River had just ended. In 1913 the Corps held another hearing and the association campaigned to get a good turnout in support of the canal.

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Ultimately, the Corps issued a report saying the idea was "inadvisable, infeasible, and impractical."

Then World War I also put a damper on the canal idea. After the war, the popularity of the automobile and the beginning of America's fixation with road building gave the region's boosters a new route for generating commerce and tourism. The idea of a barge canal between Lake Superi-

or and the Mississippi River waterway died, but the death was a very slow one. In 1952 presidential candidate Harold E. Stasson suggested a review of the project. Finally, in 1967 Jenó Paulucci, a Duluth food products entrepreneur, asked for a new study. As that idea failed, a new idea emerged: maintaining the St. Croix River's wild, scenic and recreational assets with a federal designation. This idea came to fruition with the passage of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968.

The outcome might have been very different. We could have followed the dream of George Hazzard and built that 210-mile waterway, dredging and digging our way through St. Croix Creek and then in both directions: to Lake Superior and the Mississippi River. But we didn't. Nevertheless, there are other threats looming on the horizon, and we need to remain vigilant.

As evidence of the changing values of people in the valley, the chief promoter of a wild and scenic riverway designation for the St. Croix was the St. Croix River Association (SCRA), formerly the St. Croix River Improvement Association — the same group seeking the barge canal in 1911.

The SCRA has continued to be a watchdog for the river, and in 2008 it became a formal nonprofit organization with its official mission "To protect, restore and celebrate the St. Croix River and its watershed." What a difference 100 years makes! 🌊

Dan McGuinness works as an independent consultant and lives in St. Paul. He was formerly director of Audubon's Upper Mississippi River Campaign and before that executive director of the Minnesota-Wisconsin Boundary Area Commission.