

## HISTORY OF THE NCTA IN MINNESOTA

By Roderick MacRae  
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My first acquaintance with the North Country Trail began with the publication of the BOR book *Trails For America* in 1968. At the time I was living on the East Coast and thought this seemed like a great plan and I kept the idea in mind for the future. In 1973 I resettled in Minnesota and continued to be active in the outdoor community. In 1974 I was appointed to the Governor's Trail Advisory Commission, the citizen review board for trail planning. Neither the North Country, nor other now extant trails, was under discussion at that time. Several members of the GTAC formed a "non-motorized" task force to express of our ideas. The GTAC was disbanded, for political reasons, in 1978.

In the spring of 1986 (or 1987) Midwest Mountaineering presented its first outdoor exposition show. While walking the aisles I discovered a booth with the display of the North Country Trail. A chap by the name of Chris Bredlow was exhibiting for NCTA, a citizen group based in Michigan. I was surprised and pleased that the program was underway and expressed my support. The NCTA national board meeting was scheduled to appear in Minnesota in the fall of 1986 (or 1987) at Itasca State Park. Chris encouraged me, and other trail activists, to attend. Without consultation, Chris proposed Ed Solstad and myself for board membership. This was my first occasion to actually join NCTA and pay dues!

During the winter I met with Ed Solstad and Tim Knopp (of the U/M) to discuss possible strategies for the trail. As Chris was located in Detroit Lakes he did not join us and did not respond to communications. Chris did make some attempt to communicate with NCTA members through a somewhat disjointed "newsletter." He seemed focused on trying to bring people to Maplewood State Park, which was a possible future NCT trail route. In the spring of 1988 I attended my first board meeting in White Cloud MI. Chris Bredlow also attended. At the first session some discussion seemed to offend Chris and he rose to announce that he was resigning as Minnesota state coordinator ... that I would be the new coordinator .... He then stalked out and drove back to Minnesota! I accepted post and asked Ed and Tim to form a "Minnesota Coordinating Committee." That is how we were listed in the early years as state coordinators.

We established several early goals. NCTA membership was perhaps a dozen people in Minnesota at that time. The Chippewa National Forest segment was recently completed and an NFS map was available. No other active trail was in the planning stage. Our goals were:

- 1) Become knowledgeable about the Chippewa National segment. Meet the NFS personnel/collect data for a future guidebook.
- 2) Explore extending the Chippewa segment into the Paul Bunyan State Forest for continuous trail.
- 3) Explore the possibility of developing the "Arrowhead" route along the North Shore, an obvious goal when looking at a map. Ed, with the Rovers Outing Club, had already

completed the Border Route Trail and hope to seek NCT designation. The Kekekabec Trail existed but was not maintained. The Superior Trail had yet to be planned.

4) Increase NCTA visibility to the public through exhibits, map distribution in stores, membership meetings.

We each agreed to take a territory under our wing to proceed. Tim Knopp was to work with the ski touring community and explore the North Shore route. Ed would try to mobilize the Rovers Outing Club to explore and cut trail in the Paul Bunyan State Forest. I agreed to manage the Chippewa segment and to promote membership.

We continued to host the NCTA booth at the Midwest Mountaineering show, which had become the prime outdoor show in Minnesota and the best place to meet the public. We began to publish a list of activities and dates and encouraged members and the public to come out and hike or work with us. I met with the Chippewa Forest staff and found them to helpful and interested. I also began walking the Chippewa trail with active plans for a guidebook. We made an attempt to distribute NCTA maps to local outdoor shops.

By chance encounter I met Dell Bjerkness who owned property on Bad Medicine Lake. He indicated that a local group wanted to develop a "Bad Medicine Trail" following an extinct logging rail grade. By chance this was also the precise route plan for the NCT west of Itasca Park. Dell & I began exploring this area and talked with the Bad Medicine Lake Association about the possibility of forming an NCTA chapter. The Association declined chapter status and Dell's professional work removed him from active participation for a few years.

We began a process for annual meetings of the Minnesota chapter in 1989. Our first design was to host a long weekend meeting at a camp or center near the Chippewa so that people could hike days and meet in the evenings. Two such meetings were held at the Deep Portage Conservation Center. Attendance was modest; perhaps 10-12 people, and we discontinued this model. We then tried to hold meetings as a dinner or luncheon coinciding with the Midwest Mountaineering outdoor show. Attendance was somewhat spotty (about 10-12 people) and we ultimately gave up on chapter meetings because most of people attending meetings were already active and in touch.

By 1990 I had gathered enough information to draft a guidebook for the Chippewa segment. This booklet was published by NCTA in 1990 and remains in print (although much in need of upgrading). We began our discussions with the Paul Bunyan State Forest managers about a route in this area and their basic position was that they could not support new trail but would be happy to route the NCT on existing snowmobile trail. This has always been an unacceptable option for the NCT and we continued to explore options. An Eagle Scout candidate did spend several days working on a route but his efforts vanished with no official oversight to care for them. Harlan Lillequist accepted responsibility for exploring the Paul Bunyan but worked largely alone. In 1989 we were encouraged by the DNR to put in a request for a grant from the LCMR program (a Minnesota state legislature environmental fund). The fund had been generous in funding the newly proposed Superior Hiking Trail (more than \$1 million over several years). Despite repeated applications NCTA never received a hearing or any money from LCMR. The

effort is continuing each time the fund cycle is opened for requests. We have never received any satisfactory explanation as to lack of funding.

By 1992 there had been several changes in the Minnesota leadership committee. Tim Knopp had deceased and Ed Solstad had moved on to other interests. Newly emergent faces included Harlan Lilljequist, Paul Wright, Becky Durenberger, Hans Erdmann, John Lomnicki and Dell Bjerkness. We met periodically to plan strategy but did pursue chapter meetings. I continued to lead an effort to construct backpacker campsites in the Chippewa Forest and, by 1992, we had added 4 new campsites. I also continued leading recreational backpack trips on this segment. NCTA membership in Minnesota did continue to grow but the numbers were not dramatic.

In 1992, Dell Bjerkness had retired from professional teaching and was able to give significant time to the trail. We began actively flagging the Bad Medicine route. Local residents showed up for work parties to build trail and we began to form a working relationship with a St. Paul based Scout troop under the leadership of Fred Crawford. We also commenced discussions with the Itasca State Park managers to seek a route there. Initial discussions again encountered the typical "we'll give you a snowmobile trail" position, which led to no agreement. With persistent discussions and visits to the Park we were finally able to reach agreement on a non-motorized route by 1995. The park agreed to build the new segment of trail through the southwestern corner of Itasca but NCTA would be responsible for maintenance of the new 6-mile segment.

In 1993 Dell Bjerkness agreed to join the NCTA national Board and that enabled this writer to retire after 6 years on the Board. One project that the Board had been discussing was the need for an expanded fall conference more akin to a convention. It was hoped that this would be more attractive to members. We proposed hosting the first such meeting in Minnesota in 1994. Our proposal was accepted and we hosted the first true NCTA conference over the Labor Day weekend in 1994 at Maplelag Resort. The goal was to offer educational workshops, motivational keynote speakers, local hikes and social events to nurture camaraderie. We established a steering committee to plan the event and, although there was a number of planning "glitches" the event was quite successful. Attendance was less than 40 people but we were able to maintain a budget in "the black". A particularly important event was inviting the White Earth Tribe to participate in the conference and they did so. They invited NCTA members to join in a dance of friendship and gifted me with tobacco. Unfortunately, we have not followed up on this act of good will. We believe that future trail west of Bad Medicine will require active support from the tribe.

To backtrack a bit, other events had transpired along the North Shore. The Superior Hiking Trail, because of solid funding, had gotten off to a good start and trail was actively being built and association membership growing rapidly. By 1994, the greatest bulk of the trail had been built and most of the route had been surveyed. Superior Trail Association membership topped 1,000 while the Minnesota NCTA remained static at about 100. A new group, the Kekekabec Trail Club, had emerged to rehabilitate and manage the nearly extinct trail in the BWCA. This meant that a nearly complete trail route now existed along the North Shore and back through the BWCA towards Ely.

Yet another new player emerged in this game, Paul McGough of Grand Rapids. He was leading an effort to establish a "Mesabi Trail" through the iron range country which link up the Arrowhead route with the existing NCT in the Chippewa National Forest. McGough expressed a strong interest in having the North Country Trail plan rerouted to officially follow the Arrowhead and the Mesabi route. McGough actually called several summit meetings including DNR officers and trail club officers to discuss this proposal. Although his efforts seemed abrupt and hazy his enthusiasm and dedication to the idea helped spark serious discussion of this route change. Our Minnesota Committee had long favored such a route and we began serious discussions with the Arrowhead route trail clubs. Ultimately, they all agreed to seek inclusion in the NCT system. This agreement enabled NPS and NCTA planners to officially begin the formal planning process to seek congressional approval of a route change. Although McGough disappeared from the scene and his route became a multi-purpose motorized route, his efforts have left a strong base for future planning.

In 1994, NCTA encouraged its local groups to form official chapters, qualified by national guidelines. A short dispute developed between the NCTA President and the Minnesota group over the definition of chapter territory. We had, for many years, discussed the prospects of local groups forming a small chapter (e.g., The Walker/Leech Lake area, the Itasca/Bad Medicine area and the Fargo/Moorhead area). All of these groups declined and preferred to be part of a state wide chapter. Thus, we formed the Headwaters Chapter encompassing all of Minnesota. It required a successful appeal to the NCTA Board to achieve this goal. Ten years later we are finally seeing some interest in local chapters develop. A problem we faced for many years was the lack of Chapter President. The responsibility fell upon the State Coordinator to also fill this role. I could make very little effort to promote membership activities (the chapter role) and felt my time and energy better spent in coordinating activities.

By the late 1990's the NCTA in Minnesota began to make significant progress. An aggressive membership campaign from the national office helped recruit new members. Solid relationships with several local groups (Scouts, University of Minnesota students and local activists) resulted in more trail on the ground. Agreement was finally reached with the Paul Bunyan officials for a non-motorized route and a written agreement was signed in 1997. A terrific newsletter editor was discovered when Ginne Ruppe volunteered to produce the *Call Of The North*. This enabled better communication with members. We began conducting National Trail Day events to promote the trail. Our effort to complete the Mesabi route connecting the Arrowhead to the Chippewa was officially endorsed taken under the wing of the Minnesota Parks & Trails Council. This was due largely to John Leinen's efforts. After some years of seeking to retire as State Coordinator the baton was finally passed to John Leinen in 1999. The following year, John Dreher stepped forward to serve as President of the reorganized Star of The North Chapter. In 2002 a new chapter emerged in the Walker/Paul Bunyan area under the leadership of Jerry Trout. Much has transpired since our humble beginnings in the early 1980's it is a credit to the many volunteers who have patiently stayed with the task over the years.

**Tim Holzkamm re dedication of Rod McRae plaque  
North Country Trail, Itasca State Park  
3 August 2007**

I first met Rod during the late 1980s when we were introduced by Odel Bjerkness. A group of us from Bad Medicine Lake had formed the idea of developing a hiking trail in the area and were trying to organize our efforts. Bad Medicine Lake is about 10 miles to the west and south of this kiosk. Unknown to us at the time, plans were being laid for the North Country Trail through the same area. The joining of our local efforts with the North Country Trail seemed to be a natural. As the Minnesota coordinator for the trail, Rod became a major driving force for creation of the trail. But that does not quite seem descriptive of Rod - he was more of a combination scout, cheerleader, and irresistible force. My memories of early work involve Rod popping out of the brush as we were laying out trail saying there is a perfect route just ahead. Working with Rod was like a train going downhill. Rod's enthusiasm tended to carry the rest of us along. It is not an exaggeration to say that Rod kept the rest of us going during the early years of laying out the trail in the Bad Medicine area - he was instrumental in organizing work days, locating extra volunteers, in obtaining tools, and in building trail. He led by example. That is not to say that everything always went perfectly and that there were never arguments about routing or construction, but it was the measure of Rod's professionalism and dedication that he never let such things get in the way of moving on with getting the trail built. There are also other memories of evenings at the Bjerkness cabin on Bad Medicine enjoying a dram of single malt scotch with Rod as a reward for the day's work or the sharing of tall tales. In a very real sense, the North Country Trail through Minnesota is part of Rod's legacy to the state and many of us also have the memories of working with him on the trail to mark the miles.

### **Draft RM Memorial Service written by Odel Bjerkness**

Rod was born and grew up in Minneapolis. He graduated from West High in 1954 and received his BA from Macalester College in 1960. After graduation Rod worked with the MN Children's Center until 1962 when he received an offer to go to SE Asia with International Voluntary Services. He spent the next three years as a teacher of Community Development at the Pakse, Laos Teacher's College. When Rod returned to the States, he directed recruitment for IVS in Washington, D.C. for three years. During this time he met and married Peggy Bartels. Upon receiving his MAT he joined the Alexandria VA schools as a school counselor.

In 1974 the family (Colin joined the family in 1972, John Douglass in 1974) returned to Minnesota where Rod formed Woodsmoke Associates, an outdoor education consulting business that allowed him to pursue his many interests: membership on several trail councils, part-time teaching, real estate, and a bicycle touring shop. In 1988 he accepted the Directorship of the Staring Lake Outdoor Center in Eden Prairie where he stayed until "retirement" in 1998.

Throughout his life, family, the natural environment, and service were at Rod's core. From early childhood, Rod loved the outdoors. He often reflected on the joys of sailing with his father and his brother; of attending, working, and/or volunteering at camps in Minnesota, Vermont and Thailand; and of sharing his love of nature with others through his professional work, his photography, his writing, and his volunteer service.

Rod often described himself as a "volunteer junkie." For 48 years, he volunteered for the American Camping Association. He was an ACA certified lifetime camp director and received the MN chapter's Sue Tinker Award for Distinguished service in 2004. He was a member of the North Country Trail Association for 18 years and received a Distinguished Service Award in 1994 and the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002. He was an early member of the MN Coalition of Scottish Clans, which recently created the Roderick MacRae Distinguished Service Award, to be given annually within the Scottish Community.

Rod loved spending time with family whether on a wilderness trip, walking around a city block or reading a book together. He took particular delight in going on nature hikes with one or all of his four grandchildren. His keen interest in history plus his love of family are evident in his genealogical work. The results include articles in *The Highlander* magazine, service on the board of the MN Genealogy Society, and an unpublished manuscript for a book that he was writing at the time of his death, *The MacRaes of Uig*.