

SAND DUNES STATE FOREST

Sand Dunes State Forest is located in central Sherburne County, about three miles west of Zimmerman and five miles north of Big Lake. The forest can be reached by taking County Road 5 north from Big Lake, off of U.S. Hwy. 10, or following County Road 4 west from Zimmerman off of U.S. Hwy. 169.

The Sand Dunes State Forest is located within the bounds of Orrock, Township, named after the first white settler in the area, Robert Orrock, who arrived in 1857. When these first settlers came, the land was virgin prairie. Most of these pioneers were farmers, thus most of this prairie was turned by their breaking plows. The early major crops were oats, rye, wheat, barley, corn, potatoes, and hay.

Even though the sand soils were not conducive to high yields, farming continued as a major source of income for many families until the late 1920's and early 1930s. The effect of the "Great Depression" of the 30s and the "Dust Bowl" drought of 1933 – 1934 brought an end to most farming in the area. The light, worn out soils "took to the air and drifted like snow" over roads and on to front porches.

Concerned citizens who wanted to stabilize the drifting sand began experimental tree planting in 1941. Many species, including both hardwoods and conifers, were planted. The conifers surpassed the hardwood species in survival and growth.

Ray Clement, in 1943, introduced a bill to the state legislature proposing that sections 16, 36, and the NW ¼ of section 22 (now the Ann Lake Campground) be set aside for conservation. The bill passed and the Sand Dunes State Forest was "born". The forest was enlarged from the original two square miles in 1945. In 1951 it was again expanded to its present size of 10,698 acres (approximately 17 square miles). Although all this area is within the boundaries of the state forest, only 5,447 acres, or 51% is owned by the state. The remainder is owned by the U.S. Department of the Interior and private parties.

The Sand Dunes State Forest was in danger when two teenage boys started a fire while playing with fireworks. The fire started on the east edge of the state forest May 11 with 50 mile-per-hour winds keeping the flames going. Fast, efficient work by firemen, National guardsmen, farmers, and volunteers saved the main part of the forest from going in flames.

About 20 acres of 10-year-old trees, from the north side of Lake Ann to Orrock Road, were burned. The wind swept flames across the Orrock Road, and 300 to 400 more acres of woods north of the road burned before the fire could be brought under control. High winds and low humidity made the fire very difficult to control. County attorney John MacGibbon filed charges of juvenile delinquency

in probate court against the two boys who readily admitted starting the fire while setting off cherry bombs.

Found – “Sand Dunes State Forest” – Trail Map, 2000.
“The Growth of Sherburne Co.” – 1875-1975