

INTERPRETIVE CENTERS

An Indigenous Minnesota Idea That is Thriving!

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THE 1975 legislature enacted a statute that could have far-reaching consequences for Minnesota's historical program. It calls for the Minnesota Historical Society to formulate a comprehensive plan for the future development of interpretive centers throughout the state. The plan is to include "analysis of the historical resources of the various regions of the state, the feasibility and need for interpretation of those resources and the long-range costs and benefits associated with establishment of interpretive centers." It is also to include "a priority listing of existing and prospective centers." That study is now well under way, under the capable direction of Rhoda R. Gilman, the society's supervisor of research, and her assistant, Jane Lilja. Advising them is a seven-member task force drawn from the society's staff.

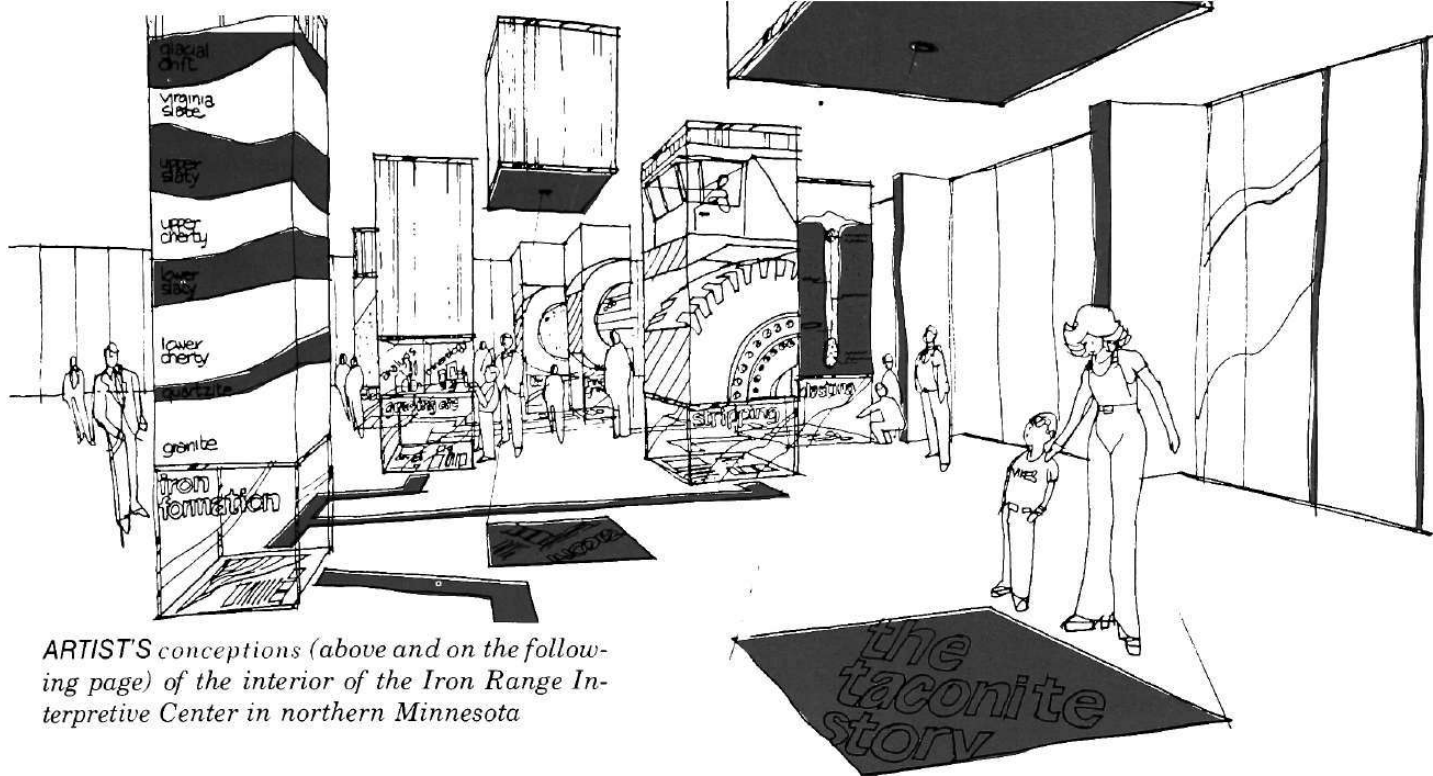
The idea of interpretive centers is relatively new in Minnesota. The name is taken from the nomenclature adopted by the National Park Service after World War II to identify its interpretive facilities at parks and monuments. Park Service personnel felt a need to get away from the term "museum," which has traditionally implied the collection and display of objects or pictures. They sought a broader name to cover the variety of exhibits, dioramas, charts, lectures, and audio-visual presentations they were using to tell the story of particular places. The first such interpretive center to be constructed in Minnesota was at Pipestone National Monument in the late 1950s.

The Minnesota Historical Society acquired a somewhat similar facility at Vineland in 1959, but it chose the name "Mille Lacs Indian Museum," partly because the term "interpretive center" had not yet become popular, and partly because the exhibits were developed around a substantial collection of native American artifacts given

to the society along with the site. The society has since built other major interpretive centers at the Lower Sioux Agency and the Lindbergh House. In size, each of these comprises 4,000 to 5,000 square feet. The reconstructed carriage house at the Ramsey House and the commissary building at Fort Ridgely (reconstructed by the WPA in the 1930s) serve the same purpose on a smaller scale. A miniature interpretive center has been built at the Jeffers Petroglyphs, and another major one is nearing completion at the Grand Mound near International Falls.

In 1974, after much discussion, the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society departed from the policy of building interpretive centers only at historic sites and approved the development of a forest history center at Grand Rapids. This center would re-create an authentic logging camp scene with live demonstrations, as well as build an interpretive facility in which to tell the story of Minnesota forests, from man's earliest habitation in them, through their exploitation, down to the present-day environmental movement. The plan also calls for nature trails, a fire lookout tower, and examples of reforestation techniques, along with suggestions for visitors interested in seeing other places related to the forest story.

But state interpretive centers have not been confined to sites administered by the Historical Society. The Department of Natural Resources has built archaeological interpretive centers at Big Stone and Mille Lacs Kathio state parks. In the early 1970s the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Commission began planning a large interpretive center to tell the story of Minnesota's iron mining industry and of the varied ethnic groups it has brought to the state. Construction is now nearly completed on a site between Hibbing and Chisholm. This



ARTIST'S conceptions (above and on the following page) of the interior of the Iron Range Interpretive Center in northern Minnesota

center, operated as a division of the IRRRC, is envisioned not only as a powerful magnet for tourists, but as the headquarters for an expanding regional program that will include, among other things, parks and recreation areas, trails, Iron Range tours, mining observation points, and ethnic festivals and celebrations. More recently, the Red River Valley Historical Society has proposed a similar regional interpretive program. This would include a network of mini-interpretive centers, maintained in co-operation with present county historical societies and each emphasizing a single theme relating to the valley as a whole. One or two major centers would sum up the story of the region and its people in an overall presentation.

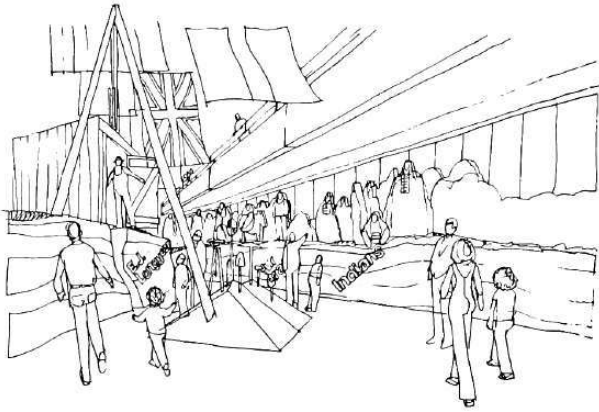
The 1975 legislative session revealed a virtual epidemic of interpretive center fever in many communities of the state. Funds for three major new centers, all to be built and operated by the Minnesota Historical Society, were recommended by the Minnesota Resources Commission and included in the Senate Finance Committee bill. They would have been located near the new Voyageurs National Park, in the St. Croix Valley, and at Pipestone (just across the road from the existing national monument). These projects, however, ran into stiff opposition in the House and were eliminated in the House Appropriations Committee bill. From the Conference Committee emerged the present law calling for a state-wide plan.

The resulting study now being directed by Rhoda Gilman is finding a continued interest in the establishment of interpretive centers. Some of this is sparked by bicentennial enthusiasm; much of it stems from a desire to promote tourism. For example, no less than six communities in southern Minnesota have expressed interest,

either in the press or through letters to the society, in having an agricultural interpretive center. As representatives of the society visit these communities, several things are becoming clear: Although the concepts differ widely in approach, the major theme common to all of the proposals is the astounding productivity of modern farm technology and agribusiness as contrasted with earlier times. History sets the stage, but the focal point is the importance of agriculture in today's economy. All look to agribusiness for a substantial part of their funding and to the touring city dweller for their potential audience. And nearly all of these communities have been under the mistaken impression that the state is committed to a system of interpretive centers as a bicentennial project.

IT IS in the public interest for the legislature to adopt a cohesive plan for a limited number of interpretive centers. Wherever possible these should be built in conjunction with existing state-owned and administered areas — such as historic sites, state parks, and college or university campuses. These areas provide appropriate settings for such centers, enhance their cultural and educational value, eliminate land acquisition costs, and save substantial amounts in staffing. This is important, for the price of building such a center is only the beginning. An average center today will cost between \$400,000 and \$500,000 to construct, but approximately \$50,000 annually will be needed to operate and maintain it, depending on the particular program. Thus operating costs will overtake capital investment within a few years.

In places where regional or local historical organizations are successfully planning interpretive centers, control should be left where it presently is — with the



county, city, or region. It is my feeling that the state should not directly administer any such nonstate projects. For these spontaneous community efforts, an extended grant-in-aid program might well be the most appropriate form of state support.

What is of paramount importance, however, is that interpretive centers serve an educational purpose and not be perverted to the commercialism of special-interest groups or the provincial boosterism of particular areas. Part of our problem is the fuzziness of the term "interpretive center." We should return for a moment to ponder the meaning of its predecessor — museum. The purpose of a museum is to preserve, illuminate, and transmit knowledge from generation to generation. Because of the great popularity of the idea of interpretive centers in Minnesota, we risk losing sight of the attribute that sets them apart from the marketplace and gives them their special quality — that is, their cultural and educational core. Without that aspect, they are likely to become indistinguishable in function from the all-too-prevalent tourist traps that increasingly litter our countryside. Interpretive centers may stimulate the economy of an area. Well and good. But that must be a by-product and not their reason for being.

BOOK REVIEWS

Food on the Frontier: Minnesota Cooking from 1850 to 1900 With Selected Recipes. By Marjorie Kreidberg.

(St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1975. viii, 313 p. Illustrations. \$10.50 hard cover, \$6.50 paper.)

A HANDSOME and informative book like this one reminds me that there have not been enough serious considerations of the daily lives of pioneer women. A hundred years ago the variety of things accomplished by mothers and daughters who helped turn homesteads into prosperous farms was taken for granted. Today such effort seems enough to make male supremacists cringe. Mrs. Kreidberg here confines herself to the kitchen and related areas, but even so the picture of the distaff world she brings to life is almost overwhelming.

Within this limitation she is alert to all the everyday demands, as well as "the satisfactions," in her words, "and the sadnesses that went into the frontier experience." She dismisses the image of the "good old days" at the outset. For the families engaged in the settlement of Minnesota and other regions, almost every hour was filled with hard work, and the production of meals was as replete with difficulties as the work of any man. In *Food on the Frontier* the details that make up the life of the average Minnesota woman in the nineteenth century are illuminating.

Mrs. Kreidberg outlines the steps to be taken in bread-making that begin with preparing one's own yeast: "Take as many hops as can be grasped in the hand twice." She reports that a home baker judged the heat of her stove by thrusting an arm into the oven, "and if she could bear the heat while she counted to 20 at a moderate speed, the temperature was right." She gives a choice of formulas for keeping eggs fresh as long as ten months. And her chapter on drying or canning fruits and vegetables combines a smattering of the history of Mason jars with glimpses of the sometimes ingenious methods used to preserve herbs, wild and domestic fruits, and garden vegetables.

The author does not leave the pork barrel to politicians but dramatizes the importance to pioneer families of salting down every part of the pig to provide food throughout long Minnesota winters. Her research turned up recipes for pemmican and jerky and for drying the many kinds of fish so abundant in lakes and streams. For short-term preservation, she found the instructions given to women a century ago for making an icebox from two barrels with holes for drainage. One melancholy note creeps in when Mrs. Kreidberg writes that few women even had a kitchen, "for a separate room solely devoted to food preparation was not the prevailing standard in Minnesota homes during the early years of settlement."

She includes seventy pages of workable recipes for all the



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