



Picturing LAKE MINNETONKA

A NEW MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESS BOOK

offers a photographic look at Minnesota's largest and perhaps most beloved summer lake resort. James W. Ogland's *Picturing Lake Minnetonka—A Postcard History* tells the story of the lake from the 1860s, when it was a fishing spot and secret hideaway, to the 1880s, when James J. Hill's grand hotels, railroads, and palace steamers dominated the lake, through the first decades of the twentieth century, when streetcar lines and express boats carried day-trippers to Big Island Amusement Park and other attractions. Ogland captures the changing times through 200 daguerreotypes, cartes-de-visite, stereograph views, and hand-tinted postcards, some with brief, tantalizing messages.

The following excerpt describes the trolley system that sped visitors from the Twin Cities to the lake and the streetcar boats that efficiently carried them to lakeside destinations.

Today, visitors can cruise the lake on the once scuttled, now beautifully restored, steam-powered streetcar boat *Minnehaha*. For more information, call the Minnesota Transportation Museum at 952-474-4801.

Lowry's Vision

BY THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, the well-to-do tourists who had helped turn Lake Minnetonka into one of the region's premier resort destinations were vacationing elsewhere. More and more people were building homes on the lake and living there year-round. The tourism business was drying up. It appeared Lake Minnetonka was well on its way to becoming an affluent, residential suburb.

But Thomas Lowry had other ideas.

Lowry owned the Twin Cities Rapid Transit Company—the firm that operated Minneapolis and St. Paul's extensive trolley system. While many people looked at Lake Minnetonka and saw a dying tourist destination, Lowry saw an opportunity. To him, Minnetonka was a beautiful, freshwater lake, close to two major cities with thousands of residents anxious to get away from their daily lives. If he could give those people

a new reason to go to the lake and a new way to get there, it might prove very profitable.

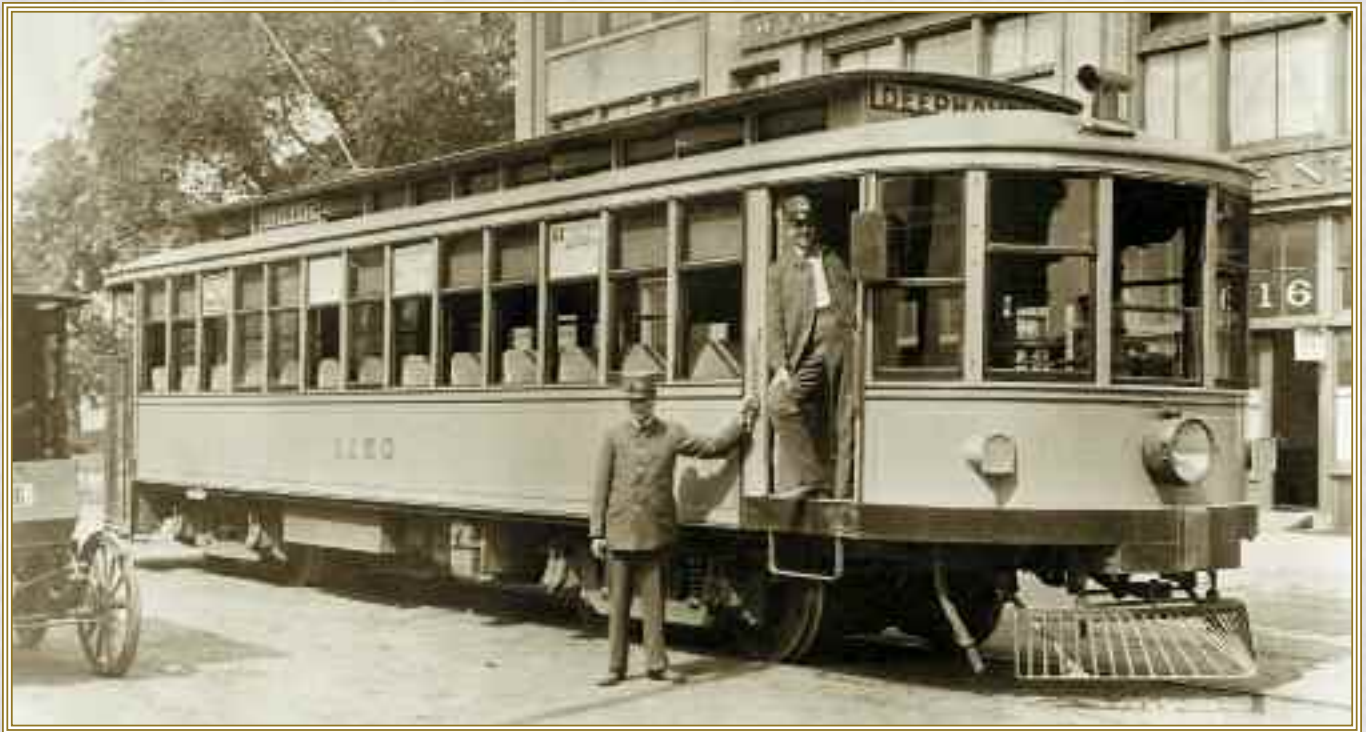
In 1905, Lowry started building a new streetcar line—a 14-mile stretch of track from Lake Harriet to Excelsior. This was big news for Lake Minnetonka, but it was only part of the story. Even as workers were laying



Postcards like this, "Interior of Lake Minnetonka Fast Electric Car," were available for sale in the depots along the TCRT's line.

Minneapolis's Union Station, as pictured in this Sweet Brothers postcard published about 1910





A streetcar bound for Deephaven on First Avenue in North Minneapolis, about 1900

the tracks toward the lake, Lowry and the TCRT were moving forward with other plans for the lake, including the acquisition of a fleet of boats and the construction of an amusement park. Lowry planned to provide fast, efficient transportation to lake residents, wealthy vacationers, and working-class day-trippers from the cities. His vision for the lake would soon become reality, but it would begin to fade much faster than he ever imagined.

A one-way ticket cost a quarter. The ride itself was an experience, as the yellow streetcars were capable of mile-a-minute speeds and wobbled constantly from side to side.

The first car left Minneapolis at 4:03 in the morning. It was called the “Early Bird,” and most of its passengers were fishermen who wanted to get out on the lake before sunrise. The trains ran at regular intervals

The Great White Way

THE TCRT’S NEW LINE to Lake Minnetonka opened in June of 1906. It was a success from the start, with thousands of people jumping at the opportunity to take an inexpensive jaunt to the lake. The trip from downtown Minneapolis to Excelsior took just 46 minutes.

☞ *Departing from downtown, the car soon skims along Lake Calhoun’s edge, plunges through woodsy reaches, and flies along the bluff that overlooks Lake Harriet. Now the car, leaving the city behind, speeds like an arrow over the 14-mile stretch of perfect track that leads to Excelsior.* ☞ from a Twin Cities Rapid Transit brochure

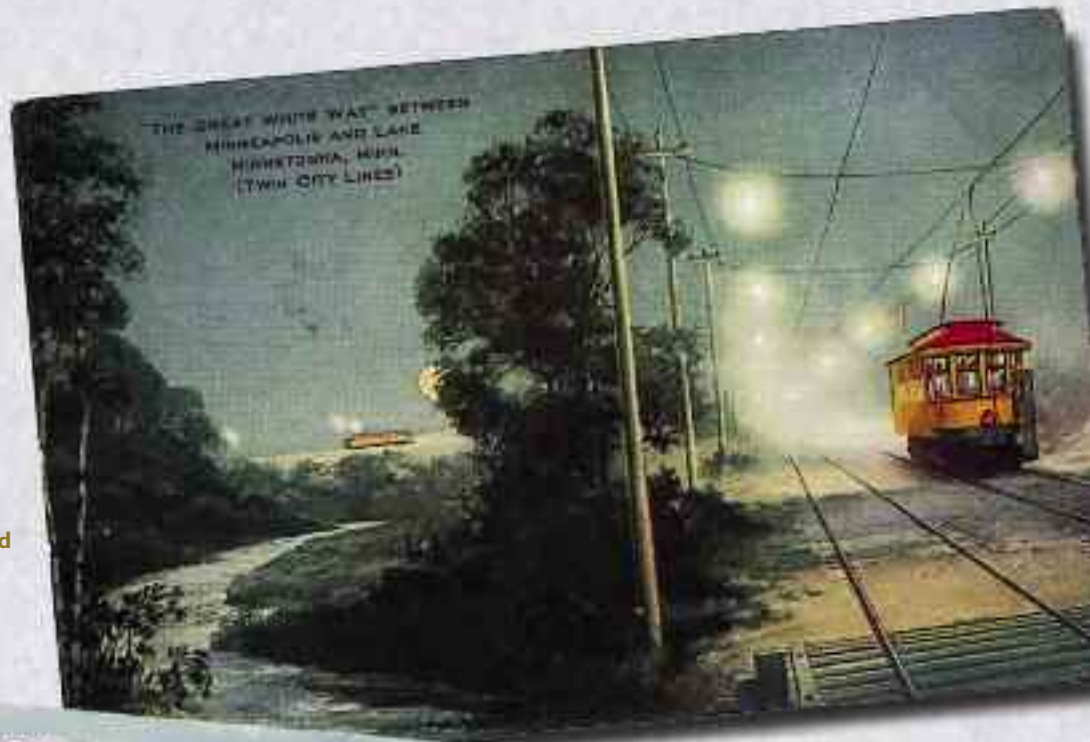
during the hour and dropped off their riders opposite the dock station in Excelsior. Excelsior was the hub of the TCRT's Minnetonka operation. From there, riders could transfer directly onto one of the company's passenger steamboats.

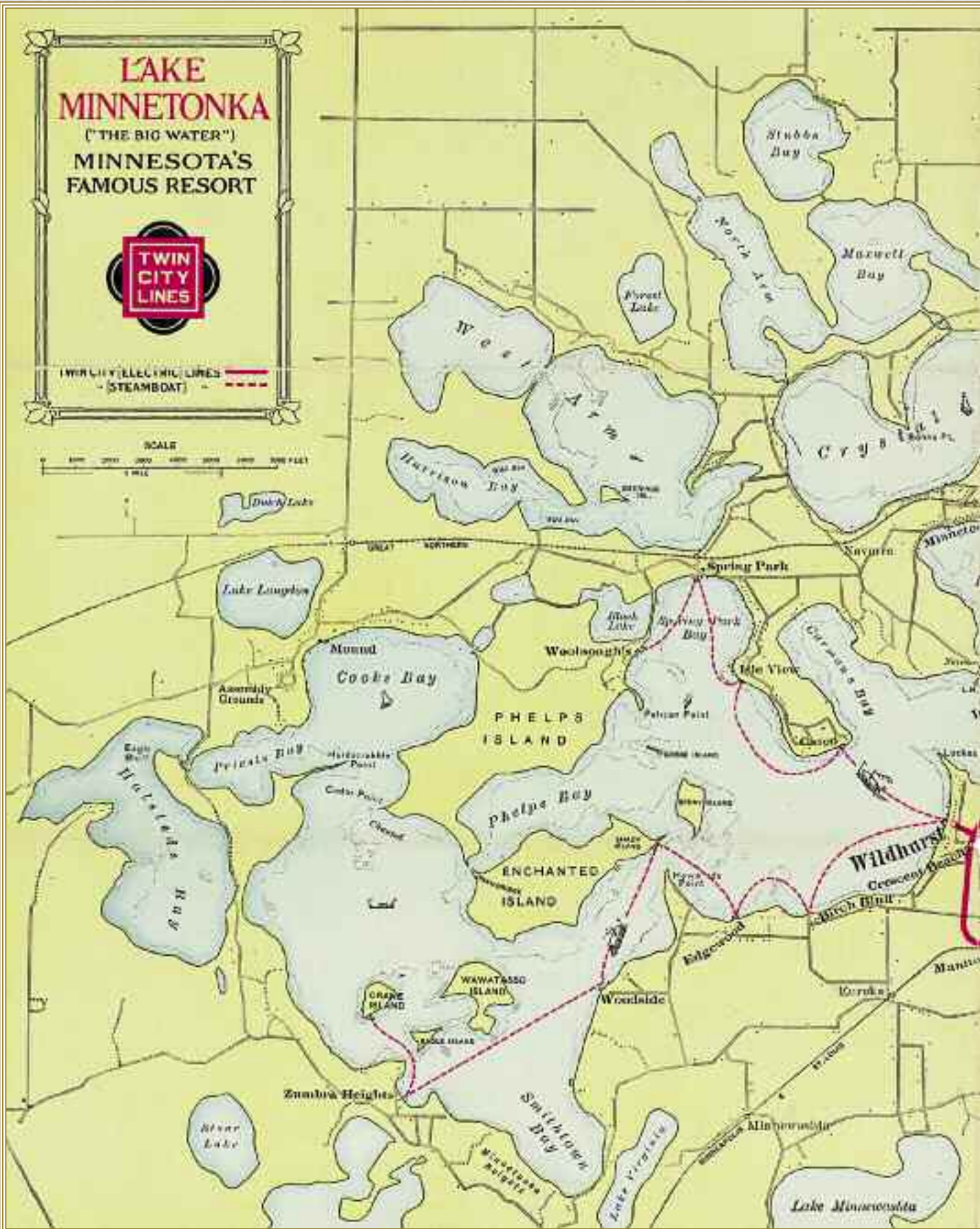
Of course, the streetcars also traveled the other way as well. The morning cars out of Excelsior carried

lake residents and hotel guests to the hustle and bustle of Minneapolis and St. Paul. During the evening, the cars filled up with city folk returning from a day on the lake. The return trip after dark was especially memorable as the streetcars seemed to fly back to the cities on a brilliantly lit line. The illuminated route soon earned the nickname the "Great White Way."

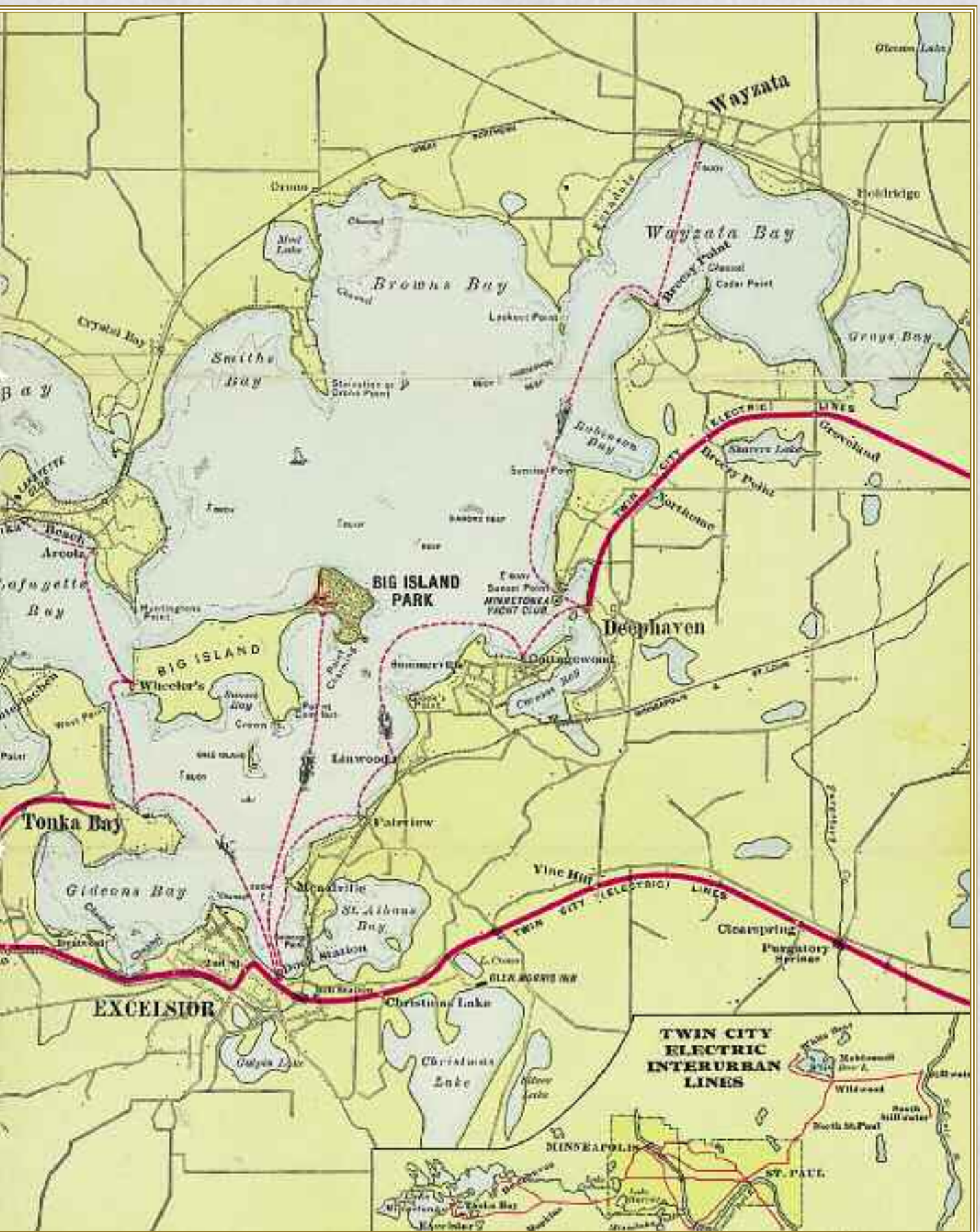
In about 1908, in response to changing postal regulations, V. O. Hammon and the Sweet Brothers produced a series of Twin Cities views with divided backs (right and below). Among them were a series of cards chronicling a trip along the "Great White Way."

A round-trip ticket from Minneapolis to Minnetonka on the Minneapolis and St. Paul Suburban Railway Company, a division of the TCRT





Twin Cities Rapid Transit Company map for the Lake Minnetonka streetcar boats



Streetcar Boats

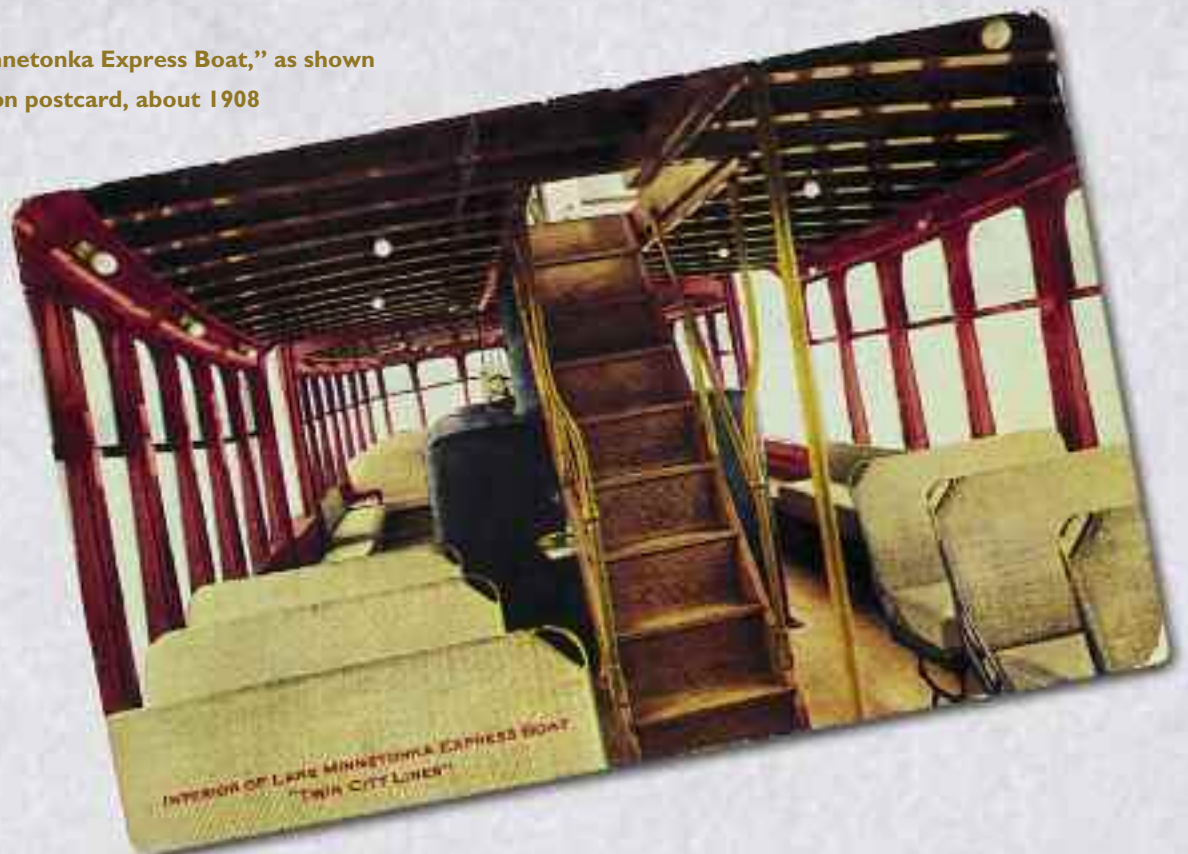
THE TCRT'S STREETCARS could carry passengers to and from the lake, but how was the company going to move its passengers to and from the streetcars?

By steamboat, of course.

Thomas Lowry and the TCRT recognized that there were three types of Minnetonka boat passengers: lake residents who needed an efficient way to get from place to place; excursionists who wanted to take a leisurely tour of the lake; and visitors from the city who had come to spend time at the company's new amusement park. The TCRT could best serve these three types of passengers by providing three different types of steamboat transportation. In the winter of 1905–06, the company began building a diversified fleet that would do just that.

The centerpiece of the TCRT fleet was a team of six fast steamers that would serve lake residents by running a tight schedule similar to the company's streetcars. The new boats even looked like streetcars. They were finished with the same yellow paint. Their seating capacity and interior decoration (all the way down to the split cane passenger seats) were identical to those of their land-bound cousins. They were even named after major destinations on the TCRT's trolley system: *Como*, *Harriet*, *Hopkins*, *Minnehaha*, *Stillwater*, and *White Bear*. The *Minnetonka Record* reported that these "streetcar boats" moved lake residents "from their cottages to their places of business in the city as expeditiously as the trains [could], with the additional pleasure of a trip by water every morning and evening."

"Interior of Lake Minnetonka Express Boat," as shown on this V. O. Hammon postcard, about 1908



Built for Speed

THE STREETCAR BOATS operated as an extension of the streetcar line, running hourly on four routes. They radiated from Excelsior to all points on the lake—twenty-seven destinations in all—in good or bad weather. The boats usually stopped at hotel docks, but they also would stop at any other dock if hailed by a white handkerchief.

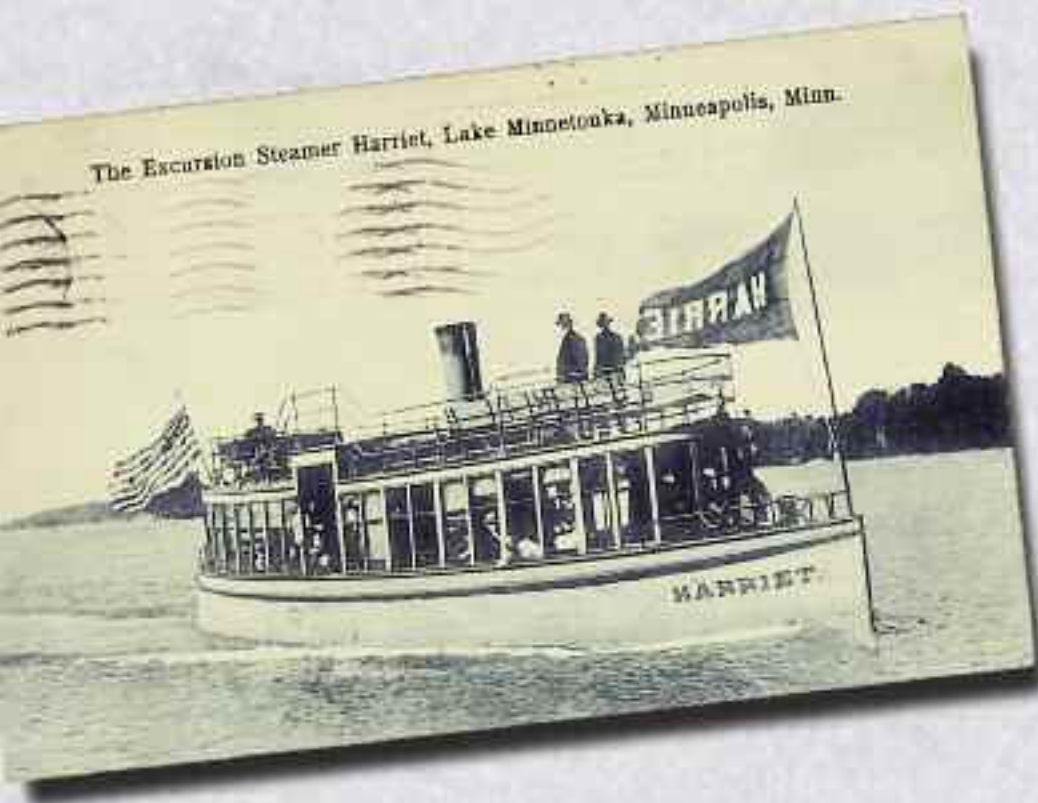
With quick, reliable, on-time service, they soon became the darlings of the summer population as well as the growing number of year-round residents.

The boats were built for speed. Their unique torpedo stern was designed to leave a small wake as the boats swept close to shore or through narrow channels. The design was so revolutionary that a steamboat company in Italy decided to start building copies.



☞ These Twentieth Century craft embody the best and latest ideas for comfort, safety, speed and beauty . . . Each boat is 70 feet long with a 14-foot beam, has a torpedo stern, can comfortably seat 120 passengers, and is so engined as to make 12 miles an hour with great steadiness in any weather. The upper deck is shaded by a canopy. These steamboats are the embodiment of the latest ideas of marine architects for watercraft making quick trips and many stops. ☞ from a TCRT brochure





Another of the TCRT's fast steamers, named for Minneapolis's Lake Harriet

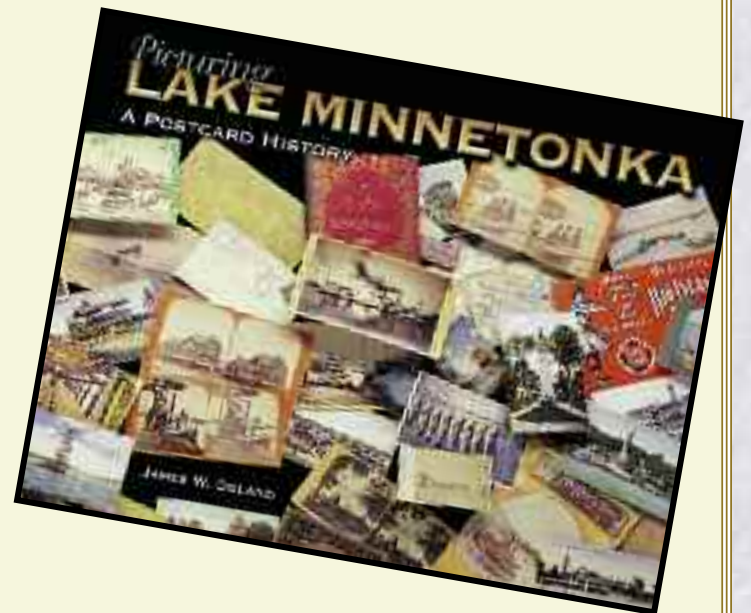
Each of the six streetcar boats carried a crew of at least three men. The pilot navigated and steered. The engineer tended the boiler and the driving machinery. The purser collected fares, tied up the boat at each landing, and helped passengers on and off when the dock was wet or the water was rough.

Many of the crew members were local men who knew Lake Minnetonka well, although TCRT streetcar conductors often doubled as streetcar boat pilots. □

The Deephaven streetcar photo is from the MHS collections; all other images are from the author's collection.

PICTURING LAKE MINNETONKA

by James Ogland will be published in mid-August by the Minnesota Historical Society Press (144 p., \$34.95 hardcover, ISBN 0-87351-402-5). It will be available at the Minnesota History Center's Museum shop, local booksellers, or direct from the publisher at 800-647-7827.





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