

Eugene Debs Becker



Photographer

MURRAY WILSON

Eugene D. Becker's pictures of Minnesota are a hidden gem of the Minnesota Historical Society's photograph collection. Becker (1919–78) worked for the Society from 1949 to 1978 as curator of what was then called the Picture Department and, ultimately, became chief photographer. Colleagues fondly remember him as a generous and outgoing person who was especially noted for his kindness to others.

Becker was a versatile photographer who believed in documenting history as it happened. To him, history wasn't something "old, old, old"; it was a live object waiting for his camera (*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 29, 1961, p. 4C). He pleaded with

people to save their family pictures and urged them to take candid shots of everyday activities. His own work ranged from portraits of such Minnesota luminaries as Gordon Parks, Sigurd F. Olson, and Josephine Lutz Rollins to contemporary events such as the 1960s antiwar protests and the death of Hubert Humphrey in 1978. He recorded cultural icons including Volkswagen beetles, a hitchhiker, and Minneapolis's Electric Fetus record store and New Riverside Café.

Becker also took hundreds of photographs of historic sites and buildings in all parts of Minnesota. He was interested in the process of historical change and looked for places that embodied it, such as sites slated for restoration or demolition. These photographs show his distinctive use of composition, relying on the elements

of his subject to lift the site out of the ordinary and dramatize it.

Above all, Becker's pictures display a love of Minnesota. Almost anything about the state was worthy of his photography. Nearly half of the 1,052 Becker photographs in the MHS collections have been digitized and can be seen on the Society's website (<http://collections.mnhs.org/visualresources>); the others are available for viewing in the History Center library in St. Paul.

Murray Wilson, branch manager of the Heritage Library in Lakeville, has worked for Dakota County for 30 years. He is staff liaison to the Public Art Citizen's Advisory Committee.

ABOVE: Eugene D. Becker, about 1952

In *Minnesota Travel Companion*, Richard Olsenius writes, “Located two miles from Lamoille on County 7, rests the picturesque village of Pickwick.” The road through town passes a decaying old mill situated on Trout Creek. Built in 1856, the gristmill originally had six stories, but the upper floors were destroyed by a tornado in 1907. Perhaps when Becker was leaving the site he glanced in his rear-view mirror and saw this picture—meaning that the tire tracks are his own.



Pickwick Mill, Winona County, 1959



Site of Ignatius Donnelly's home, Nininger, Dakota County, 1958

Ignatius Donnelly, the prominent nineteenth-century Minnesota politician who served as lieutenant governor, U.S. congressman, and state legislator, also tried his hand at land speculation and town planning. With partner John Nininger, he envisioned their Dakota County townsite becoming a “great city,” but the Panic of 1857 ended the project. Many of its residents—at one time numbering about 1,000—and some of its buildings moved to Hastings. By 1869 Donnelly’s large, elegant home was all that remained of the city of Nininger. After his death, the beautiful building deteriorated. Despite efforts to save it, the house was demolished in 1949 and its remains sold as scrap for \$400.



Capitol approach area, view from State Office Building, 1953

The expansion of the state capitol mall in the 1950s required the removal of nearby housing. Becker took this photograph on the eve of the disappearance of one such modest residential area. On this site, at the intersection of present-day John Ireland and Constitution boulevards, would rise the State Transportation Building in 1956. Here, the ordinary houses at the bottom of the picture—and the surprising abundance of cars—contrast sharply with the misty shape of the St. Paul Cathedral at the top.

Becker took several photos between 1971 and 1975 documenting the replacement of the old two-lane bridge with the new four-lane span connected to the interstate highway. Here, the old bridge, distinguished by the metal girder structure, dominates the foreground while the new pylons (with a single support) are just visible behind it.



Bridge over St. Croix River near Hudson, looking east, 1973



Site of Sun Ray Shopping Center, Highway 12 and McKnight Road, St. Paul, 1955

Sun Ray Shopping center on St. Paul's East Side was built by the Kraus Anderson Company at Hudson and McKnight roads in 1957 and has been enlarged several times since. On this July day the construction sign and earth-moving equipment, though dwarfed by the landscape, nevertheless announce that the bucolic site will soon be transformed into acres of stores and parking lots.



Spillway near bathing beach, St. Croix State Park, 1957

Most of Becker's photographs portray landscapes or architecture. This is one of the few that present ordinary human activity. It easily calls to mind a happy family vacation, cemented in memory by the beauty of nature. Located 15 miles east of Hinckley, the 30,000-acre St. Croix State Park is the northernmost in a chain of recreational and wilderness areas that stretch along the St. Croix River. The swimming beach can be found at Lake Clayton.

Becker was legendary in his friendships. Given the number of pictures he took of Olson (1899–1982), the state's great writer on nature, the two must have been well acquainted. The likely setting of this picture is Olson's home, the "Listening Point" in Ely. In his book *The Lonely Land*, Olson cast himself as a leader in the style of a French Canadian voyageur: "Omond looked at me. Bourgeois, he said, it's up to you. I looked toward the cliffs once more and the wave-tossed miles in between. Let's go, I said, and without more ado we headed out into the open." This portrait seems to capture some of that air of self-confidence.



Sigurd F. Olson, about 1960



Josephine Lutz Rollins, Stillwater, 1954

Josephine Lutz Rollins (1896–1978) was a professor of art at the University of Minnesota and painted oils and watercolors. She resided in Stillwater and was Becker’s neighbor. She was a kindred spirit, too. In her article “Exploring with Brush and Palette” (*Minnesota History*, Spring 1953), she explained, “It was my interest in Minnesota history that led me to undertake the painting of my state’s historic landmarks in water color.”



Marge and Eugene Becker lived in Afton with their two children, Hanje and Lael, and the two dogs pictured here. Their house was located on Stagecoach Trail, otherwise known as County Road 21, a north-south artery between Afton and Stillwater. From the looks of this photo, Marge shared the enthusiasm of many Minnesotans glad to be outdoors after a long, icy winter.

Marge Becker and her garden, Afton, about 1974



Graffiti, Minneapolis, 1970

By 1970 the opposition to the war in Vietnam had grown tremendously. Anti-war demonstrations occurred at college campuses across the country and often provoked a violent response from government. One of the most tragic events was the shooting of four students by the National Guard at Kent State University in May 1970, the year Becker took this photo.

The Electric Fetus record store and “head shop” epitomized the hippie era of the late 1960s better than almost any other local institution. Founded in 1968 on Cedar Avenue near the West Bank of the University of Minnesota, it sold “music and musk oil, posters and paraphernalia, counterculture gifts and good vibes,” related the *Star Tribune* on April 5, 1987 (page M14). By recording contemporary scenes like this one, Becker showed that in photography the present and the past merge into one—further evidence of his belief that history was not necessarily “old, old, old.” 📷



Window sign, Electric Fetus, Cedar Avenue, Minneapolis, 1972



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