

Nature's Crossroads: The Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota

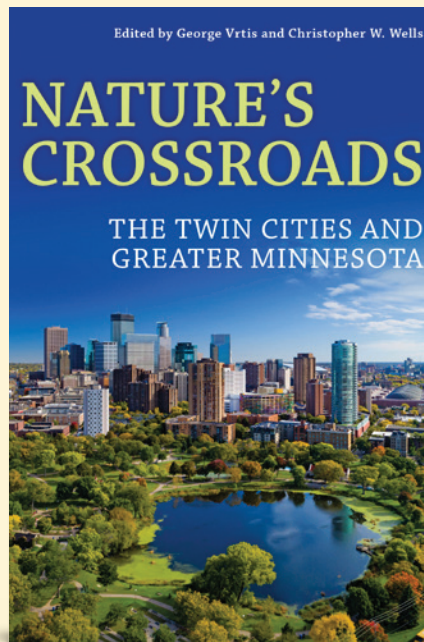
George Vrtis and Christopher W. Wells, eds.

(Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023, 420 p., hardcover, \$60.00)

Nature's Crossroads takes a serious look at Minnesota's history of western settlement, development, and land use, especially in the Twin Cities, and the impact of those activities on the Indigenous people and natural communities. Editors George Vrtis and Christopher Wells—both environmental historians—bring together chapters from 17 historians to highlight various stories about how we as Minnesotans changed the land for agriculture, forestry, and development. The book is presented in three parts: “The Dynamics of Environmental Change: Cities, Commodities, Hinterlands”; “The Twin Cities and the Built Environment”; and “Environmental Politics, Thought, and Justice.”

The Dynamics section has six chapters, including Thomas Finger's “Down to the Farm,” which covers the rise of wheat farming and milling. Wheat farming probably had one of the greatest impacts on the state's natural habitats with the conversion of prairies for agriculture, including the huge bonanza farms in the western part of the state. Another Part I chapter, by Michael McNally, examines how the milling business changed the Mississippi River upstream from St. Anthony Falls. While the damming of the headwater lakes provided reliable water flow to the mills located at the falls, it also flooded Ojibwe lands and destroyed their wild rice lakes. Another chapter in Part I, Kevin Brown's “Making Stumps and Fields,” shows how timber barons abused not only the environment but also new immigrants, by marketing the cutover northern forests as farmsteads while knowing that the land was not suitable for crop agriculture.

Part II, “The Twin Cities and the Built Environment,” includes five chapters. John Anfinson's “Fountains of Life and



Death” covers the importance of clean water to prevent disease, especially typhoid. In the late 1800s, the Twin Cities were growing so rapidly that residents contaminated the drinking water supply faster than the cities could find other sources. This led to large water systems and chlorination plants in the early 1900s. Some of the original pipe infrastructure is still in place. Karen Wellner's chapter, “Urban Environmental History and Loring Park,” explains the changes in residents' views of nature and how it fits in urban settings. As Minneapolis grew in the 1800s, natural areas were eliminated near where most people lived. The area around Loring Lake was originally designed for residents to stroll through and observe trees and flower gardens as green space. As time went on, more people wanted to use the parks for play areas, picnicking, and general activities. Loring Park remains very popular as a green space that provides a “nature” experience in a structured landscape.

In Part III, “Environmental Politics, Thought, and Justice,” Jeffrey Manuel's “Pittsburgh's Colony in Saint Paul's Hinterland” talks about the development of the Iron Range and the impact of the

mines on the native landscapes, on Indigenous people, and on immigrant-settlers. Gregory Pratt's “Minnesota Acid Rain Story” (a version of which appeared in the Winter 2021–22 issue of this magazine) illustrates how a strong concern for the environment combined with a strong political will served to lead the nation in the fight to reduce acid rain pollution of our northern lakes. James Feldman's chapter on radioactive waste at Prairie Island examines the effect of state policies and big corporations on Indigenous people and the environment.

While I highlight only some of the chapters here, this does not minimize the importance of the other contributions. Together, the book's 17 chapters examine different issues that shed light on the damage to the environment caused by us. I include myself and all non-Indigenous Minnesotans as “us,” because we have prospered from these impacts.

Nature's Crossroads reveals the under-sides of the activities and landscapes that many people feel make Minnesota a great state, from farming and milling to the Iron Range and forests. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of environmental and ecological change in Minnesota. Each chapter stands on its own, so one does not have to read the entire book from beginning to end. Further, setting the book aside after reading a chapter can allow its impact to sink in and, hopefully, increase the reader's concern for and desire to protect the environment.

—John J. Moriarty



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