

## 1948 St. Paul Winter Carnival Ice Fishing Contest

**B**ACK IN 1886, the people of St. Paul, stung by a New York reporter's depiction of their city in wintertime as "another Siberia, unfit for human habitation," responded with the Winter Carnival, complete with its signature ice palace. They'd show those snooty East Coast types the wonders of winter in the heartland. In 1947, the carnival organizers outdid themselves, adding the World's Original Ice Fishing Contest, believed to be the first of its kind in the country. Which is how the folks in this photo came to be staring into their ice holes on White Bear Lake a year later.

The scene hardly resembles Siberia, with overcoats unbuttoned, hands free of gloves, and the bait—presumably minnows—swimming about in metal buckets. It does appear they had some recent snow, as seen on the car in the background. The billboard beside the car promotes the upcoming Torchlight Parade and Don McNeill's "Breakfast Club" performance the following evening, but these folks were keen on their chance to snag some prizewinning fish.

The previous year, in the contest's debut, 605 folks vied for almost 50 prizes awarded for everything from the first to land a fish to the person who caught the most. In 1948, participation more than tripled, with some 2,100 testing their luck. The ice fishing contest quickly became one of the carnival's most popular events. By 1952, while Lake Phalen hosted car races and Lake Como speed skating, participation in White Bear Lake's ice fishing contest had soared to 5,200 people willing to chop, drill, or dig



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their own holes in the ice and drop a line on Commercial Bay.

The event became a national curiosity—this time in a good way—with publications around the country reporting on it. In its February 16, 1948, "Photo of the Week," *Life* magazine ran an aerial shot showing the participants and spectators clustered within a 600-foot diameter circle inside a large ring of cars parked on the ice. The people depicted in the photo here are near the very center of that circle.

After a 35-year run, the contest was discontinued in 1982, a novelty no longer and overshadowed by other, more popular ice fishing competitions. Carnival organizers revived the event in 2009 with the lure of \$100,000 in prize money and a new

4×4 pickup awarded for the biggest fish. The pandemic shut it down after 2020. For the past three years, ice fishing anglers have been able to compete by following fishing laws on any public waters in the state and submitting their results. In 2023, several hundred competed virtually for more than \$15,000 in prizes.

Back in 1948, the people in the photograph had no idea what was to come 75 years hence. For the moment, they were content to lug their tools in what look to be canvas golf bags across the ice, puff on a cigar, and contemplate what might grab their bait in the next few minutes. But that day, their chances were slim. Only 75 fish were caught during the contest, the largest a 5.25 pound walleye.

—John Rosengren



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