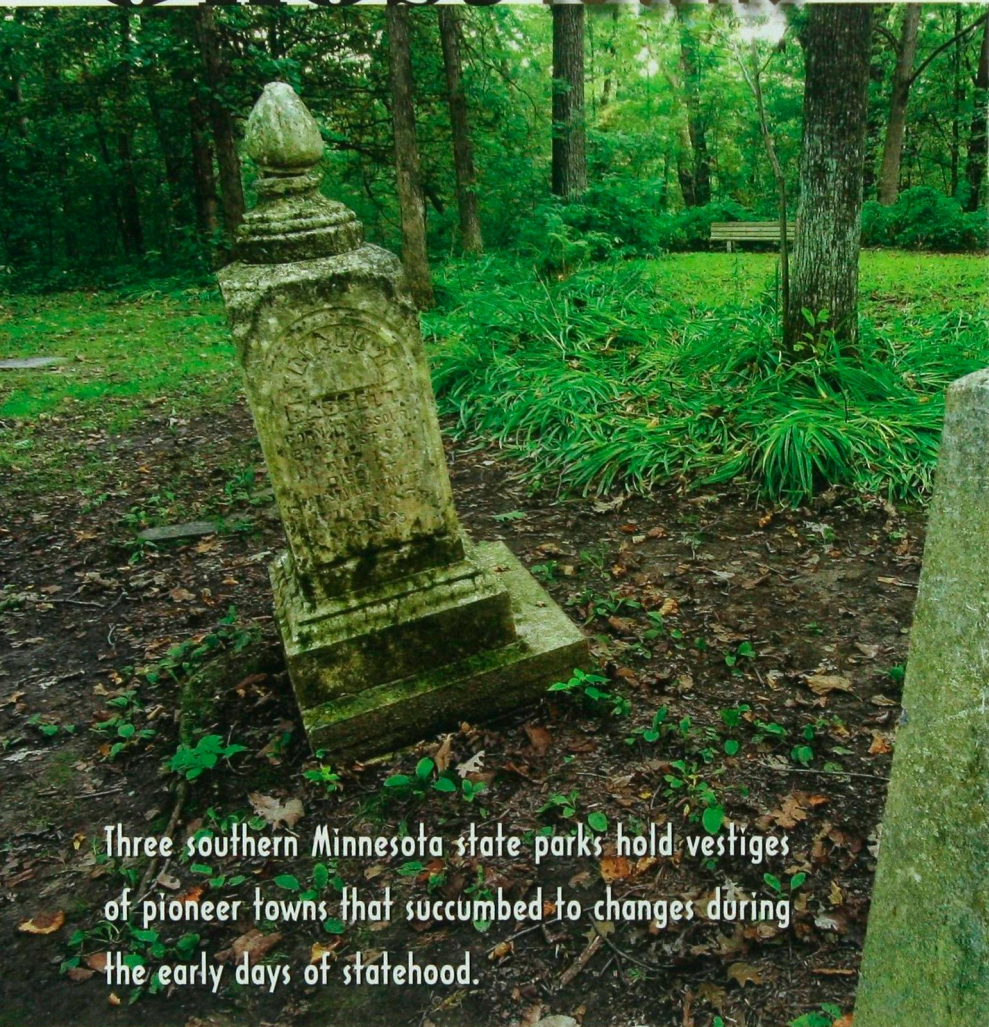


Ghost Towns



Three southern Minnesota state parks hold vestiges of pioneer towns that succumbed to changes during the early days of statehood.



Sesquicentennial Stories in Our State Parks

In honor of Minnesota's 150th anniversary in 2008, *Minnesota Conservation Volunteer* is telling stories from our state's history through travel and exploration in state parks. This story is the last in this series.

By Kerri Westenberg



Photography by Layne Kennedy



bas-relief
engraving of a

dove near the top of the
tombstone caught my eye. The
artistry was delicate, and moss had
nearly overtaken it. I bent down to make
out the inscription below the sculpture.
Much was lost to weather and age, but what
I could decipher whispered of immense
sorrow. "Riley ... 1863 ... 3 months."

As I surveyed the hilltop cemetery, the
day's last rays of light filtered through white
pines that stood 150 feet tall, trees so old
they cast their shadows on young Riley's
burial. The surrounding woods sang a song
of warbling birds and rustling leaves. A
historical marker near the entrance of the
graveyard said: "Zumbro Hill Cemetery
was not limited to one church or denomi-
nation ... the first burial was in 1856 ... the
last was William Meighen in 1899."

Some of the marble tombstones tilted
precariously. Others lay nearly cover-
ed by earth or broken into shards.
Most seemed to suggest that life here
in this pretty parcel of southeastern
Minnesota—where prairie and maple-
basswood forests once met—could be
hard, uncertain, and rife with loss.

Down the hill a single-lane bridge, a well-
stocked general store, a brick home, and
two barns are all that remain of Forestville,
one of three long-ago abandoned pioneer
towns I would visit in southern Minnesota
state parks. Historic Forestville, a site oper-

ated by the Minnesota Historical Society, is one of the main draws at Forestville/Mystery Cave State Park.

Forestville: Bypassed by the railroad.

On the night of my visit to Forestville, a dozen historical interpreters were re-creating a Saturday evening in 1899 for a special program called “By the Light of the Lantern.” The only house still standing—a sprawling brick two-story—was the center of activity. The weathered back door of the kitchen stood open, and the cooing of a baby drew me inside. As my eyes slowly adjusted in the kitchen, which was lit only by the soft sunlight that passed through its door and windows, I saw the baby splashing in a basin on the kitchen table. “The other kids are down washing in the river,” said a woman role-playing as their mother, the sleeves of her white shirt rolled up, her long brown skirt covered in a white apron. As she took the baby from the bath and handed the child to her helper (the baby’s real mother), she blithely told visitors of the work done in the kitchen throughout the summer. It’s where they can vegetables from the garden over a hot woodstove in the heat of the day and cook enough fresh-plucked chickens to feed the family and the farmhands. She raised her wrist to dab at sweat on her brow.

I walked through a squat door into the parlor, where chairs upholstered in elegant fabric made clear that the owner of the house was well-to-do. There, three ladies sat

in a small circle near the fireplace, stitching needlepoint by the light of kerosene-fired lamps. They argued the merits of a woman’s right to vote, which would come more than 20 years later. “I just don’t care to follow all those political shenanigans,” said one woman arguing against her own suffrage.

Attached to the house was a general store, owned by the same person who owned the house. There, on the crowded shelves, bolts of calico threatened to topple onto a corset. Tin mousetraps were crammed beside braided tobacco leaves and canned goods. Seeds, coffeepots, lamps, hats, dress patterns, and tools lined the rows of the narrow store.

Behind the counter stood a woman in a white shirt and long, black skirt, her hair in a neat bun. Without seeming the pushy salesperson, she extolled the virtues of an “amazing, revolutionary hairbrush.” The body of the brush was magnetized, she explained, and the magnets would erase the worst of headaches. For other ailments, the store had live leeches in a glass jar. Doctors of that era prescribed “bleeding” with leeches to bring down swelling.

I left the store as one robust middle-aged woman was trying on a corset, pleading for mercy as her friend cinched up the strings. Then I wandered through the garden behind the house, where basil, carrots, squash, pumpkins, kale, potatoes, and grapes grew. Tomatoes were staked to wooden poles with strips

Page 52: Zumbro Hill Cemetery sits atop a ridge overlooking the former town of Forestville, today a Minnesota Historical Society site. Right: Derbys, straw hats, and other 19th century-era goods are on display in the Meighen Store, built in 1857 by Felix Meighen. Felix’s son, Thomas, took over the general store and ran it until 1910, when he closed the doors and walked away, leaving the shelves filled with unsold stock.

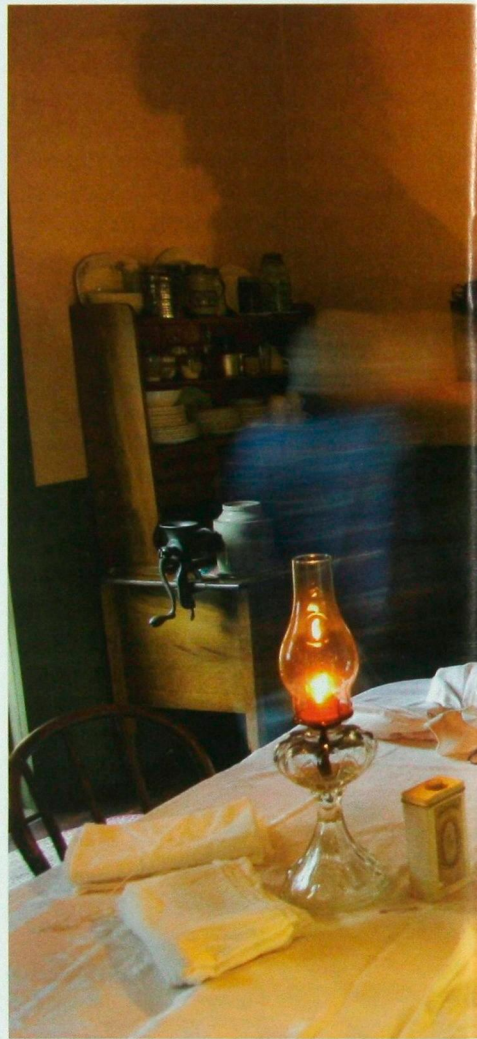


of torn rag. In a nearby barn, two farmhands in faded blue jeans played checkers on a rustic wooden board and took an occasional swig of rye whiskey.

Only one man on this Saturday evening was still at work in his office. A stout, mustached man—posing as Thomas Meighen, the town's powerful businessman and owner of the general store and the gracious brick house—read over the day's mail. Meighen's father, Felix, helped develop Forestville in its earliest days when he opened its first general store in 1852. Felix's friend Robert Foster had discovered the location—then a fledgling town on the Root River—during his explorations of Minnesota Territory, much of it on foot. Together the two men constructed a log cabin in Forestville and returned to Galena, Illinois, where they bought \$700 worth of goods to stock the store. Foster hauled the stuff back north by oxcart and steamboat up the Mississippi.

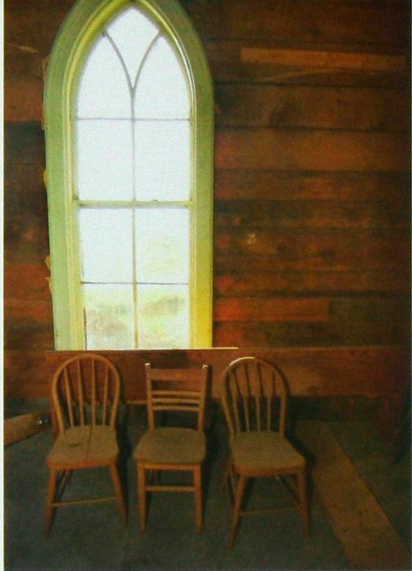
The store spurred Forestville's glory days. By 1857 Forestville counted 104 residents and boasted a new brick general store, a brickyard, two hotels, two sawmills, a blacksmith shop, a furniture-making shop, and a gristmill. Farmers came to town to mill their wheat at the gristmill. Children frolicked on their way to school down the town's single dirt road. Townspeople gathered on the front porch of the general store to chat. The railroad, which they hoped would soon lay a line through town, must have been a popular topic.

The railroad, however, did not appear. In 1868 the Minnesota Southern Railroad chugged and whistled its way to Preston. Without the influx of goods and people





Baby's Bath. Historic Forestville reenactors portray an 1800s-style baby bath. The town population boomed to 104 by 1857, but a slumping post-Civil War economy—and the railroad's decision to bypass Forestville—caused many residents to move elsewhere. By 1880 only 55 people remained in town. The Meighen family offered loans to local farmers during this tough time, with interest rates as high as 40 percent annually. When farmers inevitably defaulted on these loans, the Meighens foreclosed. By 1889 the Meighens owned all the land in town—and employed every resident.



the railroad would bring—and with the certain loss of the stagecoach line that had run through the town—Forestville faced its own demise.

Meighen's partner, Foster, sold out his share of the general store the same year the railroad decided to bypass Forestville; he instead began farming on the outskirts of town. Others decided not to stay: Residents began to move to the more prosperous railroad town. As they did, Thomas Meighen bought their property at fire-sale prices. Often, he claimed the land after farmers defaulted on their loans from his general store. By 1899, the year portrayed during my visit, Meighen employed almost everyone in town, paid workers in store credit, and rented them houses that he owned. Eventually even Meighen moved to the railroad town. He became president of the bank in Preston, left his family home in 1905, and closed the store in 1910.

But on the night of my visit, life seemed hopeful. As I strolled around the grounds, stars began to appear overhead and a three-

man band—guitar, fiddle, and stand-up bass—assembled outside a barn.

“What would you like to hear, little lady?” asked the bass man, his blue eyes twinkling behind wire-rim glasses.

“Anything by Springsteen,” I offered.

“Don't believe I've heard of him,” came the reply. Then the trio launched into a snappy tune.

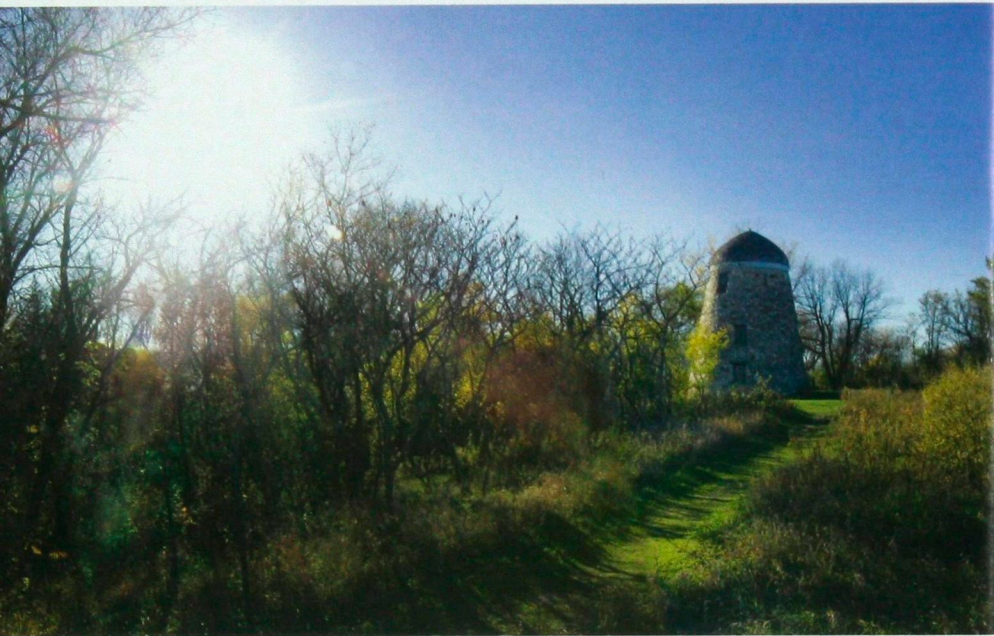
Rice Lake: Lost congregation. Several days later I drove to what's left of another by-gone town: Rice Lake Village, established around 1855, seven miles east of Owatonna. At Rice Lake State Park, I walked a path along the lake named for the wild rice that grew there until the 1970s, before land use, water pollution, and fluctuating water levels wiped it out. Original settlers were drawn by the rich land, the oak savannas that ringed the lake, and the abundant water. I was taken with the bird life flitting among the trees: The park holds marsh, meadow, and woodland habitats that attract a variety of birds, including seven species of woodpeckers and nesting black terns.

I got back in my car and drove just outside the park boundary to find the sole remaining building of the village. As I bounced down the rural road, I saw an old country church that seemed to levitate. Wooden stairs that once led to its arched doorway stood nearby, leading to thin air. I stopped my car in the church parking lot and got out for a closer look at the eerie scene.

A strong, unrelenting wind whipped through the tall grass. In the glare of sunshine, the weathered clapboard church, small and white against a big blue sky, looked forlorn. But it was no longer aban-



New Foundation. *The Rice Lake Church sits upon a lift, awaiting a new foundation as part of its restoration by a local citizen group. The church was once neighbored by a hotel and tavern, general store, blacksmith, mill, barber shop, photography gallery, and several homes in the bustling village of Rice Lake. The Ridge Road stagecoach route passed through town, but the railroad bypassed Rice Lake in 1865, and its residents left a few years later. Today this church, built in 1857, is all that remains of the village.*



done. In fact, the church hovered off the ground on a lift because the foundation was under repair by the nonprofit Rice Lake Church Restoration and Preservation Group, a small band of citizens, most of whom farmed nearby and attended the church until it closed in the 1970s due to a dwindling congregation.

Diane Stark, a restoration group member, met me at the church to tell me about the town and the Methodist community that erected this building in 1857. We surveyed the simple white structure with gothic windows and a squat bell tower.

The story Stark relayed sounded like Forestville. A settler named Ambrose B. Tiffany saw the richness of the land and imagined big things. He built the first house in 1855 along Rice Lake and turned it into a hotel and tavern. By mid-1857, a number of homes had been built. Four-horse stagecoaches stopped there along a route from Owatonna to Wasioja.

Pointing across the road from the church, past a cornfield to a distant house, Stark said, "There was a general store and a blacksmith over that way." A sorghum mill, a barber shop, and a photography gallery filled



Armless Obelisk

The Seppman Mill at Minneopa State Park operated as a windmill, with four arms that had a spread of 72 feet. But it was a mill cursed by natural calamities. Lightning struck two arms in 1873. They were replaced, but a tornado tore off two arms again in 1880. By then, advances in milling technology had made the Seppman Mill obsolete, so it was not fixed. It operated with two arms as a mill for agricultural feed until 1890—when another storm rendered the mill armless.

out the town. Frontier cabins dotted the countryside, built by farmers with pioneer names such as Ingalls, Wilson, and Hunter. They came to the area for the exceptionally fertile and relatively flat ground.

When word spread that the Winona and St. Peter Railroad would pass through here, Steven Wilson, owner of the general store, platted the city of Rice

Lake. But in 1865, the railroad bypassed the town. Tracks were laid several miles south of Rice Lake Village. The dreams of the expanded town—the commerce and opportunities a railroad would bring—were bypassed as well.

Seppman Mill: Nature takes a toll. My final stop, at Minneopa State Park, five



Wind-Powered Milling

During its heydays in the late 1860s, the Seppman Mill was a wonder of modern technology. A tracking system allowed the blades to be swiveled so they could catch the wind in any direction. Farmers came from 30 miles away to grind their grain at the Seppman Mill. On a windy day, it could process 150 bushels of wheat.



ILLUSTRATION BY BILL REYNOLDS; HISTORICAL CONSULTATION COURTESY OF BLUE EARTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

miles west of Mankato, proved that more than diverted railroads could derail the dreams of Minnesota's early settlers.

A short walk from the park office brought me to the double falls for which Minneopa is named. (In the Dakota language, *Minne* means water, *inne* means falls, and *nopa* means two.) From a bridge that spans the creek, I watched Minneopa Creek tumble over a jumble of rock on the upper falls before taking a powerful 40-foot fall straight down the lower falls. The water flowed into a lush gorge, and the trees provided plenty of shade. I could easily imagine the early residents of Mankato and farmers taking refuge here and enjoying picnics on hot summer days.

Buoyed by such natural beauty, and the new railroad line that passed nearby, the owner of the falls, D.C. Evans, created a townsite called Minneopa in 1870. He built footbridges over the creek. Soon a hotel, blacksmith shop, and lumberyard were operating; and the town began to flourish. But not for long.


Nature, which had been such a blessing with its beauty, introduced a curse: One day a dark cloud of grasshoppers descended on the land. The grasshopper plague struck in 1873 and continued for five seasons. Each summer, trees were stripped bare of leaves. Farmers' crops were gone within days. Cattle, walking on a carpet of grasshoppers, had little to eat. A man from Lyon County to the west reported, "The grasshoppers

are making a clean sweep of the grain and shrubbery of all kinds, and are not leaving a living thing on improved lands." Finally, settlers gave up and moved on. One departing wagon filled with household goods was adorned with a drawing of a grasshopper and a caption: "He wins." The town of Minneopa was abandoned.

After my walk to the falls, I drove to another part of the park, where I knew at least one piece of history remained standing, a structure of beautiful handiwork and odd folly: Seppman Windmill. It was completed in 1864 by Louis Seppman, who modeled it after mills in his native Germany. The hilltop mill ran on wind power, which rotated four wooden arms that each stretched more than 70 feet across. On a windy day, it could grind 150 bushels of wheat into flour.

Lightning struck two of the mill's wooden arms in 1873. They were replaced, but in 1880 a tornado carried away two arms. The mill continued to grind, on the strength of its two remaining arms, until 1890, when another storm knocked off the final two.

On a historical marker, I saw a photo of three unidentified men, three children, and a woman with one hand on her hip and the other holding a bonnet. The mill stood in the background, but its arms were strewn on the ground. Peering at the photo for some time, I saw weariness, but also strength.

A spark in their eyes hinted that they would try again, elsewhere if need be. 

Minneopa was a pioneer town blessed by the railroad, which built a depot nearby, but cursed by a grasshopper plague, which caused residents to flee. Even after the town was abandoned, people continued to take the train to Minneopa Falls for picnics. A newspaper advertisement in the Mankato Record in 1869 declared the falls to be "one of the most picturesque cataracts in the state."

