

# Hastings to St. Paul, Minnesota

By Reggie McLeod

The stretch of river from Hastings, Minn., to downtown St. Paul is more industrialized than any stretch down to Muscatine, Iowa. Nevertheless, there are many wild places, parks, trails and lush backwaters — a saving grace for the river and for travellers.

From about a mile downriver from Hastings, Minn., where the Mississippi makes a right turn at the Wisconsin state line, Minnesota has the river all to itself for its first 574 twisty miles.

Hastings (pop. 18,204 in 2000) is a town of many charms. Its downtown 19th century architecture is in great shape, housing a variety of shops, restaurants and other businesses. You can walk or bike on the riverfront park and trail, which extends upstream to

Lock and Dam 2. You might also want to visit **Lake Isabelle**, a quiet, tree-lined lake just to the south and east of downtown.

Did you know that there is a dramatic little waterfall in Hastings? Few people do. On Highway 61 drive south out of downtown, cross the bridge over the **Vermillion River**, and turn left into a park in the shadows of large grain elevators. The grain elevators are the inheritors of a long tradition of grain milling at the falls. Follow the path toward the river, where the waterfall cascades through a steep, narrow gorge and down into the Vermillion River Bottoms, where it meanders into the Mississippi.

History and architecture buffs will appreciate several treasures in Hastings. The **Le Duc House** is a beautiful

buff-yellow stone house on spacious grounds that's easily visible on the east side of Highway 61 as you enter Hastings from the south. The ornate city hall, downtown, was built in 1871 and served as the Dakota County Courthouse until 1974. You can pick up a map of Hastings with trails and a self-guided historic tour here. Another architectural gem is the Fasbender Clinic, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and finished in 1959.

## Signs of the City

After you cross the bridge over the Mississippi, which is scheduled to be replaced in 2010, and head north on Highway 61, you begin seeing signs of urban sprawl. Past the massive 3M plant, new condos and cookie-cutter housing developments sprout up in the middle of cornfields. Fortunately, you'll also find the **Grey Cloud Dunes State Natural Area**, a relatively new 237-acre dry oasis that protects now rare ecologies and offers fine views of the Mississippi River Valley and the channel behind Lower Grey Cloud Island. On a warm September day, dragonflies floated in the breeze, and the only sounds were the wind and a distant chainsaw. No picnic tables or benches interrupt the natural landscape.

Lower Grey Cloud Island doesn't offer much access to the water, other than a couple of boat ramps. Behind a double row of trees, massive gravel mining operations are chewing away at what is left of the island.

As you continue upriver toward St. Paul Park (pop. 5,070 in 2000), the countryside has a settled, rural feel.



Hastings has 63 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, including 33 commercial buildings downtown. (Hastings Tourism Bureau)



Above: Hastings City Hall.



Right: Le Duc House in Hastings, Minn.

St. Paul Park has the feel of a small rivertown, with a marina and a shady island park along the riverfront. Amid new houses on the south end of town,

*There's a surprise waiting for the river-loving traveller: the evocatively named Pigs Eye Lake, thick with cattails, water-lilies and arrowheads.*

the city has set aside park land with trails that wind through the forest and along the backwaters.

Sandwiched between St. Paul Park and Newport, the next city upriver, a massive Marathon refinery looms over the river. Newport is a small town, too, but it's set in what feels increasingly like the city.

Upriver from the I-494 bridge, the east side of the river is busy with industrial activity, much of it involving barges, railroads, metal recycling and chemicals. However, right in the middle of all this hustle, noise and industrial stink, there's a surprise waiting for the river-loving traveller: the evocatively named **Pigs Eye Lake**, thick with cattails, water-lilies and arrowheads. Eagles, ducks, egrets and herons nest here, and you can hear the low-pitched rumble of the city behind the squawks and croaks of wildlife. Boaters like to poke around in here.

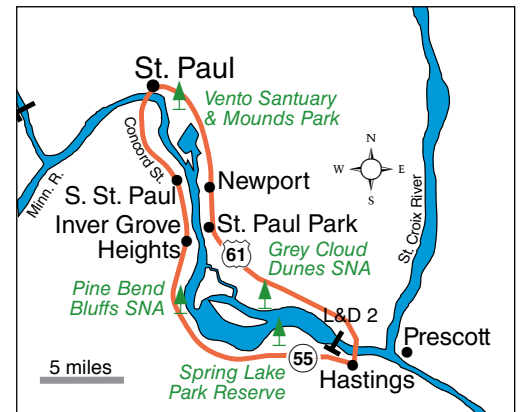
The huge municipal waste-water treatment plant that sits between the upstream end of the lake and the river accounts for much of the odor.

Back when this was the frontier, the city that came to be known as St. Paul was called "Pigs Eye," after Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant, an early trader and whiskey peddler who operated a wildly popular tavern out of a cave back in the 1830s. Eventually the local convention and visitors bureau or marketing consultants or somebody convinced town leaders to name the city after St. Paul rather than Parrant, but Pierre's nickname stuck to the lake and an island.

### Parks, Mounds & Caves

It takes stubborn persistence to find your way down to the river on the next stretch of the loop, but **Indian Mounds Park**, above Daytons Bluff, offers an excellent panorama of the urban river. All modes of transportation are visible: railroad switching, barge loading, hikers and bicyclers, jets landing at an airport, boaters on the river and traffic coursing over five bridges. To step out of the modern world, walk up the hill and study the huge 2000-year-old Hopewell mounds perched along the bluff.

Below the bluff, the **Bruce Vento**



The loop in the story starts at Hastings and goes counter-clockwise up to St. Paul on the east side of the river and back on the west side.

**Nature Sanctuary** is chock full of clues to the area's historical past. A large cave at the base of the bluff is still considered a sacred place by Dakota people. Its walls were once covered with ancient art. The Dakota village of Kaposia was here when early settlers arrived. The foundations of a long gone brewery, rail yards and other businesses occupy the little valley. Volunteers contributed many hours of labor to plant prairies and trees here. It's an interesting little park, well worth exploring. The railroad tracks and highway that separate the sanctuary from the river may



Three marinas and the Marathon Refinery across the river are visible from the old swinging tollbridge, the St. Paul Park Bridge. The decrepit bridge's future is uncertain. (Reggie McLeod)

eventually be breached by a tunnel or bridge.

Just north and west of the sanctuary, the Lowertown section of downtown St. Paul begins.

Across the river, St. Paul's West Side is home to an old established Mexican neighborhood. The intersection of Cesar Chavez and Robert streets is the heart of the neighborhood. Heading north, Chavez Street becomes Concord Street, then Wabasha Street as it crosses the river into the heart of downtown.

### Back Downriver to Hastings

This, too, is a largely industrial stretch of the river, but transformations are underway. Two short bridges across the railroad tracks — one for traffic and another for bikes and pedestrians — link a new park, **Kaposia Landing**, to South St. Paul. The 87-acre park sits atop a demolition landfill that was recently capped and landscaped. A trail runs along nearly a mile of riverfront in the park, and a fenced dog park is at the north end of the park.

(Compass points often get muddled up near the river. The river makes a few sharp turns through the

Twin Cities. Consequently, St. Paul's West Side is south of downtown St. Paul. West St. Paul is south of the West Side and west of South St. Paul, which happens to be southeast of the West Side. This all makes better sense from on the water than on the street. Pilots headed upstream on the Mississippi

*Nininger township is an interesting stop, if only to learn about one of Minnesota's most colorful citizens.*

River consider the shore on their left to be the west bank and the shore on their right the east bank, whichever way the river is running.)

This area has changed quite a bit in recent years. The busy stockyards that lined the river have been replaced by light industries and offices. A boat ramp and small park provides river access just below the I-494 bridge.

The 113-year-old **St. Paul Park Bridge**, downriver, has an interesting history that is still being written. To

find it, turn towards the river on 66th Street and drive until you get to a barricade near the approach to the bridge. This swinging toll bridge was closed in 1999, but it's still standing, and demolition plans are still in the works. It's a double decker bridge with railroad tracks on the upper level and a deck for street traffic below. All parties agree that the swinging span in the center of the river will have to go, but the city of Inver Grove Heights has considered keeping its approach for recreational activities. It's easily accessible and seems to get a fair amount of foot traffic, despite its decrepit condition and large gaps in the railing. From the bridge you can see three marinas tucked behind Newport

Island, just upstream, and the Marathon Refinery across the river and just downstream. Prolific graffiti on the approach and bridge ranges from art to racist rants.

You could easily follow Concord Street and Highway 55 back to Hastings without seeing any sign of the river, but several areas of parks and undeveloped public land border this stretch of the river as the heavy industry peters out. The 256-acre **Pine Bend Bluffs State Natural Area** (near 117th Street and the Highway 55/52 frontage road) contains a variety of relatively intact habitats from dry prairies to swamps and riverbanks.

Right after Highway 55 splits off from Highway 52 and heads toward Hastings, Pine Bend Trail splits off to the left and passes several units of **Spring Lake Park Reserve**, which Dakota County likes to call "the hidden jewel of the Upper Mississippi." Spring Lake is a wide, shallow bend in the river south of Grey Cloud Island and the Main Channel. The first park features two archery trails, an airfield for model airplanes and a pleasant trail through the woods to the lake. The last unit, **Shaars Bluff**, is popular with picnickers and offers a broad overlook of the lake and island.



From Grey Cloud Dunes Scientific and Natural Area, a rare prairie with sand dunes that rise in waves cresting 10 to 20 feet, you can see Lower Grey Cloud Island. (Reggie McLeod)

### Traces of Ignatius Donnelly

Between Shaars Bluff and Hastings you could almost drive by Nininger Township without noticing it, but it's an interesting stop, if only to learn about one of Minnesota's most colorful citizens, **Ignatius Donnelly** (1831-1901). Donnelly served three terms as a Republican congressman

and terms as a state senator and lieutenant governor. He was active in many reform movements, supporting women's suffrage, agrarian reform and a graduated income tax. He also wrote a number of books, of which *Atlantis: The Antidiluvian World* was the most popular and sparked broad interest in theories about Atlantis.

He tried to start a utopian community in Nininger City in 1856, but it fizzled. Despite attempts to preserve it, his home was dismantled in 1949. Now the only trace of this once world-famous resident is a small sign near the town hall. 🌊

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