

Review: North Woods River: The St. Croix River in Upper Midwest History.

By McMahon, Eileen M. and Karamanski, Theodore J.

Reviewed by Daniel E. Karalus

Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Arizona

McMahon, Eileen M. and Karamanski, Theodore J. *North Woods River: The St. Croix River in Upper Midwest History*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. 338pp. ISBN 029923424X. US\$24.95, paper. Alkaline paper.

Historians tend to focus on the human use and exploitation of rivers across the United States. Rivers become power generators, resource highways, garbage dumps, and sites of beauty and splendor. In *North Woods River*, Eileen M. McMahon and Theodore J. Karamanski show that the St. Croix River bordering Minnesota and Wisconsin followed many similar patterns of river use. For more than 300 years, it served as a political and cultural frontier, commercial pathway, and tourist destination. Yet they also illustrate how the story of the St. Croix symbolizes the unique character, environment, and experience of the Upper Midwest.

McMahon and Karamanski chronicle the interactions of humans and the St. Croix as far back as the 1600s. They show how wars between the Dakota and Ojibwe over access to territory and hunting grounds created new boundaries in the region and how the fur trade led to game and beaver decline and often stimulated interracial marriage for profit. They also point out that the fur trade contributed to native dependence on European goods, ultimately prompting the Dakota and Ojibwe to sign land treaties with the United States in 1837. For McMahon and Karamanski, the social and environmental landscapes of the St. Croix intertwined and transformed, both before and after Europeans arrived.

By the mid-nineteenth century, loggers and farmers took advantage of the treaties, new technologies, and dwindling fur trade to massively transform the ecology of the St. Croix. McMahon and Karamanski detail how lumbermen built dams, blasted boulders, constructed booms, and expanded railroads to turn the St. Croix into a log transportation system. Forests eventually gave way to expansive wheat and dairy farms. Dikes and ditches helped corporations alternately drain and flood cranberry marshes for maximum efficiency. Additionally, they connect these environmental changes to larger processes, as forests, farms, waterways, and railroads linked the St. Croix to regional and national commercial markets and urban centers.

McMahon and Karamanski show how changing perceptions of nature accompanied the St. Croix's broadening reach and environmental transformation and helped propel it into the tourism era. They detail how fires,

declining wildlife populations, and controlled waterways gave rise to conservation ideas at the turn of the twentieth century. The work of public and private groups, from the Civilian Conservation Corps to local sportsmen's clubs, revitalized the St. Croix. Conservation efforts attracted visitors interested in outdoor recreation and tranquil scenery and culminated with the river's declaration as a National Scenic Riverway in 1964. The story offered by McMahon and Karamanski shows a pattern of use, change, restoration, and reuse, reflecting the importance and evolution of the abundant water resources in the Upper Midwest.

McMahon and Karamanski shine most when blending local stories into larger historical contexts. Through numerous photographs, maps, and anecdotes about steamboats, log drives, Scandinavian farmers, and other interests along the St. Croix they add colorful details to their underlying emphasis on human interactions with nature, making *North Woods River* valuable for historians as well as a more general audience. The narrative's organization into a short introduction and four long chapters could be a drawback to some, making for occasionally cumbersome reading. Yet that might merely be a product of the time and space covered by McMahon and Karamanski. They show how relationships between humans and the environment endured for hundreds of years, giving the St. Croix both a place in environmental history and hope for the future.

Daniel E. Karalus, MA. <dek42@nau.edu>, PhD Student, Department of History, PO Box 6023, Building 18/Room 211, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ 86011, USA. TEL: 928-523-4378.

Electronic Green Journal, Issue 31, Spring 2011, ISSN:1076-7975