



Christmas Lake, historic roadside rest

BY CHARLIE MAGUIRE

Minnesota's first roadside rest is dedicated to a man no stranger to the streets, avenues, roads, and highways of Hennepin County. A pioneer king of the road. Charles W. Christmas Sr., born in 1796, came west with his wife and nine children in 1850 to Saint Anthony Minnesota, just across the river from what would be Minneapolis.

In May of that year, Colonel John Stevens, a founder of Minneapolis, commissioned Christmas as a surveyor to plat 100 acres on land that is now downtown. People joked about the impossible size Christmas envisioned of Minneapolis as he calculated behind his tripod-mounted Theodore Whitney surveyors compass marking out avenues at 100-feet wide and streets at 80 feet. Using his trusty Philadelphia-made instrument, Christmas plotted the grid of the infant city straight and true. So true, in fact, that when Minneapolis was resurveyed three years later by a Federal crew, there were absolutely no corrections to be made to Christmas's



original plat. Indeed, Charles W. Christmas Sr. was extraordinary in his position of "Chief Engineer of all Territorial Roads leading out of Minneapolis and Saint Anthony, which included much of the land in and around Excelsior including Christmas Lake that bears his name."¹

Standing at the Depression-era walled overlook above Highway 7 in Shorewood, the Christmas Lake roadside rest spans both sides of the highway and was the Minnesota Highway Department's first "large-scale effort to construct roadside development facilities in the state."²

A bronze plaque on the opposite side of the highway framed in "tan random ashlar rockfaced limestone" honors Christmas and is part of a retaining wall and picnic area where tables were originally placed comfortably under shelter and trees. The park, which at one time included outdoor cooking and restrooms, retains an aura of what it must have been like to pull over and grill and read up on pioneer lore all at the same time. Driving definitely was more of a "picnic" before WWII than it is today.

The entire Roadside Parking Area, which is eligible for National Register status, includes "one of only eight properties in the Rare Federal Relief Property Type Inventory that retain stone council rings,"⁴ and "one of only two that still have elaborate well and pump structures,"⁵ both of which can still be seen but are in need of repair and refurbishment.

Constructed by the NYA (National Youth Administration-WPA) from 1937 to 1941, the Rest Area employed up to 50 boys at a time working to create and improve the elaborate grounds. Not unlike the Civilian Conservation Corps, the NYA was a branch of the Works Progress Administration under Franklin Roosevelt. The difference between the NYA and the CCC was that the kids stayed in their hometowns, and a sizable segment of them were still enrolled in elementary and high school. Originally built in the National Park Service rustic style, the park boasted shelters featuring open timber construction, wood shingle roofs, and inscribed signage. Though not present anymore, the NPS rustic style can still be seen and enjoyed in our earliest Minnesota State Parks,

such as Itasca, and the cozy vintage look is still present in the older national parks.

Charles W. Christmas Sr., chief engineer and the first person to survey land west of the Mississippi River, died from "old age" at age 88 in 1884 and is buried in Minneapolis Pioneers and Soldiers Cemetery on Cedar Avenue and Lake Street (Lot 37/Block A). Next to him is his wife, Mary Ann, and two of his children.

In 1941 the Hennepin County Historical Society erected a seven-foot Kasota Stone monument to Christmas at his cemetery plot in addition to the one that went up the same year at the Christmas Lake Parking Area. The cemetery plaque is missing, but like an ancient stone cairn, the monument remains straight and foursquare, as if measured with the same keen eyes of a man who envisioned the great city of Minneapolis and helped make it so with his accurately plotted, generous streets and avenues. About 20 miles away, the Christmas Lake Parking Area honors the same man with a faded but still welcome prewar invitation to take a break and stretch your legs along the very same roads and highways Charles W. Christmas Sr. laid out.

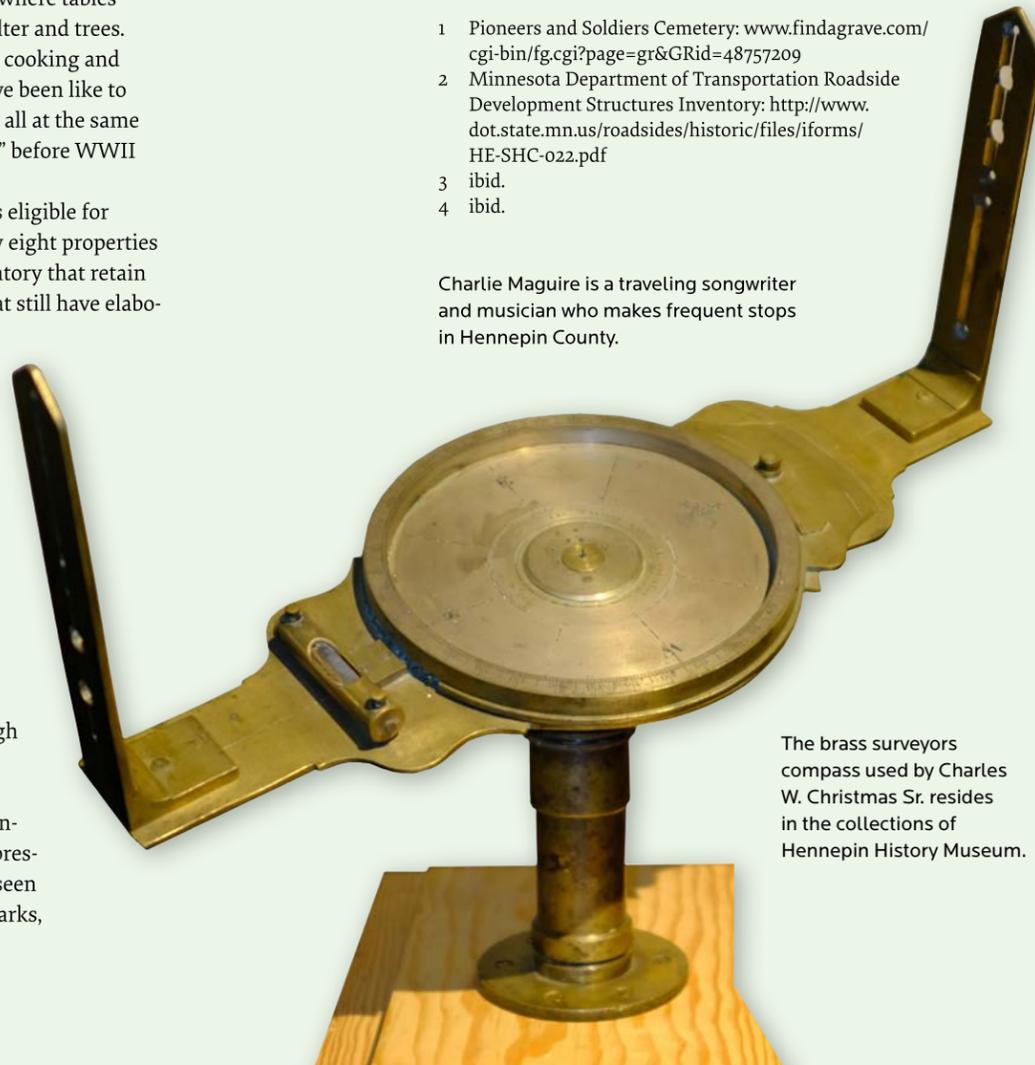
PUT ON YOUR FLASHERS:

The Christmas Lake Roadside Parking Area is located on the North and South sides of Highway 7 between Radisson Road and Old Market Road in Shorewood.

REFERENCES

- 1 Pioneers and Soldiers Cemetery: www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=48757209
- 2 Minnesota Department of Transportation Roadside Development Structures Inventory: <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/roadsides/historic/files/iforms/HE-SHC-022.pdf>
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 *ibid.*

Charlie Maguire is a traveling songwriter and musician who makes frequent stops in Hennepin County.



The brass surveyors compass used by Charles W. Christmas Sr. resides in the collections of Hennepin History Museum.

Michael J. Scanlan wins Hennepin History Award at Minnesota State Fair



Each year, the Hennepin History Museum is proud to encourage and reward collectors. The museum awards a ribbon for an outstanding display of historic items in the Minnesota State Fair's Creative Activities building.

Michael J. Scanlan of St. Paul is our 2017 winner! His collection showcased train memorabilia, including a vintage model train, brochures, menus, timetables, matches, a deck of playing cards, a ticket, an Associated Press photo showing the train's christening in 1935, a screenplay, stationary, a conductor's tie clasp, a postal cover; a uniform button, and a handwritten letter from Helga, a 1937 passenger who wrote: "Gee this train is swell."

MICHAEL SAYS: "Ever since my first electric train, arriving on Christmas when I was eight years old, I have been interested in railroading. I continued with model railroading throughout my youth and worked to learn more of the history of full-scale trains and the part they have played in the development of America. This collection display memorializes the Burlington Zephyr, the first streamlined diesel-powered train, a true milestone in railroading. When I became interested in the Zephyr, I was pleased to find their Minnesota connection. The trains served the Minneapolis - St. Paul traveling public throughout their years of service."

Mark your calendars to enter next year's competition!