

The Minnesota VOLUNTEER

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She Freed the Mississippi

Gutsy Mary Gibbs, first woman park commissioner in North America, took on armed men to free the Mississippi and protect Lake Itasca. By Charlie Maguire

MARY GIBBS had just turned 24 in 1903 when Minnesota Gov. Samuel R. VanSant appointed her to take over the duties of her recently deceased father as commissioner of Itasca State Park. Jonathan Puckett Gibbs had died in February of that year, having served as commissioner of Itasca since 1901. He and Mary, the second youngest of nine children, had enjoyed a close relationship. Because Mary had occasionally acted as his secretary, her

This portrait of Mary Gibbs was taken in 1903, the year she took over at Itasca.



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Mary Gibbs

appointment surprised no one, according to Itasca's founder, Jacob Brower, writing in his classic *Itasca State Park: An Illustrated History*. But no one could have guessed that Gibbs' appointment would predate other women in similar jobs in Minnesota state parks by 82 years. And no one could have guessed that beautiful, dark-haired Mary Gibbs would face down thugs who threatened to shoot her on a muddy log-

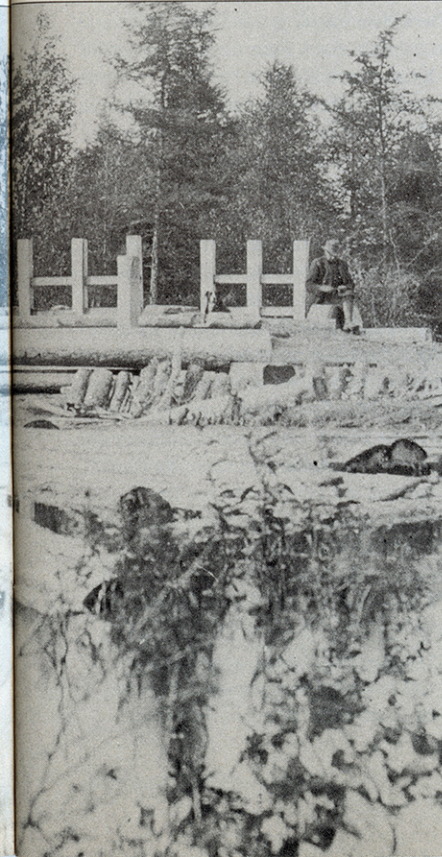
ging dam site just a quarter mile from the headwaters of the Mississippi River.

Writing in *The Itasca Story*, John Dobie notes that the existence of this obstruction to the otherwise natural flow of the river was well-known. The effect of its presence even rippled downstream to the capitol in St. Paul. Attorney General W. B. Douglas, for whom the now famous lodge in Itasca is named, "could



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The Battle at Itasca

When Itasca Commissioner Jonathan Puckett Gibbs (above) died in 1903, his daughter Mary took over his post. Soon after, she confronted thugs guarding a logging dam (left) near the outlet of Lake Itasca, because the waters it backed up to float log booms (upper left) threatened state-owned timber along the shoreline.

Mary Gibbs

have forced the lumber companies to remove the dam but he decided to bargain with the loggers," according to Dobie. "The Brainerd Lumber Co. was making preparations to log certain tracts. ... Douglas wanted the trees on these lands for the park but had no money for land purchase. The lumber company agreed to save the trees if it could use the dam to drive logs cut near the park. Douglas granted the request with the understanding that the dam would be opened if water levels became high enough to flood state timber." Indeed, a law on the books protected against such a calamity.

As spring came to Itasca that year, the water rose behind the dam built by the Schoolcraft Boom and Improvement Co. By early April, loggers had cut and floated more than 9 million board feet of timber, which they were holding on Lake Itasca to send downstream. Brower observed that the dam was "flooding the shorelines of Itasca and Elk Lake to the great damage of growing trees ... tamarac forests, meadows, creeks and camping resorts."

Composer and musician Charlie Maguire toured Minnesota last year as the state park centennial troubadour. He learned about Mary Gibbs' confrontation at Lake Itasca as he researched his song "Mary Gibbs," on State Park Tapestry, a cassette tape available at the DNR Gift Shop and most state parks.

On Sunday, April 12, Mary Gibbs decided to act. In the company of Itasca neighbor Theodore Wagmann, "Miss Gibbs undertook to prevent the lumbering companies ... from criminally damaging park property," Brower wrote. But Gibbs and Wagmann were turned away. Their request that the gates be opened and the water allowed to flow went unheeded by the men at the dam.

Gibbs returned April 15. Again the men rebuffed her. Gibbs went back the following day, this time with more witnesses than ever before and a local constable to serve the warrant. Gibbs was determined to enforce the law as protector of Itasca, and the men at the dam were equally determined to keep the sluiceway closed.

Fifty-three years later in a letter to Dobie, Gibbs recalled the moment: "When Constable Heinzelman attempted to serve the warrant and order the gates opened, I was with Heinzelman when it happened. (M. A.) Woods said, 'I'll shoot anyone who puts a hand on those levers.' Constable Heinzelman then returned the warrant to me unserved. I said 'I will put my hand there, and you will not shoot it off either.' And I did."

Gibbs did not say how long she kept her hand there, but this symbolic act of opening the sluiceway—"I could not raise the gates as it took six men to do that," she said—coupled

with Woods' failure to make good his threat, must rank as one of the most courageous, if risky, showdowns in early environmental history. Gibbs later admitted, "I don't think it was a very smart thing for me to have done that as he [Woods] might just have done what he said."

Prophetic Stand. Failing to intimidate her at gunpoint, the Schoolcraft company turned to its attorneys. Though flooding park land had "forcibly violated" the law in "a criminal manner," according to Brower, the lawyers still managed to obtain a court order keeping Gibbs from the dam site.

Barred from personally interfering at the dam, Gibbs resigned after serving only a few months and asked Gov. VanSant to appoint a new commissioner. At the same time, however, she asked the attorney general's office for legal help. A week later the injunction against her was lifted, and so were the gates of the dam. She wrote that "the sheriff arrived ... and lowered the water from 3' down to 18" which they were allowed to do

by their arrangement with the state." At some cost, Mary Gibbs had freed the Mississippi.

The victory for the park was short-lived. On April 28 C. E. Bullard from Wadena was appointed park commissioner "solely for political reasons," Brower reported, and "the lumbermen were left in undisturbed possession of Itasca Lake, the river, and the dam."

Gibbs herself was lost to history for a while, but exhaustive research revealed that she missed the centennial of Itasca and the Minnesota state park system by a mere eight years. Incredibly, Mary Gibbs lived to be 104 years old. She died in Vancouver in 1983. The certificate of her death listed her occupation as "housewife." It did not list her as the first woman park manager in North America. There was no mention of the gutsy 24-year-old's confronting armed men at a muddy dam site in northern Minnesota. Nor did it say that a brave woman prophetically made a stand for state parks in the early days of wilderness preservation. □

Road Kills of Aquatic Birds

FLYING AT NIGHT, aquatic birds may mistake asphalt roads and parking lots for rivers and ponds. After landing on the shimmering mirages, loons, grebes, and cormorants are often struck by cars. Their leg muscles are not strong enough to propel them fast enough to take off from the pavement.

But road-kill losses are small compared with the number of birds that die from other causes during their migration.

—MOUTHPIECE, Minnesota Ornithologists' Union newsletter