

Minnesota History: Controversy at the Mississippi's headwaters

By CURT BROWN

April 2, 2015



BRIAN PETERSON • brian.peterson@startribune.com in modern times: Dawn breaks in Itasca State Park. The park was created in 1888 by the Legislature, a measure that passed by only one vote.

Never mind the 8,000-year-old flint-tipped spears that archaeologists link to nomadic tribes that hunted bison and moose near the headwaters of the Mississippi River.

And forget about the 800-year-old burial mounds of the Woodland people who predated the Dakota, Ojibwe and the French fur traders — all of whom knew the ins and outs of the swampy, mosquito-infested, creeks and lakes southwest of Bemidji.

When it comes to the so-called discovery of the Mississippi's source, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft not only gets the credit. He landed naming rights in 1832. He combined the Latin words for

“true” and “head” — veritas and caput — and dropped a few letters from each end to come up with a new lake name.

Lake Itasca is now commonly considered the true head of the mighty river, attracting a half-million stone-stepping visitors annually. But before everyone agreed, the headwaters’ back story was punctuated with controversy, fraud and a young female park director who didn’t back off from gun-totting loggers.

Finding the great river’s source wasn’t easy because the Mississippi actually starts off winding north and east before coursing south to the Gulf of Mexico. Cases were made that nearby Turtle River or Elk Lake deserved the source designation.

Lt. Zebulon Pike first waded (and portaged) into the debate, trekking up to northern pre-Minnesota in 1805 to visit Leech Lake and Cass Lake, then known as Upper Red Cedar Lake. He recorded seeing the Turtle River trickling into Cass Lake’s north end, then the agreed-upon source of the Mississippi. Mission accomplished, he headed west to put his name on Colorado’s Pikes Peak.

Know that river

- The U.S. Geological Survey says the Mississippi is the second longest U.S. river, trailing the Missouri by 200 miles, 2,540 to 2,340.
- With one vote to spare and quelling logging dissenters, the Legislature named Lake Itasca State Park the state’s first such park in 1888. The only older state park in the country is Niagara Falls State Park, also established in 1888.
- The Mississippi actually starts its trek to the Gulf of Mexico by flowing north and then east to Bemidji before turning south.

Michigan Territorial Gov. Lewis Cass, who later got his name on the lake, led an 1820 expedition that made it as far as Pike did — to the mouth of the Turtle River — before heading south down the Mississippi. Among Cass’ trip mates were Schoolcraft and David Bates Douglass, whose journal recounted Indians in the area insisting the Mississippi’s true head was more than 50 miles west at a lake the French traders dubbed Lac Le Biche or Elk Lake.

Schoolcraft returned a dozen years later and renamed Lac Le Biche “Itasca,” jotting in his journal: “We glided through opposing thickets with an exhilaration of spirits, arising from the thoughts that we were near the goal of our hopes and toils. Presently, we reached the brow of a ridge, the bright gleams of a lake burst upon our vision. It was Itasca Lake.”

If the lake and its famous headwaters deserve anyone's name it might be Ozaawindib (Yellow Head). He was the Ojibwe leader of Schoolcraft's 30-member party that in 1832 traipsed through deep mud and mosquito clouds to reach and name Lake Itasca. At 1,475 feet above sea level, it's the highest point in the region of lakes and streams — thus its distinction as the headwaters and the start of a roughly 2,300-mile meander to the Gulf of Mexico.

Joseph Nicollet's 1836 map of the area, though, showed a smaller lake also known as Elk Lake that feeds into Itasca. Government surveyors and journalists in the 1870s also showed the little Elk Lake and pondered if that was the true source.

On July 4, 1881, a group led by Willard Glazier launched a mission to travel the Mississippi from "source to sea." Along the way, they reportedly dined with an Ojibwe chief named Flat Mouth, who expressed to Glazier "regret that his white brothers had been so long in ignorance of the source of the Mississippi."

Flat Mouth sent an Ojibwe guide named Chenowagesic along, leaving Leech Lake, pushing beyond Lake Itasca through a marshy "network of rushes" to a spot Glazier insisted was the real "source of the father of waters."

He promptly named this lake after himself and headed downriver, arriving at the Gulf of Mexico in mid-November. When he published his findings... the Minnesota Historical Society launched an investigation.

Its conclusion: Glazier was a "quack explorer and charlatan adventurer" who had plagiarized Schoolcraft and Nicollet's 45-year-old maps and simply named Elk Lake after himself. Glazier later confessed that he had not visited any streams feeding Elk Lake.

The Legislature passed a resolution insisting on the "Itascan sources of the Mississippi ... so that its earliest explorers be not robbed of their just laurels and to remove temptations to adventurers in future to gain notoriety by attaching their names to said lakes."

In 1888, the Legislature passed a bill — with one vote to spare amid pro-logging dissenters — creating Itasca State Park and earmarking \$21,000 to buy the land from loggers.

In 1903, the park's first director, John Gibbs, died and Gov. Samuel Van Sant, a logger, named Gibbs' daughter and park secretary as his successor. Mary Gibbs was only 24.

When logging interests that year dammed the lake to raise the water level to more easily float timber, Mary Gibbs showed up and demanded the level be dropped to protect the old-growth pine forests from flooding.

A lumber boss with a rifle later threatened her warrant server or "anyone who puts a hand on these levers." Mary Gibbs, reportedly armed, went to the dam and put her hand on the levers and proclaimed "you will not shoot it off, either."

Loggers reluctantly opened the gates, dropping the lake level before being arrested. Newspapers ran headlines saying: “She had nerve and a big gun.” Facing a demotion pushed by the logging lobby, Gibbs soon quit. Loggers were given total control over the lake, the dam and the river.

A week after Gibbs resigned, President Teddy Roosevelt stood by the Grand Canyon and said, “Leave it as it is.” A preservationist ahead of her time, Gibbs moved to western Canada, got married, raised four kids and died in Vancouver in 1983. She was 104.

Curt Brown’s tale on Minnesota’s history appears each Sunday. Readers can send him ideas and suggestions at mnhistory@startribune.com.