

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

### SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

**NRIS Reference Number: 00000570**

**Date Listed: 6/16/00**

<b>Property Name</b> Oberholtzer, Ernest C., Rainy Lake Isl. H.D., Koochiching Co., MN	<b>County</b>	<b>State</b>
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**Multiple Name**

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 This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

*Bill Doland*  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of the Keeper

*6/20/00*  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date of Action

=====  
**Amended Items in Nomination:**

While the nomination documents significance under National Register Criterion B--association with a significant person, nomination documentation currently does not support eligibility under Criterion A--association with significant events. Only the box for Criterion B is applicable and should be checked in Section 8 of the nomination form.

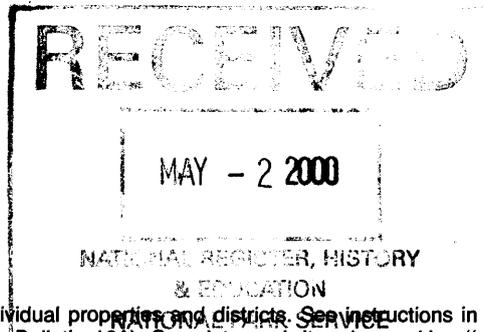
This information was confirmed by Susan Roth of the MN SHPO staff.

**DISTRIBUTION:**

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form**



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This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

**1. Name of Property**

historic name Oberholtzer, Ernest C., Rainy Lake Islands Historic District

other names/site number "The Mallard"

**2. Location**

street & number Mallard, Hawk and Crow Islands in Rainy Lake  not for publication

city or town Unorganized Territory Ranier  vicinity

state Minnesota code MN county Koochiching code 071 zip code 56668

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

*Ian R. Stewart* April 27, 2000  
 Signature of certifying official/Title Ian R. Stewart Date  
 Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer  
 State or Federal agency and bureau Minnesota Historical Society

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of certifying official/Title Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 State or Federal agency and bureau

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that the property is:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entered in the National Register. <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	<u><i>Bell Boland</i></u> Signature of the Keeper	<u>6/16/00</u> Date of Action
<input type="checkbox"/> determined eligible for the National Register <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined not eligible for the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> removed from the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> other, (explain:)	_____	_____

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
9	2	buildings
		sites
3	2	structures
		objects
12	4	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

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Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/museum

SOCIAL/civic

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

No style

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Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation	STONE
walls	LOG
	SHINGLE
roof	ASPHALT
other	

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Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- Criteria A, B, C, D with checkboxes and descriptions.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- Criteria A through G with checkboxes and descriptions.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Conservation

Period of Significance

1922-1949

Significant Dates

1925

1930

1934

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Oberholtzer, Ernest C.

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Oberholtzer, Ernest C.

Johnson, Emil

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Documentation checkboxes: preliminary determination, previously listed, designated landmark, recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey, recorded by Historic American Engineering Record.

Primary location of additional data:

- Location checkboxes: State Historic Preservation Office, Other State agency, Federal agency, Local government, University, Other.

Name of repository:

Minnesota Historical Society

Name of Property

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 37

UTM References Island View, Minn., 1969, photorevised 1986
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

UTM grid boxes 1 and 2 with labels Zone, Easting, Northing

UTM grid boxes 3 and 4 with labels Zone, Easting, Northing

See continuation sheet checkbox

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Rolf T. Anderson
organization date January 12, 1999
street & number 212 West 36th Street telephone 612/824-7807
city or town Minneapolis state MN zip code 55408

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name
street & number telephone
city or town state zip code

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Oberholtzer Historic District  
Koochiching County, MN

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### Description

The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Rainy Lake Islands Historic District is located on Rainy Lake, seven miles east of Ranier, Minnesota, and just to the northwest of Voyageurs National Park. The lake is an immense body of water, 60 miles long and up to 12 miles wide, with 2,500 miles of shoreline and over 900 islands. Rainy Lake is shared by both the United States and Canada with the Oberholtzer property located just to the southwest of the international boundary which divides the lake. The district consists of three islands named Mallard, Hawk, and Crow, as well as the surrounding waters. They are part of a series of five islands known as the Review Islands, named because they appear like ships in review.

Mallard, Hawk, and Crow Islands are all parallel to each other and separated by narrow channels of water. Crow Island is located to the north, Mallard Island is in the center, and Hawk Island is to the south. Crow Island is the largest of the three. It is 1,500 feet long and 375 feet wide at its widest point. Mallard Island is 1,000 feet long and varies from 50 to 100 feet in width. Hawk Island is 750 feet long and is 250 feet wide at its widest point. The topography of the three islands is typical of the pristine wilderness of the border lakes region and is characterized by rocky granite outcroppings, White, Norway, and Jack Pine, occasional birch, cedar, oak, and maple trees, as well as low juniper shrubs and mosses.

The nominated property consists of 37 acres and includes nine contributing buildings and two contributing structures as well as three non-contributing buildings and two non-contributing structures. All the historic resources are located on Mallard Island. There is one non-contributing building on Hawk Island. There are no buildings on Crow Island. All non-contributing resources are indicated with the notation (NC). There are also several docks on the island as well as three outhouses, all from the modern era, which are not described separately.

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Mallard Island

The buildings and structures on Mallard Island were constructed over a 40 year period to meet Oberholtzer's personal needs, as well as to provide working space for his conservation efforts, and to accommodate his many visitors including friends, family, colleagues, and government officials. Ultimately the island became a story-book village of picturesque structures, all connected with unpaved footpaths. The earliest buildings included two houseboats and a cabin which had been moved to the island, while many of the later buildings were constructed by Emil Johnson, a local craftsman, following the instructions of Oberholtzer with perhaps rough sketches, at best, to guide the construction. Architecturally, many of the buildings represent imaginative vernacular designs utilizing unpeeled, split cedar log siding in horizontal and vertical patterns, and local stone. Oberholtzer noted that, "All the buildings are of local material in the character of the country....and fit attractively into the landscape." The island remains remarkably evocative of Oberholtzer's presence as the buildings retain all his possessions including his roughly 11,000 books, furniture, artwork, music, and photographs.

1. Building: Front House

Date: 1921

Located on the northeast shore of the island, Front House was originally a one-story cabin located on nearby Deer (Grassy) Island where Oberholtzer had been employed. The building was moved to Mallard Island in 1921 and was later lengthened by additions to each side. (Front House appears as such in historic photographs.) Then in 1933 the building was moved back slightly from the shoreline and the floor of the rear portion was raised 10 inches to accommodate a rocky outcropping. A second story was added at that time.

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Front House is basically a T-shaped building roughly 40' long and 24' wide. The building is clad with shingles and covered with a gable roof with green rolled asphalt roofing. The second story reflects the T-shaped design of the lower level but it is stepped back from the first floor. A porch extends along the principal facade and is sheltered by a roof supported by unpeeled poles and brackets. Window openings are generally casement sash which are centered in each bay. A red brick chimney projects from the west slope.

The north facing principal facade features single entrance doors which flank a large casement window. These openings reflect the interior of the first floor which basically consists of three large rooms. It is likely that the central room represents the original cabin moved from Deer Island in that its side walls include windows which now open into the adjacent rooms. The structural components of these flanking wings are sometimes exposed and consist of unpeeled poles. The room to the west served as a kitchen and includes a sink with a hand pump as well as a stove. A wood box in the central room may be filled from the kitchen through a small opening in the wall. Knotty pine flooring is used throughout the first story except for the raised floor at the rear of the building where maple is employed.

The second floor is reached by a steep stairway located at the back of the center room. The stairs lead directly into the leg of the T-shaped second story. Paired north facing casements in this room are sheltered by a canopy supported by unpeeled log brackets. A room to the west may be entered directly from this room. A third room is located to the east but may only be entered through a trap door reached by a ladder that is located in the east wing of the first floor. Throughout Front House many of the walls are finished with particle board and cedar bark trim is used as well.

Oberholtzer and his mother lived in Front House in 1927 when high water caused Cedarbark House to flood.

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2. Building: Tool House

Date: 1925

The Tool House is a 20'5" by 12'4" frame building projecting over the water's edge along the channel separating Mallard and Hawk Islands. The building is supported by log posts and beams and is clad with unpainted cedar clapboard siding which has weathered to a dark golden brown. The Tool House is covered with a medium pitch gable roof with wood shingles. An off-center entrance door flanked by four-light casement sash is located on the west facade. One twelve-light window opening is located on the north facade. Used originally as a shop and for storing tools, the building is now used as a library, housing many of Oberholtzer's books.

3. Building: Cedarbark House

Date: 1919

The Cedarbark House is a houseboat which was believed to have been acquired by Oberholtzer in about 1919 and was originally moored along the island's south shore near the Japanese House. This may have been his first residence on the island. It was permanently installed along the island's north shore in 1926 with a portion of the building projecting over the water's edge. The I-shaped building is roughly 18' wide and 38' long and it is possible that the houseboat was expanded at each end during the historic period or perhaps open decks were enclosed. The houseboat is capped with a low-pitch gable roof covered with green asphalt rolled roofing. Once clad with unpeeled vertical cedar bark siding, the exterior siding was recently replaced with unpainted cedar clapboard siding, with the exception of the inner wall of the porch extending along the east facade which still retains its cedar bark. Various sized casement sash with green trim, some of which are hinged at the top, are spaced along the facades. A fieldstone fireplace with unusually deep joints is centered on the west facade. A deck with no railings built in the modern era extends to the east of the porch. The interior spaces consist of a porch to the east, a central room supported by peeled posts and 2" x 6" ceiling joists, and the western portion of the buildings which is loosely divided into three spaces by two archways. Interior detailing includes a hardwood floor, cedar bark trim, and the fireplace with a stone hearth and a round-arched opening. Original furnishings include an upright piano.

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4. Building: Kitchen Boat

Date: 1919

The Kitchen Boat is believed to have been acquired by Oberholtzer in about 1919 along with Cedarbark House and the two houseboats are seen in historic photographs moored along the island's south shore. At one time the Kitchen Boat had been a wannigan in a lumber camp. The boat was permanently installed along the channel separating Mallard and Hawk Islands in 1929 with a portion of the building projecting over the water's edge.

The Kitchen Boat is basically T-shaped with the top of the T measuring roughly 17' long and 8' wide and the leg of the T measuring 27' long and just over 10' wide. It appears that the top of the T may have been constructed when the Kitchen Boat was brought ashore. The top of the T is clad with white clapboard siding with various sized casement sash with green trim spaced along the facades. A shed roof covers this portion of the building. The remainder of the Kitchen Boat is also clad with clapboard siding and three four-light casement sash are positioned on each side wall. This portion of the building is covered by a flat roof and is surrounded by a narrow deck which has been extended to the north in the modern era.

The entrance to the Kitchen Boat is located in the building's east end in the top of the T. From the entry, the kitchen and dining room are reached by descending a steep stairway consisting of four steps. Interior features include built-in benches and shelving, and a sink with a hand pump. The building continues to function as a kitchen.

5. Building: Ice House/Cook's Cottage

Date: 1938

Constructed by Emil Johnson and located at the water's edge along the island's north shore, the Ice House/Cook's Cottage is a rectangular frame building covered with unpeeled vertical cedar log siding. The building is roughly 38' long and 12' wide with a second story rising above the eastern portion of the building. Both stories are covered by gable roofs with wooden shingles. The building fits tightly between the water and a hillside to the south.

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The first story consists of a room to the east which now contains the island water pump. This room is entered through a door built with heavy planks which is located on the east facade. The center of the building provided space for storing ice and is entered through double doors centered on the north facade which are built with split cedar logs identical to the sheathing on the remainder of the building. A one room addition, actually a five-sided bay, to the west end was made perhaps as early as the 1950s. It was called the artist's house because an artist, Gene Monahan, lived in the space for a period of time.

The cook's room was located on the second floor and can be reached by a stairway on the south facade that leads to a small balcony. The second floor features a screened porch along the north facade which is covered by the building's gable roof but whose pitch decreases as it extends over the porch. There is also a balcony along both the north and east facades. The balcony projects so far into the channel that its three supporting posts rest in the water. A fieldstone chimney is visible on the first story of the east facade but is concealed as it passes behind the projecting wall of the second story until it extends above the roof line. The gable ends of the second story feature brackets and horizontal cedar log siding.

6. Building: Winter House (NC)

Date: c1950s

Named Winter House because it was better insulated than the other structures on the island, Oberholtzer spent many winters in this building. The one-story building is 24' long and 16' wide and is perched on the edge of a hill on the island's north shore with views of Crow Island. The building is clad with combinations of vertical and horizontal unpeeled cedar log siding which extends to the ground as the hillside slopes away from the building to the north. Winter House is covered with a gable roof with green asphalt rolled roofing. Window opening of various sizes are positioned on all four facades. A small four-sided screened entrance porch with a shed roof is attached to the building at its southeast corner. Because the building was constructed after the period of significance, it is considered non-contributing.

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7. Building: Tool Shed

Date: c1920s

Located adjacent to Winter House, the Tool Shed is an 11' square building clad with unpeeled vertical cedar log siding. It is covered with a shed roof with green asphalt rolled roofing. A single entrance door built with cedar siding is centered on the south facade.

8. Building: Big House/Old Man River House

Date: 1936-40

The Big House is a sprawling building constructed at the island's highest point. It extends over a steep cliff overlooking the channel between Mallard and Hawk Islands. With its dormers and gables, porches and balconies, fieldstone fireplace and chimneys, and combination of horizontal and vertical unpeeled cedar log siding, the Big House is a remarkably picturesque structure in the tradition of a great rustic lodge.

The irregularly shaped two and one-half story building is approximately 55' long and 35' wide. It is sited on a hillside such that the first story may be entered at the east end of the north facade but as the hill rises the second story may be entered at the west end. The basement or lower level is exposed along the south facade and features a split stone foundation wall to the sill level. The remaining wall surfaces are generally clad with unpeeled split cedar log siding with a reddish brown stain. The siding is often laid vertically up to the sill level, then horizontally between window openings, and vertically above. However, a portion of the exterior wall of the great room is sheathed with what appears to be simply cedar bark that curves at the base to form a drip edge. Various sized casement sash, usually with four, six, or ten lights are positioned on the facades. Paired casements sometimes serve as French doors leading to adjoining porches. A massive stone fireplace is located on the north facade while a stone chimney that extends the height of the building is located on the west facade. A porch extends along the east facade of the first floor and a second porch wraps around both the south and west facade of the same story. The portion of the porch on the north facade is screened. A third porch opens

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off the west facade of the second story. The building is covered with a gable roof with green asphalt shingles and broad bracketed eaves. Both shed and gable dormers project from the roof.

The basement includes the winter kitchen and the furnace room. The main level consists of the great room, the library, and a small room used for storage. The great room has no second story above, allowing the ceiling to dramatically extend the full height of the gable roof and features exposed posts, beams, and trusses, all built with peeled logs. Other interior features include a maple floor, knotty-pine paneling, projecting dormers, French doors leading onto one of the porches, and an immense fieldstone fireplace. The fireplace mantel consists of a stone slab supported by stone brackets. A trap door in the floor leads to a steep stairway to the lower level. The room is filled with Oberholtzer's furniture and piano as well as his books, artwork, and music. A canoe rests in the rafters and a ceremonial Indian drum is suspended from a ceiling beam. Oberholtzer's coat still hangs on a peg on the back of the entrance door.

The second story contains a large bedroom divided into two spaces by two steps which separate the north half of the room from the south half. A ladder leads to a small room in the attic which occupies a projecting dormer. Alterations to the building include the removal of a roof top deck and lookout, which may have been removed when the upper dormer was added.

Emil Johnson first built the western section (the library and second story) of the building in 1936 and began the eastern portion (the great room) in 1938 which was ultimately completed in 1940. Oberholtzer called the building the Big House or the Old Man River House.

A plaque in memory of Oberholtzer is set in stone just to the west of the Big House. The plaque reads, "This island was for fifty years the home of Ernest Oberholtzer - Pioneer in the effort to save the wilderness - Devoted Atisokan<sup>1</sup> to the Indians and cherished friend and companion - 1973."

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<sup>1</sup>Atisokan was a name given to Oberholtzer by his Ojibwe friends which means legend and refers to his storytelling ability.

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9. Structure: Root Cellar (NC)

Date: c1950s

The Root Cellar is located immediately to the east of the Big House. This bermed concrete structure is exposed only on its 23' long south facade, which is faced with split fieldstone, as well as a portion of the west facade. The interior consists of a small ante-room and a larger room with poured concrete walls lined with shelves and an arched concrete ceiling. Several vents project from the berm. Because the Root Cellar was constructed after the period of significance, it is considered non-contributing.

10. Building: Bird House

Date: 1935

Named the Bird House because it appears perched amid the trees, this 12'6" by 14'7" three-story building consists of one room on each floor. The building is covered with combinations of horizontal and vertical unpeeled cedar log siding with various sized casement sash positioned on the facades. The building is covered with a low-pitch gable roof with green asphalt rolled roofing.

The first floor is entered through paired doors on the east facade. This room was used by Oberholtzer as his working or private study. The second story is reached by a footbridge located just to the north of the Big House and adjoins a balcony with a curved Adirondack-style railing. The third story is reached by a ladder on the second floor. The rooms on the upper floors are filled with books and serve as bedrooms. The walls are lined with cedar bark.

Alterations include the replacement of the cedar bark siding on the first floor with vertical cedar planks and the removal of a roof top deck and railing. Several steel cables help provide structural stability to the building.

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11. Structure: Foot Bridge (NC)

Date: 1950

The Foot Bridge was built in 1950 to replace a graceful wooden foot bridge that connected the main portion of Mallard Island to its western extremity where the Japanese House is located. Although the bridge spans a very narrow channel of water, the structure is 40' long, including its extended approaches. The 4'8" wide bridge is built with stone, including stone paving and low side walls. A round arch spans the channel. Because the Bridge was constructed after the period of significance, it is considered non-contributing.

12. Building: Japanese House

Date: 1922

The Japanese House is perched over the water on the western tip of the island. The building consists of a single room, 9' by 10', which is surrounded on all four sides by a screened porch. The entire structure is covered with a gable roof whose pitch decreases as it extends over the porches. The under structure consists of large posts and beams while the upper structure is supported by unpeeled cedar posts and rafters. The enclosed room includes a door built with planks, 10-light sash on each side wall, and paired 10-light casements which act as French doors on the west facade. The exterior is sheathed with unpainted cedar clapboard siding. Because of its seriously deteriorated condition, the Japanese House was rebuilt in 1995 utilizing original materials, when possible, including the original door, windows, wall board and flooring for the interior, and the roof deck. Its reconstruction actually brought the building back to an earlier appearance, after having been somewhat expanded over the years with some of the screened areas enclosed.

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13. Structure: South Retaining Wall Date: 1944

The South Retaining Wall is a low rock wall along the south channel that was infilled in order to slightly widen the island. There are three sections of retaining wall, each about 50' long.

14. Structure: North Retaining Wall (NC) Date: 1953

The North Retaining Wall was built along the north channel and was infilled to increase the width of the island. It extends from Cedar Bark House to Winter House. Because the North Retaining Wall was constructed after the period of significance, it is considered non-contributing.

15. Structure: Foot Paths Date: c1919

A narrow unpaved foot path extends the length of Mallard Island with short secondary paths branching off to adjacent buildings. The foot path is approximately 1,000 feet long.

Hawk Island

16. Building: Teepee (NC) Date: c1920s  
and 1960s

This Teepee was constructed on the Dahlberg Estate on adjacent Jackfish Island in the 1920s. It was located west of the main house along a high cliff on the south shore of the island. Sinclair Lewis was said to have written a portion of Elmer Gantry in the Teepee while staying with the Dahlbergs.

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However, by the 1960s the Teepee was in deteriorating condition and the then owner of the Dahlberg estate gave the building to Oberholtzer. It was disassembled and lowered down the cliff into boats which transported it to Hawk Island where it was reconstructed. However, the fire marshall would not allow the Teepee to be clad with its birch bark covering and it was subsequently covered with asphalt shingles. A frame entrance projects from the east facade. The interior includes a fireplace and a ladder which leads to a lookout. Because the Teepee was moved to Hawk Island in the 1960s and was not associated with the island during the period of significance, it is considered non-contributing.

The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Rainy Lake Islands Historic District retains a remarkably high level of integrity with only minor changes introduced to the historic structures. It remains remarkably evocative of his life and activities on the island. Today the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation owns and maintains Oberholtzer's island home. In the summer months the site is used as a retreat center.

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### Statement of Significance

The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Rainy Lake Islands Historic District is historically significant under National Register Criterion A in the area of Conservation and under Criterion B for the association with significant persons and is also related to the State Context of Northern Minnesota Lumbering. The district is significant for its association with one of the key individuals in what was to become a pivotal chapter in the history of the conservation movement in the United States. Ernest Oberholtzer organized and led the movement in support of wilderness preservation in an early conflict between industrialization and conservation affecting the border lakes region between the United States and Canada. These events gained national attention through the involvement of an International Joint Commission which included representatives from the United States and Canada working to resolve the issues surrounding the boundary waters and because of the subsequent passage of the Shipstead-Nolan Act, landmark legislation which was the first statute in which Congress explicitly ordered federal land to be retained in its wilderness state. This created a new precedent, "giving legislative sanction to a new conception of land service," for the purpose of preserving the "inspirational, spiritual, and recreational potentialities of (national forest) lands."<sup>1</sup>

Through Ernest Oberholtzer's island home, the story can be told of the emergence of industry in the border lakes region and the development of the modern conservation ethic. Oberholtzer is considered the "original architect of the border wilderness" who began the environmental campaigns in the 1920s to stop the construction of dams for hydro-electric power and who was instrumental in the creation of such notable conservation organizations as the Quetico-Superior Council, the President's Quetico-Superior Committee, and the Wilderness Society. Moreover, decade after decade Oberholtzer and his supporters continued to

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<sup>1</sup>R. Newell Searle. Saving Quetico-Superior: A Land Set Apart. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977), p. 89.

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define the newly emerging concept of wilderness preservation and its practical application which in turn influenced the wilderness movement throughout the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Ernest C. Oberholtzer was born in Davenport, Iowa in 1884. After his parents separated he and his mother and a brother lived with his grandfather in a large Victorian house. In 1903 he entered Harvard University and graduated in 1908. That same year he traveled to Ely, Minnesota to canoe the lakes of the boundary waters. He then returned to Harvard to complete a year of graduate study in landscape architecture under Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. Oberholtzer returned to Minnesota in 1909 and traveled with Billy Magee, an Ojibwe from Minne Centre, Ontario, who became a lifelong friend and inspiration. They spent the summer canoeing unmapped lakes of the Quetico-Superior region, photographing moose, and taking notes. Oberholtzer sold his notes to the Canadian Northern Railroad for its guidebooks, wrote an article about the country for the Youth Companion magazine, and wrote another article for National Geographic (which was never published) in which he suggested that the region should become an international preserve. He then traveled to Europe with a friend and wrote and lectured about Native Americans and wildlife, studied the works of Canadian explorers in the British Museum, and served briefly as vice-consul in Hanover, Germany.

He returned to the United States in April 1912 and began a six month journey with Billy Magee which took them to the border between Manitoba and the Northwest Territories and to Nuelton Lake. Oberholtzer was the first white man known to have visited the area since Samuel Hearne in 1772. Thereafter Oberholtzer

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<sup>2</sup>Major sources of information for the nomination include the Ernest C. Oberholtzer papers and the records of the Quetico-Superior Council, both found in the manuscript collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. The Oberholtzer papers consist of 52 microfilm reels containing his personal journals and correspondence as well as essays, articles, and information on his conservation activities. The records of the Quetico-Superior Council consist of 112 boxes containing correspondence, scrapbooks, publications, memoranda, reports, speeches, financial records, and other materials documenting the history of this organization which was established in 1928 to preserve the wilderness values in northern Minnesota and Ontario.

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settled permanently on Rainy Lake. For a time he managed a sheep ranch owned by William Hapgood on Deer (Grassy) Island. As early as 1919, Hapgood was apparently unable to pay Oberholtzer his wages and instead gave him nearby Mallard Island, valued at \$75. at the time. At about the same time Oberholtzer bought two houseboats and began his residence on Mallard Island, which he generally referred to as simply "The Mallard". At a later date Oberholtzer purchased the adjacent Hawk and Crows Islands from Hapgood.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the year, Oberholtzer was visited by a stream of sophisticated friends including writers, artists, professionals, and even members of the New York social set such as Sewell Tyng, a young attorney who became one of his closest colleagues.

Within sight of Oberholtzer's home, and just over one-half mile away, was the summer home of Edward W. Backus. Oberholtzer and Backus had become acquainted as a result of their adjacent island homes, and in the early years it was common for Backus to make a social call at Oberholtzer's during the summer months.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, Backus was to become Oberholtzer's major opponent in his efforts to preserve the border lakes region and he served as the catalyst for the emergence of a modern conservation movement.

Edward Wellington Backus was born in New York in 1860 but later moved to Red Wing, Minnesota along with his family. He entered the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis in 1876 and during his senior year he worked as a bookkeeper for a small lumber mill. Backus did not finish college but rather bought a half interest in the mill in 1882 and owned it outright by 1885. He expanded his operations, married the daughter of a lumberman, and by 1891 the Backus mills were producing 70,000,000 board feet of lumber annually. He then reorganized his company by forming a partnership with William F. Brooks, an engineer who worked for

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<sup>3</sup>Documentation is somewhat inconclusive concerning the exact date that Oberholtzer began to reside on Mallard Island although it is believed it may have been as early as 1919. However, discussions went on for years between Oberholtzer, his attorney, and Hapgood concerning the terms of the purchase and the transfer of clear title. Because the earliest correspondence concerning the purchase that has been located in the Oberholtzer papers dates from 1922, the beginning date of significance has been set at that date.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Edward Hall. September 1996.

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railroad and water-power interests. The Backus-Brooks Company soon became an umbrella for a score of subsidiary forest products industries.<sup>5</sup>

But as timber was beginning to be depleted in the upper Mississippi River valley, Backus turned his attention to the area of northern Minnesota along the Canadian border with its untapped forests and potential water power from the Rainy Lake watershed which passed over Koochiching Falls. His plans included generating electrical power as well as manufacturing lumber, newsprint, the demand for which had soared, and paper. In 1904-5 Backus bought land on the American side of the waterfall and leased land on the Canadian side. He then proceeded to build a sawmill at the Minnesota townsite named International Falls. Backus also constructed a railroad from Brainerd, obtained a pulpwood concession in Ontario, promising to build a pulp mill at Fort Frances, and he spent \$750,000 on the construction of a dam across the Rainy River at Koochiching Falls. He also acquired the rights and title to most of the feasible damsites in the region, giving him control of Kettle Falls, and Namakan, Sand Point, Crane, Little Vermilion, Loon, La Croix, Crooked, Basswood, Knife, and Saganaga Lakes.

The Koochiching Falls dam was completed in late 1908 and a second dam at Kettle Falls, which controlled Namakan and Kabetogama Lakes, was finished in 1914. The first rolls of paper were shipped from International Falls by the Minnesota and Ontario Paper Company in 1910. The Backus-Brooks empire expanded even further when engineers discovered that insulation board, the first of its kind, could be made from waste screenings and by-products from paper pulp. Backus established the Insulite Company in 1916

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<sup>5</sup>The Backus-Brooks subsidiaries included the Rainy River Lumber Co., Koochiching Co., International Lumber Co., Rat Portage Lumber Co., Great Lakes Paper Co., Keewatin Paper Co., Keewatin Power Co., International Boom Co., Columbia Gold Mining Co., International Telephone Co., National Pole and Treating Co., International Improvement Co., Seine River Improvement Co., Kenora Development Co., Kenora Paper Mills, and the Minnesota and Ontario Paper Co. (MANDO). The Minnesota and Ontario Paper Company was apparently the parent firm of the Rainy River Improvement Co., Border Publishing, Daily-Journal, International Bridge and Terminal Co., Fort Frances Pulp and Paper Co., Minnesota and International Railway, and the Minnesota-Dakota and Western Railway.

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which then produced the board. By 1920 the Backus-Brooks companies were the fourth largest newsprint manufacturers in North America.

After a quarter century of development, Backus took great pride in and credit for the prosperity of International Falls and Fort Frances. He began, he said, when the country was "not worth 30 cents a million acres" and built up million-dollar industries. "Everything that is there today came directly or indirectly through us.....through the payrolls." Since 1909, he recalled in 1930, he had spent more than \$50,000,000 in the region.<sup>6</sup>

Backus built an elaborate two-story houseboat in 1910 named *Elizabeth B.*, after his wife, and hosted parties on Rainy Lake.<sup>7</sup> In 1914 he bought Red Sucker Island and the following year he began construction of a summer home.<sup>8</sup> Somewhat of a showman, he wore flashy ties and gave catered parties on his Rainy Lake island that featured imported fresh clams and seaweed, whisky smuggled from Ontario during Prohibition, a hired brass band, and Indians in traditional dress, all of which impressed publishers, journalists, politicians, and financiers.<sup>9</sup>

But to understand the controversy which would change the lives of both Backus and Oberholtzer, a brief history of the region should be told. Rainy Lake is on the western edge of what is known as the Quetico-Superior region, an area along the border between the United States and Canada in northeastern Minnesota and western Ontario. It is a remote wilderness consisting of pristine lakes and rivers and dense forests. Explorers commented that the region was different from all others they had seen.

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<sup>6</sup>Searle. p. 39.

<sup>7</sup>A photograph of the *Elizabeth B.* is located in the files of the Koochiching County Historical Society.

<sup>8</sup>The Backus property was also considered for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. In fact, an historic district was contemplated which comprised both the Backus and Oberholtzer properties. However, because of considerable new construction on Red Sucker Island during the modern era, and because of the removal of at least two historic buildings, and significant modifications to the main lodge, the property was determined ineligible.

<sup>9</sup>Searle. p. 39.

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For the past two centuries it has attracted trappers, prospectors, and lumbermen. Logging had a particularly devastating effect on the region. It was actually a short-lived industry but the lumber companies left a legacy of abandoned tote roads, railroad grades, and cutover lands. As logging peaked in Minnesota, a number of citizens became concerned about the state's forests, particularly because their exhaustion was so swift and visible. Gifford Pinchot, who organized the U.S. Forest Service in 1898, was a typical reformer from the period who believed that with the exhaustion of natural resources "disaster and decay in every department of national life follow as a matter of course."

The notion of conserving natural resources was a new concept for Americans. But the idea quickly took hold in Minnesota as demonstrated by the establishment of Itasca State Park in 1891 in order to preserve the headwaters of the Mississippi River and to "maintain intact, forever, a limited quantity of the domain of this commonwealth, seven miles long and five in width, in a state of nature." Efforts to preserve the Quetico-Superior region began as early as 1902 under Christopher C. Andrews, Minnesota's forestry commissioner, who believed there was public support for the creation of a "forest reserve to include some of the highlands north of Lake Superior." Andrews convinced the commissioner of the General Land Office to withdraw from sale 500,000 acres of public land in northeastern Minnesota which had been overlooked by lumbermen because they had been burned by fires in 1863, 1874, and 1894. He thought the second-growth forest and the numerous lakes would make the region valuable as a "fish and game preserve". In 1905, at the age of seventy-seven, Andrews made a trip by canoe along the international boundary from Basswood to Crane Lake. He was impressed with the beauty of the region and remarked that, "To denude (the lands) of timber would be of public injury..."

At Andrews' recommendation, the General Land Office withdrew from sale another 141,000 acres of timber along Crooked Lake and Lac la Croix. The conservation movement had also begun in Canada, and Andrews asked the Ontario government to create a public forest on the shores and islands on the Canadian side of Crooked Lake and Lac la Croix. When, on February 13, 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt established the Superior National Forest in northeastern

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Minnesota, Ontario responded in kind with the creation of the Quetico Provincial Forest Reserve, later designated as Quetico Provincial Park in 1913.

By the 1920s the Superior National Forest was becoming a well-known canoe area. A brochure described the region as possessing "scenery, absolute solitude, clear air, and the indefinable lure of wilderness." A Forest Service pamphlet hinted that an "unlimited number" of summer homesites would be available for lease once roads opened up the forest. In addition, the introduction of the automobile dramatically increased the accessibility of the forest to the public and the administrators of the Superior National Forest began to define their policies in order to accommodate recreational activities. Moreover, the Forest Service now began to face questions as to whether producing timber, preserving wilderness, or providing recreation would be the paramount use of the land.

As the notion of wilderness preservation began to emerge, an early controversy was the issue of roads in such areas. Chief forester William B. Greeley noted that the public interest would be best served if "a substantial number of large roadless areas" including the "most attractive, rugged, and inspiring sections" were preserved in their natural condition. While this notion gained support, others wanted better access to wilderness areas. As of 1921, northeastern Minnesota had few roads and considerable pressure developed to cut roads through the forest. While the Forest Service withdrew its own funds for road building in the Superior National Forest in 1923, there was also acknowledgment that the construction of certain roads would be beneficial from an administrative standpoint. In August 1926, Secretary of Agriculture William M. Jardine convened a conference to resolve the controversy. The Forest Service proposed limited roads and a wilderness area of moderate size. The Izaak Walton League wanted to "keep that forest as it is" noting that roads would be the beginning of the end of the wilderness. This position was supported by the American Legion and the Minnesota commissioners of game, fish, and forestry. The main opposition came from the officials of Minnesota's northeastern counties who viewed roads as vital to their economic well-being. A compromise was reached and on September 17, 1926, Secretary Jardine issued a policy statement

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on road building in the Superior National Forest: the Service would retain three roadless areas - the Superior, Little Indian Sioux, and Caribou, all of exceptional value for canoeing. No less than one thousand square miles of "the best lakes and waterways" would be reserved for wilderness recreation. The policy signaled a fundamental change in forest administration, namely, a recognition that the forest had social and human uses that were as important as producing timber. Thus, the road controversy became an early test of the wilderness idea.<sup>10</sup>

The major portion of the Quetico-Superior region drains into the Rainy Lake watershed and includes international waters. Thus the dam at Koochiching Falls at the western edge of Rainy Lake was not under the exclusive jurisdiction of either American or Canadian laws. In 1909, the same year as the establishment of the Superior National Forest and Quetico Provincial Forest Reserve, Britain (on behalf of Canada) and the United States signed a treaty which created an International Joint Commission to study issues arising out of the use of these international waters and to settle disputes. It was composed of three Canadians and three Americans.

The International Joint Commission opened hearings on what was called the Rainy Lake Reference in the Koochiching County Courthouse in International Falls on September 28, 1925. Four questions had been placed before the commission:

(1) In order to secure the most advantageous use of the waters of Rainy Lake and of the boundary waters flowing into and from Rainy Lake, was it from an economic standpoint presently practicable and desirable to raise the levels of Rainy and Namakan Lakes and provide storage on the boundary waters above them?

(2) If this were desirable and practicable, what levels would be recommended, how much land and at what cost would be necessarily acquired for flowage; what Canadian and American interests would be benefited to what extent; and how should the costs be apportioned among them?

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<sup>10</sup>Searle. pp. 1-33.

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(3) What methods of control were required to regulate the boundary waters?

(4) What interests were benefited how and to what extent by the present storage dams at International Falls and Kettle Falls; what was the cost of this storage and how should it be apportioned?

In fact, the proceedings were initiated through the efforts of Edward Backus. He pressed for additional water storage stating that, "the uncertainty and inadequacy" of water power were already "keenly evident, and will arrest further progress on both sides of the boundary unless early remedial action be taken." He expected the Commission to accept his unsupported claim that his industries had expanded "far beyond the realized power output". Under his plan, Rainy Lake would be raised three feet, Kabetogama and Namakan Lakes would remain unchanged, and additional dams would provide "storage on the upper waters along the boundary," so that all of the lakes of the watershed would be "susceptible of far more efficient and satisfying regulation." A dam at Lac la Croix would stop its waters from rushing down the Namakan River, diverting them instead along a canal on the international boundary to a power plant to be built on Vermilion Lake. New dams would raise Little Vermilion Lake 80 feet, Lac la Croix 16 feet, Loon Lake 33 feet, and Saganaga and Crooked Lakes 15 feet, thus drowning Lower Basswood Falls and harnessing the power of Curtain and Rebecca Falls. Backus also stated that further storage "which will unquestionably be developed in the future," existed on Vermilion, Sturgeon, Otukamamoan, Manitou, and Footprint Lakes and on the Seine, Maligne, and Turtle Rivers. He claimed that coordinated control of the waters...would benefit all power users from Koochiching Falls to Lake Winnipeg.<sup>11</sup>

Backus proposed that the costs of the additional storage and regulation of the upper waters "be apportioned among the various interests benefited," part to the Canadian and American governments "to cover navigation and other (public) benefits" and part to the power interests, including those on the Winnipeg River. He proposed that the IJC assume responsibility for the

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<sup>11</sup>Searle. pp. 48-49.

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"administration, allocation, levy and assessment of these costs." In fact, this approach would basically subsidize the expansion of the Backus-Brooks industries. Backus also dismissed the damage to the scenic beauty of the area.

Backus' plan was criticized for lacking specific details concerning costs or construction plans, and for suggesting that the two governments shoulder part of the expense. In addition, the power users on the Winnipeg River indicated they had no need for additional power. Even the City of Fort Frances opposed higher water levels on Rainy Lake. Howard R. Selover, president of the Minnesota Izaak Walton League, opposed the dams and provided resolutions and petitions from league chapters. He believed the dams would destroy the country "for all scenic and tourist purposes." He pleaded with the commissioners to "help preserve things as they are unless some overweening public necessity absolutely demands their use."

The most eloquent opposition to the dams came from Ernest Oberholtzer who denied that the claimed benefits of additional power merited the destruction of 14,500 square miles of wild beauty. "We feel that the burden of proof.....rests upon the people who want to make the change." Oberholtzer announced that "we have another plan for the development of this same region which means far more to the people and is of far more immediate public interest than the plan presented by the power company."

Following the hearings Oberholtzer wrote that:

One big event here is over. We had the hearing of the International Joint Commission last week. I attended all the sessions, which lasted three days, and we are securing a copy of the entire minutes from the official reporter. There was nothing to complain about. The commission, though evidently predisposed in favor of power development, were very fair in their attitude toward all opponents. No decision can be expected for at least a year after the engineers report. The opposition is so overwhelming and Backus was so isolated

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in his position that I do not see how the proposition can go through.<sup>12</sup>

The minutes were secured in order to conduct a detailed analysis of the proceedings and to provide a formal response to the Commission. The response was in the form of a sixty-eight page brief drafted largely by Sewell Tyng and which was completed in May 1926 and entitled, "Brief on Behalf of Ernest C. Oberholtzer, in Opposition to Elevation of Lake Levels."<sup>13</sup> In the brief Oberholtzer noted that "the region lends itself to power development," but insisted that the "country is chiefly famous for its natural beauty." He contended that the government involvement which Backus proposed would give him an advantage because it would lend a certain legitimacy to the proposal which a private application would not have. Oberholtzer and Tyng examined the transcripts from the proceedings and found "an amazing lack of concrete facts and a mass of unsupported assertion".

The proposals themselves are so indefinite and nebulous as to preclude any possibility of intelligent examination or scientific criticism. Beyond the unsupported statement of glittering generalities, no evidence is offered of concrete benefits to be derived by anyone, even by the proponents themselves, from the adoption of their proposals. It is certain that no actual necessity for raising the lake levels has been shown.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, the accomplishments of Backus were also recognized and praised, perhaps in an effort to avoid what might appear to be a personal attack since he and Oberholtzer were well-acquainted as a result of their adjacent island homes.

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<sup>12</sup>Letter from Oberholtzer to Francis Henry French dated October 5, 1925.

<sup>13</sup>Sewell Tyng was married to the niece of William P. Hapgood by whom Oberholtzer had been employed on Deer Island.

<sup>14</sup>"Brief on Behalf of Ernest C. Oberholtzer, in Opposition to Elevation of Lake Levels." pp. 30-31.

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It must be understood that in reviewing the testimony and in criticizing the proposals presented, no personal imputation of any kind is intended against Mr. Backus. The value of his contribution to the development of the country to which this reference relates must not, in fairness, be underestimated. He has devoted thirty years to developing and exploiting the border-lake country, and by the strength of his personality and his business acumen he has built up a group of companies which in effect dominate industrially the whole region under discussion. It is perhaps not to be wondered at, that he regards with genuine astonishment and chagrin the widespread opposition to his plans, to which he invariably refers with some bitterness as "propaganda." Throughout the hearing Mr. Backus was constantly in evidence as the protagonist of the proposed change. As such, we believe that his statements and attitude are properly the subject of fair comment; and if at times he appears to become the villain of the piece, it must be remembered that our attack is directed against the proposals which we believe are wholly contrary to the public interest, and not against the individual whose personal record of industry and accomplishment commands our sincere respect.<sup>15</sup>

The brief went on to describe various opponents to the proposal, including the local municipalities, other industrial interests, local property owners, and civic and conservation associations. It was also pointed out that the proposal would result in the unlawful taking of private land for a non-public use. The brief's concluding summary addressed each of the four questions that had been posed to the commission and included the following points which were based on the testimony presented:

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

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- 1) There would be no substantial benefit to navigation by an increase in water-levels.
- 2) The injury to the country scenically and for recreational purposes would be incalculable.
- 3) There would be no tangible or immediate economic advantages to be derived, and the growing tourist trade would be destroyed for an indefinite period.
- 4) The damage to property owners of all classes would be very extensive, amounting to millions of dollars, and in many cases would be irreparable.
- 5) The additional water-power which would be made available at International Falls and Fort Frances would be negligible.
- 6) No assurance whatever exists that additional water-power would be available to the inhabitants of Minnesota, for the nebulous power interests which Mr. Thomas purports to represent are so vague and ill-defined, and their plans so speculative as to be unworthy of serious consideration.
- 7) Additional flowage is neither needed nor desired on the Winnipeg River.
- 8) Although constantly urging in general terms the advantages of his proposed increase in the lake-levels, Mr. Backus entirely failed to present any concrete evidence of a need for such an increase by his own companies, or to cite a single specific instance in which additional water-power is necessary.
- 9) The communities and governmental authorities on both sides of the border are unanimous in their opposition. They are joined by the industrial interests and property-owners of every class. Except for Mr. Backus himself not a single resident of the whole region

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appeared to support the proposal to raise the elevation of the lakes.<sup>16</sup>

The report concluded that, "From the evidence presented to the Commission, it is clear that the harm that would result from the adoption of the plan presented by Mr. Backus, or from any similar plan, would greatly outweigh any possible benefits to be derived. We therefore earnestly request this Commission to recommend that no alteration be made in the existing levels of Rainy Lake or of any of the boundary lakes."<sup>17</sup>

After the hearings Oberholtzer realized it would be necessary to organize very quickly in response to the Backus plan or the IJC would approve the power proposal. By June 1927 he reluctantly agreed to lead the fight against Backus. He found a group of allies in Minneapolis who had been organized by Howard Selover of the Izaak Walton League. Most were veterans of World War I who had canoed the boundary waters and believed that the public had acquired an interest in the region. They included Wilbur H. Tusler and William G. Dorr, architects; Melanchton R. Nyman, Welles Eastman, John F. Reynolds, Lester R. Badger, James F. Sutherland, and Howard Selover (son of George Selover), businessmen; Frederick S. Winston, Charles S. Kelly, and Frank B. Hubachek, lawyers; and Rufus R. Rand, Jr., Commander of the Minnesota American Legion.

In a letter to Hubachek, Oberholtzer outlined the complexity of the issue facing them as well as his personal connection with Backus.

We have come to realize more and more that if Mr. Backus is to be defeated we shall need a national organization and a paid Executive Secretary who can give his whole time to the fight.....The issue is two-fold -- clean politics and conservation. Publicity is what is needed. The matter can be made a national issue. It is a really great emergency.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 65-66.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

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I have had no personal animus against Mr. Backus. He is my neighbor here on the lake. I recognize that he is a master builder.

.....I'm convinced that he will let nothing stand in his way of his purpose.....He has a tremendous political advantage both in Washington and Ottawa.<sup>18</sup>

Oberholtzer compiled additional information about the power project for his colleagues and in order to generate publicity against the proposal he anonymously authored an article entitled, "Conservation or Confiscation, An Analysis of the Water Storage Projects Proposed by Mr. E. W. Backus as Affecting International Boundary Waters Particularly in Quetico Park and the Superior National Forest". The article was widely distributed by the Committee on International Boundary Waters of the Minnesota Conservation Council. Its members were noted on the cover page and included the Izaak Walton League of America, Pajodan Wild Life League, Girl Scout Council, St. Paul Association, Minnesota Game and Fish Department, Capitol City Sportmen's Club, Ramsey County Sportsmen's Club, Minnesota State Federation of Labor, State Kiwanis Clubs, Minnesota Association of Commercial Secretaries, Conopus Clubs, Lake County Development Association, Minnesota Outers Club, League of Minnesota Municipalities, The Audubon Society, Duluth Chamber of Commerce, Department of Forestry - University of Minnesota, Minnesota Forestry Association, Minnesota Conservation Department, Minnesota Highway Department, State Rotary Clubs, Twin City Hoo-Hoo Club, Minnesota Game Protective League, American Legion, Ten Thousand Lakes Association, American Legion Auxiliary, Gopher Camp Fire Club, Arrowhead Association, Hennepin County Sportsmen's Club, Federation of Women's Clubs, and the Minnesota Farm Bureau.

The eight page pamphlet summarized the major components of the proposal and their implications. It intended to answer the question, ".....what precisely does Mr. Backus propose to do with these boundary lakes, which have assumed such national, if not international importance and what will be the effect of his developments, if authorized by the Commission and their respective governments?" The article concluded that,

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<sup>18</sup>Letter from Oberholtzer to Frank B. Hubachek dated June 10, 1927.

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This is one of the rarest regions on the continent, if not in the world. Nowhere else is there to be found so precious and picturesque a combination of water, rock, and forest, all linked together in a single maze of bewildering beauty. Here is the last remnant of that far-flung forest that once embraced most of Minnesota and Wisconsin....A health-giving climate, pure, clear waters, the oldest naked rocks in the world, aboriginal inhabitants, an eventful history---all have contributed to the charm and national importance of this region.....

Recall too the speeding up of travel in the past quarter century and its present accelerated tendency. There is no other refuge of any comparable size or importance anywhere in the heart of the continent. It is only a century and a half since we Americans occupied a thin line of seaboard. Today we fill the confines of the most bounteous land in the world. If we look back only 50 years at our growth and look ahead another 50 years, where shall we find ourselves then for open places to strengthen our bodies and to expand our souls?

.....Either we are to confiscate this principality to help achieve the industrial ambition of one man or we are to keep it for the perpetual use and enjoyment of the North American People.

Let us not only keep it but enrich it. Let us restore it to all its primeval grandeur. Let us preserve some portion of our mid-continent wilderness to remind our children forever of their rugged and romantic past.

Oberholtzer began working out a broad design for the Rainy Lake watershed hoping to see "some deep comprehensive scheme for a more or less public dedication of the whole region."

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Oberholtzer began to develop his plan for an international park and his allies raised funds for him to travel to various conferences and to Washington, D.C. in order to gather information and discuss the proposal with the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service. In Washington he met with Assistant Chief Forester Leon F. Kneipp who suggested he send a definite proposal to William Jardine, the Secretary of Agriculture.

Oberholtzer sent Jardine a lengthy letter describing his plan in which primitive recreation would be harmonized with modern forestry. It contained four principles which he believed should be formalized by a treaty: (1) that the visible shores of islands, lakes, and rivers within the Rainy Lake watershed "be made forever inviolate from logging, flooding, or other forms of exploitation"; (2) that the hinterlands away from the lakes be "devoted to practical forestry for economic purposes"; (3) that all game and fish be "regulated for maximum productivity"; and (4) that these major objectives be fulfilled under the direction of an international commission representing the forestry, park, and wildlife services of both nations.

Under the treaty the sprawling region would be dividend into three areas: a large inner zone, encompassing most of the Rainy Lake watershed, would "be kept as nearly primitive as possible"; a thin middle zone surrounding the wilderness and accessible by water and foot trails would be opened to leased summer camps; the outer zone, extending to rail and highway facilities, would include privately owned homes, resorts, and other developments harmonious with wilderness recreation.

Oberholtzer's long letter foreshadowed the subsequent development of the Quetico-Superior region. His was a prophetic vision with its flexible and coordinated use of resources. Jardine replied at great length, finding great merit in the plan. But a formal organization was needed to move this agenda forward and with that end in mind the Quetico-Superior Council was formed on January 27, 1928. Oberholtzer became the organization's first and only president. The creation of the Council brought organized opposition to the border dams into the open.

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Congressman Walter H. Newton of Minneapolis was intrigued with Oberholtzer's proposal for the border lakes region as was Senator Henrik Shipstead. On April 4, 1928 Shipstead introduced a bill in the Senate and Newton introduced an identical bill in the House which was intended to "promote the better protection and highest public use of lands of the United States and adjacent lands and waters in northern Minnesota". It proposed that federal lands in northeastern Minnesota would be dedicated to public uses enhancing "the protection of forest products, the development and extension of recreational uses, the preservation of wildlife, and other purposes not inconsistent therewith." Hearings began on the Shipstead-Newton bill on April 30, 1928 before the Senate subcommittee of the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, and on May 1 before the House Committee on Public Lands.

Both congressional committees toured the border lakes region in August 1928 in order to become familiar with the area and to see first-hand the effects of the plans proposed by Backus as well as the impact of the proposed Shipstead-Newton bill. The Committee on Public Lands toured the area in early August in a party that included thirteen congressmen: Addison T. Smith, Idaho; Don B. Colton, Utah; Charles E. Winter, Wyoming; Scott Leavitt, Montana; F.D. Letts, Iowa; Joseph L. Hooper, Michigan; Victor L. Berger, Wisconsin; John M. Evans, Montana; Tom A. Yon, Florida; Samuel S. Arentz, Arizona; W.L. Carss, Harold Knutson, and Walter H. Newton, all from Minnesota. The total party numbered thirty-three and also included A.G. Hamel, supervisor of the Superior National Forest, who served as the guide; J.F. Gould, state game and fish commissioner; William H. Hanson, game warden of the Superior National Forest; O.L. Kaupanger, state secretary of the Izaak Walton League; Seth Gordon, conservation director of the League from Chicago; Fred D. Vilbert representing the Arrowhead Association of Duluth; as well as Ernest Oberholtzer and Edward Backus.

The itinerary included a rather extensive tour of the border lakes region by plane, motorboat, and canoe, and was organized as follows:

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August 4 - Leave New Duluth Hotel, 9:30 a.m. by motorcar. Lunch at Virginia, 11:30 a.m. From there by car to Winton and on to Basswood Lake; sightseeing on the lake and spend the night at Basswood.

August 5 - Breakfast at camp on Basswood, leaving 8:00 a.m. by car for Winton. From there to Tower and Lake Vermillion with lunch on the boat traveling to the Vermillion dam. By car to a resort in Harding and remaining there overnight.

August 6 - Breakfast at Harding. Leave 7:30 a.m. via motorboat through Little Vermillion Lake, Loon River, and Loon Lake to Lac la Croix. Lunch on the way with a side trip to the Cascades. Dinner and lodging on Lac lac Croix at the Outing Company's camp.

August 7 - Spend entire day on Lac la Croix with the party separating into groups for sightseeing, fishing, and side trips by airplane. Spend night at camp.

August 8 - Breakfast at camp. Leave at 7:30 a.m. via Loon River and Little Vermillion for Namakan and Kabetogama Lakes. Lunch on the boats. Spend the night at Kettle Falls.

August 9 - Breakfast at Kettle Falls. Leaving by launch at 7:30 a.m. crossing Rainy Lake.<sup>19</sup> Stop at Roberts Camp. Arrive International Falls and leave by train for the Twin Cities that evening.

The nights of August 6th and 7th were spent on an island on Lac la Croix. In a light moment, the congressmen staged a mock trial in which E. W. Backus was tried and convicted of being an accessory after the fact in an attempt to annihilate the socialist party in the United States and was sentenced to be placed in the custody of the Izaak Walton League for a period of five years. The Minneapolis Journal featured a humorous photograph of the trial which was held around a camp fire.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>This route led the party passed the island homes of Ernest Oberholtzer and Edward Backus.

<sup>20</sup>The Minneapolis Journal. City Life and Editorial Section. August 12, 1928 p. 1.

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As early as August 8, the press began to report that virtually all the congressional members on the trip declared they would favor the Shipstead-Newton bill in order to prevent an increase in water levels. The party had visited the site of a proposed dam on Little Vermillion Lake which would raise the water level of that lake by 82 feet, as well as the level of Loon Lake by 40 feet, and that of Lac la Croix by 18 feet. Between six and eight hundred islands on Lac la Croix would be submerged entirely while the remainder would be partially covered or become two or more islands. Ironically, the island on which the party had camped would become three small islands. Congressman Victor L. Berger declared that, "Mr. Backus must have unmitigated gall to even ask for the right to flood tremendous areas of public lands--property that is wonderful from a scenic point of view."<sup>21</sup>

While at Kettle Falls, the congressmen held an informal hearing in order to obtain a more detailed statement from Backus concerning his plans for the region. However, Backus remained indefinite stating, "There is no proposal; just a suggestion to the International Joint Commission as a starting point for its investigation....We asked for the maximum increase in water levels, and we don't expect to get (that). We could make no direct proposal until the engineers for the commission make their report. Then we will work out a definite project. I would be the last one to interfere with the recreational value of the area, but still I believe in the use of its commercial values."

Congressman Victor L. Berger stated that Backus had failed to show the "social necessity" for the project. Backus replied, "Yes I have. It means a big payroll for industries of the region. There is not enough power now at International Falls, and as a result we have to install two great steam turbines to develop an additional 20,000 horsepower." Berger countered that, "I still can't see where the public necessity comes in except that it gives you the means to make more profit and to obtain more dividends for your stock and bondholders. You are proposing merely a private enterprise for profit."

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<sup>21</sup>The Minneapolis Journal. August 8, 1928. p. 1.

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William Carss, a congressman from Minnesota whose district included the proposed Backus project stated, "I believe the committee is already convinced that a necessity exists for preserving the wilderness in its natural beauty for recreational purposes." Addison T. Smith, the chairman of the Public Lands Committee concluded that while the committee would accept any additional information offered by Mr. Backus and would not "form a definite decision" until the proper time, the committee believed the controversy was between representatives of the public interest versus those interested in private gain.<sup>22</sup>

Oberholtzer referenced the pending legislation in several articles that were published during 1929. The articles are of considerable interest not only because of their insight but also because Oberholtzer authored surprisingly few published works, despite a staggering volume of correspondence. The first of these articles appeared in the June-July 1929 issue of American Game and included a number of photographs by Oberholtzer which depicted the beauty of the region as well as the devastation to islands and shorelines caused by fluctuating water levels as a result of the existing dams. Oberholtzer traced the history of the region and described the current controversy. He noted that,

The difficulty, of course, is to reconcile local business demands for utilizing resources and the larger public desire to protect them. So far as Superior National Forest is concerned, I believe this obstacle is more imaginary than real. There is not such conflict between fundamental economic needs and national aspiration as many of the exploiters would have us believe. The conflict is not between industry and sentiment but between waste and profusion. The ancient game of grab, long tolerated and in fact encouraged by public inertia, has not only left industry stagnant and great portions of the land barren but has saddled the counties with a tax problem. The Forest Service alone has pointed the way out; it has stepped in for the purpose of restoring exhausted lands to production.....The ideal of the Forest Service is to

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<sup>22</sup>The Minneapolis Journal. August 10, 1928.

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replace old habits of vandalism by the orderly harvesting of surplus crops.

.....There is room in its due place under the proposed application of zoning principles for every form of recreation the American people may require.

.....The latest commodity to assume monopoly value is what Thoreau calls "the tonic of wilderness". It is this above all that the Quetico-Superior Council hopes to protect and perpetuate in the Rainy Lake watershed.

He concluded by describing the region in the words of Canadian conservationist Arthur Hawks as "an outdoor university with a campus of 14,500 square miles."<sup>23</sup>

Three additional articles followed which appeared in American Forests and Forest Life in September, October, and November 1929. In the first article Oberholtzer discussed the history and geography of the region and noted that the Rainy Lake watershed,

.....spreads its web of wooded lakes among the granite ridges like a huge open fan, 14,500 square miles in extent, one third in Minnesota, two thirds in Ontario. In its isolation it has become a natural repository for the past. To its rich history of explorers, fur-traders and Indian warriors is added all that was once American--the forest, the game, and the Indians themselves....

(At the time of the creation of the Superior National Forest).....the main lakeland had not appreciably deteriorated. It kept its wilderness quality. It was still a place of rare delight--a region apart from the modern world, where man could enjoy the profusion of nature as completely as in the days of Columbus.....It was not a sombre forest but a forest threaded with sparkling waterways, flooded with sunshine and peopled

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<sup>23</sup>Oberholtzer, Ernest C. "An International Wilderness Sanctuary." American Game. June-July 1929.

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with all its ancient creatures. There were so many islands that it seemed an inland archipelago.....

(The region has) today become the scene of one of the most dramatic struggles between public and private purposes ever known on the continent.....Mighty forces, contending for the fate of the Rainy Lake watershed, are drawn in opposing camps; on the one hand, an outraged public of huge proportions; on the other political, financial, and industrial power, who number their timber lands, in Ontario and Minnesota, in tens of thousands of square miles, who have never failed to pocket any resource that they coveted, and who have built up a well-merited legend for invincibility. The outcome will largely determine, in the opinion of conservationists, whether remaining natural resources in regions of unique endowment shall continue to be laid waste by the first comer or made to yield to all the people perpetual returns in wealth and happiness.<sup>24</sup>

The second article discussed the changes which industry had already brought to the border lakes region as well as the increased interest on the part of the public for recreational opportunities in wilderness areas.

Let us see what has happened to the Lakes of (the voyageur) Verendrye since first I spent a whole summer among them twenty years ago. It's true that in 1909 by a miracle of unofficial cooperation Ontario and the United States set aside more than two million acres of the wonderland as timber and game reserve. But big business, ever bolder and more far-seeing than mere governments, at the same time set its net for the whole watershed. The mill that was building at International Falls early in 1909 has had few rivals in the United States for yield of lumber, paper, and wallboard.....Every drop of water from the watershed

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<sup>24</sup>Oberholtzer, Ernest C. "A Lakeland Archipelago - A Glimpse into the Colorful Past of the Ontario-Minnesota Border Lakes." American Forests and Forest Life. September 1929.

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before pursuing the sparkling course to Hudson Bay paid tribute, to the tune of 20,000 h.p., at the new international dam in Rainy River.

The dam more than demonstrated its worth to the mill and to the ten thousand inhabitants in the mill communities on both sides of the river. At the same time it introduced a number of novelties into the life-history of nature and man in this border region. Blocked by the dam, sturgeon ceased their age-old migrations to Rainy and upper lakes. The wild-rice beds of Rainy, which from legendary times had supported ducks and Indians, became submerged under five feet of water and subject to a whole new range of fluctuations. Homesteaders round the western shores of the lake found themselves without warning dispossessed of their lands, their houses and barns invaded by water.....Below the dam in Rainy River, where boats had plied for generations between Fort Frances on the river and Kenora on Lake of the Woods, the service ceased to operate for lack of water following Sunday-closing of the dam. These were but some of the minor inconveniences inseparable from progress and referred to with admirable resignation by mill officials as "acts of God."

So completely successful had these man-made operations proved that by September 1925 the author of all the local prosperity, who meantime had expanded his operations to include Lake of the Woods, appeared at a hearing of the International Joint Commission.....and unfolded a project for the final development of the entire watershed.

.....Throughout the region vicious logging has proceeded without interruption for many years--the kind that leaves nothing for reproduction and is swept by periodical fires.

(Yet there is a) rapidly mounting demand for what is variously known as life in the open, return to nature, escape from urban conditions--all those satisfactions

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that come under the head of outdoor recreation.....If ever there was a region calculated to satisfy the modern hunger for escape from the workaday world, it's the Rainy Lake watershed. The rough and rocky character of the area protects it from ordinary settlement.....At its best it has unsurpassed quiet beauty in endless variety of woods, rock and water.....It is more central than any other recreational area in North America and large enough to permit tens of thousands of modern adventurers to lose themselves from modern life for weeks at a time.....(But) the supply of original America is dwindling to the vanishing point.

These two tendencies--the expanding demand and the dwindling supply--are meeting tragically in the border lakes region of Ontario and Minnesota.....Either there must be some prompt and adequate declaration of public policy on the part of both countries or this rare region is doomed. Private enterprise has run riot like a bull in a botanical garden.....The responsibility rests ultimately upon the public and upon the public alone. How they meet it may mean more for unborn generations in the two nations than many an issue of war or peace.<sup>25</sup>

The final article of the series described the Quetico-Superior program and the efforts to prevent commercial exploitation of the region and also referred to the pragmatic approach to wilderness preservation that the organization was formulating.

If logging under proper supervision were confined to the unvisited hinterlands out of sight of the traveled waterways and if the whole area were placed on a sustained yield basis, insuring perpetual forest growth and an unbroken forest cover, the main economic objection to a vast reservation on the scale demanded by modern conditions would be removed. The present temporary wood industries would be made permanent. Such

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<sup>25</sup>Oberholtzer, Ernest C. "The Ancient Game of Grab - How the Resources of the Ontario-Minnesota Border Lakes are Vanishing into Thin Air." American Forests and Forest Life. October 1929.

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an adjustment is possible, it may be noted, largely because popular enjoyment of the area is confined to the lakes and streams and their wooded margins.....

In preparation for the time when treaty arrangements may be possible with Canada, steps have already been taken to protect the Superior National Forest. The so-called Shipstead-Newton-Nolan<sup>26</sup> bill, which seeks to apply some of the principles of the proposed treaty to the Minnesota area, will come up for final action in Congress this winter. In furtherance of its objects, 26,000 acres of remaining unappropriated federal lands within the area have already been withdrawn from public entry by temporary Executive order. It recognizes the paramount importance of the beauty of the natural features and shore lines of the lakeland, including rapids, waterfalls, islands, and beaches, and forbids further alteration of natural water levels without the consent of Congress.<sup>27</sup>

A later article of particular interest was authored by Oberholtzer in December 1931 for Minnesota Municipalities which was entitled, "Conservation and the Economic Situation in Minnesota." He noted that, "Our public works have been confined mostly to buildings. It is high time we began public works affecting natural resources." Photographs in the article show "lakeshore once heavily wooded now cut over and useless", flood and fire damage on Crane Lake, and "lands stripped with taxes paid only until the acres (were) harvested (and then) returned tax-forfeited." Oberholtzer referred to the "wreckage of the old regime," and encouraged replanting, noting that "our forest problem lends itself better than any other to the solution of slack labor." It seems as if Oberholtzer was envisioning the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which was established by President Roosevelt in 1933.

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<sup>26</sup>The bill was renamed the Shipstead-Nolan bill after William I. Nolan when he replaced Congressman Newton who had accepted a position in the Hoover administration.

<sup>27</sup>Oberholtzer, Ernest C. "A University of the Wilderness - The Proposal to Perpetuate by Treaty the Ontario-Minnesota Border Lakes." American Forests and Forest Life. November 1929.

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Opposition to the Shipstead-Nolan bill had begun to appear in northern Minnesota in early 1929. It developed out of fears that proposed power dams on the Kawishiwi and Pigeon Rivers would be stopped and that county property values would decrease. It was believed the bill would interfere with local governments and prevent the development of natural resources. Backus himself testified at the congressional hearings and attempted to prevent the passage of the bill. However, after procedural delays and minor amendments, the bill passed both the House and Senate without dissent on July 3, 1930. It was signed by President Hoover on July 10, 1930.

The Shipstead-Nolan Act was a landmark for the Quetico-Superior program and as Oberholtzer predicted it became "a firm foundation for further constructive effort." It protected an area almost as large as the state of Connecticut, and much larger than the Superior National Forest. The act applied to 4,000 square miles, extending along the international boundary from Lake Superior on the east to Rainy Lake on the west, and south to Lake Vermillion and Birch Lake. The legislation was nationally significant as the first statute which explicitly ordered federal land to be retained in its wilderness state, a precedent "giving legislative sanction to a new conception of land service," for the purpose of preserving the "inspirational, spiritual, and recreational potentialities of (national forest) lands." In 1933 the Minnesota legislature passed similar legislation applying to state lands within the area. Thirty years later in the Multiple-Use Act of 1960, Congress broadened the principles embodied in the Shipstead-Nolan Act.<sup>28</sup>

Another watershed came in 1934 when after nine years of deliberation the International Joint Commission reached its final conclusions. The hearings had begun in International Falls in 1925 and had continued in Ottawa in 1932, with final hearings held in Winnipeg and Minneapolis in 1933. Conferences and executive meetings were held during the intervening years in Ottawa, New York, and Washington, D.C., and extensive engineering studies were also conducted.

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<sup>28</sup>Searle. P. 89.

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After the completion of the Winnipeg hearings on October 6, 1933, Oberholtzer sent the following telegram to Frank Hubachek and Charles Kelly:

Winnipeg hearings concluded tonight. Leaving for Minneapolis tomorrow evening. Canadian and Provincial Governments represented devastating case against Backus interests. Only Backus supporters were company representatives and feeble Fort Francis delegation. Our affirmative case to be presented at Minneapolis will be greatly strengthened. Congratulations (to) you both.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, the Winnipeg Evening Tribune featured a front page article with the headline, "Dominion Joins Opposition to Rainy Lake Project." A government spokesman was quoted as stating, "The government of Canada concurs (with the unfavorable reaction to the Backus plan by various Canadian interests), and in view of the unanimity of the various Dominion and provincial bodies, is of opinion that the commission can only report to the two governments that there is no present demand for increased storage facilities, and that any future demand will be dependent altogether on conditions (which might occur) in the future."<sup>30</sup>

The final hearings were held in Minneapolis at the Curtis Hotel from October 9-12. Considerable publicity was also generated. One article in particular featured photographs of both Backus and Oberholtzer noting that, "Opponents Gird for Border Dam Fight." It went on to describe how, "Opponents in a bitter and long drawn-out controversy over northern boundary resources met in the windup of their struggle before the International Joint Commission here today." Backus was described as the original sponsor of the program for water power development in the border waters and Oberholtzer as the leader of the opposition to the Backus program.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Oberholtzer to Hubachek and Kelly dated October 6, 1933. Kelly papers within the Quetico-Superior Council records.

<sup>30</sup>Winnipeg Evening Tribune. October 7, 1933. p. 1.

<sup>31</sup>The Minneapolis Journal. October 9, 1933.

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Backus testified for hours, describing the history of the industrial development in the region and its current economic importance, as well as defending his plans for more dams and continually asserting the need for additional waterpower. At one point Sewell Tyng asked him, "You imply that the Quetico-Superior Council is operating under the direction and influence of your business and political rivals?" Backus answered, "I think they made much better progress when our little friend (Oberholtzer) got into it."<sup>32</sup>

Ironically, the Backus-Brooks Company had been forced into receivership in 1931 because of its overextended finances due to the declining demand for newsprint. Thus, Backus was essentially representing the receivers of his former company, yet he nonetheless continued the battle.

Oberholtzer testified that, "Any further power development in the Rainy Lake district is not only uneconomical but will cause damage to public interests far outweighing any benefits to private interest." It was stated he based his findings on his residence of over twenty uninterrupted years in the district which were spent in constant study of this problem.<sup>33</sup> Sewell Tyng wrote to Charles Kelly that, "We have been battling at Armageddon for three days and closed our affirmative case last night. On the opening day Governor Olson came out for us 100%.....Ober spoke yesterday and made an excellent impression."<sup>34</sup>

Over the winter, the commissioners of the IJC poured over years of transcripts and prepared their final report. In March 1934, Backus and Oberholtzer were both in Washington, D.C. Oberholtzer wrote:

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<sup>32</sup>The Minneapolis Journal. October 12, 1933

<sup>33</sup>The Minneapolis Star. October 11, 1933.

<sup>34</sup>Sewell Tyng to Charles Kelly dated October 12, 1933. Kelly papers within the Quetico-Superior Council records.

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My visit here is involving me in much work, as usual, with no tangible results so far. My friend, Mr. E. W., is here also and perhaps is more effective. He is holding forth at the Cosmos Club, where all the scientists and government men congregate, and seems to be settled permanently with his staff--very much like a separate government of his own.<sup>35</sup>

The Final Report of the International Joint Commission on the Rainy Lake Reference was released in May 1934. It answered the four major questions posed in 1925 and essentially concluded that the status quo should be maintained:

The boundary waters referred to in the Reference and the territory tributary thereto are of matchless scenic beauty and of inestimable value from the recreational and tourist viewpoints. The Commission fully sympathizes with the objects and desires of the State of Minnesota and the Quetico-Superior Council and others who take the position that nothing should be done that might mar the beauty or disturb the wild life of this last great wilderness of the United States. The Commission feels that it is impossible to over-state the recreational and tourist value of this matchless playground. Its natural forests, lakes, rivers and waterfalls have a beauty and appeal beyond description, and nothing should be done to destroy their charm.

The Commission also sympathizes with the aims and the objects of those who advocate that this beautiful natural sanctuary, emblematic of peace and unmarred by the hand of man, should be set apart as a memorial park to commemorate the more than a century of peace, good will and common ideals that have existed between the English-speaking peoples that live side by side on the northern half of this continent; and the Commission is particularly desirous that nothing contained in this report should present any obstacle to or in any way

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<sup>35</sup>Oberholtzer to Judge John H. Brown dated March 21, 1934.

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interfere with the Governments of the two countries entering into a treaty for this purpose.....

There are, however, other interests and aspects that cannot be overlooked. The citizens of the two countries have invested large sums of money at International Falls and Fort Frances in the construction of works for the production of pulp, paper and other commodities.....It, therefore, becomes of the utmost importance that nothing should be done that would militate against their continued operation on a firm and sound economic basis.

In the opinion of the Commission it is not impossible to reconcile the recreational value of the territory under review with a certain amount of power development.....and the Commission feels that a reasonable use of these waters, properly controlled and regulated, might be permitted without serious injury to the beauty of the district.

While, therefore, the Commission is of the opinion that at the present time the construction of power works is not necessary or desirable, it wants to leave the way open for the approval of a reasonable development of storage facilities upon the waters above Namakan Lake if and when economic and other conditions warrant; such improvements to in no way interfere with the vast area tributary to the headwaters of the water system in question, and to be constructed under such conditions and supervision as to adequately safeguard recreational interests.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Final Report of the International Joint Commission on the Rainy Lake Reference. May 1934. pp. 48-49.

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Neither side was particularly satisfied with the report. However, Backus had other pressing problems. He was trying to regain control of his company and brought the issue as far as a special hearing before the United States Senate banking and currency committee, but to no avail. While in New York City in search of funding to refinance his companies, Backus died of a heart attack in his hotel room on October 29, 1934. His death was announced with banner headlines on the front pages of the St. Paul Dispatch and Minneapolis Tribune. Oberholtzer was remarkably conciliatory about Backus, recalling his old neighbor across the lake, and commenting,

One can't be in the harness so long with a teammate without missing him. I'll miss E.W. He seems to me to have been tragically alone at the end.....I really had no personal feeling against him and I hope I was not unfair or unjust or even unappreciative. I know what able qualities he had."<sup>37</sup>

But the final hearings of the International Joint Commission had drained the energy and resources of the Quetico-Superior Council. Even by late 1933 Sewell Tyng had suggested that the project "should be unloaded on the Federal Government and made an administration problem." Federal endorsement would give the program a type of official status and provide the project with an element of prestige so that Canadian interests could be approached more readily. Oberholtzer agreed and he suggested to Harold L. Ickes, the new Secretary of the Interior, that the federal government formally adopt the Quetico-Superior program.<sup>38</sup> The Department of the Interior drafted an executive order which was approved by Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace and signed by President Roosevelt on June 30, 1934. The order established the President's Committee for the Quetico-Superior which consisted of Sewell Tyng, Ernest Oberholtzer, Charles Kelly, and Robert Marshall and William Zimmerman, Jr. as the designated representatives from the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior. The Executive Order (No. 6783) read as follows:

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<sup>37</sup>Letter from Oberholtzer to Charles S. Kelly dated November 11, 1934.

<sup>38</sup>Ickes was acquainted with Oberholtzer and had visited him at his Rainy Lake island home in the 1920s.

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**EXECUTIVE ORDER  
Creation of the Quetico-Superior Committee**

WHEREAS the Quetico-Superior Council, associated with the Izaak Walton League of America, has formulated a program for the establishment of a wilderness sanctuary in the Rainy Lake and Pigeon River watersheds through which runs the international boundary line between Canada and the United States; and

WHEREAS this program has been endorsed by numerous organizations interested in the preservation of wildlife and the conservation of the few remaining tracts of American wilderness; and

WHEREAS it has been proposed that the wilderness sanctuary should be dedicated as a peace memorial to the service men of both countries who served as comrades in the Great War; and

WHEREAS the Congress of the United States, in the act of July 10, 1930 (Chapter 881, 46 Stat. 1020), has given legislative effect to its principles "of conserving the natural beauty of shore lines (in these watersheds) for recreational use" and of preserving "the shore lines, rapids, waterfalls, beaches, and other natural features of the region in an unmodified state of nature"; and

WHEREAS the Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, in its administration of existing law, can give further effect to the aforementioned principles; and

WHEREAS certain executive departments and administrative agencies of the Government of the United States, the Department of State, the Treasury Department, the Department of the Interior, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Labor, the Emergency Conservation Work Administration, and the Subsistence Homesteads Administration<sup>39</sup>, and the State of Minnesota will be concerned in whatever performance there may be of the Quetico-Superior Council program;

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<sup>39</sup>Emergency Conservation Work was the official name of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The Subsistence Homesteads Division was a New Deal program administered within the Department of the Interior and later the Resettlement Administration.

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NOW, THEREFORE, by virtue of and pursuant to the authority vested in me as President of the United States I hereby appoint a committee, to be known as the Quetico-Superior Committee, to consult and advise with the various Federal departments and agencies concerned and with the State of Minnesota, and to make such recommendation from time to time as it deems proper.

The committee shall be composed of E.C. Oberholtzer, S.T. Tyng, C.S. Kelly (who have been invited to serve and have accepted), 1 person designated by the Secretary of Agriculture and 1 person designated by the Secretary of the Interior. The committee shall serve for a period of 4 years and without compensation. Any vacancy occurring in the committee shall be filled in the manner in which the members are appointed.

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

The White House  
June 30, 1934

The creation of the Quetico-Superior Committee provided an official agency which could promote its program of wilderness preservation. Since Oberholtzer, Tyng, and Kelly were active members of both the Quetico-Superior Council and the Committee, the distinction between the two organizations was often blurred. In general, the Committee dealt directly with government agencies while the Council continued to generate public interest and support.<sup>40</sup>

Another achievement of the 1930s was to become one of Oberholtzer's most enduring accomplishments when in February 1935 he joined Robert Marshall, Aldo Leopold, Robert Sterling Yard, Benton Mackaye, and others in founding the Wilderness Society, a national wilderness preservation organization still in existence to this day. One of the organization's executive committee meetings was held at Oberholtzer's island home.

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<sup>40</sup>Searle. pp. 106-107.

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Yet despite the death of Edward Backus, the passage of the Shipstead-Nolan Act, and the findings of the International Joint Commission, the efforts of Oberholtzer and his colleagues to preserve the border lakes region in a state of wilderness continued. It was to become a lifelong commitment for Oberholtzer and his closest colleagues: Charles S. Kelly, Frank B. Hubachek, and Frederick S. Winston. The correspondence between these men was staggering, often consisting of several letters each week, year and year. Winston resided in Minneapolis while Hubachek and Kelly had relocated their law offices to Chicago, and Oberholtzer remained on Rainy Lake when he was not traveling on behalf of the cause or spending time in Minneapolis at the official offices of the Quetico-Superior Council. Yet the focal point from which their collective efforts emanated continued to be Oberholtzer's island home. It was there that he directed the overall effort and frequently met with his colleagues. From there the evolving strategy for wilderness preservation continued to emerge and evolve.

Enlarging the Superior National Forest to include all areas protected by the Shipstead-Nolan Act became the next step for the Quetico-Superior Council. As a result of the Great Depression, millions of acres of cut-over and tax-delinquent lands were available for purchase. Yet, there was some resistance in Minnesota to the idea of additional expansion of the forest, in part because some were reluctant to allow state forest lands to be acquired, in spite of support from Governor Floyd B. Olson. On December 28, 1936, President Roosevelt, through presidential proclamation, enlarged the Superior National Forest by 1,250,000 acres to a total of 3,465,000 acres, without including any state forest lands.

By late 1937 Oberholtzer was preparing recommendations for the President's Committee's to submit to Roosevelt. The 1938 report focused on the further expansion and consolidation of the forest and the initiation of a treaty with Canada.

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Twelve years have now been spent in coordinating the efforts of those interested in furtherance of the program, in working out the details of the program itself with government officials, and in carrying on a sustained effort to put the program into effect. During the three and a half years that this Committee has functioned, its activities have served to reduce the main steps still to be taken to the two recommended in this Report, namely, Federal acquisition of the remainder of the area, and negotiation of a treaty with Canada.<sup>41</sup>

The goal of land acquisition was referring to the purchase of all privately owned lands in Minnesota located in the project area, unlike that portion within Ontario which was owned almost in its entirety by the provincial government. A treaty between the United States and Canada would assure permanent administration of the area in conformity with the goals of the Quetico-Superior program. The report also discussed the importance of land-use planning.

To provide for maximum human use, the program requires most comprehensive planning, lest the distinctive wilderness character of the area be impaired either by unwise commercial exploitation or by unregulated recreational development. Such planning calls for the application of zoning principles on a very large scale. In that way public facilities, such as summer homes, resorts, camps, and clubs, can be kept close to existing communities or on the outer lakes that are already in contact with roads and railways, while maintaining the heart of the area as undeveloped wilderness.<sup>42</sup>

When Roosevelt received the report he referred it to the Secretary of State asking for an opinion as to what steps should be taken with Canada. Oberholtzer had already written to Roosevelt outlining the principles of the proposed treaty:

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<sup>41</sup>"Report to the President of the United States on the Quetico-Superior Area by the Quetico-Superior Committee," February 25, 1938. p. 26.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

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Keep all lakes and streams with their islands, rapids, waterfalls, beaches, shores, and other natural features "undisturbed in a state of nature"; administer the forests for a sustained yield of forest products, manage all game, fish, and fur-bearing animals for "maximum natural production"; and establish an advisory board composed of forest, wildlife, and park authorities from each nation to co-ordinate "practices under the principles agreed upon in the treaty."<sup>43</sup>

Secretary of State Hull told the president that he could see no objection to sending a copy of the report to the Canadian government for a reaction. The dominion government sent the inquiry to the Ontario provincial government where it languished for more than a year until a second inquiry was sent. In November 1939, the Canadian government transmitted the disappointing reply from the lieutenant governor of Ontario which essentially stated that because of the war it was not possible to give any assurance that negotiations could be undertaken within any reasonable period of time.<sup>44</sup>

Between 1938 and 1940 the Forest Service acquired 23,000 acres in the Grand Portage State Forest and 160,000 acres in the Kabetogama State Forest. Hundreds of miles of shore lines and beaches, dozens of waterfalls and scenic points, and large stands of pine had been added to the roadless areas. To accomplish this, the regional forester had shortchanged other national forests and diverted a quarter of the allotted purchase funds to the Superior National Forest.

The Forest Service correctly predicted that consolidating the roadless areas would become a major problem, but of more immediate concern to conservationists were long-range plans to cut timber within as well as outside of them. Some conservationists began to doubt the compatibility of logging and wilderness recreation on the same land. In 1939 the Forest Service offered to sell 5,000,000 board feet of timber within the roadless areas adjacent

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<sup>43</sup>Searle. p. 122.

<sup>44</sup>Searle. p. 123.

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to Lac la Croix. Although no one bid on the timber, the reaction was swift and angry. Ken Reid, executive director of the Izaak Walton League, suggested that the Forest Service give the roadless areas wilderness classification, and that Congress appropriate money to consolidate them.

The Shipstead-Nolan Act, considered a farsighted measure in 1930, had been passed when the wilderness idea was still a new concept. Since then, the Forest Service had established seventy-two other wilderness areas where logging was prohibited. Yet wilderness status proved troublesome to Oberholtzer and his colleagues who had stressed a multiple-use program for the Rainy Lake watershed. Although Oberholtzer also stated, "I personally do not approve of logging the wilderness areas," nor did he believe "logging can be done there without irreparable harm to the wilderness values". And while he thought wilderness designation "would not seem to me to be false to our original principles" since the chief emphasis of the multiple-use program had been on wilderness recreation, he stated when the Izaak Walton League pressed for wilderness status, "the effect is to place us distinctly on the defensive."

Winston and Kelly did not agree with Oberholtzer that the long-established multiple-use concept should be dropped in favor of wilderness status. Winston could not "see how we can abandon our program on that point." Kelly agreed. He had no personal objection to wilderness status, but "our program is built on the idea of protecting the commercial as well as the other values." He would not "be a party to anything which interferes with the commercial values to any greater extent than our program as originally drawn would interfere."

Wilderness status for the roadless areas was considered at the 1939 convention of the Minnesota Izaak Walton League. Winston told Reid that the issue "puts the Quetico-Superior Council in a Hell of a hole." If a vote were forced, the Council would have to choose between abandoning its original program or opposing the League. Since it was believed that no logging would occur for ten years, there was no urgency to the issue and the matter was dropped. The Forest Service had not favored wilderness status either, but a restricted management zone was created along the international boundary where logging would be prohibited in order

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to preserve and perpetuate its primitive character. The President's Quetico-Superior Committee indicated it had no objection to the creation of a "no-cut zone". At the request of the Americans, Canada responded by modifying their logging contracts by compelling lumbermen to leave a broad strip of timber along the shores of the larger lakes and streams of the boundary waters.<sup>45</sup>

Oberholtzer was 60 years old in 1944 and had been working on the preservation of the border lakes region for twenty years. He finally paused from his tireless efforts and spent time with his Ojibwe friends, who had clearly influenced his dedication to preserving the wilderness, studying their ancient way of life and traditions.

After World War II ended, and beginning in 1945-46, Oberholtzer and his colleagues, as well as the Forest Service, reassessed what was needed to complete the Quetico-Superior program. They then began a three-part effort to consolidate the roadless areas in federal ownership, eliminate aircraft from these areas, and initiate a Canadian Quetico-Superior organization which would generate support for a treaty to establish an international peace memorial forest.

The presence of private lands within the roadless areas had been a problem for years, but with post war prosperity they increased in value as resort and cabin sites. The problem was exacerbated by hydroplanes, which made individual parcels accessible. By 1946, twenty resorts had been built or were under construction in the roadless areas. Such development changed the character of the boundary waters and affected canoe travel through it. Travelers who had seen Curtain Falls in its pristine state -- foaming white water thundering over granite ledges flanked by dark pines -- were upset to discover that an adjacent resort had cut down pines, built cabins, and erected a large lodge with a bar and slot machines. The boathouse smelled of gas and the surrounding water was covered with a film of oil.

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<sup>45</sup>Searle. pp. 124-138.

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Then in 1946 the Forest Service prepared a proposal to authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to purchase lands within the roadless areas. In March 1947 this was introduced by congressman John A. Blatnik and senators Edward J. Thye and Joseph H. Ball. The Thye-Blatnik bill applied to most of the roadless areas and was designed to accomplish "certain public purposes explicit and implicit" in the Shipstead-Nolan Act. The Secretary of Agriculture was authorized to acquire any lands where, in his opinion, their potential or actual development would "impair or threaten to impair the unique qualities and natural features of the remaining wilderness canoe country." The bill passed the House on June 8 and the Senate on June 9, 1948. The Thye-Blatnik Act again focused national attention on the canoe country. It reaffirmed previous congressional intentions that the roadless areas and the Shipstead-Nolan area remain in a natural state. Congress had given further definition to the idea of wilderness preservation, a concept that would receive complete expression sixteen years later in the Wilderness Act of 1964. For the first time in its history, the U.S. Forest Service had authority to purchase lands for some purpose other than timber production and watershed protection.<sup>46</sup>

The next effort involved restricting aircraft from the roadless areas. In April 1948 Oberholtzer travelled to Washington to work to determine how to coordinate this issue with Canada and to meet with the general counsel for the Civil Aeronautics Board. The President's Quetico-Superior Committee and the Forest Service, along with attorneys from the Department of Agriculture, prepared a formal request asking the president to establish an airspace restriction. On December 17, 1949 President Truman signed an order reserving the airspace above the roadless areas to an altitude of four thousand feet. The law was tested by litigation in which the United States filed suit against certain resort owners and others who refused to abide by the ban. The courts sustained the air ban, in spite of a subsequent appeal by the defendants.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Searle. pp. 143-164.

<sup>47</sup>Searle. pp. 165-184.

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Another significant initiative from the period involved the effort to secure a treaty between the United States and Canada concerning the Quetico-Superior region. Throughout the winter of 1948, the State Department reworked the proposed treaty drafted by Oberholtzer. In May 1949 it was sent to Toronto for review. Oberholtzer wrote to then General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had a large following in Canada, and suggested that a statement from him approving the program would be of great value. In addition, the Quetico-Superior Council began a grass-roots effort to encourage the creation of a Canadian counterpart organization.

The province of Ontario continued to resist the notion of a treaty but an important international meeting was held on June 23, 1955 on Frank Hubachek's property on Basswood Lake which he had developed into a wilderness research station with a resident director, laboratories, and assistants. Twenty-two Canadian officials attended the conference which was again repeated in 1956. The meetings helped both parties come closer to an agreement. But a treaty proved elusive because Ontario could not sign a treaty since it was outside the scope of a provincial government. Nor would the province transfer administration of the Quetico area to the dominion. However, letters of agreement were exchanged in April 1960 and an international advisory committee was created.

Fifty years after Oberholtzer first dreamed of an international wilderness along the boundary the Canadian and American governments found a pragmatic solution to an international problem. Although the advisory committee had no binding principles, it had a sweeping assignment to recommend mutually acceptable policies to the respective governments.<sup>48</sup>

Other notable events included renaming the roadless area as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) in 1958, the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, and the creation of Voyageurs National Park on the Kabetogama Peninsula south of Rainy Lake in 1972.

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<sup>48</sup>Searle. pp. 193-215.

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But time had eroded the ranks of the Quetico-Superior conservationists. And for some years younger men such as Sigurd Olson had assumed leadership roles for the cause. Fred Winston died in 1964, a few months before the Wilderness Act was passed. Oberholtzer withdrew from the President's Committee in 1970. He died on June 6, 1977 at the age of ninety-three. Hubachek spoke for them all when he paid tribute to his friend saying,

When the long, long history of the now famous Quetico-Superior region is written, the name of Ernest Oberholtzer will bulk large near the top of the list. Yes, Ober, your name runs like a strong bright thread through the fabric of many accomplishments.

In some ways the work of the Quetico-Superior Council continues through the families of Oberholtzer's colleagues. After Fred Winston died, Fred Winston, Jr., along with his mother, created the Quetico-Superior Foundation, which continues to promote the goals of the council. Charles S. Kelly, Jr. now serves as its President. Frank B. Hubachek, Jr. continues the research station begun by his father in the border lakes region.

Through life-long dedication, Oberholtzer and his colleagues fashioned the concepts of modern wilderness preservation. In Wilderness and the American Mind it is noted that, "One of the most important causes involved the Quetico-Superior country in Minnesota." Sigurd Olson commented that the effort to preserve the Quetico-Superior region "actually started this whole movement for national preservation of wilderness and has laid the groundwork on many battlefronts where the principles involved are the same." When the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964, "the act cogently expressed the concepts that had evolved during nearly forty years of struggle to protect the Quetico-Superior country."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Searle. p. 221.

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The home of Ernest Oberholtzer is located in the midst of the border lakes region which he spent his lifetime trying to preserve. His efforts were instrumental in the creation of numerous conservation organizations from which emerged the modern concept of wilderness preservation. Much of the seminal thinking occurred at Oberholtzer's island home as he and his colleagues studied the problems of industry, ownership, and development in the Quetico-Superior region and formulated solutions to these issues through the implementation of practical preservation policy.<sup>50</sup> The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Rainy Lake Islands Historic District is associated with one of the most significant efforts in the history of wilderness preservation in the United States.

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<sup>50</sup>Interview with R. Newell Searle. July 20, 1998

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Geographical Data

UTM References

	Zone	Easting	Northing
1.	15	484500	5385150
2.	15	485080	5385160
3.	15	485080	5384980
4.	15	484840	5384840
5.	15	484720	5384920
6.	15	484500	5384920

Verbal Boundary Description

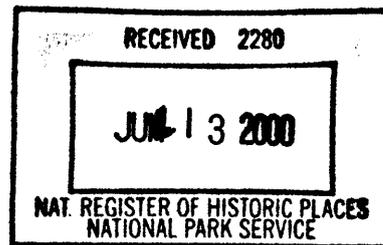
The boundary of the nominated property is delineated by a polygon whose vertices are marked by the above UTM reference points. It includes Mallard, Hawk, and Crow Islands as well as the adjacent waters of Rainy Lake.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the lands and buildings that have been historically associated with the property and which retain historic integrity.

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Additional Documentation

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page 1

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Photographic Information on print # 013065/20

Ernest C. Oberholtzer Rainy Lake Islands Historic District

Unorganized Territory, Koochiching Co., MN

photographer: Virginia Roberts French

date: late 1930s

Location of negative: Original photo in possession of Oberholtzer Foundation

view: Ernest C. Oberholtzer

photo number: 013065/20

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Britta L. Bloomberg".

Britta L. Bloomberg  
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer  
Minnesota Historical Society

7/7/00  
Date

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION

PROPERTY NAME: Oberholtzer, Ernest C., Rainy Lake Islands Historic District

MULTIPLE NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: MINNESOTA, Koochiching

DATE RECEIVED: 10/17/00 DATE OF PENDING LIST:  
DATE OF 16TH DAY: DATE OF 45TH DAY: 12/01/00  
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 00000570

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N  
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N  
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT  RETURN  REJECT 11/14/00 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

*Additional Documentation Accepted*

RECOM./CRITERIA \_\_\_\_\_

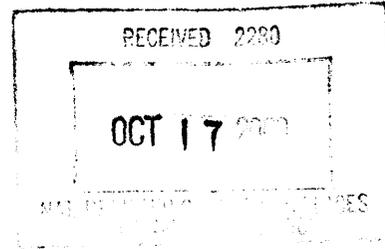
REVIEWER Eden Beall DISCIPLINE \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

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Oberholtzer Historic District  
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Reference Number: 00000570

State: Minnesota

County: Koochiching

Resource Name (Historic): Oberholtzer, Ernest C., Rainy Lake  
Islands Historic District

Comments: Section 5, Classification, Number of Resources  
within Property is incorrect. The correct number of  
resources is as follows:

9 Contributing buildings	3 Noncontributing buildings
2 Contributing structures	2 Noncontributing structures

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11	5	Total
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*Britta L. Bloomberg*  
 Britta L. Bloomberg  
 Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

10/12/00  
 Date