

AN UNIDENTIFIED TRADING POST ON THE "PORTAGE LA SAVANNA".
(Near Big Sandy Lake)
by Richard R. Sackett

Among the thirty-one state forests, which have been established through the efforts of the Minnesota Department of Conservation, is the Savanna State Forest, so named to commemorate the historically famous "Portage La Savanne" which in days long ago and for nearly a century provided the only route from the east by way of Lake Superior to the headwaters of the Mississippi River. Located in northeastern Aitkin County, it embraces ten townships of beautifully wooded forest land, interspersed with 17 major lakes, the largest of which are Big Sandy and Minnewawa. It is a region made readily accessible by two state highways and traversed by numerous all-weather roads, truly an ideal playground for hunters, fisherman and tourists.

The historical significance of this particular region can be traced to its geographical location. In the days when transportation was principally by canoe and portage, it was inevitable that this region should become the site of one of the most important portage routes of the Northwest. Here canoe-navigable waters of the great St. Lawrence waterway closely approach similar waters of the equally great Mississippi system. Most of the Savanna Forest is drained by the Mississippi River, which runs adjacent to the area on the west, and its tributaries, the Swan, the Prairie and the West Savanna Rivers. The East Savanna River leaves the forest at about the east central portion and drains eastward through the St. Louis River to Lake Superior.

Between the East and West Savanna Rivers lies the divide between the two waterway systems and the historical route of the old Savanna Portage over which more than a century of silence has fallen. From east to west overland, the distance is approximately five miles. This portage was called by J. C. Norwood, an early Government Geologist who worked in this region about 1848, "the worst carrying place in the Northwest, as the east end for a mile and a half is through a tamarack swamp flooded most of the time".

Historians claim that it is by this route the first Chippewas pushed their way westward from their homes on Lake Superior; invading and finally gaining control of territory occupied by their traditional enemies, the Sioux. Over this portage the explorers, fur traders and missionaries penetrated deep into the wilderness of the Mississippi headwaters.

During the summer of 1932, while engaged in preliminary survey and classification of lands which were established as the Savanna State Forest, Mr. Edward Lawson, Forester for the Minnesota Forestry Department, was greatly impressed by the area's richness in historical lore. The finding of several stone artifacts on the east shore of Sandy Lake stimulated his desire to probe deeper into the history of the region. Mr. Lawson was fortunate at this time to make the acquaintance of Mr. Wm. P. Ingersoll, a resident of the locality, who in company with Professor Irving H. Hart of Iowa State College during the fall of 1926, had located the route of the old portage.

Professor Hart's excellent account of the re-discovery of the old portage, as well as records and diaries of early fur traders and explorers who had used this route, describe in detail this wilderness area. Reverend Boutwell and Lieutenant James Allen, who accompanied Schoolcraft in his search for the source of the Mississippi in 1832, also give descriptive and detailed accounts of their trek across Savanna Portage. Professor Hart in his report mentioned the discovery of a probable site of a fur trading post or camp located at the

western terminus of the portage. Although his investigations were brief, he felt confident that further search on the site would prove profitable.

Consulting an old time settler of the district, Mr. Anderson, a farmer living near Shumway Lake, Mr. Lawson was informed that from the evidence he had gathered during his long residence there, it seemed probable that the portage terminated on the West Savanna River in the SE 1/4 of the SW 1/4, Section 7, Township 50, Range 22. When the first opportunity presented itself, Mr. Lawson set out with Jacob Lick, a member of the land Classification crew, to re-discover the trading post site mentioned by Professor Hart. Starting from Sandy Lake Ranger Station on Billhorn Bay, they drove northeasterly to Balsam Lake post office. Proceeding northward from that point on a passable but winding and hilly road they soon reached a place in Section 7, Township 50, Range 22, that is quite accurately described in a detailed description of the portage by Dr. Alexander Wolcott, a surgeon with the Lewis Cass party in 1820.

- - - - "Where the portage approaches the sources of the West Savannah, there is a descent into a valley covered with rank grass without forest trees. The valley is skirted with thick and brushy growth of alder, aspen, and hazel. The adjoining hills are sandy and covered with pine. The stream here is just large enough to swim a canoe, and navigation commences within a mile of its source".

The road on which they had been travelling descended the steep bluff on the eastern side of the valley. Near the base of the bluff traces were noticed of an old trail or tote road bearing off in a southwesterly direction. Following this trail which skirted along the eastern edge of the valley it was found that it terminated shortly at what evidently had been a site of an old lumber camp, as hummocks of soil clearly indicated where the dirt had been banked up against sill logs of at least two former camp buildings. Between this site and the tree-lined borders of the West Savanna River, less than twenty rods distant to the west, is a low open piece of ground covered with marsh grass and willow, and cut up by a bow shaped, long-abandoned former channel of the river. Crossing an alder swale they came to a slow-flowing spring of cold clear water. Water drained from this spring into the old river channel which at this point appeared to be filled from bank to bank with muck and ooze. A short distance to the north of the spring was a small rise of highland and immediately beyond that a more prominent pine-crested hill. Skirting the north side of the old channel they walked westward to the river. The course of the West Savanna River from here is almost due south, and at this point is a shallow stream less than twenty feet in width.

Considering the shallowness of the stream, the overhanging branches, broken tree trunks and rocks which visibly cluttered the water course, it would be a difficult route on which to travel by canoe at the present time.

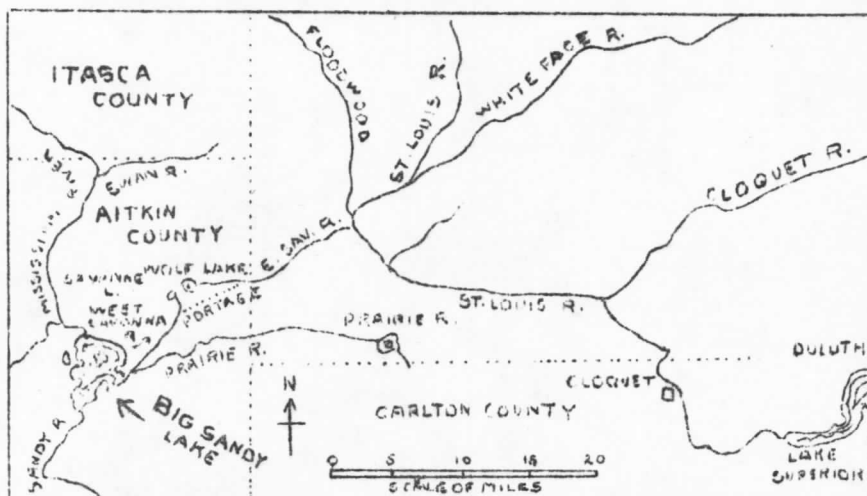
Sizing up the probable location of the site of the trading post, they decided the most likely location was on the pine-crested hill which commanded a view of the river and also the adjacent valley. On the hill there was evidence of an excavation and rather loose turned soil, which had been the previous workings of Professor Hart and Mr. Ingersoll. They returned to the river,

carefully scanning the soil along the bank and checking to see if it could be determined how and where the old bow shaped river channel had been cut off, concluding that it was possible that a beaver dam may have altered the course ages ago. They retraced their steps to the hill and then turned to the adjoining small rise of highland immediately to the north of the spring. Here at this point it seemed advisable to set a test trench. Several red and white beads were soon uncovered. Further excavation resulted in the finding of numerous small ornamental beads, also long beads which appeared to be made from shell, lead bullets with outer surfaces oxidized through age, fragments of blue English china-ware, hand wrought nails, a silver earring, gun flints several with edges squarely cut and worn down from use, a large copper button possibly from the cloak of an early trader, a rusty hunting knife, and a lock and hammer from an old flint-lock musket. Many other articles used in Indian trade a century or more ago were found, gathered together and preserved at the Ranger Station on Big Sandy Lake.

It may be questionable, however, if this site was actually one of the large trading posts. Possibly it was a stopping-off place, a camp, or overnight resting station for the trader or trapper traveling across the portage. Its occupancy for a considerable period of time is shown by the fragments of dishes, clay pipes and other relics found. It is more than likely that the cabin was destroyed by fire resulting in the loss of much trade goods, since it is quite reasonable to assume that such equipment as a hunting knife, a gun lock, and similar accessories found on the site and so valuable and difficult to replace in those early times were not carelessly abandoned by their owners.

During the summers of 1940 and 1941, progress was made toward re-establishing the old Savanne Portage. Cooperative efforts on the part of the Division of Forestry, the Minnesota Historical Society and the Boy Scouts of America, of Region 10, made possible an outstanding project for 66 Eagle Scouts. This project resulted in locating, brushing and clearing the old Savanne Portage, which had become obliterated by forest growth and which seemed soon to become only a tradition.

DETAIL MAP SHOWING WATERWAY TRAVEL BETWEEN
BIG SANDY LAKE AND LAKE SUPERIOR



COURTESY OF MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY