

OBER'S ISLAND

(Ernest Oberholtzer's Mallard Island)

(Mallard Island)

(Ober's Mallard Island)

One of the Review Islands on Rainy Lake, bounded on the south by The Hawk Island and on the north by The Crow Island. These islands are located seven miles east of Ranier, Minnesota, three miles west of Voyageur National Park, and one mile south of the international border of the United States of America and Canada. The legal description of Mallard Island is Lot 6, Section 19, T-17-N, R-22-W, Koochiching County, Minnesota

Ranier vicinity

Koochiching County

Minnesota

HALS MN-6

HALS MN-6

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

National Park Service

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HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

OBER'S ISLAND (Mallard Island)

HALS NO. MN-06

Location: Ober's Island, or The Mallard Island, is one of the so-called Review Islands on Rainy Lake, Ranier, Minnesota, bounded on the south by The Hawk Island and on the north by The Crow Island, within the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Rainy Lake Islands Historic District, entered into the National Register of Historic Places on June 16, 2000 under reference number 00000570.

These islands are located seven miles east of Ranier, Minnesota, three miles west of Voyageur National Park, and one mile south of the international border of the United States of America and Canada.

The legal description of Mallard Island is Lot 6, Section 19, T-17-N, R-22-W, Koochiching County, Minnesota.

The geospatial point coordinates are Latitude 48.619625, Longitude -93.204579 (the center of the Kitchen Houseboat, at the midpoint of Mallard Island, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84.

Significance: The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Rainy Lake Historic District is nationally significant under national register evaluation criteria B, recognizing the contributions of Ernest Oberholtzer as a pioneer in wilderness conservation. He was a conservationist, explorer, and wilderness philosopher of the Rainy Lake area. His legacy is associated with the Quetico-Superior Council, of which he was a founder (1928) and president; the President's Quetico-Superior Committee, on which he served from 1934-1968; as an articulate voice of authority in the struggle to preserve wilderness character in the border lakes region along the international boundary between the United States and Canada; and as a founder and officer (1937-1967) of the Wilderness Society.”¹

Ernest Carl Oberholtzer was born February 6, 1884, in Davenport, Iowa, and died June 6, 1977, in International Falls, Minnesota. He lived most of his adult life on Mallard Island in Rainy Lake near Ranier, in northern Minnesota.

Oberholtzer was educated at Harvard University, receiving a broad liberal education, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1907. During his senior year, Oberholtzer studied landscape architecture under the tutelage of Frederick

¹ Minnesota Historical Society. ERNEST C. OBERHOLTZER: An Inventory of His Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society, Manuscripts Collection, <http://www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00353.xml>

Law Olmsted Jr. He then continued an additional year at Harvard in the newly established school of landscape architecture under the tutelage of James Sturgis Pray.

The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Rainy Lake Historic District nomination did not document nor analyze the cultural landscape of Mallard Island. Yet the cultural landscape of Mallard Island remains as a monument to the genius of Ernest Oberholtzer in the area of landscape architecture. This island is significant under national register evaluation criteria C, as a distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction, but its distinctive characteristics are of a type, period, and construction that represent the work of a master and possess his high artistic values.

The cultural landscape of Mallard Island is significant at the national level as embodying the type and period of a rare remaining example of a personal estate created by a student of the world's first professional graduate course in landscape architecture education. It is significant at the state level as embodying the type and period of rustic landscape architecture associated with the National Park Service, Civilian Conservation Corps and state recreational development in Minnesota. Mallard Island also is significant at the local level as embodying the historic context for tourism and recreational development in the northern border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s.

Description: Mallard Island is a narrow mass of rock protruding from Rainy Lake. The one and a half acre island stretches 1,300-foot from end to end, and 150 feet across at its widest point. The highest point of granite rises only twenty-four feet above the lake level.

Oberholtzer biographer Joe Paddock described Mallard Island as a spiritual place sacred to the region's Ojibwe Indians before it became home to Oberholtzer in the early 1920s.² Indeed, when I departed from my first visit the place seemed spiritual as sunbeams broke through the grey day to illuminate Mallard Island and a bald eagle circled above.

When approaching the island from the lake, the many trees lining the shore reveal the buildings slowly. My first impression upon stepping foot on land was that this is a very special place.

Oberholtzer created during the half century he occupied Mallard Island what appears a small village. It was only after Oberholtzer Foundation Board member

² Paddock, Joe. A Sanctuary for All Time: A battle between two men shaped the first legislation in U.S. history to support wilderness for its own sake. The story began on the shores of Rainy Lake. Minnesota Conservation Volunteer Magazine, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 2013. <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/volunteer/novdec12/oberholtzer.html>

Diana Tessari gave me a tour that I realized the extent of development on what first appeared a wooded island. Oberholtzer's mastery of landscape architectural space makes the small island seem expansive. Rustic buildings blend into the landscape. Some buildings stand-alone and Oberholtzer grouped others in clusters. Oberholtzer developed his island incrementally over a span of fifty years. It is an integrated complex of domestic buildings and related structures.

The island development is a rustic recreational camp type, of the early twentieth century period, and individual buildings are ephemeral constructions assembled from natural wood and stone materials purchased or gathered locally and recycled from earlier buildings. Oberholtzer's main house – also called the Old Man River House or simply Ober's House – is a substantial three-story structure built into the rock at the island's highest point of the same natural wood and stone materials. It possesses a dignity of rustic design and the construction is the work of Rainy Lake artisan Emil Johnson.

The most distinguishable entity of Mallard Island is its cultural landscape. The spatial organization of building components and land patterns; adaptations of structures, furnishings and objects to the natural topography; and choreography of places, views, and paths is landscape architecture of high artistic values. The many buildings and structures, terraces and gardens, and walks are carefully sited upon the rocky island, and crafted of natural materials gathered locally they blend into the natural scene.

The cultural landscape is the character-defining feature of Mallard Island. The spatial organization of Ober's "little village," his carefully integrated buildings and structures upon the topography, the creation of useable spaces that blend imperceptibly into the native setting is a masterwork of landscape architecture.

History:

Ernest Carl Oberholtzer was the leading figure in the crusade for preserving wilderness along the international boundary of Minnesota and Ontario. Mallard Island is the epitome of his cause – his wilderness retreat for a half century. Joe Paddock, author of *Keeper of the Wild*, suggested "it is surprising to some that Ober kept his island more carefully groomed than it is today." Oberholtzer appreciated wilderness but also enjoyed having cultural comforts in the wilds. For example, he carried his violin on long wilderness canoe trips. Likewise, he gathered around Mallard Island comforts of civilization, including many friends and a library of ten thousand books.

Ernest Oberholtzer at Harvard

Ernest Oberholtzer was educated at Harvard graduating with a BA in 1907. His courses included literature, history, and in his senior year courses in landscape architecture. He took advantage of Harvard's 'elective' studies, explaining, "You don't have to specialize or major in some one subject. I think that was good for

me, except that I never learned a trade. I never learned anything that I could earn a living with. But I found out more about myself and what my interests were, you see.”³

Perhaps equally significant to his academic studies were the friendships Ober made at Harvard. One friend, Conrad Aiken, became a famous writer and poet. Another friend was the “budding historian Samuel Eliot Morrison, grand-nephew of Harvard’s President Charles William Eliot. Eliot’s son was a partner in the Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot landscape architecture firm.⁴ Morrison’s mother invited Ober “to become a tutor and caretaker of her retarded son Bradford. “Weekdays I would be with the boy,” he said, “from nine in the morning till about a quarter to one. I’d have lunch there and go right back to Harvard.”⁵ This acquaintance brought Ober into close contact with the Boston Brahmins and the genteel art of landscape architecture through the Elliot family. The Brahmin caste of Boston, as dubbed by Oliver Wendell Holmes, felt obliged by their wealth “to strive for personal achievement and social usefulness.”⁶ Charles Eliot the younger found both personal achievement and social usefulness in landscape architecture before his early death. His father created a memorial to him by establishing at Harvard the world’s first landscape architecture degree program.

Ober studied landscape in his senior year at Harvard. “I took a preliminary course under Fredrick [Law] Olmsted [Jr.], who was the great landscape architect of the time, and there I happened to just hit it right. I made out very well and got the top marks in my landscape project The two top men in the program, Olmsted and Pray, invited me to go on in the [graduate school] course and to be an assistant the next year. I was to be paid three hundred dollars.... [T]hat first year was devoted almost exclusively to architecture. Architectural drawing was dreadful for me, that formal drawing with all those tools. You almost always had to work with an architect in this kind of planning, except for the wilderness planning, which was the thing, even then, that appealed to me. I might have loved a lot of it later, planning national parks and all sorts of

³ Ernest Oberholtzer Oral History, Cited in Joe Paddock, *Keeper of the Wild: The Life of Ernest Oberholtzer*. (Minneapolis Minnesota Historical Society, 2001): 22-38.

⁴ “Charles Eliot secured for Boston and other New England towns many parks, riverways, shorelines, and reservations of relatively wild landscapes. As a partner of Olmsted, Olmsted, and Eliot, a member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, and in support for creating the Trustees of Public Reservations in Massachusetts – the first statewide preservation and conservation organization in the United States....” Melanie L. Simo. *Forest & Garden: Traces of Wildness in a Modernizing Land, 1897-1949* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003):11.

⁵ Ernest Oberholtzer Oral History. Cited in Joe Paddock, *Keeper of the Wild: The Life of Ernest Oberholtzer*. (Minneapolis Minnesota Historical Society, 2001): 25.

⁶ Keith N. Morgan, “Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect: A Father’s Life of his Son. Houghton Mifflin: 6.

things....”⁷

Before Harvard offered the first university degree for landscape architecture, men studied at Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard for entry into that profession. Nathaniel Southgate Shaler was dean of the Lawrence school. Charles Eliot, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., James Pray, among others studied under the direction of Shaler for their entry into the profession. Shaler guided that first generation of professional school educators away from the focus on garden design to broader social issues “which are of value to the spirit of man,” including preserving natural landscapes. Shaler wrote in *Man and the Earth* (1906) of the rapid industrialization then occurring in the United States and the transformation underway from a nation of a predominately rural society to an urban society. He claimed that the ‘resources of the earth were not the possessions of a single person...but the inheritance of all people and their descendants.... As any individual could have a ‘life estate’ in those resources, to squander them was an act of barbarism. To conserve them – that is, to use them wisely – was man’s duty.... Shaler predicted some portions of the natural domain would be preserved in its natural state for the sake of the earth’s natural beauty would remain as samples from a time ‘when the earth was free.’”⁸

Harvard established the world’s first academic program in landscape architecture in 1900. The program was modeled on the philosophical and practical writings of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., the co-designer of New York’s Central Park, and Charles Eliot, the son of the Harvard president, Charles William Eliot. Two separate lines of thought emerged in that first professional school of landscape architecture.

Eliot envisioned a new type of public landscape -- and used a distinctive vocabulary to articulate a new set of objectives. Whereas Olmsted wrote about green country parks, parkways and pastoral retreats as places in which modern city dwellers could find spiritual replenishment through passive contemplation of nature. Eliot discussed reservations, trusteeships, and rural landscape preservation that would provide settings for active enjoyment of nature. In contrast to Olmsted’s retreat into private contemplation of nature, Eliot compared scenery or landscape to other advantages of urban culture, especially books and art. While Olmsted’s parks were created through design, Eliot’s reservations were products of choice, preservation and improvement.⁹

⁷ Ibid. Ernest Oberholtzer Oral History, Cited in Paddock: 22-38.

⁸ Nathaniel Shaler. *Man and the Earth*. 1905. Cited in Melanie L. Simo. *Forest & Garden: Traces of Wildness in a Modernizing Land, 1897-1949* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003): 11.

⁹ Ibid. Morgan: 15.

In 1901, Henry Vincent Hubbard was the first graduate of the Harvard landscape architecture program. He became a faculty member in 1906. The Lawrence school, which had had awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in landscape architecture, dismantled that year. In 1906, landscape architecture became a department of the professional studies program in Harvard's new Graduate School of Applied Sciences and awarded the Master of Landscape Architecture Degree.¹⁰ Olmsted left Harvard in 1907 to concentrate on his flourishing landscape architecture practice. His teaching assistant James Sturgis Pray replaced him as the program director.

The first year of the landscape architecture program at Harvard introduced students to design history, its nomenclature and examples of the great gardens of the world. The second year focused on the broader issues of environment, geography and aesthetics. It is possible that Ober saw a course description similar to the following. "The types of landscape and garden design are taken up in the historical order of their highest development, but in addition to the critical description of historical examples with the aid of plans, drawings and photographs, reference is made whenever possible to actual examples, illustrative of the same principles, to be found in the vicinity of Boston."¹¹

Olmsted's introductory course took students on a virtual world tour "with a survey of ancient gardens, and devoted the remainder of the history sequence primarily to Renaissance Italy, Seventeenth-century France, and the estates and parks of eighteenth-century Britain."¹² Ober's written term papers for this course included one on Renaissance Italian Villa gardens, another on the eighteenth-century English manor Montacute House, and a critical analysis of the Spot Pond reservation in Boston's metropolitan park system designed by Olmsted.¹³

On January 24, 1906, in neatly penned letters Ober wrote his "Report for Landscape Architecture, Italian Villas of the Renaissance." The paper was written for Professor James Prentice Pray in the School of Landscape Architecture at Harvard. "Pray's teaching style relied heavily on having students

¹⁰ Melanie L. Simo. *Forest & Garden: Traces of Wildness in a Modernizing Land, 1897-1949* (Charlottesville: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 113.

¹¹ GHI Bulletin Supplement 4 (2007), Cited in Melanie L. Simo. *Forest & Garden: Traces of Wildness in a Modernizing Land, 1897-1949* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003): 112.

¹² *Ibid.* Simo: 11.

¹³ Montacute House is considered one of the finest Elizabethan houses in England. The owner was known for his refinement and hospitality. "Mr. Philips was a man of large acquaintance and ample means, and his country home was designed with a special view to the entertainment of cultured friends, wrote Ober in his student paper." Ernest C. Oberholtzer, "Report for Landscape Architecture, Montacute: A fortified Manor in Somersetshire, England," unpublished student paper, Harvard school of landscape architecture, Hollis 6, December 4, 1907: 1.

prepare written reports.”¹⁴ The report was to be “descriptive and critical and accompanied by original illustrations.” Ober wrote, “The meaning of ‘villa’ is sometimes a little confusing to the uninitiated. But the Italians were accustomed to see men design both houses and gardens, it is always understood to mean the tract of land and all the buildings, upon it. In this respect it is like to medieval manor and the American plantation of the south. It is in this sense that we shall use the term.”¹⁵

“The principal lesson to be learned from the Italian villas is that a landscape school should express the spirit of its time,” Oberholtzer wrote. “In the plan of nearly all great gardens there is distinguishable a tendency to divide the plot into three parts of approximately equal size. This is best seen at [Villa] Lante. The parterre was the flower garden proper. It was the spot upon which most ingenuity was centered to secure a unique but beautiful formal design. It was usually strictly symmetrical about a center point. The second part of the plot, the terraces, was devoted to beautiful walks and to charming resting places from which the parterre and surrounding country could be leisurely enjoyed. The third part, the bosquet or grove, was a place to get lost in. More than any other part it was a wilderness, but always a classic wilderness in which one might expect to see nymphs and fauns. It was not intended primarily to furnish a splendid view point for the surrounding country. It was rather a region in which one could forget the outside world and give oneself up to contemplation. It was, in most cases, thickly grown with trees, somewhere in the midst of which was buried the distributing reservoir of the whole establishment.”¹⁶

“The evident harmonizing of arrangement between the house and surrounding landscape is what first strikes one, it being clear that the architect of the house was also the architect of the garden and the rest of the villa,” he continued. “The Garden was designed as another component, the terraces and groves still another where one might walk about and find a place suitable to their hour of the day and feeling of the moment and still be in that sacred portion of the globe dedicated to one’s self. (...) the Italian villa perfectly expresses the ideal of a unique period in history and only with such material as was native and natural,” Oberholtzer concluded.¹⁷

As Oberholtzer pointed out, the Italian villa was divided into three zones, and it was in this sense that designers applied zoning to the layout of villas. Scholars

¹⁴ Michael Lee, Puckler at Harvard University, GHI Bulletin Supplement 4 (2007)
<http://www.ghi-dc.org/publications/ghipubs/bu-supp/supp004/ul.pdf>.

¹⁵ Ernest C. Oberholtzer, “Report for Landscape Architecture, Italian Villas of the Renaissance,” unpublished student paper, Harvard school of landscape architecture, Hollis 6, January 24, 1906: 4-5.

¹⁶ Ibid: 9-10.

¹⁷ Ibid: 21.

further defined villa gardens as the “third nature” where human intervention goes beyond the functional needs of what is required by the practice of agriculture to include an aesthetic experience, where agrarian interventions and methods of cultivation are merged with the refinements of architecture and applied to pleasure gardens, walks, terraces and porches as outdoor extensions of the dwelling.¹⁸ The agricultural zone beyond the pleasure gardens was referred to as the “second nature.” This zone included all the necessary accoutrements of farming and husbandry: farm buildings, enclosures, orderly rows of trees and groves. In this zone nature is made over for the purposes of productivity. The zone of untamed nature beyond the cultivated landscape was referred to as the “first nature” where no human interventions are discernable. In Classical mythology this was the mysterious and feared territory of the gods. In the cultural history of the United States, First Nature was the home of aboriginal Americans. Going into wilderness is a journey from whence one must return. It lay “beyond habitual society and scenery...where nature does not depend upon human wishes.”¹⁹

The Harvard history courses stimulated students to travel and experience first-hand the great landscapes of the world as a continuation of the design education. It was referred to as the Grand Tour. “In the absence of academic programs in landscape architecture,” wrote Olmsted, “a period of apprenticeship, combined with travel and supervised reading, was the only way to enter the profession.”²⁰ Olmsted encouraged his own sons and apprentices to travel abroad, and he wrote letters of introduction to carry with them. His son Frederick Jr. travelled to Germany with Henry Hubbard in 1903. In 1914, Harvard established the Charles Eliot Traveling Fellowship to make first-hand studies of European gardens a regular part of the landscape architecture curriculum.²¹ Oberholtzer, too, traveled abroad and was enriched from the experience. In the summer of 1908 he made a tour of England and Scotland on a bicycle. “After my year of landscape architecture, I went to Europe with Conrad Aiken, who was to become a famous writer and poet.... We got into the Lake District [of England], and that was, of course, just the most heavenly place. It was very beautiful, and we lingered there. This region appealed to Conrad especially because, of course, he knew all those poets [of the Romantic School] connected to the region, Shelly and Keats and the others, all by heart. Then there were the very beautiful lakes. Just how they could have such beauty and not spoil it in any way, as we do [in America], is a wonder. The buildings didn’t intrude. Nothing did. There was nothing wrong. It was just as natural and beautiful as if it had been set down there from

¹⁸ John Dixon Hunt. *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory*. (Philadelphia: U of Penn Press, 2000):62.

¹⁹ *Ibid*: 58.

²⁰ Phyllis Andersen. “The Arnold Arboretum and the Early Years of Design Education in America,” *Arnoldia* 62/3:4.

²¹ GHI Bulletin Supplement 4 (2007).

heaven.”²²

It was likely that Ober encountered in the Lake District the Thirlere Lake controversy. Conrad Aiken would have wanted to see Lake Thirlere, the Romantic landscape celebrated by William Wordsworth in the heart of the Lake District. The reservoir constructed to provide water for the industrial city of Manchester submerged Lake Thirlere and its beautiful valley in 1896.²³ Emma Jacobs described the controversy as the first environmental battle.²⁴

In the spring of 1909, Ober went abroad again, for a three month grand tour as the guest of his hometown friend Harry French. They traveled through France, Hungary, Germany and Switzerland with stops in Paris, Vienna, London and Oxford. Ober was as much impressed with the picturesque landscape of the English Cotswold as he had been with the Lake District on his first trip abroad. He described the trip to Oxford. “We were passing through one village after another, and they were just bowered in trees and flowers.... There were tiled and thatched roof. Oh, it was beautiful.”²⁵

Between summers abroad, Ober took a year of graduate education in landscape architecture at Harvard. The landscape architecture program had undergone extensive changes since 1907. The new graduate course required an undergraduate degree for admission into the program. The graduate program was an advanced level of study “dealing with complex professional issues”²⁶ and the curriculum increased from five undergraduate to twenty graduate courses. Architecture and landscape architecture programs shared the same core curriculum, faculty and classrooms until 1908, when landscape architecture received its own “distinct professional identity” as a fine art.²⁷ “The level of tension rose to internecine squabbling,” it was said.²⁸

“I took that course,” said Oberholtzer, “but I had all this architectural drawing at night, very fine drawing, and my eyes just didn’t focus well enough to do this job. I forgot what kind of mark I finally got at the end of the year, but I had pretty well made up my mind by that time that that wasn’t what I wanted to do.

²² Ibid. Ernest Oberholtzer Oral History, Cited in Joe Paddock: 22-38.

²³ Simon Akam, “Wordsworth’s Lake District, 200 years on,” The Washington Post, June 6, 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/04/AR2010060402773.html>.

²⁴ Emma Jacobs, “The First Modern Environmental Battle Over Lake Thirlmere,” History of Science (January 8, 2010), <http://thefastertimes.com/historyofscience/2010/01/08/the-first-environmental-battle-over-lake-thirlmere/>

²⁵ Ibid., Ernest Oberholtzer Oral History.

²⁶ Anthony Alofsin. The struggle for modernism: architecture, landscape architecture and city planning at Harvard. (New York and London: WW Norton, 2002), pg. 40.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

So I dropped it, because it meant seven years more, and then you'd only be an apprentice. I'd have to go to Japan and every other place first and study gardens, and I wasn't interested in formal gardens. A lot of that would have been just formal landscape architecture, and I wasn't interested in that anyway. So I dropped it, and I have never regretted it."²⁹

The shift of focus in landscape architectural education from garden design to addressing larger social issues concerning the health, safety, and welfare of society "coincided with the emergence of the progressive movement. It was a turning point in American politics and social policy. Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt and continuing with William Taft and Woodrow Wilson, American presidents used their office to curb the political and financial excesses and corruption that had arisen with the industrialization of America."³⁰ Landscape architecture education at Harvard reflected the progressive ideologies. "As succinctly summed up by historian [and Ober's friend] Samuel Eliot Morrison, "Common to all progressives was belief in the perfectibility of man, and in an open society where mankind was neither chained to the past nor condemned to a deterministic future; one in which people were capable of changing their condition for better or worse."³¹

At Harvard, the "implications of this new social philosophy for the design professions were highly significant: change was possible, the past could be reconsidered, the future could be better, social life could be enhanced, and the disenfranchisement induced by industrialization could be tempered by the social institutions."³² Under these wide sweeping social changes of the United States in the early twentieth century, Ernest Oberholtzer concluded his Harvard education and set out to find his place beyond the rapidly changing world. He turned to Rainy Lake.

Rainy Lake and Mallard Island

Overshadowing the recognition of Mallard Island as a masterwork of landscape architecture is the legacy of Ernest Oberholtzer in the conservation and preservation movement for his pioneering work to preserve the wilderness of the Quetico-Superior region of northern Minnesota and southern Ontario. Less known is the pioneering work of Ernest Oberholtzer as a real estate developer.

²⁹ Ernest Oberholtzer. Oral History, Original Reel 7, Transcripts of interview with Lucile M. Kane, March 17, 1964, Minnesota Historical Society Oral History Interview. <http://www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/oh81/pdf/ober03.pdf> (accessed October 17, 2010, pg. 26.

³⁰ Ibid, Alofsin: 42.

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

Wilderness conservation and real estate development are often at odds. That is not so in Ernest Oberholtzer. That blending of conservation and development may have something to do with Ober's (as he is called) education in landscape architecture at Harvard, or his mentoring with Fredrick Law Olmsted Jr., or James Sturgis Pray, leading landscape architect professors and practitioners of the time, who showed the world how perfect natural scenery while making civilization beautiful.

Oberholtzer launched his career on Rainy Lake in northern Minnesota. "My home all these years has been on an acre and a half of rocky island in Rainy Lake a mile from the Canadian border. It has no modern facilities and no fully insulated dwelling. There have been times when I have been entirely alone for long periods. In summer, the situation is often just the opposite. Whatever has happened, even in the worst of times, I have thought I was enjoying myself.... In worldly wealth, I have much less than at the start, but I am richer in health and friends of every sort, many of the best of them Indians who never had a day in school. I have never had a car or driven one but have lived on a big wide-open stage and seen a whole pioneer era pass—probably the last."³³

Train service to Ranier, Minnesota, in 1907, opened access to people of rugged nature into the Rainy Lake region. This led to the development of rustic resorts, camps, and cabins.³⁴ Ernest Oberholtzer was soon among those rugged visitors. He was a different sort from the early pioneers who were fur trappers, timber harvesters, gold miners and farmers. Oberholtzer was a pioneer in outdoor recreation. He first passed through the area by canoe in 1909 exploring the Rainy Lake watershed on the international boundary between northern Minnesota and southern Ontario. His sold field notes and photographs from that trip to the Canadian Northern Railroad for use in promoting outdoor adventure travel along the rail line. Once before, Oberholtzer canoed in the boundary waters. It was in 1906, near Ely, with his hometown friend Harry French.³⁵

After graduating from college and a short term working as managing editor of a daily newspaper in Rock Island, Illinois, Oberholtzer went to Rainy Lake—"One of the dreams of my life," he said. "This watershed with its thousands of connected lakes in both countries is larger than Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island combined. It was then little known and almost entirely wild. Its Ojibway Indians were little changed from the time of Columbus. Here I traveled that summer with Indians, some three thousand miles by canoe, improving steadily in health. I spent the entire summer of 1909 in the Rainy Lake district,

³³ Ernest Oberholtzer, Personal autobiography for fiftieth yearbook, Harvard.

³⁴ Hiram Drache. Taming the Wilderness. (Danville, Illinois: Interstate Publishing, 1992):69.

³⁵ Biography of ERNEST C. OBERHOLTZER: An Inventory of His Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society <http://www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00353.xml#a8>

traveling continuously by canoe with local Indians as paddling partners and guides. I am supposed to have paddled some 3,000 miles that summer. That was the beginning of my knowledge of the region. In that one summer, I attempted to traverse all the main canoe routes in the Rainy Lake watershed. It was a colossal job, and it was the first time I's ever traveled widely by canoe.”

During that period, northern Minnesota was still considered wilderness even though much of the vast white pine forest was logged. The remoteness enhanced the draw of the region for some recreational potential for some tourists early on.³⁶ The region received only little statewide advertising before 1940 because it was too inaccessible and remote for most people. Additionally, the tourist guides described the area in very unflattering terms due to the logging, as the landscape was scarred by deforestation, fire and erosion. “Bleached piles of sawdust and rusted hulks of old steam engines add to a general appearance of desolation and abandonment.”³⁷

Oberholtzer returned to the area in the summer of 1910 and explored in the boundary lakes again traveling by canoe deep into Canada with an Ojibwe Indian guide named Billy McGee. In the summer of 1912, he traveled again by canoe with McGee on a five-month journey into the unchartered Northwest Territories of Canada. His stories and photographs reached home in Davenport, Iowa, and attracted his friend Horace Roberts to Rainy Lake, where he bought an island and hired Oberholtzer to supervise the construction of a summer camp.³⁸ Roberts was the son of a wealthy manufacturer. He came to Rainy Lake in 1913 and with Oberholtzer's help developed a showplace summer home on Atsokan Island.³⁹

This temporary employment opportunity for Oberholtzer established him with some acclaim among the wealthy on Rainy Lake, and introduced him to the possibilities of real estate development for summer camps. Oberholtzer's maternal grandfather, William Marckley, had carried on a small housing business in Davenport, Iowa. Entering into real estate development was both a familiar opportunity and one that utilized the landscape architectural skills that

³⁶ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p22/. Opt. citation: Minnesota Arrowhead Association, *Minnesota Arrowhead Country, The Arrowhead Resort Directory* (Duluth: The Minnesota Arrowhead Association, 1933). Minnesota Historical Society Archives, St. Paul.

³⁷ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p23. Opt citation: Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration, *Minnesota: A State Guide* (1938; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986): 31.

³⁸ Editor. “The legacy of a man called ‘Ober’,” *The Rainy Lake Chronicle*, August 2, 1975:5.

³⁹ *The Rainy Lake Chronicle*, November 16, 1975: 7.

he had obtained at Harvard.⁴⁰

During this period, Oberholtzer was without a permanent home. He camped on various islands during the summers and lived in a houseboat on the mainland during the winters.⁴¹ “My mother and I camped out on the island during all of the summer,” he said, “and we cooked out of doors.”⁴² Oberholtzer embraced the wilderness lakes, the traditional Indian ways, and the idyllic life he had fashioned for himself.⁴³

The frontier mystique of this untamed region of lakes and forests included romantic images associated with Native Americans and their legends. The Minnesota Arrowhead Association connected its name to native American legends and the historic wilderness it promoted. This image was also included in real estate development of that period. For example, Bror Dahlberg’s “Redcrest” estate included an elaborate cedar and birch bark “Indian Lodge” designed by Ernest Oberholtzer in the style of a wigwam. Jack and Elsie Ellsworth embellished their property on Namakan Lake known as Ellsworth Rock Gardens with teepees and arrowhead rock sculptures.⁴⁴

There were different values in northern Minnesota recreation compared to other areas of Minnesota. Vacationers traveled to the north to “renew” themselves through adventure, which differed from the entertainment value offered down state. The development of recreational properties in the north reflected these adventure recreational activities. The buildings were not as opulent as the resorts and summer homes found in the south. As a rule, in the north, cabins occupy isolated locations, either accessible by boat or primitive roads. Most contained a cluster of associated outbuildings necessitated by isolation of the cabins, including root cellars, icehouses, generator sheds, woodsheds, boathouses, privies and hand pumps for water.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Biography of Ernest C. Oberholtzer: An Inventory of His Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society <http://www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00353.xml#a8>.

⁴¹ Joe Paddock, *Keeper of the Wild: The Life of Ernest Oberholtzer*. (Minneapolis Minnesota Historical Society, 2001): 129.

⁴² Joe Paddock, *Keeper of the Wild: The Life of Ernest Oberholtzer*. (Minneapolis Minnesota Historical Society, 2001): 133.

⁴³ R. Newell Searle. *Saving Quetico-Superior: A Land Set Apart*. (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977):59.

⁴⁴ National Park Service. *Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s*. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p1.

⁴⁵ National Park Service. *Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s*. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p32.

The development of tourism and recreation in northern Minnesota reflects two periods of the general evolution of tourism in the state. The early development, peaking in the 1920s, is distinguished by island summer homes and cabins owned by wealthy adventurers who took prolonged vacations in remote areas. In the following decades, the types and numbers of vacationers included a wider variety of recreational interests.

Superior National Forest was one of the first regions in northern Minnesota developed for tourism. Harding, Minnesota, (renamed Crane Lake) was accessible from Duluth by a corduroy highway in 1925 and gained a reputation as the access point to some of the greatest inland canoeing waters in the continent.⁴⁶ Early tourism development was primarily adventure, hunting, fishing and canoeing. Visitors to Rainy Lake stayed in resorts, camped, or summer homes and cabins.

Edward Backus was one of the “chief promoters” of recreational opportunities on Rainy Lake. He built the Minnesota and International Railway rail line into the area from Bemidji, and in 1909 “escorted prominent Twin City and Chicago visitors to the lake.” Many purchased islands for summer homes. This group of well-to-do land owners came to be called the Rainy Lake Aristocracy.⁴⁷

Many of the early seasonal estates of wealthy owners on Rainy Lake were architect designed and built by an experienced contractor. They often were a type and construction that represented the work of a master builder and possessed high artistic values. The remoteness of the area required extended stays, and necessitated that recreational properties include in addition to the main lodge a complex of outbuildings, including a caretaker's house, an icehouse, a power plant, guesthouses, a boathouse / boatlift and docks that made them self-sufficient.

Rainy Lake was a showplace of summer homes built primarily on islands, accessible only by boat. In 1910, Edward W. Backus constructed his summer estate on Red Sucker Island (later called Curtis Island).⁴⁸ He invited other wealthy individuals to build their summer homes on the lake. Among them were Horace Roberts, who built “Atsokan” in 1913. He acquired the Rainy Lake property through his friendship with Ernest Oberholtzer. Bror Dalberg, former

⁴⁶ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p15.

⁴⁷ Paul Clifford Larson. A Place at the Lake. (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 1998):141.

⁴⁸ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p18.

Backus employee and later founder of the Celotex business, constructed "Redcrest" in the 1920s. Dr. Frederick Dunsmoor constructed "Dunsmoor" on Home Island in 1922. Henry French, a millionaire industrialist and Oberholtzer friend from Davenport, constructed "Green Mansion" in 1935.⁴⁹ Dalberg's 'Redcrest' was equipped with telephone service, and included a multi-room main house with six bedrooms, a sun porch, kitchen, butler's pantry, veranda and two baths. The guesthouse had four bedrooms and baths, and quarters for servants.⁵⁰ Henry French, Oberholtzer's hometown friend from Davenport Iowa, developed an estate within view of Mallard Island. The lodge was described as a "Norman Castle" and featured handcrafted hardware, hewn beams, hardwood floors and wall paneling. The property was developed during the Great Depression for summer recreational use and constructed of native rock by Fort Frances contractor F.G. Myers in 1931 according to plans drawn up by Minneapolis architect Maurice F. Maine.⁵¹

In addition to these island estates, lakeside cabin development increased along the mainland lakeshore for summer cottages.⁵² H.I. Bedell, a homesteader on Rainy Lake, was one of the first in the area to develop resorts and build summer homes and cabins. He developed four miles of lakefront for summer cabins. By 1905, he operated two resort cottages on Rainy Lake, and over the next ten years developed Crystal Beach, Jackfish Bay, Lake Park and Forest Point for lakefront vacation homes. R.H. Bennett constructed a hunting Lodge named Island View Hotel (now Island View Lodge) on Rainy Lake in 1908. This was the first of its type on the lake, and featured a two-story log cabin main building measuring twenty-four by forty feet. The Koochiching Development Company and Falls Commercial Club published a guide in 1909 promoting the potential of the scenic beauty of the International Falls area for commercial recreational development.⁵³

By the mid-1920s, at least one resort business served tourists on each of the major lakes in the region. Watson's Lake View Resort was constructed in 1918

⁴⁹ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p18.

⁵⁰ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p33.

⁵¹ Darryl Allan, "Day Before Yesterday," Fort Francis Museum, August 16, 1982.

⁵² National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p18.

⁵³ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p18.

on Kabetogama; Borderland Lodge started on Crane Lake in 1920 by Bill and Kate Randolph. There was Clark's resort on Sand Point Lake, Island View Hotel on Rainy Lake, and Palmer's Frontier Lodge on Ash River. Although advertised as "resorts" some lacked amenities desired by visitors. Most early cabins had no plumbing.

About 1916 while working on the development of Horace Robert's island Oberholtzer met William Hapgood and his brother Norman, the editor of Collier's Magazine. William Hapgood owned a group of islands on Rainy Lake seven miles east of the village of Ranier and was interested in developing them. He was taken with Oberholtzer's abilities and made him the manager of Deer Island. "I feel, as does [my wife] Ellen," Hapgood wrote to Oberholtzer, "You are the man to supervise the development of Deer Island. We are calling our company 'The Deer Island Enterprise.'"

Oberholtzer and Hapgood shared a vision to create a self-sustaining resort complex on the 375-acre Deer Island. Oberholtzer proposed to keep the shoreline timber intact to preserve the natural appearance of the island from the water, open clearings in the center of the island for sheep farming, and construct cabins and campsites in the forest around the perimeter of the island with views of the lake for leased to paying guests for summer recreational use. "This was the largest operation that I'd been given scot-free permission to plan," said Ober. "Of course I kept Mr. Hapgood informed. We decided we would take the interior of the island and gradually clear it where it had good soil and carry on a farm operation there and raise sheep. We were going to keep the outside of the island wild, with summer cabins along the shores."⁵⁴

In 1920, Oberholtzer's management position in the development of Deer Island had evolved into a partnership in Hapgood's Deer island real estate development venture, including attorney John Brown as a third partner. By 1922, a reversal in Hapgood's business fortune from the Columbia Conserve Company, of Indianapolis, Indiana, led the partnership to dissolving. The partners hung onto the venture for a while longer, but the business faded in the 1930s. Oberholtzer's investment capital in the project was his sweat equity. He had not taken monetary return from the venture and for the settlement of his share of equity, took ownership of three small islands (Crow, Mallard, and Hawk) in the "so-called" Japanese group of islands adjacent to Deer Island. He also received Sand Point Island in Canada and parcels around Bancroft Bay.

Failure of the Deer Island enterprise was only one of Oberholtzer's concerns at that time. The larger issue was that the recreational potential of the whole Rainy Lake watershed was at stake. Oberholtzer had committed most of the prior

⁵⁴ Joe Paddock, *Keeper of the Wild: The Life of Ernest Oberholtzer*. (Minneapolis Minnesota Historical Society, 2001): 136.

decade to building up his outdoor recreation business and he was too far involved in it not to worry about the loss of the natural resources upon which his future success was dependent. "Only a start had been made," said Oberholtzer, "however, when the startling word came of a plan for wholesale exploitation of the timber and water resources indicating destruction of the area for all other purposes, particularly for such interests of mine. Permission was sought to extend the power development already installed at the outlet of Rainy Lake to all the main lakes of the watershed, raising them to new elevations, diverting rivers, and in the process, of course, swamping the shorelines, islands, waterfalls and rapids that had few peers for beauty and health in the world."

Through common use from time immemorial, Oberholtzer shared the view that all of all Rainy Lake belonged to the Ojibwa and to anyone else who would love it. He feared the vast mirror of its wilderness would be shattered into a thousand irregular cracks as men seeking retreat fenced off their private favorite corners. People who had fled from farms and small towns and had gone to the cities to get rich came here, trying to buy back a tranquility their wealth had cost them. Oberholtzer saw his wilderness become a watering-spot, saw trading posts grow into resorts, and the best campsites made into tennis courts or gardens. He heard the weird crystal wail of the loon silenced by the weird alcoholic wails of city loons, penetrating the silent reaches from aboard their polished yachts and speedboats and laughing as the stern swell of their vessels overtook a frightened, fleeing canoe.⁵⁵

Even Oberholtzer after years of camping on various islands during summers, claimed a piece of rock outcrop in Rainy Lake for his own domicile. "On a moonlight night he beached his canoe on the mallard, rolled himself up into a blanket and lay brooding. 'It's going fast,' he sighed. 'I could move on,' but faced with a truth which all pioneers must face: pioneers don't stay pioneers. They pioneer; then they become a part of the earth they plow, the sailor a part of the sea. That night on the Mallard Oberholtzer realized he was too much a part of Rainy Lake to move on like the stock-brokers and railroad magnates, so he bought with dollars a fragment of the mirror to hold as his own. The fragment was the Mallard."⁵⁶

Oberholtzer began the development of Mallard Island by constructing several buildings, utilizing wood and stone materials from the natural landscape. "Year by year the Mallard grew, and friends journeyed there to appraise each completed project. Building became a major operation."⁵⁷

Edith Rylander recalled her first impressions of Mallard Island. "I looked at the

⁵⁵ Editor. "Atisokan: His Rainy Lake," The Rainy Lake Chronicle, September 24, 1978: 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Editor. "Atisokan: His Rainy Lake, 3" The Rainy Lake Chronicle, October 8, 1978: 5.

sheer physical beauty of the place, and there was the man who had seen this beauty and preserved it. I looked at the many island buildings and saw another Ober, the man who so carefully sited these buildings, designed and directed the building of them.”⁵⁸

Oberholtzer constructed the buildings and structures on Mallard Island over a fifty-year period to meet his personal needs, as well as to provide working spaces for his conservation efforts and to accommodate his many visitors, among them were friends, family, colleagues and government officials. Ultimately, he developed a storybook village of picturesque structures spread out across the island, all connected with footpaths. Many of the buildings are imaginative vernacular designs utilizing unpeeled, split cedar log siding in horizontal and vertical patterns, and local stone in course patterns. “All the buildings are of local material in the character of the county,” noted Oberholtzer, “and fit attractively into the landscape.”⁵⁹

Over the passing years, Oberholtzer remained deeply interested in and affectionate toward the Ojibwe Indians of the border lakes, particularly Bill Magee's family and other residents of the Mine Centre area. He frequently visited their camps and they regularly stopped at The Mallard. Oberholtzer spoke fluent Ojibwe and was a spirited learner of the culture. He was initiated into the Ojibwe Grand Medicine Society because of his long association with the tribe and his dedication to their language, legends, and spirituality. The Ojibwe named him "Atisokan," meaning "Storyteller".⁶⁰ As Oberholtzer searched Rainy Lake absorbing the beauties of wilderness and searching for the secrets of nature, he befriended the aboriginal Ojibwe and learned their language and legends.⁶¹

As a landscape architect, Oberholtzer embraced the values of encouraging natural vegetation to grow on the island. He liked to tell the story about a grain merchant that visited him there, who complained that Oberholtzer was living on a rock that could not produce grain for commercial profit. Seeing the value of the natural landscape, Oberholtzer replied by telling the story of a young man and a grain merchant. “Is there a lawn to be mowed on our island?” asked the young man. Oberholtzer replied by saying, “A grain merchant visited his island once, and after walking around it, growled, ‘I wouldn’t live on this damned rock heap for all the money in the world.’ The trouble with you, Oberholtzer replied, “is that you are a grain man. You judge the Mallard by how much grain it would grow. If you were fond of blueberries, you would call it the promised land!”

⁵⁸ Edith Rylander, “All the Different Obers,” Oberholtzer Foundation Newsletter 8 (1994).

⁵⁹ Rolf T. Anderson. Oberholtzer Historic District, Koochiching County, MN, National Registry of Historic Places Nomination, June 6, 2000: Section 7:2.

⁶⁰ Oberholtzer Foundation, Timeline.

⁶¹ R. Newell Searle. Saving Quetico-Superior: A Land Set Apart. (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977):59.

Mallard Island is an idyllic spot where little boys didn't have to shove big lawnmowers for a slave allowance of twenty-five cents a week.⁶²

Oberholtzer was part of a larger group on Rainy Lake that was seeking to blend culture with the rustic lifestyle. Chicago photographer and poet Juan Fugita developed the four-acre Wendt Island west of Brule Narrows near Kampton Channel into a "setting suggestive of the Japanese countryside." The cabin is a simple construction of natural wood and stone. Its deliberate rusticity is in deference to the natural landscape, influenced by Japanese tradition.⁶³ Rainer pioneer Harry Erickson, Sr., built the rustic native-rubble fireplace of Fugita's cabin.

Most of northern Minnesota recreational cabins were "unpretentious" structures. Their builders were thrifty in selecting building materials. They would move a second-hand building over the ice to the building site and assemble a "hodge-podge" structure from the pieces.⁶⁴ Others accomplished an artistic result by fine artisanship using simple materials of wood and stone, such as the Dr. Adolph Levine ca. 1930s cabin on Kabetogama Lake with massive rock foundations and chimneys and finely crafted logs above. Simplicity ruled in most recreational constructions. The celebrated character of the northern lakes is its primeval character. Nature is unadorned, soothing, restful, wooing, unconventional, and not artificial.⁶⁵

Oberholtzer's main house is an artistic creation built of natural wood and stone. It sits snugly on a south facing rock outcropping below the highest point of the island. The upper level of the three story house rests directly on the rock outcropping. Each of the two stories below opens onto terraces, porches and balconies.⁶⁶

The Lenanders were cattle rancher from Iowa and homesteaded on Rainy Lake in 1909. The island conveys feelings of the family's long-term occupation with a 26' x 34' log home of four rooms and a screened porch on 2 sides, a 12' by 14'

⁶² Editor. "Atisokan: His Rainy Lake," *The Rainy Lake Chronicle*, September 2, 1978: 5.

R. Newell Searle. *Saving Quetico-Superior: A Land Set Apart*. (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977):59.

⁶³ National Park Service. *Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s*. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p35.

⁶⁴ Paul Clifford Larson. *A Place at the Lake*. (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 1998):124.

⁶⁵ Paul Clifford Larson. *A Place at the Lake*. (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 1998):138.

⁶⁶ Paul Clifford Larson. *A Place at the Lake*. (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 1998):141-142.

foot guest cabin, a privy, and a 15' by 20' storage shed.⁶⁷ Carl Leander built the Junior Island cabin for his son. “Leander may have been influenced by the designs of public facilities at Yellowstone or Glacier National Parks, as reflected in the large exterior fieldstone chimney and innovative detailing. The 1929 cabin design integrates the organic appearance and rustic style that exemplifies National Park Service Rustic architecture in the 1930s.⁶⁸

The Ellsworth Rock Gardens on the north shore of Namakan Lake occupies the site of an earlier lumber camp, which occupied the site of an earlier Indian camp. Jack Ellsworth constructed rock retaining walls within the folds of the granite bedrock outcropping to create an extensive terraced garden.

The Monroe cabin constructed about 1924 on Namakan Lake was “very picturesque” and occupied “a highly visible point on the lake.” In addition to the cabin, structures on the property included an icehouse, tool shed, boathouse with rail system, water tower, rock breakwater and rock retaining walls along the shoreline and extensive terraced flower and vegetable gardens and an irrigation sprinkler system.⁶⁹

Second-hand material salvaged from old buildings constructed many Depression-era seasonal cabins. Most tended to be a modest size and built of a variety of materials, including log, log veneer, clapboard or lap siding, wide cedar boards, and asphalt shingles.⁷⁰ Asphalt shingles is a very common roofing and wall covering material. For example, the Garrett cabin on Rainy Lake is an example of the local tradition of building with recycled material. The structure evolved with several small additions. Carl Peterson constructed the original part of the cabin in 1929, beginning with a twelve by sixteen foot room and stone fireplace. Subsequent additions resulted in six-room multi-level structure.⁷¹ When Garrett expanded the cabin, he built additions around trees to preserve the

⁶⁷ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p33.

⁶⁸ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p36.

⁶⁹ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p36.

⁷⁰ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p37.

⁷¹ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p39.

natural setting.⁷²

Stone fireplaces and chimneys are common features and many small cabins are nearly overwhelmed by a large stone fireplace.

There often are many structures on seasonal properties and often include a privy, floating or fixed crib dock, small dock house for storage, small sheds for tools and firewood, small building enclosing a generator or light plant, pump house or water tank, fuel tank, and some sites include a guest cabin and suana.⁷³ I.W. Steven's resort on Namakan Lake included all of these accessory structures.

The architecture and landscape planning of these early recreational facilities are significant and represent the evolution of tourism and recreation in northern Minnesota.⁷⁴ Oberholtzer assimilated the character of this local vernacular architecture and planning in to his development of Mallard Island.

Little by little, and year by year, Oberholtzer built upon Mallard Island, initially lightly as a camp. He paced its 1,300-foot length and studied the possibilities. "This spot would be damp," he understood. "Here a house would require cutting of a favorite spruce. Another spot was too conspicuous from the lake!"⁷⁵ At first, he moored a houseboat for himself and another one for his mother, along the shoreline of the calm bay on the island's western end. He built his first structure, the Japanese house, on the far western point of the island overhanging the bay and calm water. He came to know over time the complexities of the island intimately, and the particulars of the seasons, the views, the warm sunny warm places, the cool shady places, the directions and seasons of the breezes and storms, the currents of water around the island, the setting and rising of the moon and the sun and the constellations of night sky. Oberholtzer experienced Mallard Island as a Renaissance master landscape architect creating his villa.

Not every action produced successful results. Oberholtzer moved an old structure from Deer Island in 1921 and set it close to the shoreline as a beacon on the eastern point of the island. This eastern point is exposed to the wind and waves from a twenty-mile fetch across Rainy Lake. This point can be very windy and push waves over the shore. For example, the remains of an old boat dock are located here. The dock was useful on a clam day for unloading groceries, but

⁷² The Daily Journal. "Reflections of Rainy: A Borderland Collection," International Falls: Northstar Publishing, 2009: 22.

⁷³ National Park Service. Historic Context for Tourism and Recreational Development in the Minnesota Northern Border lakes from the 1880s through the 1950s. Midwest Regional Office and Voyageurs National Park, 1999, p35.

⁷⁴ The Daily Journal. "Reflections of Rainy: A Borderland Collection," International Falls: Northstar Publishing, 2009: 9-42.

⁷⁵ Editor. "Atisokan: His Rainy Lake 4," October 15, 1978: 5.

leaving a boat moored there risked it breaking up under the forces of wind and waves. The fluctuating lake level worsens problems. High water levels forces waves higher and farther onto the land.

C.J. Lenander was an early Rainy Lake landowner with a recreational camp on the Kabetogama Peninsula. He built an icehouse near the shore among the pines, which he estimated were at least forty years old and above the high water level. In mid-June of 1916 the lake rose two feet above normal basin elevation and Lenander's ice house floated away.⁷⁶ With no structures already built on Mallard Island, Oberholtzer apparently did not understand the dynamics of the lake level fluctuations when he erected the front house in the 1920s. Heavy rains in 1926 repeated the shoreline flooding that had occurred in 1919. The long fetch of waves from the east pushed water into the front house. Oberholtzer later moved the house away from the shoreline and raised it upon some rocks. The Public Works Department held the water level behind the Koochiching Falls right around 1108 “almost continuously from July of 1926 until the spring runoff of 1927.”⁷⁷ Evidence of new masonry courses laid above old sections of seawall along shoreline of Mallard Island indicate that the seawall was later raised to be above this high water level.

As Oberholtzer learned the lay of the land on the island, he moved his houseboats from the water and permanently onto land at the low center of the island between the large granite rock outcroppings at both ends of the island. The boats were raised onto the land and a cribbing foundation was constructed beneath them. The Cedar Bark Houseboat floor was set to low at elevation 1110.6 and the floor of the Kitchen Houseboat not much better at elevation 1110.9 feet. Flooding is an ongoing problem and particularly destructive in 1950 when the lake level rose to 1112.97, five feet higher than the authorized maximum,⁷⁸ leaving the houseboat floors under two feet of water. The front house floor was under a foot of water, and the toolshed floor was under almost four feet of water. The icehouse floor was two feet under water, and the Japanese house floor was under a foot and a half of water. The shoreline was flooded all around the island. The main house, root cellar and birdhouse were built after the flood of 1950 and Oberholtzer knew to build them at higher elevations.

The cultural landscape of Mallard Island is a palimpsest of the life of Ernest Carl Oberholtzer on Rainy Lake from the end of the pioneer era when he first set up a camp there in the early 1920s to 1967 when he departed the island at age 83.

⁷⁶ David L. Fritz and Lawrence F. Van Horn. Historic Resource Study, Water-Level Regulation, Commercial Fishing, Logging, Dawson Trail, Gold Mining: Themes Associated with Voyageurs National Park, Minnesota. Denver Service Center, Midwest/Rocky Mountain Team, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, Denver, Colorado. October 18, 2002:65.

⁷⁷ Ibid: 109.

⁷⁸ Ibid: 132.

The cultural landscape of Mallard Island is remarkably intact. The Oberholtzer Foundations continues to maintain the island resources and host small groups during summers as a continuation of Ober's Wilderness University. There is so much more to say about Mallard Island that it deserves the long-form Historic American Landscapes Survey. I worked two years on this project and to do more is run out. Keeper of the Wild : The Life of Earnest Oberholtzer by Joe Paddock is a good contemporary source of reference on Ernest Oberholtzer.

I give special recognition to the Oberholtzer Foundation, especially Diane Tessari who gave my first tour of Mallard Island, Beth Waterhouse for hosting me, Bob and Mary Hilke for befriending me and sharing their personal accounts of Ober and Mallard Island, as well as Jean Replinger, Elaine Thrune, Robin Monahan, Charles and Gene E. Kelly. I dedicate this report to Mary Hilke. Barb Craig first told me about Mallard Island and Tara Nelson set up my first visit. I have enjoyed making the many acquaintances and friends through sharing the stories of Mallard Island.

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Figure 1: Main house. View looking southeast. (David Driapsa, 2011).



Figure 2: Main house. View looking east. (David Driapsa, 2011).



Figure 3: Root house. View looking northwest. (David Driapsa, 2011).



Figure 4: Front house. View looking east. (David Driapsa, 2011).



Figure 5: Cook's house. View looking southwest. (David Driapsa, 2011).



Figure 6: Terrace, located southeast end of island. View looking east. (David Driapsa, 2011).



Figure 7: Japanese cabin, located western end of island. View looking west. (David Driapsa, 2011).

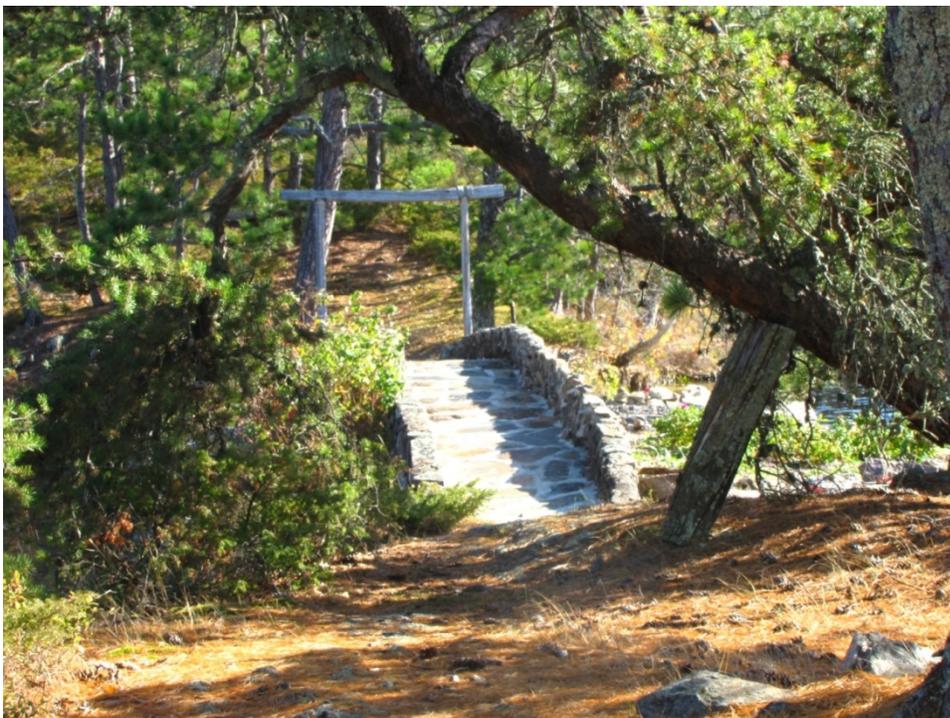


Figure 8: Bridge and torii. View looking east from Japanese island. (David Driapsa, 2011).



Figure 9: Japanese island. View looking southeast. (David Driapsa, 2011).



Figure 10: Path. View looking east. (David Driapsa, 2011).