

# RICH IN Beauty

Winona businessman **JOHN LATSCH** loved nature so much that he bought some—and gave it to the people.

BY C.B. Bylander

Have you ever wanted to get back at a bully?

Or to be so rich you could buy whatever you want?

What if you did both, and it inspired a national movement, a movement so powerful it prompted an act of Congress to set aside millions of acres of land for wildlife and outdoor recreation? Wouldn't that be cool?

Well, that is the story of John A. Latsch, a Minnesotan whose unusual revenge of 110 years ago did just that and put some of southeastern Minnesota's most beautiful places in the hands of its people.

This millionaire businessman loved nature so much that he bought and donated land to create parks and natural areas. River valleys, forests, scenic bluffs, and entire city blocks became ball fields, parks, state parks, and other places where children could play, animals could live, and trees could grow.

ILLUSTRATIONS by Bill Reynolds



## ANGRY Encounter

This extraordinary story takes place in and around Winona, a southeastern Minnesota city nestled between towering limestone bluffs and the Mississippi River.

Latsch worked long hours Monday through Friday in the grocery supply business, and he looked forward to being outdoors on weekends. That's when he could explore the Mississippi River in his canoe. He would camp, fish, and relax on a sandbar with a jug of buttermilk and the newspapers he hadn't had time to read.

One weekend in June 1907, Latsch headed out on one of his getaways. He paddled upstream on the river, then suddenly got caught in a drenching rainstorm. Wanting to get off the water until the storm passed, he headed for shore and took shelter beneath his overturned canoe in the bottomlands, the low-lying land along the river.

Soon, though, the farmer who owned the land stormed up to Latsch and angrily ordered him off his property. Threatened by the man and his barking dog—and possibly a shot-

gun, according to some accounts—Latsch was forced back onto the river in the wind and rain. He was shaken. He felt wronged. He fixed to do right.

Latsch summoned Frank Fugina, his friend and business agent, to deliver an urgent order of his own. Latsch told Fugina to buy the farmer's property and to keep buying land, especially up and down the river from Winona. Latsch viewed the river corridor as one of America's great public playgrounds. It's where birds flew, fish swam, and adventure was but a canoe stroke away. He couldn't imagine people being told to stay away.

Fugina did as he was told. Before long Latsch owned much of the land between Minnesota's Mississippi River towns of Minneiska and Homer, a distance of about 20 miles. He also owned thousands of acres of land on the Wisconsin side of the river from Alma to Trempealeau, a similar distance in length. Latsch reserved these lands for all who wanted to enjoy them. Never again would a paddler, picnicker, or berry picker have to put up with the grief he had taken.





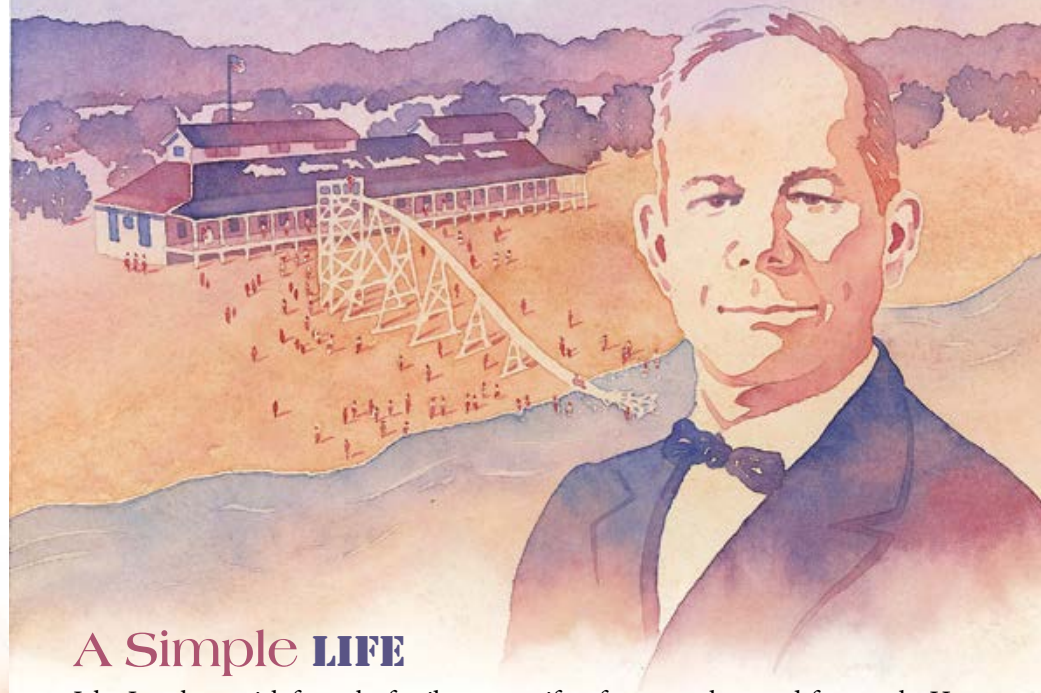
## ONE MAN, Many Parks

Latsch's dream of preserving land for current and future generations was not unique. Many of America's and Minnesota's great natural treasures, including Yellowstone National Park and Itasca State Park, were preserved during his lifetime. Still, most land preservation was being done by state and national governments. Latsch was doing this by himself, and in a big way.

Latsch bought and donated land that would later become part of the Upper Mis-

issippi State Park was purchased by Latsch. The park named after him features three eye-catching bluffs called Mount Faith, Mount Hope, and Mount Charity. They overlook the site where Latsch and the farmer had their life-changing faceoff.

Latsch gave land to the city of Winona too. Bluffside Park, Prairie Island, Westfield Golf Course, Athletic Park, Gabrych Park, and Aghaming Park are all Latsch purchases. These donations



## A Simple LIFE

John Latsch was rich from the family grocery business he inherited, but he didn't act like it. As a millionaire without a wife or children, he could have traveled the world and roamed about in a lavish mansion. Instead, he lived simply. He never owned a car and rarely rode in one. His house was modest, and mostly he lived in just two rooms.

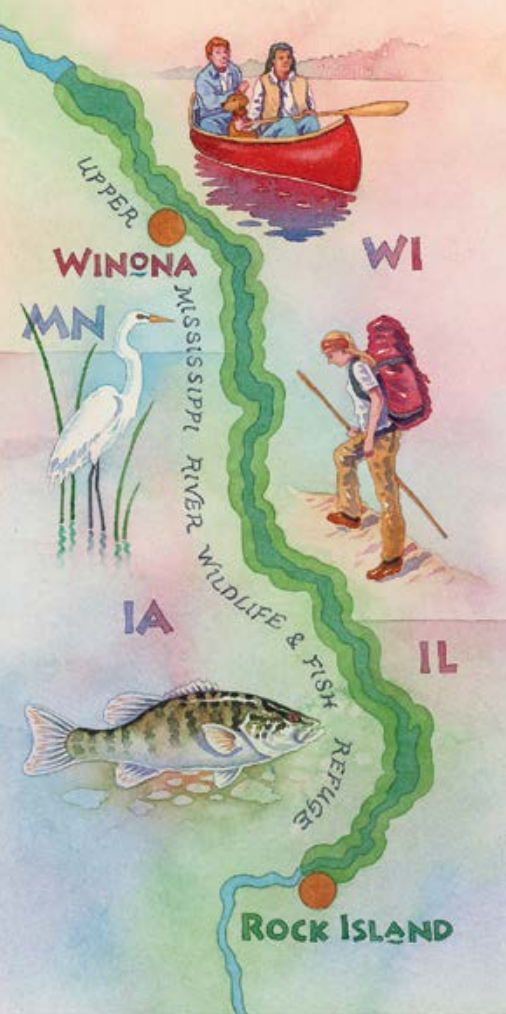
Latsch's generous land donations came with few or no conditions. He wasn't a "what's in it for me?" kind of guy. When he donated land to Whitewater State Park, he stated it "may be exchanged for other lands deemed more suitable if the state desires." This means he trusted others to make wise decisions on his behalf.

Ultimately, Latsch's donations were the

gifts of a man who cared for people. He loved the outdoors, and he wanted others to enjoy it. And he wanted children, especially those who like him were drawn to the river, to have a safe place to swim. Twice he donated large amounts of money to the city so it could provide a beach, a massive bathhouse, and lifeguards. He did this because too often children would drown at unsupervised swimming holes along the river, and this greatly saddened him.

Latsch did not make his donations to become famous or get attention. In fact, very few photographs of him even exist. He donated land valued at \$2 million in the 1930s, which would amount to more than \$36 million today—and sought no recognition at all.





## INSPIRING Action

Though Latsch didn't seek news headlines, he earned them anyway. Among those who learned of Latsch's many donations was Will Dilg, a Chicago man who frequently fished for smallmouth bass in the Winona area. Dilg was the founder and first president of the Izaak Walton League, an environmental organization.

This group of outdoorsy guys wanted to make sure good fishing would continue for generations, and they were especially concerned about a plan to dike and drain 20,000 acres of river bottomland near McGregor, Iowa, so it could be converted to cropland. This was the first step in an overall plan to dike and drain roughly 300 miles of Mississippi River bottomland.

It was time to halt such destruction, Dilg and his followers declared. But how?

Dilg had the answer. "Get the government to do like that man Latsch did at Winona," he said. "Turn the whole bottomlands into a great bass refuge."

So that's what they set to do. Dilg went to Washington, D.C., to meet with politicians and President Calvin Coolidge, spearheading a drive that resulted in the U.S. Congress signing the 1924 Federal Wildlife and Fish Refuge Act. This act allowed the federal government to purchase thousands of acres of Mississippi River bottomland from Lake Pepin—a mile-wide spot in the Mississippi River above Wabasha—down to Rock Island, Illinois.

Today, the Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge is one of the largest blocks of floodplain habitat in the lower 48 states. The refuge covers more than 240,000 acres and is 261 miles long. Hunters, anglers, paddlers, hikers, bird-watchers, and many other people enjoy the woods, waters, and wildlife of this beautiful area.




## LATSCH'S Legacy

Today, more than 80 years after his death in 1934, Latsch is still fondly remembered in Winona. Last winter a film about his life premiered to an overflow crowd at a Winona film festival. People so enjoyed the movie that it won the People's Choice Award among 81 films.

A dramatic sculpture that honors Latsch was recently created by Winona artist Lynette Power. Her work depicts Latsch lugging his canoe back to the river as he shields his face from rain. Many

people hope that someday a larger version of this sculpture will be put in a Winona city park.

The Latsch legacy also lives on in Mike Kennedy, a Winona history buff, who presents fact-filled talks about Latsch, who once declared, "I made all my money in Winona, and I am going to leave it here for the benefit of all of the people of the area."

Latsch did just that. We are his heirs. Future generations will receive his inheritance, too. 

### TEACHERS RESOURCES

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