

Documenting Minnesota's Agricultural Heritage

The Nansen Historic District

A decade ago, the arrival of the National Register Bulletin on rural historic landscapes at the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) created some concern. Up to that point, Minnesota's vast agricultural heritage showed up on the National Register as a scattering of agricultural building complexes along with some mills and elevators and processing facilities. As one of the state's primary cultural activities, agriculture was seriously under-represented. The bulletin called the question.

But where to start, given the complexity and breadth of the story of farming? A new emphasis in planning for the state's primary growth corridor, 150 miles from St. Cloud through the Twin Cities to Rochester—along with a special state appropriation from the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources—brought focus to the issue. Two goals emerged: to locate and document a historic agricultural district of good integrity and to work with public and private interests to chart ways to help preserve that district within the context of overall land-use planning frameworks.

Working with consultants from Mead and Hunt, the Minnesota SHPO conducted a reconnaissance survey of the growth corridor and identified four study areas. These were areas that informants described as “unspoiled,” “lacking significant urban development,” “scenic,” or “featuring a long history of farming as the predominant activity.” Immediately, the National Register Bulletin's guidelines on landscape characteristics and integrity came into play to help distinguish a historic agricultural district within the larger category of farming areas that had simply escaped urban encroachment.

Three of the study areas, while still essentially rural in character, were found to have undergone tremendous change in patterns of spatial organization, circulation networks, boundaries, vegetation, buildings, and other factors, often due to changes in agricultural practices themselves.¹

The fourth study area, located mid-way between the Twin Cities and Rochester in the Sogn Valley, was chosen for detailed documentation and analysis. An intensive survey of about three dozen farms confirmed a high degree of retention in field patterns, buildings, and other components. The evaluation of the survey data concluded that the area met National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) criteria as a historic district.

At this point, a linear approach to the historic preservation process might have called for nominating the district to the Register, and then following up the nomination process with a plan for appropriate treatment. Instead, the formulation of a treatment plan for the area immediately followed the evaluation of eligibility. Although the draft NRHP form was also prepared immediately after evaluation, the public process of nomination and listing was delayed and was incorporated as one of the potential treatment activities in the plan.

The siting of buildings like the barn on the Anders Erickson Haugen Farm responds to the rolling nature of the topography of the district.





Roads, tree lines, field configurations, buildings, and structures (P. O. Underdahl Farm), and topography all contribute to the patterns of spatial organization in the Nansen Agricultural Historic District.

Working with residents and with several public agencies and private organizations, BRW, Inc. planning consultants developed a historic preservation strategy with three general goals: Education and Recognition, Stewardship and Incentives, and Land Management.² Twenty recommended actions were included under these goals. One of the recommended actions (#2 under Education and Recognition) was National Register listing. This approach of treating the nomination process as a treatment activity brought several benefits:

1. The process of developing the planning strategy moved concurrently with the assembly of data for the National Register form, rather than following it. The district's defining historical characteristics that were being documented as part of the draft nomination form could help focus the plan. Conversely, the planning needs could influence questions of format and content in the draft nomination form. For example, the mapping format used in the nomination form grew out of the planning discussions.
2. The public workshops held as part of the planning process could include a discussion of the National Register as a prelude to listing. When historic districts are proposed for possible nomination, it is not uncommon for there to be considerable concern among property owners, local agencies, and others about the long-term implications of having a property listed. The planning workshops were a good opportunity to provide details about what National Register listing means (and doesn't mean), and about how the listing relates to other programs. It also provided a number of opportunities over several months to discuss the listing process with interested parties.

3. The educational and recognition value of the nomination process itself could be emphasized. The newspaper articles that usually appear at the time of a State Review Board meeting, and the board meeting itself, are often underutilized opportunities to tell the story of a historic district to new audiences. And the review and listing of properties by the Keeper of the National Register adds another level of recognition.

The other 19 actions in the plan included interpretation, oral histories, grants, easement programs, re-use studies, and better integration of cultural resource issues in existing land-use programs. Many of these activities are long term by nature, and they will rely on the initiative of a wide variety of players.

Following completion of the plan, the SHPO initiated the nomination process as one step toward plan implementation. Although there were still some objections to the potential listing of the district, the relationships that had been built through the survey and the planning process ensured a much higher level of understanding of the National Register program. Even the name of the district had changed as a result of planning discussions. Initially called the Sogn Valley Historic District, local residents pointed out that the Sogn Valley was a much larger area than the proposed district, and that historic activities in the district had really been focused on the hamlet of Nansen, named for explorer Fridtjof Nansen by the area's Norwegian settlers. The review board approved the Nansen Agricultural Historic District on March 21, 2000, and the Keeper subsequently listed it on the National Register November 15, 2000.

To date, some of the plan's other recommendations have been initiated, including interviews with three residents by the Minnesota Historical Society Oral History Office. Other recommended actions await further consideration by the various players identified in the process. The long-range outcome—whether this area's historical character will survive—is certainly not clear at this point.³

Yet, for the many residents who have long valued and appreciated the qualities of the area, the National Register has added a significant element to the push-and-pull of forces that will shape the Sogn Valley's future. The National Register Bulletin set forth the viability of the rural historic district concept; the National

Register documentation on the district's barns, fields, wood lots, roads, and other features focused perceptions and planning discussions; the National Register evaluation highlighted the distinctive nature of the historical continuity in this district, as compared to many other farming areas; and the National Register listing brought recognition and appreciation of the district as an important historic environment. Although the historic district's future is far from guaranteed, an important new dimension will be present as that course unfolds.

Notes

- ¹ Mead & Hunt, "Minnesota's Historic Agricultural Landscapes: Phase I Report," State Historic Preservation Office, St. Paul, 1997; Mead & Hunt, "Minnesota's Historical Agricultural Landscapes:

Phase II Report," State Historic Preservation Office, St. Paul, 1998.

- ² Sluss, Jackie, et al., *Managing a Working Landscape: A Protection Strategy for the Nansen Agricultural Historic District, Goodhue County, Minnesota* (St. Paul: State Historic Preservation Office, 1999).
- ³ The Minnesota SHPO also produced a manual on agricultural historic landscapes for statewide use. See: Sluss, Jackie, et al., *Preserving Minnesota: Inventorying, Managing and Preserving Agricultural Historic Landscapes in Minnesota* (St. Paul: State Historic Preservation Office, 1999).

Dennis Gimmestad is Government Programs and Compliance Officer, Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Photos by Mead & Hunt, courtesy the Minnesota Historical Society.

Erika Martin Seibert

Multiple Property Documentation for Planning and Interpreting Archeological Resources

Multiple Property Submissions (MPS) is an under-used nomination format that provides valuable contexts for current historical and archeological research and for public outreach opportunities such as inclusion in National Register educational programs like Teaching with Historic Places lesson plans and the National Register travel itineraries.¹ These documents may be used as frameworks for documentation, assessment, education, and eligibility decisions. They encompass a broad range of topics and themes. Currently, there are 175 MPS nominations for archeological properties from 39 states in our files.²

Archeological sites, and the research that takes place on them, often provide a different perspective on the past than do other types of properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Although it could be argued that most places listed in the Register are examples of material culture, archeological materials supply detailed information on the daily lives and activi-

ties of past peoples and cultures. Examining issues such as diet, health, tool making, settlement patterns, and consumer behavior through patterns in the archeological record allows us a more complete window into the past and a broader perspective on our social and cultural history.

Although archeology is an important part of the historic preservation framework, it is often overlooked because the nature of the archeological record is such that much of this information is buried or invisible to the untrained eye. Archeological sites often do not visually convey their significance; rather, someone familiar with the discipline must articulate what types of important information those invisible deposits might yield. There are many reasons that archeological properties continue to be the most under-represented property type in the National Register of Historic Places, but their invisibility contributes to the dearth of significant sites on this important list.