

From Soo Line to Soo Line

In 2014, Minnesota had just over 4400 miles of rail lines crisscrossing the state. The map at right showing those lines is from the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Fifty years prior, that number of track miles was almost double. At its height, there were over 9000 miles of track tucked into nearly every corner around the state.

Beginning in about 1965, rail companies began to scale back. A combination of declining service need, financial hardships, and consolidation within the industry accelerated the loss of miles.

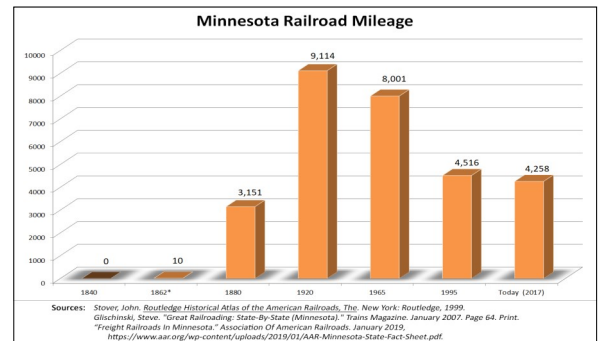
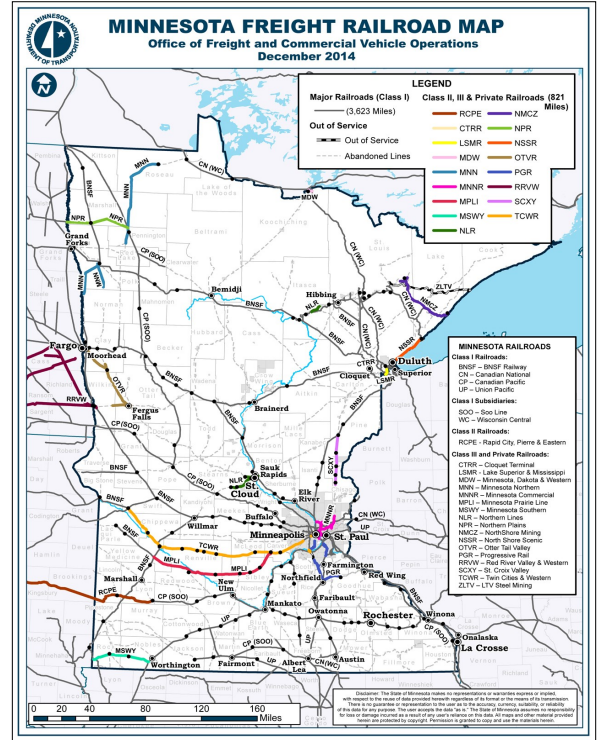
Many of the state's primary highways paralleled rail lines, which made sense as the roads were built where the towns already were -- along those railway lines. Now though if one travels the state, in many areas it is hard to tell there was ever a rail line there, even upon close examination.

There is one way to tell though. Because not all of those rail miles were lost to nature or private property ownership.

Minnesota became a leader in repurposing large sections of miles for another use – recreational trails.

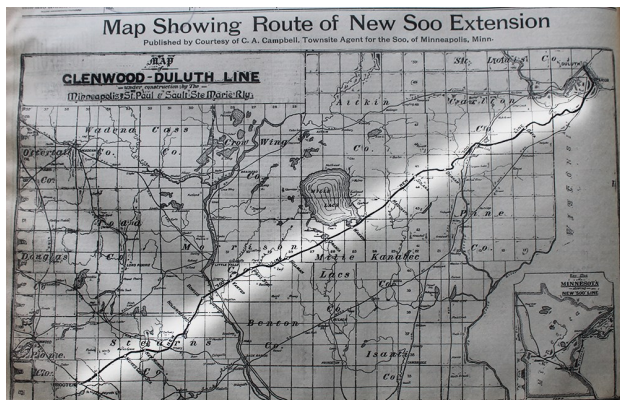
Of those over 4500 miles of track which were abandoned, 2100 of them – nearly half – were converted into trails.

Morrison County is home to 36 miles of those trails.



The First Soo Line

Originally chartered in 1883, the Minneapolis, Sault Ste. Marie and Atlantic Railway was formed like many rail companies, to serve agricultural interests. The line, commonly known as the "Soo Line" after the phonetic pronunciation of Sault, serviced countless ag communities across the Upper Midwest. Some of those included Morrison County.



In 1907, Soo Line announced it would construct a length of tracks from Glenwood to Duluth. That line, which originated in Brooten, allowing for a connection to an already existing Soo Line rail, would wend its way northeast, crossing through Stearns, Morrison, Mille Lacs, Aitkin, Pine, and Carlson Counties, and eventually via Saunders, Wisconsin, terminating at the Duluth Harbor for shipping.

That line, shown highlighted on the map above from the June 8, 1907, Little Falls Daily *Transcript*, opened in Fall 1908. While not heavily trafficked, the line served its function as a connection for grain elevators to ship their goods on the Great Lakes, along with passenger service for travelers.

The line also saw the incorporation of many new towns for station locations, including in Morrison County the communities of Bowlus, New Pierz -- now known as Genola, and Hillman.

In 1961 it officially became known as the Soo Line Railroad through a merger of Minneapolis, St. Paul and Sault Ste. Marie Railroad, the Wisconsin Central Railroad, and the Duluth, South Shore and Atlantic Railroad. This type of merger was not uncommon in railroads at the time.

Eventually, through a series of legal maneuvers too long to describe here, Soo Line became part of the Calgary, Alberta-based Canadian Pacific Railroad Company.

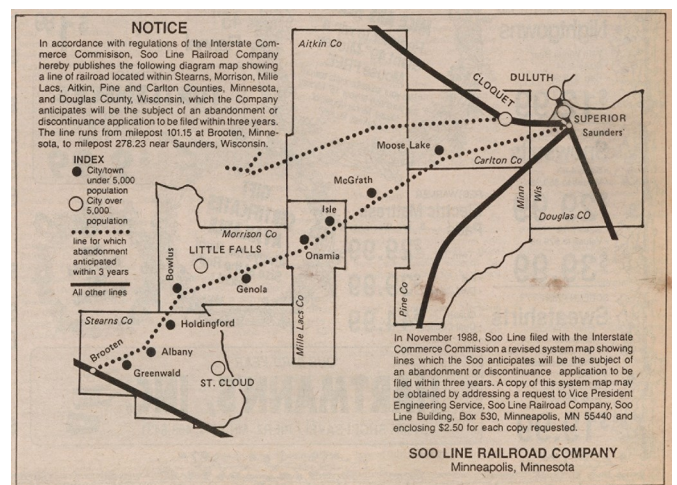
By the mid-1970s, like many railway companies, the Soo was experiencing financial difficulties.

And like many other railroads, by the early 1980s, Soo was looking to jettison track miles. The line which cut through Morrison County was on the list.

It should also be noted that Burlington Northern did much the same when it abandoned their line from Little Falls to International Falls, leaving behind only the spur which connects to Camp Ripley.

In November 1988, Soo Line officially filed with the Interstate Commerce Commission its intention to abandon the line constructed in 1907-08. The date of abandonment was not official, but this notification put all concerned on notice about the fate of the line.

Morrison County officials definitely took notice and began to act.



Morrison County Record, 28 November 1988

The Second Soo Line

In files donated by former county commissioner Faye Petron – who it should be noted has been the one and only woman to ever serve as a commissioner in Morrison County – there can be found correspondence and notifications about what options the county had at their disposal.

The one they chose to pursue was the creation of a Regional Rail Authority. This would allow for all the counties impacted by the pending abandonment to negotiate with Soo to purchase the rail bed for a trail.



In late 1989, Morrison County Commissioners did just that, voting unanimously to create a Rail Authority.

The intention of turning the line into a trail was not met with uniform support.

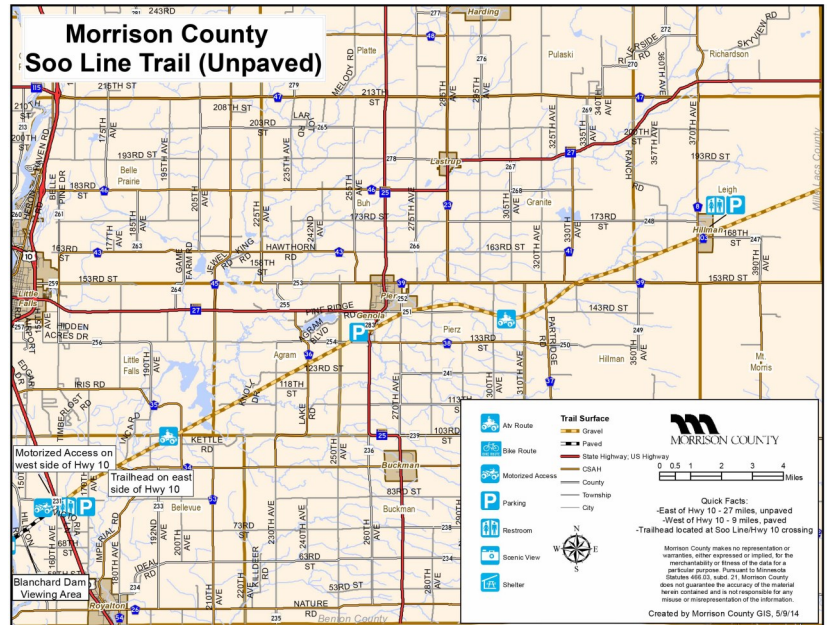
Much of the line cut through land used for ag purposes, and many landowners would have preferred the acreage be turned back to that and, in the words of one property owner, not have a recreational trail mere yards from their front door.

Morrison County Record, 8 January 1990

Supporters of the move noted that purchase of the line would allow for funding sources to be tapped which could help develop year-round recreational opportunities.

Developing the soon-to-be former rail bed into a trail was not without logistical challenges, most notably two bridges on the southern end of line – one which crosses over US Hwy 10 and what was at that time the Burlington Northern rail line, and one which crossed over the Mississippi River at Blanchard Dam.

It would take nearly a full decade from the abandonment of the tracks by Soo Line, then purchase by the Rail Authority, and finally conversion into a trail.



Maps of both sides of the Soo Line Trail. Paved section on the left, unpaved on the right. ([Minnesota Trails Magazine](#); Morrison County web site.)

Despite the challenges, the Soo Line Trail has become a huge attraction for those seeking recreation opportunities. A public parking lot on Highway 10 between Little Falls and Royalton provides ease of access to the trail, which runs 106.5 miles from end to end. While most of it is unpaved, two sections are, and the entire length is nearly level grade thanks to the skillful designers and builders of the rail line.



Signage of the Soo Line Trailhead access on US Highway 10 between Little Falls and Royalton.

Future plans include connections to the Camp Ripley Veterans State Trail and the Paul Bunyan State Trail, which was created from remnants of that abandoned Burlington Northern line from Little Falls to International Falls.

In the two decades since the trail's opening, its usage and enjoyment are immeasurable.

Thanks to Minnesota leading the way in the conversion of rails to trails and county government officials providing foresight in the matter, area residents, and indeed pretty much anyone who wishes to, can enjoy the scenic beauty of our section of the state.

Sources:

- *Little Falls Daily Transcript*, 8 June 1907
- *Morrison County Record*, 28 November 1988; 18 December 1989; 1 January 1990; 8 January 1990; 25 July 1999
- Soo Line Railroad file, MCHS Archives
- Petron, Faye; papers, MCHS Archives
- Minnesota Department of Transportation web site.
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources web site.
- Minnesota Trails Magazine.
- Glichinski, Steve. *Minnesota Railroads: A Photographic History, 1940–2012* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
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- Morrison County web site.
- *Soo Line Recreational Trail Master Plan*, Bolton & Menk, Inc., September 2017, MCHS Archives

This article is an expanded version of one published in the Spring 2023 edition of the MCHS Newsletter. It is not in any way intended to be a complete history of the Soo Line railroad or of the trail.

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