



Podcast 18 Transcript

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Francis J. Marschner

The Original Vegetation of Minnesota

The man who made this map, the extraordinary cartographer Francis J. Marschner, never visited Minnesota. For him, it was a virtual state, and the map that you see before you was created from data gathered almost 100 years before he made the map. Marschner is an Austrian born cartographer who studied at the Great Cartographic Institute in Berlin. He came to the United States and took a job in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. He read around 200 handwritten volumes of Minnesota survey field notes made by the public land surveyors between 1847 and 1907. Working from those observations, Marschner combined with them his interpretations of soil and climate data for the state's 2775 townships. He then was able to conceptualize patterns of vegetation that might have existed before agricultural settlement. Contemporary scholars have found some errors between the patterns he mapped and the patterns that actually exist on the landscape, but the overwhelming consensus is that the map is accurate, particularly in the southern part of the state, but less accurate in the northern part of the state where he had fewer materials to base his map upon. The map shows the state's three broad diagonal zones of vegetation: the prairie in the southwest, the mixed hardwoods in the central zone, and the pine forest in the northeast. Marschner's map is an excellent example of the cartographic craft or art. Sometimes the limited land surveys observations were generalized, but on reflection, we can see that Marschner's map is an excellent example of a cartographer's craft or art. His work with the survey, and his data on land qualities enabled him to create something where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. We know very little about why the map was made. At the time, he was working conservation and resource management. Questions that were coming to the front of many policy debates in the United States. Perhaps he had some special friend in St. Paul, but we really don't know. Only two copies of this map were made. One was sent to St. Paul; the other was kept in Washington D.C. After the Minnesota copy was lost, perhaps to a WWII paper drive, the Washington copy was sent to St. Paul in 1963, where it remained for ten years in a file drawer until it was redrafted in 1974, when this map was published. Marschner himself retired in 1952. He continued to walk seven miles each day to his office at the agriculture department. Already legendary for his accomplishments and diligence, he died in 1966 of a heart attack while walking across the capitol mall during a heavy snowstorm at the age of 83 on his way to work. Without family in the United States, he was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. Yet, his map stands as a testimony to one of the greatest cartographers ever to work in Minnesota.