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Stillwater runs deep

By Greg Sellnow

If you want a good idea of what a thriving city in Minnesota looked like in the 1880s, you could watch a movie like the Great Northfield Raid, starring Robert Duvall as Jesse James. Or, you could visit historic Stillwater.



Stillwater

Unlike Rochester, which has a small and dwindling number of buildings left over from the 19th century, Stillwater's Main Street still looks much the same as it did when Theodore Roosevelt was president.

Once a mighty lumber town, Stillwater has reinvented itself as a getaway destination, primarily for those who live in the Twin Cities, Rochester and other communities in southern Minnesota and western Wisconsin.

The mills are long gone, but dozens of opulent three- and four-story homes and sturdy brick business buildings constructed by the lumber barons remain. Many of the homes have been refashioned into bed and breakfasts. And former saloons and breweries are now restaurants, boutique clothing stores and antique shops.

Buildings were refurbished and retrofitted, dilapidated mansions were reborn as inns, and new, high-end retail businesses catering to tourists were born. Over the last half-century, Stillwater has won a reputation as one of southern Minnesota's most attractive destinations for day-trippers, antiques, and couples interested in a romantic weekend getaway.

The city has a lot to offer visitors year around. But we'd suggest going between Memorial Day and Labor Day, when all of the seasonal businesses, such as the riverboat dinner cruises, are open. Another good time to go is October, when the St. Croix River Valley, one of Minnesota's most gorgeous regions, explodes with fall colors.

History lesson

Stillwater, nestled along the lush, tree-covered bluffs of the St. Croix River Valley, calls itself the birthplace of Minnesota. It was the site of a planning convention that eventually led to the creation of the Minnesota Territory.

The community's population grew rapidly after territorial leaders designated Stillwater as the home of the region's first prison--one of three big prizes awarded by the territorial organizers. (St. Paul got the state capitol, and Minneapolis was awarded a university.)

In the 1870s and 1880s, Stillwater was one of the biggest lumber centers in the Midwest, due to its close access both to forests and waterways. Wealthy lumber executives made sure that it had all of the amenities of the larger cities, such as Boston and New York, where they had lived. They built magnificent homes, brought gas lighting to town, established telephone service and made sure that Stillwater was one of the first cities in the Upper Midwest to operate an electric railway.

The city also had six breweries, which used stone caves to cool their products, and more than three dozen saloons. But the lumber boom was short lived. By 1900, the dense forests were depleted and most of the mills had closed. By 1940, the city's population had shrunk from about 13,000 at the height of the lumber boom to about 7,000.

Some architectural examples

The former Isaac Staples Saw Mill is now home to the Stillwater Art Guild Gallery, a Chicago Hot Dogs restaurant, an antique store and the Supreme Bean coffee shop. The Commander Grain Elevator, the tallest building in town, is home to P.J. Asch outfitters, which has installed climbing walls inside the cavernous structure. The Grand Garage auto repair shop is occupied by a Starbucks. A former railroad warehouse is now patronized by customers of the Freight House restaurant. The Washington County Courthouse and jail, Minnesota's first courthouse, built in 1867, is now a museum. Constructed in an Italian style and fashioned in large part from native sandstone, it is one of Minnesota's most historically significant buildings.

The city's population dropped nearly in half after the lumber boom faded in the early 1900s. But Stillwater resurged after World War II, when the Twin Cities exploded in growth and surrounding suburbs began to spring up. City dwellers headed to quaint, scenic communities like Stillwater and Hastings to get away from the hectic pace of the city.

Where To Eat: The city has a wide variety of restaurants, ranging from casual and inexpensive (our favorite is **Leo's Grill and Malt Shop**, where the burgers are exquisite, the fries are homemade, and you can order a Fresca out of a glass bottle) to the upscale (I'd suggest **Savories**—try the garlic peppercorn steak). We'd also recommend **Luna Rossa Trattoria**. The Italian pasta dishes and pizza are excellent. But the restaurant is also built alongside a cave system formerly used to cool beer from the Joseph Wolf Brewery. The restaurant offers patrons tours of the cave for a small fee.

What Else To See: The Warden's House museum displays a variety of artifacts from the lumber boom. The **St. Croix Boat & Packet Co.**, offers river boat dinner cruises on the river. (Unfortunately, the once-popular Zephyr train, where you could get dinner in a passenger car while touring the St. Croix River Valley by rail, went out of business last summer.)

Getting There: Stillwater is about 90 miles north of Rochester on Minnesota Highway 36.

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