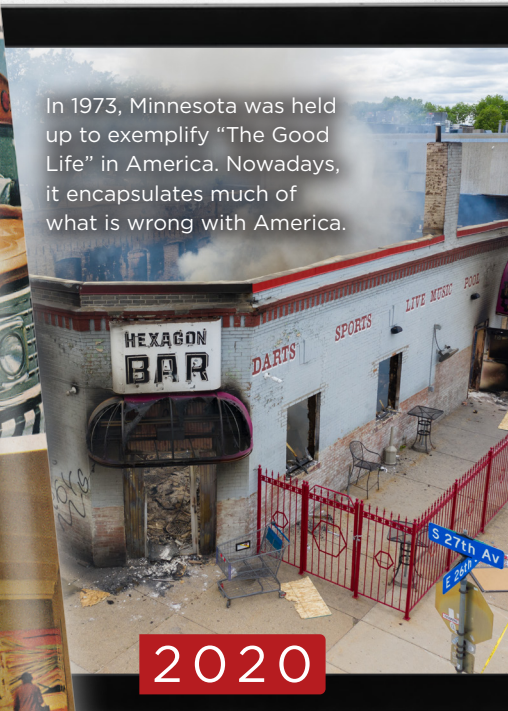




1973

In 1973, Minnesota was held up to exemplify "The Good Life" in America. Nowadays, it encapsulates much of what is wrong with America.



2020



HISTORY REVISITED

STATE OF OUR STATE

50 years after its *TIME* cover story, does Minnesota still work?

By John Phelan



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On the morning of Monday, August 13, 1973, *TIME* magazine hit newsstands across the United States. Cultural figures like Marlon Brando and Norman Mailer and statesmen such as Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev had recently graced the magazine's cover, but this week it featured a man in a plaid shirt standing in a boat in the middle of a lake holding up a fish. That man was Wendell Anderson, governor of Minnesota, and the headline ran: "The Good Life in Minnesota." Turning to page 24, readers found Lance Morrow's cover story: "Minnesota: A State That Works."

Fifty years on from that famous cover story, Minnesota is once again being held up as an example for the nation, but for very different reasons.

The Good Life

The year 1973 was a turbulent time in America. The social turmoil of the 1960s continued unabated, and the economy was weakening. America's involvement in Vietnam was ending in the

country's first defeat. The Supreme Court overturned state bans on abortion in its *Roe v. Wade* decision, sparking the "Culture Wars." The Watergate scandal was beginning to consume the Nixon presidency and in October, facing charges of tax evasion, Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned.

Judging by the movies they went to see, Americans were looking to escape this reality. The top 10 movies released that year included three nostalgia pieces: "The Sting," "American Graffiti," and "The Way We Were." Another slice of nostalgia, *The Waltons*, jumped from 19th to 2nd in the ratings behind *All in the Family* whose lead, Archie Bunker, encapsulated a growing feeling that things were getting worse.

But in his *TIME* article, Morrow argued that Americans looking for The Good Life in 1973 didn't need to go to the movie theater or Jefferson County, Va., they just had to go to Minnesota.

"On an August Saturday afternoon, the scene is a slice of America's Norman Rockwell past," he began.

Barefoot children play one old cat and race their wagons down gently sloping sidewalks. Under the overhanging oaks, their fathers labor with hand mowers and rakes. On one lawn up the street, a rummage sale is in progress. Station wagons, laden with children, groceries, dogs and camping equipment, and trailing boats, slide out of driveways, heading north for a week or two at the lake.

It could as well be Little Rock, Ark., or Great Bar-

ington, Mass., or Portland, Ore.,... But the setting is the north side of Minneapolis, in Minnesota, a state where the Rockwell vision pertains with a special consistency. If the American good life has anywhere survived in some intelligent equilibrium, it may be in Minnesota.

Morrow painted a seductive portrait of life in our state, where the "residual American secret still seems to operate. Some of the nation's more agreeable qualities are evident there: courtesy and fairness, honesty, a capacity for innovation, hard work, intellectual adventure and responsibility."

Minnesota combined urban amenities and rural idyll. "As downtown Minneapolis was deteriorating in the 1950s," Morrow wrote,

the Daytons elected to keep their huge department store there rather than move it to the suburbs. Cooperating with the city, they turned Nicollet Avenue into a shopping mall and built a system of skyways linking the buildings along the street. The project, spearheaded by Donald C. Dayton, 58, has stimulated more than \$200 million in new downtown construction, reversing the familiar urban pattern of decay and turning the area into a bright and active commercial district. The new 51-story IDS tower, designed by Philip Johnson, is the tallest and most distinguished building between Chicago and San Francisco.

Should you want a change of scenery, "Nature is close," Morrow noted, "20 minutes from a downtown Minneapolis office building to a country lake."

Minnesota's people were its great resource. "The citizens are well educated," Morrow reported, "the high school dropout rate, 7.6%,

is the nation's lowest."

They were *decent*, too. "Minnesotans are remarkably civil; their crime rate is the third lowest in the nation (after Iowa and Maine)," Morrow continued. He interviewed Arleen Kulis, who moved to Minnesota from Chicago: "At first, she did not like it: the winters were formidable; the people seemed a bit provincial. But then she began savoring the lack of traffic, the safety of the streets..." "No one ever bothers you on the streets," Ms. Kulis told him. "You listen to the news in the morning, and there aren't 20 million murders." Another interviewee, Jim Johnson, a former Princeton instructor who had recently returned to Minnesota, said: "You just don't have people barking at you when you're walking down the street or sitting in a restaurant."

Minnesotans were as decent in the corridors of power as they were in the streets of downtown Minneapolis. "Politics is almost unnaturally clean," Morrow wrote. "No patronage, virtually no corruption."

Together, land and people were the foundation for a strong economy. "The state harbors some of the nation's fastest-growing computer companies," Morrow noted, "Honeywell Inc.,

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Control Data Corp., Univac — along with a diversity of such other corporations as 3M Co., General Mills Inc., Geo. A. Hormel & Co., Pillsbury Co., and Investors Diversified Services Inc., one of the world’s largest mutual fund conglomerates.” This was one reason why “Minnesota has been attracting new population, notably from the neighboring Dakotas.”

There had been race riots in Minneapolis in the late 1960s, but now “...blacks are often among the state’s more enthusiastic boosters.” Gleason Glover, executive director of the Minneapolis Urban League, told Morrow:

For a black, Minneapolis is one of the truly outstanding cities in the U.S. to live in. The problems here — housing, education, discrimination, unemployment — are manageable... There just isn’t the real, deep-seated hatred here that blacks often encounter in other cities.

To round out the appeal, “the Twins, the North Stars and the Vikings have brought a state of natural participant sportsmen into the big leagues.” Indeed, Bud Grant’s Vikings were on the cusp of a season that would take them to the Super Bowl for the first of three visits in four seasons.

Another of Morrow’s interviewees was Chuck Ruhr, the 36-year-old owner of a Minneapolis ad agency and resident of White Bear Lake. “There is a little less of the bad things here,” Ruhr told him, “drugs, pollution. Being way up here, people have had a chance to see the crest of the wave coming and react to it. There’s an attitude, too, that we’ve got a nice little thing and let’s keep it that way.”

Fifty years on

Fifty years on, America is again going through turbulent times. But nobody, now, would offer Minnesota as an escape from America’s troubles. Indeed, nowadays, it frequently encapsulates them.

Minnesota can no longer point to a strong economy as a magnet for “attracting new population.” In each

year since 2014, Minnesota’s economy grew more slowly than that of the United States generally, and it is one of just 13 states that has not yet regained its peak of pre-COVID-19 employment. The corporate computing stars of 1973 are no more: Control Data Corp. and Univac no longer exist and Honeywell is now headquartered in North Carolina. Minnesota had 16 companies on the Fortune 500 list in 2022, but this was a legacy of the state that Morrow eulogized: Eight of these companies had been on the Fortune 500 in 2000 and another six had been on that year’s longer Fortune 1,000 list.

Indeed, our state is now *losing* record numbers of residents to other parts of

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America: a net 16,312 in 2021, the most since 1991, a record that stood for just one year until 19,400 fled in 2022. In 2020-2021, Minnesota lost residents, on net, in every single age category and in every income group above \$25k to \$50k annually. More headed to Florida than any other state.

Minnesotans are no longer as “well educated” as they were. The 2023 *U.S. News & World Report* “Best States Rankings” ranked our preK-12 22nd,



John Phelan is an economist at Center of the American Experiment. He is a graduate of Birkbeck College, University of London, where he earned a BSc in Economics and of the London School of Economics where he earned an MSc.

down from 8th as recently as 2017. Over the same period, our state dropped from 6th for reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to 18th and from 3rd to 8th for math. Minnesota’s students of color are particularly badly affected. Mississippi’s Hispanic 8th graders outperformed Minnesota’s Hispanic 8th graders in both reading and math, and Mississippi’s black 8th graders outperformed Minnesota’s black 8th graders in reading. The public schools’ shift in focus from education to indoctrination has hurt students of color most.

Figures like these are often blamed on the COVID-19 pandemic, though that just raises the question why it had such terrible impacts in Minnesota compared to other states. But the pandemic and the riots following the death of George Floyd didn’t so much start new trends as accelerate trends that were already underway.

With crime, for example, it is true that the 96 homicides Minneapolis saw in 2021 were the most since 1995 and that St. Paul set a new record with 40 in 2022. But the *Star Tribune* reported in September 2019 that robberies in downtown Minneapolis were up 54 percent compared with the same period in 2018 and that “the number of shootings in the surrounding First Precinct are up 22% from last year.” Minnesotans are not so “remarkably civil” as they were — indeed, Minnesota’s serious crime rate is now higher than the national average — but they have been getting that way for a while.

Few would now call downtown Minneapolis a “bright and active commercial district.” Businesses are fleeing — CBRE, Portico Benefit Services, and AT&T all in the space of just three weeks earlier this year — and there are now over 21.2 million square feet of vacant office space in the Twin Cities metro, with office vacancy rates up 12 percent year over year. Dayton’s department store closed in 2017 and the owners of the IDS Center, the gleaming wonder of 1973, can no longer pay the mortgage.

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pre-pandemic activity, only slightly better than Chicago and Detroit, and the city cracked a list of the top 10 nationwide that homebuyers want to flee.

Neither is nature as close as it was. Between 1982 and 2014, the amount of time the average driver spent stuck in traffic in the Twin Cities quadrupled, from 12 hours to 47 hours, and the metro went from being the 35th most congested urban area in the United States to 21st.

Neither would anyone seriously say that our “politics is almost unnaturally clean” anymore. In 2022, the Feeding Our Future scandal broke. This was the largest fraud in the United States stemming from payments made during the COVID-19 pandemic, involving \$445 million in federal money received by two networks of Minnesota nonprofits to provide free meals to children, much of which has never been accounted for and more than \$250 million of which was stolen. A number of those indicted made donations to DFL candidates, including Attorney General Keith Ellison.

And if Minnesotans are less decent in the streets of Minneapolis, they are also less decent in the corridors of power. During the last legislative session, the House DFL blacklisted a journalist for asking a question, a state rep accosted another on the floor, and a nominating convention in Minneapolis erupted into violence.

Most depressing of all, perhaps, race relations are, we are told, worse in 2023 than they were in 1973. In a stark shift

from Gleason Glover’s glowing tribute to Minneapolis, Professor Samuel Myers, Jr. of the University of Minnesota recently wrote that:

Minnesota is also putatively one of the worst places for blacks to live. Measured by racial gaps in unemployment rates, wage and salary incomes, incarceration rates, arrest rates, home ownership rates, mortgage lending rates, test scores, reported child maltreatment rates, school disciplinary and suspension rates, and even drowning rates, African Americans are worse off in Minnesota than they are in virtually every other state in the nation.

So bad, apparently, is the lot of Minnesota’s black residents that there is a name for it: “The Minnesota Paradox.”

Even those sports teams are no longer what they were. The Vikings haven’t made a Super Bowl since 1976 and the North Stars now play in Dallas.

Earlier this year, Fox 9 tracked down Chuck Ruhr to Scottsdale, Ariz. “At that time, in relation to the rest of the country, Minnesota was pretty atypical. Now compared to the rest of the country Minnesota is pretty typical, unfortunately,” he told reporters. “The average has come up, or we moved down.”

The Good Life, 2023

Even so, Minnesota is, once again, being held up as “The State That Works,” where The Good Life can be found.

In April, the *New York Times* reported on “a string of policy moves to the left after Democrats took full control of the Statehouse after nine years of divided government.” The same month, NBC News wrote that Minnesota is “attracting attention as a laboratory for how to effectively use that power to achieve progressive policy priorities.”

What priorities? NBC hailed “protecting abortion rights, legalizing recreational marijuana and restricting gun access — and they have signaled their plans to take on issues like expanding paid family leave and providing legal refuge to trans youths whose access to gender-affirming and other medical care has been restricted elsewhere.” When The Daily Beast celebrated “a wide range of progressive reforms” in Minnesota, it added “a bill

making 55,000 felons eligible to vote” and “a measure allowing undocumented immigrants to obtain a driver’s license.”

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The State That Works claim in 1973 rested on a thriving urban center, strong economy, low crime, clean politics, exceptional education, and winning sports franchises. In 2023, Minnesota can offer none of that, and the legislative “triumphs” heralded by the national media will do nothing to improve any of those.

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Last year, Morrow returned to The State That Worked, in print at least, concluding a column for *The Wall Street Journal* noting that:

The difference between my 1973 story and the news reports of 2022 amounts to the difference...between Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Tom gives you the boyish, innocent, sun-shot rendering of Hannibal, Mo.,...Huck’s story is the version of America that includes poverty, murder, alcoholism, child abuse, race prejudice, blood feud and imbecility.

These evils were present in America in 1973, but, then, Minnesota was a refuge from them. In 2023, it is Minnesotans who are seeking refuge elsewhere. ★