People from Willmar may be unaware that the county in which they live — Kandiyohi — means "where the buffalo fish come" in the Dakota language.

And some people from Mora may have no idea that the county in which they live — Kanabec — is the Ojibwe word for "snake."

Those are just a few of the derivations of the names of Minnesota's 87 counties — little-known facts that are largely overlooked in the bustle of ordinary life.

But those names are perhaps the best indicator of the patchwork quilt that is Minnesota. Each county has a distinct flavor all its own.

Minnesota's diversity isn't surprising given the state is the nation's 12th largest in size. But the regional differences, from the flat potato and sugar beet country of the Red River Valley in northwestern Minnesota to the dairy farms and hardwood forests of the southeast, and from the lush lake country of the northeast to the rich prairie lands in southwestern Minnesota, have been largely put aside since Minnesota became a state in 1858.

Just as the 50 United States are different, so, too, are the 87 counties of Minnesota. But there is clearly a united sense of Minnesota.

Fifteen county names came directly from the Dakota language, and 12 are derived from the Ojibwe language — the two principal American Indian groups in Minnesota. Fifty-two counties were named for early explorers, fur traders, Minnesota pioneers and prominent U.S. citizens.

Wilkin County, for example, was named for Col. Alexander Wilkin, who was shot and killed in the Civil War in 1864 during the battle at Tupelo, Miss.

Six more counties were named by pioneers for prominent geographic features of the area. Pine County, for example, was named for the abundant pine forests in the region.

If it's true that the most telling glimpses of a culture are revealed by studying what is most overlooked, then the following origins of county names should offer a brief sketch of the Minnesota character.

Aitkin County: Named for William Alexander Aitkin, a fur trader with the Ojibwe Indians, who married into an influential Indian family. Est. May 23, 1857.

Anoka County: Taken from the town of that name, which, in the Dakota language, means "the other side, or both sides." The town lies on both sides of the Rum River. Est. May 23, 1857.
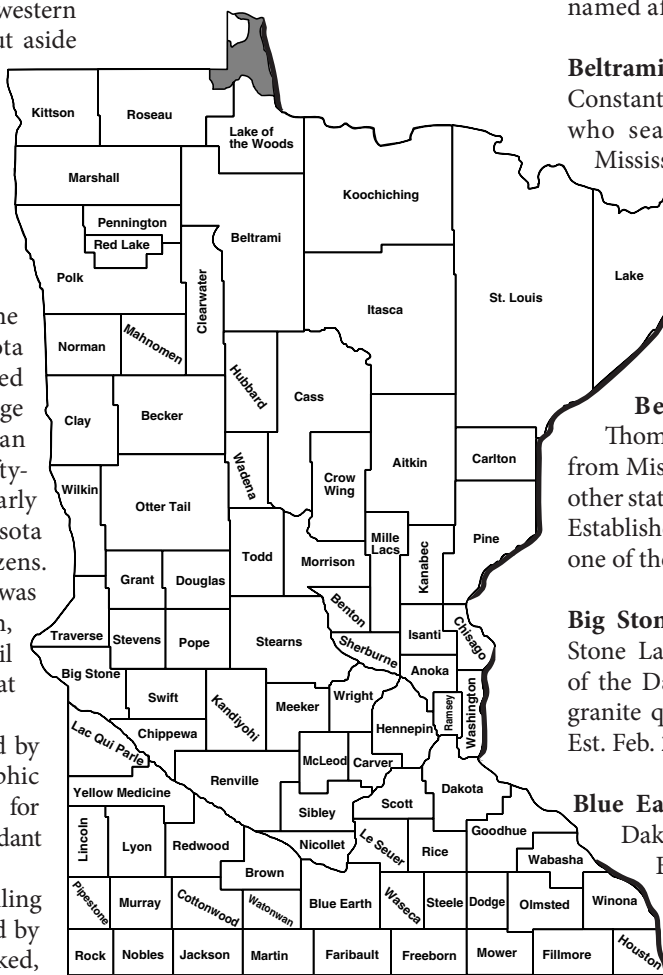
Becker County: Named for lawyer George Loomis Becker, one of three people elected to Congress in 1857. But upon gaining statehood, Minnesota was allotted only two House seats, and Becker lost the draw. His reward, in part, was having a county named after him. Est. March 18, 1858.

Beltrami County: Named for Giacomo Constantino Beltrami, an Italian explorer who searched for the source of the Mississippi River. Accused of plotting to establish an Italian republic, he was exiled and came to America. Est. Feb. 28, 1866.

Benton County: Named for Thomas Hart Benton, a U.S. senator from Missouri from 1821 to 1851. Seven other states have counties named for him. Established on Oct. 27, 1849, Benton is one of the earliest Minnesota counties.

Big Stone County: Derived from Big Stone Lake. The name is a translation of the Dakota term that alluded to the granite quarries at one end of the lake. Est. Feb. 20, 1862.

Blue Earth County: Taken from the Dakota name — Makato — for the Blue Earth River. "Maka" means earth, and "to" means blue or green. Est. March 5, 1853.

Kittson, Roseau, Lake of the Woods, Marshall, Pennington, Red Lake, Koochiching, Polk, Clearwater, Beltrami, Cook, Norman, Mahnomen, Hubbard, Itasca, St. Louis, Lake, Clay, Becker, Cass, Wilkin, Wadena, Crow Wing, Aitkin, Carlton, Otter Tail, Mille Lacs, Pine, Todd, Morrison, Kanabec, Grant, Douglas, Benton, Isanti, Chisago, Traverse, Stevens, Pope, Stearns, Sherburne, Anoka, Washington, Big Stone, Swift, Kandiyohi, Meeker, Wright, Hennepin, Ramsey, Lac Qui Parle, Chippewa, McLeod, Carver, Dakota, Yellow Medicine, Renville, Sibley, Scott, Goodhue, Lincoln, Lyon, Redwood, Nicollet, Le Sueur, Rice, Wabasha, Brown, Blue Earth, Waseca, Steele, Dodge, Olmsted, Winona, Pipestone, Murray, Cottonwood, Watonwan, Houston, Rock, Nobles, Jackson, Martin, Faribault, Freeborn, Mower, Fillmore

Brown County: Named for Joseph Renshaw Brown, a prominent pioneer, soldier, trader, lumberman, speculator, founder of cities, legislator, politician and editor. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Carlton County: Named for Reuben B. Carlton, one of the first settlers in the town of Fond du Lac. He was a farmer and blacksmith for the Ojibwe. Est. May 23, 1857.

Carver County: Named for explorer-author Capt. Jonathan Carver, who explored the Minnesota area as early as 1766. He later wrote a book about his travels. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Cass County: Named after Lewis Cass, who led an expedition that explored the area. He was also a governor of Michigan Territory, a U.S. senator, and held cabinet positions with two presidents. Est. Sept. 1, 1851.

Chippewa County: Named for the Chippewa, or Ojibwe, American Indians and the Chippewa River, which joins the Minnesota River in this county. "Chippewa" is a French corruption of "Ojibwe." Est. Feb. 20, 1862.

Chisago County: Named after the county's largest lake, Ki-chi-sago, meaning "large" and "lovely" in Ojibwe. The Legislature meant to name the county "Chisaga," but a typographical error changed the last letter from "a" to "o." The mistake was never corrected. Est. Sept. 1, 1851.

Clay County: Named after American statesman Henry Clay, a member of both houses of Congress, speaker of the House and a candidate for president several times. Est. March 8, 1862.

Clearwater County: Named after Clearwater Lake and Clearwater River that lie within the county. The Ojibwe name — clear water — was inspired by the crystal clearness of the lake and river. Est. Dec. 20, 1902.

Cook County: Named after Maj. Michael Cook of Faribault, a prominent citizen who died fighting in the Civil War. Cook moved to Minnesota in 1855, worked as a carpenter, and served as both a territorial and state senator. Est. March 9, 1874.

Cottonwood County: Named after the Cottonwood River and the many cottonwood trees in southern Minnesota. Est. May 23, 1857.

Crow Wing County: Named for the Crow Wing River. The river's name is an erroneous translation of the Ojibwe term for "raven's wing." The raven is a cousin of the crow. Est. May 23, 1857.

Dakota County: Named after the Dakota people, who made up a large number of affiliated American Indian groups that lived in Minnesota and adjoining states. The Indian meaning for "Dakota" is "alliance" or "league." Est. Oct. 27, 1849.

Dodge County: Named for Henry Dodge, a territorial and state governor of Wisconsin, and his son, Augustus C. Dodge, of Iowa. Wisconsin Territory had included parts of Minnesota. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Douglas County: Named in honor of Stephen Douglas, a U.S. senator, statesman and leader in the Democratic Party. Est. March 8, 1858.

Faribault County: Named after Jean Baptiste Faribault, a longtime trader with the Dakota. He moved to Minnesota in 1803 and was the first white settler to practice agriculture in the state. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Fillmore County: Named after Millard Fillmore, president of the United States from 1850 to 1853. Fillmore visited Minnesota in 1854 after leaving the presidency. Est. March 5, 1853.

Freeborn County: Named after William Freeborn, a territorial settler. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Goodhue County: Named after the first printer-editor in Minnesota, James Madison Goodhue. He founded the *Minnesota Pioneer* in 1849. Est. March 5, 1853.

Grant County: Named in honor of Ulysses S. Grant, who led the Union forces to victory in the Civil War. He was later elected president of the United States. Grant visited Minnesota in 1883 to celebrate the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Est. March 6, 1868.

Hennepin County: Named after Louis Hennepin, a Franciscan missionary, explorer and author. This early explorer came to the area during the 1670s. Est. March 6, 1852.

Houston County: Named for Samuel Houston, president of Texas before it became a state. Houston later became a U.S. senator. Est. Feb. 23, 1854.

Hubbard County: Named after Lucius Frederick Hubbard, governor of Minnesota from 1882 to 1887, and founding editor of the *Red Wing Republican*. Est. Feb. 26, 1883.

Isanti County: Taken from the American Indian name Izaty, the ancient name for the Santee, members of the Dakota alliance. Est. Feb. 13, 1857.

Itasca County: Named from two Latin words for "truth" and "head." The Mississippi River passes through this county from Lake Itasca in Clearwater County. Est. Oct. 27, 1849.

Jackson County: The origin of this name is still in dispute. Early sources have the county being named after Henry Jackson, the first merchant in St. Paul and a member of the first Territorial Legislature. Later accounts have the county named after Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States. Est. May 23, 1857.

Kanabec County: Named after the Ojibwe word for "snake" and the Snake River within the county. Est. March 13, 1858.

Kandiyohi County: Taken from the Dakota language. "Kandiyohi" means "where the buffalo fish come." The fish swim upstream in the region's rivers to spawn. Est. March 20, 1858.

Kittson County: Named after Norman Wolfred Kittson, an early pioneer of the area. Est. March 9, 1878.

Koochiching County: Named after an Ojibwe word for Rainy Lake and Rainy River, it means "neighbor lake and river." Est. Dec. 19, 1906.

Lac qui Parle County: Taken from the French translation of the Dakota words meaning "the lake that speaks." The name apparently stems from the echoes that bounce off the bluffs around the lake. Est. March 6, 1871.

Lake County: Received its name from Lake Superior, which is directly south of the county. Est. March 1, 1856.

Lake of the Woods County: Named after the lake of the same name that lies within a portion of the county. Jacques De Noyon, a Frenchman who explored the area in 1688, named the lake "Lac aux Iles," or Lake of the Islands, because it has more than 14,000 heavily forested islands. Est. Jan. 1, 1923.

Le Sueur County: Named in honor of Pierre Charles Le Sueur, a Canadian French trader and explorer who first visited Minnesota in 1683. Est. March 5, 1853.

Lincoln County: Named in honor of Abraham Lincoln, president of the United States during the Civil War. The Legislature made four attempts to name a county in honor of Lincoln. Est. March 6, 1873.

Lyon County: Established by two legislative acts on March 6, 1868, and March 2, 1869. It's named after General Nathaniel Lyon, who was killed in the Civil War.

McLeod County: Named after Martin McLeod, an early fur trader in Minnesota. Est. March 1, 1856.

Mahnomen County: Named after the Ojibwe word for wild rice, whose root word is "mano," or spirit. Wild rice is abundant in this area. Est. Dec. 27, 1906.

Marshall County: Named after William Rainey Marshall, governor of Minnesota from 1866 to 1870. Est. Feb. 25, 1879.

Martin County: Named after Henry Martin, who moved to the area, bought large tracts of land, and then returned to his home in Connecticut. Other accounts have the county named after Morgan Lewis Martin, a U.S. representative from Wisconsin who introduced the law calling for the organization of the Territory of Minnesota. Est. May 23, 1857.

Meeker County: Named after Bradley B. Meeker, an associate justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court from 1849 to 1853. Est. Feb. 23, 1856.

Mille Lacs County: Named after the county's large lake called Mille Lacs, which, in French, means a thousand lakes. It was known to the Dakota as "spirit lake," and to the Ojibwe as "great" or "everywhere lake." Est. May 23, 1857.

Morrison County: Named after William and Allan Morrison, two brothers who settled and worked in this area. Est. Feb. 25, 1856.

Mower County: Named in honor of John E. Mower, a lumber worker and state legislator. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Murray County: Named after William Pitt Murray, who served in various positions within territorial, city and state government. Est. May 23, 1857.

Nicollet County: Named after geographer-explorer Joseph Nicolas Nicollet, who had a map of the area published in 1843. Est. March 5, 1853.

Nobles County: Named after William H. Nobles, a member of the Territorial Legislature. Est. May 23, 1857.

Norman County: Named in honor of the large number of Norwegians, or Normans, who settled in this county. When the county was established on Feb. 17, 1881, it had the largest proportion of Norwegians in the state.

Olmsted County: Named after David Olmsted, the first mayor of St. Paul. He later became editor of the *Minnesota Democrat*, a pioneer newspaper. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Otter Tail County: Named after Otter Tail lake and river. The lake received its name from the Ojibwe words for a long and narrow sand bar that was shaped like an otter's tail. Est. March 18, 1858.

Pennington County: This county, established Nov. 23, 1910, is one of the state's newest counties. It was named after Edmund Pennington, a longtime railroad operator.

Pine County: Named for the abundant pine trees in the area. Pine City is its county seat, and it has several lakes and rivers named "pine." Est. March 1, 1856.

Pipestone County: Named for the county's supply of red pipestone used by Native Americans to make sacred pipes. Est. May 23, 1857.

Polk County: Named in honor of James Knox Polk, the 11th president of the U.S. On Polk's next to last day in office, he signed the congressional act organizing the Minnesota Territory. Est. July 20, 1858.

Pope County: Named in honor of Gen. John Pope who led explorations of this area. He also was commander of the U.S. Army's Department of the Northwest, headquartered in St. Paul. Est. Feb. 20, 1862.

Ramsey County: Named in honor of Alexander Ramsey, the first governor of the Minnesota Territory, the second mayor of St. Paul and the second governor of the state of Minnesota. He later served as a U.S. senator and secretary of war. Est. Oct. 27, 1849.

Red Lake County: Named after Red Lake and Red Lake River. The Ojibwe named the lake for its wine-like color at sunset. Est. Dec. 24, 1896.

Redwood County: Named for the cedars and willows in the area. Est. Feb. 6, 1862.

Renville County: Named for Joseph Renville, an early settler in Minnesota. He served with the British in the War of 1812, leading a company of Dakota warriors against U.S. forces. He later served as an interpreter, trader and source of information about the Dakota. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Rice County: Named after Henry Mower Rice, one of the first two U.S. senators from Minnesota. Est. March 5, 1853.

Rock County: Named after the prominent rock deposit in the county. The rock plateau, covering 3 or 4 square miles and a height of 175 feet, also gives its name to a river within the county. Est. May 23, 1857.

Roseau County: Named after Roseau Lake and Roseau River, the French translations of the Ojibwe references to the many reeds in the lake and river. Est. Dec. 31, 1894.

St. Louis County: Named for the St. Louis River, the largest river flowing into Lake Superior. It is the largest county in the state. Est. March 3, 1855, and March 1, 1856.

Scott County: Named for Gen. Winfield Scott, who served in the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and, for 20 years, was general-in-chief of the U.S. Army. Est. March 5, 1853.

Sherburne County: Named for Moses Sherburne, an associate justice of the Supreme Court of the Minnesota Territory. Est. Feb. 25, 1856.

Sibley County: Named in honor of Gen. Henry Hastings Sibley, an early pioneer, governor and military defender of the state. Sibley was the first governor of Minnesota. Est. March 5, 1853.

Stearns County: Named after Charles Thomas Stearns by mistake. The county was to be named after Isaac Ingalls Stevens, but a clerical error changed the name to Stearns. The Legislature decided Stearns was worthy of the honor, and another county was later named after Stevens. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Steele County: Named after Franklin Steele, a prominent pioneer of Minneapolis. The Legislature elected Steele to the first Board of Regents of the University of Minnesota. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Stevens County: Named after Isaac Ingalls Stevens, who commanded a surveying expedition for a Pacific railroad. An earlier attempt to name a county in his honor failed due to a clerical mistake in the Legislature. Est. Feb. 20, 1862.

Swift County: Named for Henry Adoniram Swift, governor of Minnesota in 1863. Elected lieutenant governor, he succeeded to the governorship when Gov. Alexander Ramsey resigned to take a U.S. Senate seat. Est. Feb. 18, 1870.

Todd County: Named in honor of John Blair Smith Todd, commander of Fort Ripley from 1849-56. He was a veteran of the Seminole and Mexican wars and later became a trader. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Traverse County: This county's name comes from Lake Traverse which lies "transverse" to Big Stone and Lac qui Parle lakes. The name comes from a Dakota word meaning "lake lying crosswise." Est. Feb. 20, 1862.

Wabasha County: Named after three successive chiefs of Mississippi bands of Dakota. Est. Oct. 27, 1849.

Wadena County: Received its name from an old trading post. It stems from an Ojibwe word meaning "a little round hill." It's also a common Ojibwe name. Est. June 11, 1858.

Waseca County: Named for the Dakota word meaning "rich," a reference to the fertile soil in the area. Est. Feb. 27, 1857.

Washington County: Named in honor of George Washington, a founding father and first president of the United States. Est. Oct. 27, 1849.

Watonwan County: Taken from the Dakota word, "watanwan," meaning "fish bait," or "where fish bait abounds." Est. Feb. 25, 1860.

Wilkin County: Named, for the third time, after Col. Alexander Wilkin, a lawyer who served as Minnesota's U.S. marshal and was later killed in the Civil War. Earlier, it was named for a U.S. senator from Georgia who later became the Confederacy's secretary of state; then, for Andrew Johnson, who succeeded Abraham Lincoln to the presidency. Neither of them were acceptable to county residents, so they petitioned the Legislature to change the name to Wilkin. Est. March 6, 1868.

Winona County: Named in honor of Winona, a female cousin of Wabasha, who was the last of three successive chiefs of the Mississippi band of Dakota with that name. Winona, in the Dakota language, means "first-born female." Est. Feb. 23, 1854.

Wright County: In a compromise, this county was named after Silas Wright, a New York statesman. The delegation traveling to St. Paul to propose the establishment of the county was unable to agree on a name. A member of the delegation, who was a friend of Wright, proposed Wright's name for the county; the delegation agreed. Est. Feb. 20, 1855.

Yellow Medicine County: Named after the Yellow Medicine River that crosses the county. Yellow Medicine stems from the Dakota word, "pajutazee," for the long, yellow grasses that are abundant in this region. Est. March 6, 1871.