

## *What is it About the Brule?*

*By John Beth*

*When I first thought about writing this piece, I contemplated trying to convey into words, the significance of this river. Not only to me, but to everyone... from yesterday, today and tomorrow. It seemed daunting... I thought to myself... "What is it about the Brule – besides everything?"*

*I have always viewed rare places like the Boise Brule River – as great metaphors of life, reverence and hope. Indeed for me – it carries a strong aura of it's past. If any place in the state... or Midwest for that matter, has great "ghosts"... it's here!*

*I think this river and its valley – are unique places of great silence, that at the same time, are always "speaking"... from the smallest eddy, to the roar of its rapids. It is standing in her pulsing currents... her veins... that one begins to sense that they flow to and from the heart of all that is wild. In the eyes of an open soul – the images begin to come into focus... there is a timeless dignity in this quiet place... listen... and watch – the magic slowly comes alive. It is everywhere... you simply must believe it... to see it.*



*It is in the morning fog... a wisp of ghostly swirls above the playful updrafts of the river... in the mayflies, caddisflies, the midges and others... dancing by riffles, backlit by the warm summer sun. It is in the million beams of fractured light that slice through the canopies in the woodlands.*

*In the silence of a calm evening on Big Lake – broken only by the sounds of whip-poor-wills – calling to each other from the enchanted forest that surrounds the glassy lake.*

*I hear it in songs of the wind through the tall pines, and watch it in the silent glide of September leaves as they "waltz" to the woodland floor... some canoeing downstream over rocks from the basement of time – until they slowly disappear in the restless currents of autumn.*



*There is the crunching, frosty grass – and the steam from my breath that reminds me that soon the river valley must sleep – in silent reverence under a fresh, soft blanket of snow. The animals guarding the bright winter landscape... knowing spring will come again.*

*It is in the fish... the deer... the wolf and the eagle, it is in the forest and the water and in those tree-top winds that I hear voices that I hear nowhere else. All those who dwell here, create a carefully composed balance... and each has an equal part in this symphony they play. To remove or change any "instrument" – would diminish, the already perfect music. The clockwork of nature slowly – but steadily ticks on... constant only in its change.*

*One can still see glimpses into the past. I imagine a train whistling in the distance as I gaze wistfully at the old wooden trestle remains – silent yet stoic in their fading reminder of a time long past.*

*And as I walk its creaking floors, I stare deeply into the faded black and white photographs... proudly displayed on the walls of the old Winneboujou Club... each one telling a story that fewer and fewer people will know with each passing generation.*

*As I look upstream from the FF Bridge, I can hardly imagine the task of ascending these powerful currents, with ancient – 1600 and 1700s technology canoes – portaging to the St Croix... and on... I try to envision brook trout so abundant, they were harvested privately and commercially – and sold to restaurants.*

*I close my eyes and imagine being here – in the peak of the lumbering years... the logs crushing down... miles and miles of lumber and lumber men... a Superior Wisconsin newspaper... The Evening Telegram – early in 1899 estimates "20 million feet of logs will float down the Brule this spring..." twenty million feet... of logs.*



*And no one could count – how many thousands of campfires graced her many miles of banks... Indians, trappers, hunters and lumbermen, miners and voyageurs... sightseeing tourists... and countless fishermen and canoeists, presidents – and people like you and me... how many campfires? I don't know... but as the stars awaken at dusk... I swear I still can smell them.*

*I have always viewed myself as a guest here... only a guest. One is reminded that this is a church in the purist form... you need only look around this cathedral to quickly feel a very small part of a greater scheme and purpose... a strong sense of creation exudes its self here.*

*And there are other voices – the ones you can't quite make out... spoken words lost in the winds of time... or perhaps, in a language I don't understand. There are voices that encourage, invite... and caution. They reminding us that this river that can be your best friend... yet could take your life in an instant.*

*Being part of this world – is always as humbling as it is peaceful. It makes me think of the past. It makes me think of the future. Most importantly, it makes me think about today. It is in this place that I ask, are we losing more than we're gaining in our world today? The river makes me slow down, inside and out.*

*When I fish the waters... the rhythm of the rod... the swish of the line, and the sight of a fur and feathered creation dropping to the surface, always... give me endless occasions for hope. And it is in that personal moment of serenity... I know why I am drawn here.*

*It is a connection to something of special beauty – the spiritual energy of memories and possibilities, painted in a picture by all those who found or revisited their soul in this place... only to ultimately, leave part... or all of it... here. I know some of them stood on this same rock... or that one over there... casting a different fly or bait, or perhaps casting only a glance... but in their way, still "fishing" for their dream.*





*On the few occasions, I catch a fish... I am quickly reminded of my guest status... grateful that the river has given me a reminder that it is very much alive while reminding me that I am too. A little more, in fact, at that moment.*

*Sometimes – there is the help from the invisible hand on the shoulder that points... "There, by the far current seam... just this side of the birch tree." I never know whose it is... Gordon MacQuarrie, Mr. President, Doc*

*Bauer, or maybe a local "old timer" with a name time has forgotten... or maybe one we remember... Eisenhower... or Coolidge... a father or grandfather?*

*As my own years pass... I still must visit the river when I can... I am reminded that the reflection of the face I see when I gaze into its calm pools... is many decades older than that it was the first time the Brule River reflected it back to me... and though she still moves with timeless enthusiasm, I no longer do.*



*I have watched a young boy, race ahead of his father to ready his rod for his first cast into this river... eyes full of anticipation and heart full of hope... his steps full of youth... and I have watched an old, tired man... walk slowly to the only spot on parking lot bank he can now safely fish from... his eyes full of anticipation and hope... and one additional thing – gratitude... for he is, in that moment, if only in the memory of his heart, that young boy again... his life still ahead of him... not behind.*

*Whatever place and sport that can do this reaches deeper into our lives than we may acknowledge... such a thing, and such a place, are rare, and sacred. Anything and everything we can do – in our life – to save it for ourselves, and others... of any age, of any generation, must be a part of our mission.*

*Perhaps it is for all those yet to come – whom we preserve it for the most. They will see what we did – or didn't do - when it was our turn to do it.*

*In the end, if we fail those coming behind us... who will we talk to on those future days... saying "cast there... by the fast water below the rock,"*



*As I reflect on life... I am reminded that to me, every inch, every riffle, every pool, and every drop – of the Brule River's water – is sacred.*

*Every rock, fish and tree... from the dusk to dawn of every season, every voice and story, still lives there.*

*Each memory... especially yours... and mine, is special... together, they make us become a spiritual family, connected by the "ghosts" of the Brule Valley.*

*In the quietest of moments, in the autumn our lives, we will look back at the many paths we followed along and through this river... our river. What did we seek? What did we find?*

*Even if we don't ever know or understand why, we still return almost uncontrollably – not unlike the trout and salmon some of us pursue... to a place that in some measure – gave us life.*

*As she pushes eternally north over her many varied miles... restless to finally sleep in the cold, unforgivingly silent depths of Superior... The Bois Brule remains a treasure like few others... a diverse, complex, beaconing, and hauntingly beautiful, living river... with a heart, soul and history – all as alive as any of ours.*

*Someday, one by one, we will all walk away from her a final time... in that moment, as I did in the first, I know I will contemplate still... "What was it about the Brule... besides everything?"*