

This River

By Ed Chaplinski

March 7, 2023

A few years back some of the Club members asked me to write about some of the experiences that I've had on the Brule River since the 1960s. I have permission to use all the names in this chronicle.

"This River"

I have fished 'This River' for more than 60 years. Like most people who enjoy 'This River,' I for one took it for granted that it ran from its headwaters to Lake Superior without any problems. Not until I became a member of the Brule River Sportsman's Club, and then joining the Club's board of directors, did I know that it takes resources, labor, time, energy, and assistance from many other agencies to keep 'This River' flowing pristinely to Lake Superior.

The events you are about to read about are spot on – the years may be a bit off. I was born in 1945 in a log cabin in Western Taylor County Wisconsin in the town of Gilman, the second oldest of nine. Living on a farm, we had the Yellow River running through the north forty. So, I learned to fish and enjoy the outdoors at an early age. It became my job to pick nightcrawlers. I would pick four to five hundred over the summer and store them in a 55-gallon white oak vinegar barrel in our cellar. It was filled with cat spruce moss, rotten straw, old cow manure and big hunks of sod. In the winter, I fed them coffee grounds, eggshells, and bonemeal.

In the spring my father, with John and Frank Kondrasuk (all were my mentors), would head up to 'This River'. I had to get twenty or thirty dozen crawlers ready and put them in a wooden nail keg. He took them to Brule and sold them to Arnie Raivala, who ran the Standard station. He would say, "My name is Arnie, but they call me Barnie."



Every spring, my dad would leave to fish 'This River' on Friday night and be back by Sunday night. I would wake up Monday morning to do chores, and in the sink were two or three big steelheads and browns. The next spring, they would do the same thing. And every spring, I would ask him, "Can I go?" "Not this time son," he would say. We had a very large farm with many chores. We cleaned the big barn with horses and my siblings couldn't harness them. And then in 1961, I got to go to 'This River' with my dad, Frank, and John. I didn't catch any fish, froze my butt, but I was hooked on 'This River.'

In 1965, my two brothers, Chipper and John, went to the opener. It was very cold, 15 degrees. We walked down the hill to Purple Martin Gulch, which was the name of the cabin at the Boathouse Hole. The road was not plowed, just boot tracks with two feet of snow. My brothers fished at the Boathouse Hole. They soon had a nice steelhead. I went upstream and caught a nice brown, but it broke off. I went back to the boathouse, and we landed two more small fish.

The next morning, not so cold, my brothers fished in the same spot. It was still dark when we got to 'This River'. I went back upriver to the Beaver Hole-now it's called Leppala's Run. It was just breaking daylight when I hooked a pig. It went up and down the stream, pulling and jerking, for fifteen minutes. It finally broke the water. I had a beaver by the tail with a spawn sack. While fishing Beaver Run, I could hear dogs barking. They were running deer. When I returned to the Boathouse Hole, my brothers had pulled a small deer out of the river. It had washed downstream to where they were, only it tried crossing to lose the dogs. We laid it on the bank and went back to get lunch. On returning that afternoon it was dead.



1967 – Frank Kondrasuk, who ran the Standard station in Gilman, was a great outdoorsman like his brother John. They were always focused on what they did. Frank had lost his left hand at the wrist in a press. He had a pinch for fingers. He fished with a Zebco 33. He would cast, then switch hands and wind up the line.

Frank had picked me up at the farm and we went to 'This River' fishing. It was the first part of April. We started fishing at the Boathouse Hole. Frank had crossed above the hole, so he could fish it on the good side. I stayed on the east side. We both fished down river. I was almost to the Whirlpool Hole, 'Getschel Run.' I called it the whirlpool because you could hear the whirlpool's sound when they sucked the air.

I heard Frank holler, "Help." He tried crossing before the Whirlpool Hole and slipped in. He was hanging onto a big rock only fifteen feet from the east bank and holding on for life. There was an ice shelf on my side. I could see smoke from a fire at the hole and yelled for help. Two men came to help. We had pushed a dead spruce tree above Frank, and it hung up on a big rock. I remember telling Frank to lift the tree over the rock and hang on. After two or three tries, he finally got it over. Frank was in deep trouble. He got the dead tree over and hung on. The current pulled him to our side. One of the fishermen held the tree with me, and when Frank got to the ice shelf, the other man pulled him up. We took him to the campfire, but he only got colder. We headed back up that long hill to his station wagon. He changed his wet clothes and had a cup of coffee. He couldn't stop shivering.



He decided to head back to Gilman. It was sprinkling, and it soon turned to sleet. The road to Brule was glare ice. We stopped at the Standard station. Frank and Arnie, or maybe it was Wesley, were talking. They said Highway 27 south was all ice. They convinced Frank to stay the night. I stayed at the station while Frank went to Arnie's home for the night. In the morning, we ate at the Twin Gables, and I saw the big red brag board. I needed to be on that board.

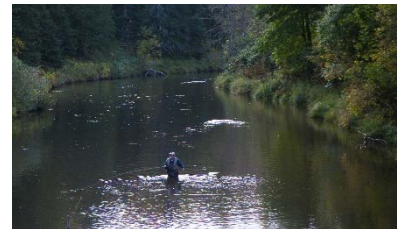
Different story 1968 – I took my girlfriend fishing 'This River' in May. We fished the Foam Hole, and I believe we netted nine fish that day. I still have the same girlfriend. We will be married fifty-five years in June.

1969 or 1970 – My brothers and I drove our pickup camper and parked it at the Clay Road off the Culhane Road. My brothers went to fish the Bachelor's, and I went to the Boathouse and Beaver Run. I ripped my waders, so I came back to patch them and have a bite to eat. A truck pulled up and an older man got out with

a round steel saucer and a sack of the potatoes. He put the spuds in the saucer and started walking down the Clay Road, just a trail not plowed. I caught up with him and started talking. I think he was the Bachelor down the big hill. I pulled that sack of spuds to the top of that hill. He said to me, "Get back of that saucer or it's going to hit you in the heels." Guess what? Ouch! Every time I fish that part of 'This River' that old Bachelor comes to my mind.

1970s – My dad didn't go for the opener, so I got to go. I went with John Kondrasuk and his son, Bobby. John was all business when it came to fishing. Like blinders on a horse bridle, straight ahead with no side interruptions. John had an old school bus turned into a big camper. We reached the Cullhane Road, and it was not drivable. Ruts, water, frost boils were a no go. So we went to Jack and Edna's tavern. John knew them, so John parked that old bus in the parking lot, and we walked to the Pine Tree hole. There was real deep snow with no fishermen tracks. We fished there till dark. That was my first trip to the Pine Tree and that stretch of 'This River'. We came back to the bus and ate. John knew Jack. Jack said he had a friend who lived off Clevedon Road. So next morning John, Bobby, and I were off. We drove that bus to a small farm and down a dead-end road. It was like the top of a mountain and a deep valley below. John was gone in a flash. Bobby and I followed on a deer trail and down the hill we went in deep snow – "We're going to have to come back up you know." No fish, no sleep, no lunch, no fun. Love 'This River.'

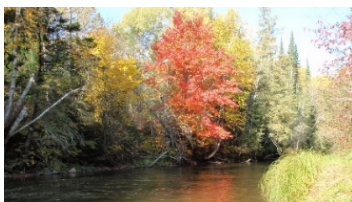
1970 – Have a few days, so up to 'This River' I went in early September. The river was very low, not many fish getting caught above Highway 13. I decided to fish off the Mouth Road. I walked to where the electric barrier was. I noticed fish breaking water on the far side. I fished it with everything I had but no luck. I saw a few small fish, two or three inches long, so to my streamers I went – no luck. The small fish were silver, so I put on a rainbow smelt streamer with a stinger hook. A few casts later, I hooked a big fish. I netted it, a thirteen pound, 30- to 33-inch steelhead. The stinger hook was in its gill and gill plate. It was bleeding. I took it back home.



I registered it at the Big Minnow in Holcombe, Wisconsin, for the Lucky 13 fishing contest in Eau Claire. I took 1st place in the trout category, and I won a 16-foot canoe. I got on the board at Twin Gables too.

1980s and 1990s – I fished 'This River' every year nothing too exciting. Just a lot of fish with my dad, my son Matt, and my daughter Bretta.

2019 – Fishing in the fall, down at Pine Tree having a sandwich at the Wing Dam, a man wanted a fish netted. I landed it for him, a big rainbow. He released it. We started talking. I said I was from Gilman. He asked me if I knew Coach Rosemeyer. "Yes," I said. We were related, I married his cousin Mary." The man was a football coach at Mondovi, Wisconsin and played football with Gilman. Small world. He was eyeing up my fly rod. "Where did you get that rod?" "From the Sears outlet store in Prairie du Chien," I said. "In 1969. It's a 9 weight 9-foot hollow glass, Ted Williams model." "Where's the reel?" I couldn't afford it. The rod was \$80, and the reel was \$50. So, I just have the rod. We became great friends to this day. His name is Tom Bauer from Eau Claire. I told him I teach fly fishing in Coach Rosemeyer's Phys Ed class. "I have something for



you," he said. He gave me rods and reels for my classes. In the box of reels, there it was, the Ted Williams reel that matched my rod, still in its original box. "Thanks Tom!" I fish with him and his good friend, Kevin, true sportsmen, old school.

In the early 2020s, I fished with my grandsons and their friends.

2021 spring – Having a sandwich above the Wing Dam on Pine Tree, on a very cold, windy day, I met two fishermen from Montana I've seen before. They rent a cabin on Lake Nebagamon. One of the men started fishing just below the Wing Dam and the other went down river with me. In a short while I heard, "Help." I looked upriver and the other man was in 'This River'. Déjà vu all over again! I ran back to him, jumped in, grabbed him, and pulled him to the bank. We rested. I called for help and two men from upriver came to help pull him up that steep bank. "Thanks men," whoever you are. They went back to their cabin at the lake. The following fall, a man fishing next to me, in the same spot said, "Thanks Ed, for getting me out of this river."

2022 fall – I just netted two king salmon above the Wing Dam by the big willow tree and was sitting on a log enjoying 'This River' when an older lady came by. She was looking for her cat. She has a cabin across from Co-op Campground. They rented it out to fishermen. Very interesting lady. I told her I fished 'This River' since the 1960s. I fish the Culhane Road area a lot. She said her husband's family lived there and knew the old Bachelor. I think she said he was family. I told her I would stop and see her and talk more about her and her family. Next Spring, that's this year, 2023, I'm going to finish these memories or chronicles for now...

'This River' was and is a big part of my life and will be until I can't enjoy it any longer.