

A Look Back

by Larry Ramsell

Authors Note: Searching for a new musky frontier? This is a common thread among many of today's musky hunters. Looking for that next new "nirvana" where the muskies have yet to see an anglers lure? Do any such waters yet exist? Well we are no different today than were the serious musky hunters of over 100 years ago!

Are today's musky hunters spoiled? Based upon what our predecessor's had to endure during their searches of over 100 years ago, when it comes to accommodations, boats and equipment, I think that after reading the following, you will agree that indeed we are! So journey back with me to June 6, 1897, and experience the difficulties of finding new musky waters then during a time when anglers were anxious to "share" their new found waters:

Excerpted from "New Muscallonge Waters" by W.P. Mussey in the July 10, 1897 issue of *Forest and Stream*.

Chicago, Ill., June 25.-*Editor Forest and Stream:* This is to narrate the experiences and detail the fortunes of a fishing party in search of new waters, hitherto unshadowed by the rod of an angler. Jason's quest of the Golden Fleece would seem a bagatelle compared to the task of finding waters which the great world of American fishermen are unfamiliar with, yet our little party was successful in that particular. At least we got into a country where the famous muscallonge is plentiful, and yet none had ever been taken with rod and reel. In fact, the name of the fish was unfamiliar and its habits and appearance unknown to all the natives with whom we talked prior to our first catch. And yet we found superb muscallonge water, and, with suitable weather, would doubtless have enjoyed sport grand enough to sate the most greedy hunter of the voracious 'lunge.

This land of delight is located in northern Minnesota and not far from the head waters of the Mississippi River. It lies just south of the Leech Lake Indian reservation, and its lakes, of which there is an incredible number, empty northward into the Father of Waters. Until this year the region was practically inaccessible in the summer, and, as no one dreamed that muscallonge were to be found, no one attempted to surmount the difficulties of reaching these lakes, when other waters, in easy distance, contained such myriads of pike, bass and pickerel. Therefore, the lakes contiguous to Woman Lake were neglected, and our party was the first to prove the existence of the muscallonge in that section...

...Originally our entire party had intended leaving Chicago June 3, but matters intervened that caused six of us to postpone departure until the 6th...At St. Paul, next morning, we had breakfast and changed cars for the Northern Pacific R.R. to Brainerd. Arriving there at 1:20 o'clock that afternoon, we had dinner, and a 3:30 started on the Brainerd & Northern Minnesota R.R. for Pine River Station. A logging train off the track ahead of us delayed us somewhat, and we did not reach Pine River until about 7 o'clock, too late to depart for Kabekona Camp that night. We found Pine River a typical backwoods railroad station. There are two houses in the town: one a log cabin, the other a hotel, saloon and general store combined. Barclay, the owner of the hotel, does quite an extensive teaming business for the logging camps in the surrounding country, and, being a down East Yankee, seems quite prosperous. Around the saloon door was gathered a miscellaneous crowd of about a dozen lumber cruisers, loggers, Indians and teamsters, nearly all drunk or willing to become so. After attending to our luggage, and making arrangements for an early morning start for Kabekona, we retired to our beds, which we found clean and comfortable enough.

Tuesday morning dawned cloudy, wet and cold, but we determined to start anyway, as we had little affection for the crowd around Pine River. Six of us got into the spring wagon, and, with Mr.

Sanders as driver, followed the baggage wagon. We found the road for about eighteen miles an excellent one, having been an old "tote road" for the lumber camps, and had it not been for the cold rain would have enjoyed the ride. We passed Lake Ponto...about 10 o'clock, , and then began to get the bad road...Just after reaching Black Water, a large and "muskie-looking" lake, we met our first misfortune. The rear spring of our wagon broke, and from then on most of us perambulated...A little later...in crossing a marshy bit of ground, the baggage wagon got mired, and that cost more delay. We trampled on philosophically, however, and there being no mosquitos, were comparatively happy...we came upon Kabekona Camp at about 1 o'clock.

We found the makings of an ideal camp, but necessarily somewhat in embryo yet. The camp is to consist of a main building with office, dining-room and kitchen, and ten cottages, each 12X14, for sleeping purposes. The main building and three cottages were completed...The cottages are alike, and each contain two double iron beds with good mattresses and plenty of clean warm clothing. Washstand, mirrors and plenty of drawer room are also conveniences not often found at fishing camps...

...We found (that the others), despite their early arrival, had only been able to go fishing that day, as the boats had only arrived the day previous, owing to delays in transportation, so we could find nothing definite about muscallonge, and no one who absolutely knew of their existence in those waters...Charley Wilcox and I secured a boat and a venerable-looking boatman, who cherished a belief that muscallonge were just overgrown pickerel. That belief by no means tended to allay our suspicions that our long journey had been for naught. We put in no time on Woman Lake that afternoon, as Stone, our oarsman, wanted us to try a couple of smaller lakes in easy rowing distance...no 'lunge rewarded our efforts.

...a boat appeared...They informed us they had three muscallonge, one weighing 23 lbs., and nothing could have been more welcome news, as we had at last made certain that the "lunge" was an inhabitant of those waters.

At this we were eager for the next day, and put in but little time sleeping. Wednesday dawned in discouraging fashion, very cloudy and cold, and directly after breakfast rain began to fall. Charlie Wilcox and I were eager, however, and started to cross Woman Lake to reach Little Girl. The rain, however, came down so heavily and there was such a sea on the lake that we put back to camp after going about three miles...After dinner the rain stopped briefly, and I determined to give a trial to Baby Lake...Charley would not brave the weather, so I went alone with Stone, the oarsman. We ran through the throughfare into Heron, and thence to Child Lake, then by a rapid and crooked creek into McCune Lake, a portage of a few yards being necessary on account of rapids. From McCune we got into Man Lake, and thence into Baby.

On Baby I came across Downey and Leach, who had been there all day. They reported three more 'lunge...A little island, covered with tamarack and surrounded by rush-covered bars running out into the lake, looked inviting, and I barely began to skirt it when I felt that vicious but welcome rush of a muscallonge on the spoon, and as I tautened up on the line I saw him leap wildly from the water 60 ft. away...A quick command to "Get into deep water, quick!" was obeyed, and then began a pretty little fight, which ended in about half an hour in the capture of a handsome 17 pounder.

...we left Baby Lake and crossed Man Lake on our way home. As a mere matter of form I let out my spoon on Man Lake, though with no hopes of fish, as we were crossing the middle of the lake and going fast. But we crossed a hitherto unsuspected bar, and once more I felt that savage rush and knew I was fastened to a big one now...I hurried the fish as much as possible, but for a long time he would not show himself. Finally, though he came slowly and sulkily to the surface, and I gave Stone the Winchester .22 with instruction to hit him between the eyes. He shot him about an inch forward, and did no especial damage except to make that fish wild. He was off like a flash and put in another quarter hour in mad rushes that made my wrist ache in keeping control. Once more he came to the top, and this time Stone's aim was better and we secured the prize. He was

a fine fish, weighing 27 lbs. and measuring 47 1/2 in. Time taken to land him about forty-five minutes. He turned out the heaviest fish captured on the trip.

ON getting to camp I found that Haskell and Dick had gone to Little Girl Lake and Dick had taken a fine 20 pounder. Sanders had captured a 14 pounder on Baby Lake.

On thursday, in spite of threatening weather, all four boats went to Man and Baby lakes. I bent on a No. 9 spoon and hooked on it a particularly lively and willing frog. But few moments elapsed until the same bar where I had taken the big one the night previous, I fastened to a beauty that gave me a hard fight for three quarters of an hour. He weighed 23 lbs., and was my second largest fish.

About noon, a very heavy rain came on, with plenty of thunder and lightening, and our entire party in the four boats gathered at the dam between Baby and Man lakes for shelter and subsequently dinner. We made a wet and dismal looking crowd, but every boat had 'lunge, so we were not ill natured. After the rain let up a trifle, we managed to cook dinner, and then took to the boats again. I caught no more 'lunge that day, but my boat companion, Charley Wilcox, succeeded in landing two, on 10 and one 12 pounder, and took both of them while the rain was falling in torrents, and the thunder and lightning were terrific. We remained on the lake during all the storm, as we were as wet as we could get anyhow, and we did not care to risk the trees, as several were struck by lightening in our vicinity...

Saturday, Sunday and Monday were three days of oppressive heat, and flies, bugs, beetles, mosquitoes and "sich like varmint" began to appear in great numbers. With the heat the "bloom" appeared in the waters of all the lakes, and the fish stopped biting. We took but few 'lunge meantime...

...I had not left the landing ten minutes when I fastened to a small one, and an hour later killed a fine 18 pounder after a pretty fight...the next day, on Man Lake, Haskell landed two and Dick's one, all heavy fish, in little over two hours.

A rather unusual occurrence was noted with Dick's 'lunge. Haskell had just landed a 20 pounder, and the boat was barely underway again when Dick saw a big 'lunge swimming leisurely alongside the boat. He had but a few feet of line out when the fish struck, and had a fine fight, ending with the capture of a 23 pounder.

That afternoon on Baby Lake, Prof. A. Bournique of Chicago, who had arrived the day previous...took a 'lunge that measured 51 1/2 in., although being a female that had just spawned, she weighed but 25 lbs...

It had been our original intention the make a trip to Wabedo and Little Boy lakes, which are drained by the Little Boy River, a direct tributary of the Mississippi, and are not affected by any dams. We had heard from the Indians of extremely large fish in those lakes, and have every reason to believe them unsurpassed muscallonge water. We were, however, obliged to abandon the trip, much to our regret, on account of the uncertain weather and the fact that we would have to camp out two nights. The latter would not have deterred us had we any facilities for keeping fish caught and getting them back to camp. It is a trip I shall certainly make next time.

I should mention that the outlet to Little Girl Lake is at present obstructed by a dam that maintains the water in Little Girl and Woman Lakes about 6ft. above normal. As it is well known that fish go up with rising and down with falling water, we had good reason to think that Wabedo and Little Boy lakes, below this dam, would contain many fish that had been unable to get over the dam...

...Rain eight days, and intense heat three days, was enough to ruin any fishing. We were all, however, satisfied that these lakes contain large numbers of big muscallonge, and hope to give

them a trial under better conditions this fall. Our party captured about sixty muscallonge, averaging in weight 16lbs. Not bad sport under the circumstances...

...It is sufficient to say that we found new muscallonge waters and that there are plenty of the big beauties there...