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Twin Oaks Inn



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Tales of Hoffman: The Compleat Angler



Jack Hoffman

Indian River, Michigan—

Sweating and annoyed by the mosquito that buzzed near my ear, I was reaching to swat it when a brown lashed the bait in a boil of water. Excited, adrenaline pumping, I set the hook and unwittingly stepped back for the battle.

The powerful river swept me off my feet and I splashed backwards into icy water, unable to control my body in the torrent that swept me, bump, bump, bump along the pebbles and sand toward Devil's Bend and the deep, dark, foamy water that slams into the tangle of debris.

Fortunately, in stepping into the froth of the Sturgeon I'd tightly cinched a belt around the waist of my waders. It prevented the waders from filling and sending me to the bottom. Instead, the trapped air inside the waders kept me afloat as I crashed into the logjam, struggling to keep upright and holding onto the fish that thrashed about at the end of the line.

Later, on shore, having somehow struggled out of the vicious current, I lamented the loss of the fish I'd barely seen. But I was alive, my new fly-rod was intact, and amazingly the fire in my cornucopia pipe was still ablaze. The escaped trout, I knew, would be back another day.

I've learned a good deal since then about fishing the Sturgeon. It, like its sister stream the Little Sturgeon, is unforgiving for those who flaunt safety. But it's perhaps Michigan's finest trout stream.

Living on the west bank of the Little Sturgeon and owning 10 acres adjacent to Devil's Bend on the Sturgeon, I enjoy this fishing paradise as frequently as newspapering will permit. Browns and rainbows in the Sturgeon, brookies in the Little Sturgeon. And if I tire of these waters, which happens infrequently, I can ply the waters of the Indian, Pigeon, or Maple rivers, all just 15 minutes away. Each of these magnificent streams has its own attractiveness, but all are excellent fisheries.

If you enjoy fishing or if you would like to take up this infectious sport I can, without fear of contradiction, say that both expert and novice will find joy here. Even if you return with an empty creel, you will have enjoyed nature at her finest.

But before heading out for our neck of the woods in the Tip of the Mitt, be absolutely sure you've packed plenty of safety reminders. Without precaution, don't for a minute think you can step into the Sturgeon and not be swept into Devil's Bend; walk the

bank of the Little Sturgeon and not sink out of sight into the 100-year-old silt of Michigan's lumbering era; or hike into the wild, uninhabited regions of the Pigeon and not become lost. Care is absolutely essential in fishing our trout streams. Oh, boy, is it!

Although I'm no expert, by any standard, I've learned enough about trout fishing here to suggest the following:

- Fly fishing is the pits.
- Spinning outfits work best.
- Don't pay attention to moon phases.
- Honor the lowly worm.
- Shadows scare trout.
- Carry a compass.
- Tomorrow's fishing will be better.

About fly fishing: Unless you are particularly agile and don't mind climbing into treetops for a favorite lure, none of our rivers—save perhaps the Indian—is sufficiently open to permit unencumbered, full, smooth, round-house casts. That isn't to say fly fishing is impossible, but it requires shorter, on-the-mark casts that few but the expert angler can manage with regularity. It is a rare day, no matter how carefully I work the line, that I don't lose an artificial lure or a tippet or two. Yet, I persist, taking as much satisfaction in infrequently dropping an untangled bait into a deep pool as actually experiencing a strike.

Spinning outfits: I've had much more success with a light-weight, open-face spinning reel. With cedars and aspen hugging the edges of our rivers, it's far easier to lay down a short line and let the bait drift back towards me over a chosen hole. Even with spinning outfits, short, often side-arm casts are a necessity to avoid the hungry limbs of trees and brush.

Also, I've not forgotten something Mike Preville taught me years ago while fishing a stream in the Porkies. "Dunk for 'em," he said. Laughable as it seems, "dunk 'em" works. Brookies love it. A downstate advertising genius who grew up in the U.P., Mike dangles a line from his spinning outfit while slowly edging along with the current in hip-deep water, bobbing his line off the bottom. His crude brand of fishing belies every rule in the game, but I can say from experience that it produces more fish fries than many a sophisticated experiences.

Mike summed it up in our Porkies days when he asked, "Do you want to catch-and-eat or fish?"

Moon phases: Frank Kochalko, a retired South Lyon band director, who twirls a fishing rod as well as he did a baton, won't venture forth unless the moon table tells him its worthy of his time. And, as much as I scoff, I must admit that wildlife—in and above the water—seems to become more active when the moon phases are right. We have been on the water, with nary a