

River Guides, Long Boats, and Bait Shops: Michigan River Culture

by C. Kurt Dewhurst

Life in Michigan has been shaped not only by its Great Lakes but also by its small lakes, rivers, and streams. Across the northern part of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan, a network of rivers has provided transportation, subsistence, and pleasure for Native Americans, lumbermen, and eventually recreational fishermen. Rivers such as the Au Sable and Pere Marquette have rich local traditions in guiding, fishing, fly-tying, and boat building. Each of these rivers, to different degrees, has spawned a sense of place that has been sustained by an interaction between those who lived along the river and the ecology of the river itself. Building on the past, each river gives meaning to those who inhabit its banks.

Over the years, river guides have been a primary force in the maintenance and transmission of river culture. Paid for their services by the day, these individuals not only build boats but they also prepare meals for their clients, serve as local historians, tie flies, and provide a general orientation to the nuances of fishing. Sitting on a stern seat or standing with punt pole in hand, the guide serves as a powerful purveyor of local Michigan folklife while the fisherman (customer/client) sits in the bow of the boat, like a witness or apprentice to the guide.

Perhaps the foremost guide on the Au Sable today is Jay Stephan, who is also recognized as the most accomplished builder of Au Sable riverboats. A guide since sixteen, he comes from a long line of river people. His great-grandfather came to Grayling (on the Au Sable) from Rouen, France. Stephan recalls that guiding in the past was somewhat different than the life of the guide today:

When I started, you had to teach them how and where to fish. You needed to read the water. The guide was expected to provide camping gear, camp set up, lodging—either a tent or cabin, all the food and cooking, and maintain all the gear—including retrieving ‘treed’ flies.

Life in the boat was not only hard work but often somewhat perilous. When paired with a novice with a fly-fishing pole, the guide frequently was nicked or caught by a misdirected line. Stephan notes, “I had a rule, that if a customer was careless, I would tell him he pays an extra 50 cents a nick [with a hook] and \$1.00 each time he draws blood.” Such rules instilled more cautious casting; however, it was not unheard of for a careless customer to be put out of the boat on a bank and told to find his way home.

Renewed interest in guiding today has increased the number of guides on the Au Sable, although few pursue the occupation full-time. Increased interest is attributed to the desire of the new

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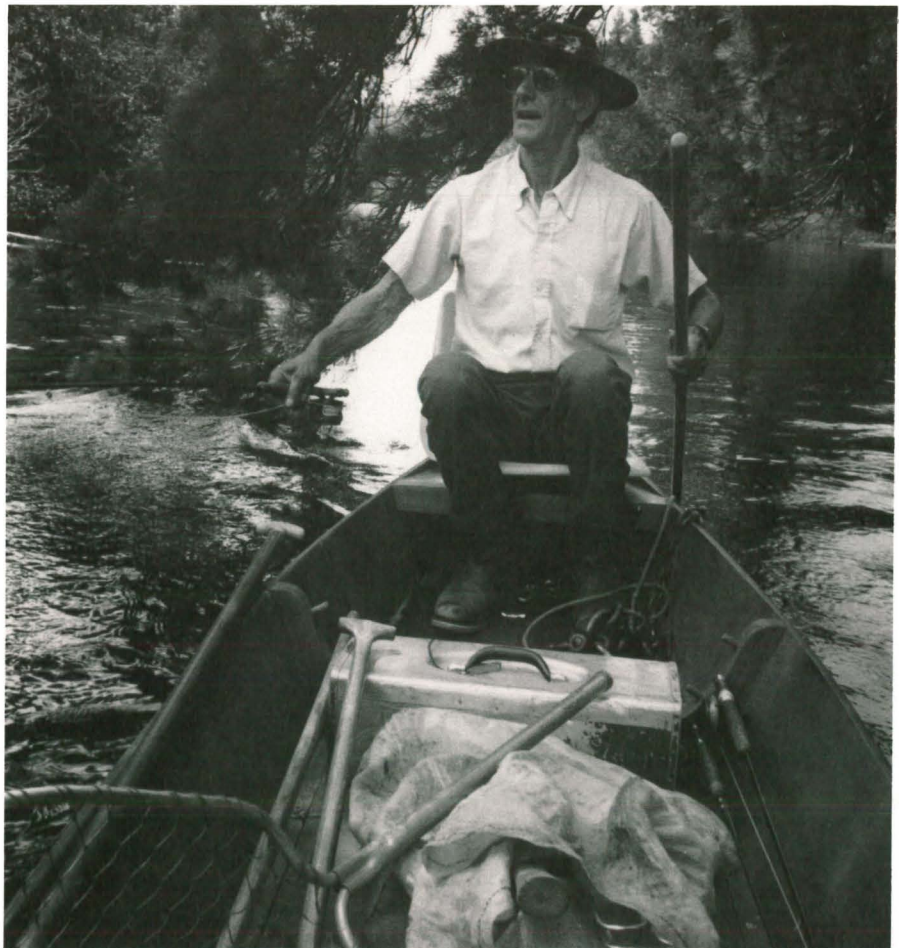
fisherman to have lessons before going out on his own. The guide himself does not usually fish, but rather he directs the customer to good fishing spots and teaches the techniques of casting, “working the fly,” and “setting the hook.” Good guiding requires patience and a willingness to work within a customer’s ability. Guides, like Stephan, take pride in teaching a customer and developing regulars. Never relying on advertising, guides are well known locally, and area bait shops provide constant referrals.

The cooking of meals by guides along the river depends on the success of the fishing. Dinners of brook, brown, and rainbow trout are ideal, but disappointing fishing requires the guide’s ingenuity. A local, long-time favorite recipe on the Au Sable is “fish and flapjacks.” A sparse catch of brook trout and an ample supply of flapjack mix are combined to make a “fish fritter”-like dinner.

The Au Sable riverboat, the most tangible evidence of river culture, has changed little since 1879 when the first known written account of the boat appeared in *Scribner’s* monthly. The origin of the boat’s design has been a subject of dispute. Some locals claim it was influenced by dugout canoes made by local Indians such as Chief Shoppenagon — a legendary guide. Others contend the form was brought to the river during the lumbering boom years between 1867 and 1883 when one and one-third billion feet of logs rolled out on the Au Sable River.

One of the few design changes involves weight reduction due to the introduction of new materials. Old pine plank boats weighed as

Au Sable River guide Jay Stephan with a punt pole in one hand and a fly rod in the other.
Photo by C. Kurt Dewhurst



much as 350-400 pounds and more when waterlogged. Today's boats of marine plywood weigh 130-150 pounds. With the advent of polymers and epoxy finishes, the longboats can be sealed so they will not take on water. These finishes enable builders to utilize the more porous plywood, and naturally these lighter boats make loading and transportation up and down the river easier.

Riverboat building on the Au Sable continues today. According to David Wyss, one of the next generation in a long line of river guides and boat builders,

Many people have chosen to try and build their own longboat in recent years. The results are usually mixed as each builder tried to make his boat better — and they usually learn why the traditional patterns remain intact — they work and they are time tested.

The oral character of the boat building tradition is reflected in the comment of one old boat builder, "Bud had everything in his head just as I do." Such knowledge is passed down with care and pride.

Fly-tying on the Au Sable and other Michigan fly-fishing rivers — like boat building — demonstrates the persistent character of local folk traditions. While the so-called "scientific angling movement" has resulted in the sale and national distribution of standardized handmade flies of every type, local fly-tying remains intact. Wyss notes that people ask him, "What is that fly supposed to be?" He usually responds, "Well, it could be a number of things, but it works!" The key principle is to select the right fly to replicate insects found both in the area of the river and at the right stage of development in the season. Some local favorites on the Au Sable are Ernie Borchers's Special, Earl Madsen's Skunk Fly, Jim Wakeley's Yellow Bug, Barber Pole Drake, and the By Walker Drake. Each was developed by a local guide and often his name remains as part of the local vernacular name of the fly. These names in themselves are cultural artifacts of Au Sable River culture.

While fishing practices have changed and "no kill" areas have

Jay Stephan, one of the master boat builders and river guides on the Au Sable, loading a punt pole in his boat as he prepares for a "float" downriver. Photo by C. Kurt Dewhurst

Dick Bittner of Grayling tying flies. Photo by C. Kurt Dewhurst





Pere Marquette River or "P.M." boats were flat bottomed with squared off ends. Guides remained standing as they maneuvered the boat downstream with a 12-foot punt pole. Photo courtesy of Barney Barnett

Suggested reading

Adney, Edwin Tappan and Howard I. Chapelle. *The Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983.

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been established, Au Sable River culture survives today as a vital and energetic force. On other rivers, such as the Pere Marquette, traditional river culture has not fared as well. Like the Au Sable River, it too was the scene first of lumbering and later of sport fishing. Guides like Simmie Nolph settled in Baldwin and had a local boat builder fashion 20 P.M. (Pere Marquette) riverboats for use by a stable of local guides. Nolph, along with individuals such as Graham MacDougall and members of the Barney Barrett family, carried on the traditional practices of decades before. Combining all the roles of the Au Sable guides, these men carved out their own distinctive river lore.

Perhaps the most visible difference from Au Sable tradition is in the design of the P.M. boat itself: a float boat with squared ends, it featured an open area at the bow for the customer to sit in and a central plank seat. The twelve to thirteen foot punt pole had a metal spike on the end and the guide stood to punt the boat. Bill Beherens, a local boat builder, receives credit for refining the design. Not only were these boats used for fishing, they also took families and groups of local women downriver on pleasure cruises in the 1920s through the 1940s.

The nature of the river culture on the Pere Marquette was every bit as complex and established through the 1950s as it was on the Au Sable. Locally developed flies for fly-fishing were the Adams, the Royal Coachman, Lady Beaver Kill, and the Lady Jo Caddis (named for a local woman who owned a bait shop). However, state governmental fishery practices have dramatically altered the river culture on the Pere Marquette in recent years. The introduction of salmon for sport fishing has affected the trout fishing and the folk culture on the river permanently. Along with these changes have come new large drift boats. Recreational canoe liveries and the changing character of fishing has led to a steady decline of traditional Pere Marquette River culture.

Overall, however, river culture endures in Michigan, adapting to changes in the water resources, availability of materials, and public policy. One need only look at the Au Sable River, for example, to find evidence that the traditional boat designs are carried on despite the elimination of white pine planks as boat building material. What remains central to the character of local community culture—like Au Sable River culture—are the waterways and folk traditions that have combined to create a distinctive sense of place. Michigan has a wealth of such local folk cultural communities that deserve not only our understanding but also our commitment to their continued existence.