

Life in the Michigan Northwoods

by Eliot A. Singer

Above a line that follows US 10 from Ludington's harbor on Lake Michigan through Clare, the self-proclaimed "Gateway to the North," to Lake Huron's Saginaw Bay, Michigan is mostly woods. Interspersed with thousands of lakes, crossed by cold rivers and streams, teeming with fish and wildlife, the northwoods is to the tourists, boaters, anglers, snowmobilers, and hundreds of thousands of deer hunters who make their yearly pilgrimage in late November, a recreational paradise.

During the off seasons, away from the big lakes and resorts, however, the northwoods has a more permanent population. Purposefully ignored by the travel brochures, and benefiting only marginally from the tourist industry, these people have made an art of *making do*. With almost no industry in the region, and, except for the fruit farms near Lake Michigan, little economically successful farming, "you either live off the woods or you go on welfare." And for most of these people, who pride themselves on self-reliance, government assistance is rarely an acceptable alternative. The spiritual, and in many cases the actual, descendants of earlier fur traders, loggers, and homesteaders, these residents have earned the right to the description once applied to the typical lumberjack: "the most independent man on earth. . . . No law touched him, not even smallpox caught him. He didn't fear man, beast, or devil" (in Richard Dorson, *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers*).

In this harsh economic environment, the people of the northwoods survive through self-sufficiency, adaptability, and versatility. Any one person may expertly hunt, fish and trap, smoke fish and venison, sell bait or a few Christmas trees, cut pulpwood, grow and can fruits and vegetables, raise a few chickens, process maple syrup, and, occasionally, guide hunting or fishing trips. The emphasis is on doing it yourself, and in finding a way to modify whatever is available to fit one's needs.

The piles of rusting metal scraps and the junked cars on cinder blocks, loathed by the tourist industry and interpreted by visitors as signs of slovenliness, are, in fact, resources for manufacture. While the log cabin may be the most romantic example of a northwoods home, much more common is the construction of a house by modifying and building extensions upon a trailer or mobile home. Land in the northwoods is generally cheap, and most families manage to purchase a small parcel. Building a house, however, requires far more capital, so often a young couple will live on their property in a trailer. As weather and a growing family necessitate, the couple may build onto the trailer: a roof for protection from leaks and heavy snow accumulation, an entrance way to keep the house clean, an area for storage, and an additional room for a child. These trailer houses are typical of the northwoods, but often the

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Michigan backwoodsman, 19th century. Photo courtesy Michigan State Archives, Department of State

modifications become so extensive, the original trailer all but disappears from view.

The trailer house is an excellent example of the ingenuity with which northwoods residents make creative use of available materials. Their greatest resources, however, are the natural ones the woods and water provide. The culture of the northwoods revolves around hunting and fishing. It is the favorite topic of conversation, and the joke is that when a new electrical power plant was built in Ludington, the workers agreed to work every day of the year, even Christmas, except one: November 15, the first day of deer season.

While visiting hunters and anglers provide an important boost to the local economy, these sportsmen and women, who are more likely to stuff a big fish than eat it, are generally treated with disdain by the locals who are so expert at killing deer that they regard venison as a staple, not a delicacy. Nothing annoys the natives more than a trophy hunter who takes the head of a deer and leaves the carcass to rot. Most northwoods residents strongly feel that they ought to have a greater right to the wildlife that surrounds them than should those who hunt and fish for sport. This leads to controversy over what kind of fish should be stocked and by what means they should be caught. It also leads to poaching.

Poaching, or “violating,” as the locals call the illegal taking of fish or game, is serious business. Michigan’s Department of Natural Resources issues a long series of rules that govern hunting, fishing, and trapping, and the breaking of any of these rules is punishable by considerable fines and imprisonment. No one, including the violators, denies that enforcement of these laws has greatly enhanced wildlife in the state. Yet, violating in the northwoods remains a common, and for many people a socially acceptable, practice.

Poaching sometimes leads to potentially violent encounters between conservation officers and poachers, and the game wardens love to tell stories of their heroics in the face of danger. The lighter side of poaching comes from the stories the violators tell of their escapes and pranks. One violator, who sees himself as something of a Robin Hood, claims he kills deer for those too old to hunt “because they still like the taste of venison.” He tells about how,

One time I walked into the [local restaurant] only to find the game warden sitting there. ‘Hey, Joe,’ he says, ‘You killed any deer lately?’ ‘Sure,’ I says, ‘I got two bucks in the back of my truck right now.’ Well, the game warden just laughed. ‘But you know somethin’, that’s just what I had. I had two bucks out there in the back of my truck, under a tarp.’

Another story tells how the game warden was having trouble catching an unknown poacher. Every Sunday he would go to his sister’s house for dinner and brag about how he was going to lay in wait for that poacher the next day. But, each time it was as if the poacher knew just where he was going to be. Turns out, the poacher was that game warden’s brother-in-law.

Many of the first non-Indians to visit Michigan came as trappers or fur traders, and trapping continues to be an important part of northwoods life. While only a few earn a living at it, many trap to supplement their incomes. Successful trapping requires an enor-



Trapper Damien Lunning pulling a beaver from the ice, Mio. Photo by Eliot Singer



Trapper Judy Lunning skinning raccoon, Mio. Photo by Eliot Singer

mous amount of environmental knowledge. Trappers must distinguish tracks and spoor, recognize paths and channels, and have an intimate knowledge of animals' habits. A good trapper learns how to modify or disguise nature to encourage or lure the animal to a trap. For example, trapper Damien Lunning of Mio, after moving around branches to transform a channel, marks his construction, as a beaver does, by placing a wad of mud on it. Good trappers are also good conservationists (their livelihood depends on it) and take care not to overtrap a given area.

To run a trap line, every day the trapper must drive down almost inaccessible dirt roads, tramp many miles through underbrush, swamp and snow, and drag his catch out of the forest. And when he returns home, after ten hours in the woods, with, say, a half dozen beaver, ten muskrats, a couple of coon, a red fox, and a coyote, the animals still have to be skinned, scraped, and put on boards or stretchers to dry before the next day's trek.

Little of the animal is wasted. Beaver and muskrat are often eaten, used to bait coyote and fox, or fed to the chickens; scent glands of some animals can be sold; and even the penis bones of the male racoons are of value: down-state factory workers like to give them to their wives and girl friends for necklaces or earrings.

Those who live off the land in the northwoods see themselves as, and in many ways they truly are, the natural inheritors of a way of life that goes back to before the first non-Indian settlers. But this tradition of making do, of living off the land and using whatever resources are available, does not exclude them from the modern world. Northwoods natives own televisions and satellite dishes, drive pick-ups and snowmobiles, and cut their firewood with chain-saws. Modernity even intrudes on poaching stories. Not long ago, so the story goes, a hunter shot a wild turkey and put it in his freezer. A few weeks later the game warden knocks at the door. "Where's that turkey you killed?" "What turkey?" asks the poacher. "The one you killed," says the warden. This goes on for a while, but, finally, the poacher gives in and shows the warden the freezer. "How'd you know?" he asks. The game warden reaches under the wing of the turkey. "Like this," he says, and he pulls out one of those electronic gadgets used for tracking endangered species.

Suggested reading

Reimann, Lewis C. *The Game Warden and the Poachers*. Ann Arbor: Northwoods Publishers, 1959.