

The Whitefish Lake Watershed

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My Whitefish Lake (there are two Whitefish Lakes in Beltrami County) is just over twenty miles north of Bemidji. The Lake is 330 acres in size and located on the north side of the continental divide. Our water empties first to Red Lake, then to Lake Winnipeg and finally into Hudson Bay. For those of us who canoe in the BWCA and the Quetico, the ultimate trip would be a paddle to the Bay – the Hudson Bay. My best ever canoe trip began in Artillery Lake near the Manitoba/Ontario border and traveled the length of the Blood-Vein River back to Lake Winnipeg. The first night in camp as we recounted the long drive and the plane ride, I remarked to my partner, “We could have launched in Whitefish Lake in front of my house and actually paddled to this very campsite!” We began the down-river journey the next morning by offering tobacco at a pictograph site (the top photo on map) and the buffalo in the pictograph is evidence that the artist probably traveled from the plains area. I have often wondered if he ever visited Whitefish Lake?

The Beltrami County Plat Book (and tax statement) describes my 57.2 acres in Nebish Township as Government Lot 3, Section 12, Township 149, Range 33. Author Gary Snyder, in his book The Practice of the Wild, makes a convincing argument that regional government might be more relevant and effective if each unit or area was defined by watershed boundaries

My watershed address might be defined as: A community of oak, birch, and poplar trees that cover the southern slope of a rise of land above the northwest corner of Whitefish lake, at the 1358 foot elevation, that divides the Hay Creek watershed from the Darrigan’s Creek watershed, both a part of the Red lake Watershed that ultimately flows north to the Hudson Bay.

I have selected the Whitefish Lake watershed and surrounding area for my project but the boundaries will not extend to the Arctic. Aldo Leopold in The Sand County Almanac best describes my territory:

“It is a fact, patent both to my dog and myself, that at daybreak I am the sole owner of all the acres I can walk over”.

I began the project with a list of the wildlife that we typically observe. Two mornings ago, twenty-one deer walked past my dock area just before sunrise. They came from the west and walked around the corner and disappeared toward North Bay. I found that such a list was incomplete - there were so many questions. Where did these deer come from? Where they running out of natural browse? Did they feed at neighbors and why are they involved? Do the deer make a circular route? What is the history here? I

believe that “my place” will be best described if I make the connections and tell the stories of the animals, places, people, attitudes, and history.

Really Old History

The bedrock of northern Minnesota is a volcanic intrusive that dates back over two billion years. The soil covering this original part of North America is a mixture of sand, clay, and limestone that was left behind when the last glacier retreated some 10,000 years ago. The uneven terrain suggests a terminal moraine and while my well is 55 feet deep, hardly a mile to the west, water was not reached until 400 feet. There has been some exploratory drilling between Whitefish and Red Lake for valuable minerals and a number of mining companies are currently developing copper-nickel operations in the Arrowhead region of Minnesota. Currently the Minnesota Legislature is grappling with the controversy concerning future pollution from sulphide mining pitted against the economic trade-offs offered with local jobs. We could expect this Whitefish community to divide along those same lines.

Native Americans

The red line on the White Fish Lake map is labeled Old Indian Treaty Boundary and I know that I live on land that once belonged to the Red Lake Band of Chippewa. A number of treaties reduced the size of the Tribal holdings as the “white” population expanded when they discovered the value of the natural resources present. One of my neighbors has purchased a large amount of title insurance to protect his holdings in case some future judge would rule against the 1889, Final Land Agreement. The northern Minnesota Indians lived as family groups in the winter but then came together as a tribe for the maple-sugaring season. I always wonder if the same families claimed the same ground when they dispersed every year for the winter season. On Whitefish Lake, the crest of Eagle Island certainly must have been held as a sacred place for those families. The skinny island slopes upward to an eastern-facing top and then drops abruptly down a bare clay slope to the water’s edge. This peak is covered with ancient white pines, an eagle’s nest and a view to a rising sun across the widest part of the lake.

Logging

My roots are in northern Minnesota – my Grandparents came to this area at the turn of the century. The Nebish Township was surveyed in 1890 and a railroad was built in 1887 to transport the logs eight miles north to the Red Lake Landing (Redby). The early equipment was shipped by rail to Walker, barged to the north shore of Leech Lake, and then winter sleighed to Nebish. In 1900, the Minneapolis, Red Lake & Manitoba Railway Company initially extended its tracks 2.5 miles to Whitefish Lake and subsequently to Bemidji.

Lumberjacks felled the white pine trees in the winter. The trees were limbed, cut to length, branded with a marking-hammer that indicated ownership, and then skidded to the frozen edge of the lake. By the time the ice melted in the spring, I would guess Whitefish Lake was nearly filled with floating logs. The old rail line extended on a trestle

over the water where the floating logs were hoisted into the empty cars and shipped to the mills.

The Whitefish spur was abandoned in 1905. The old rail line bed remains as a four-foot high, narrow ridge of sand extending diagonally across my driveway. Today the tracks are gone but jack pine trees more than a foot in diameter now cover the old grade. We occasionally find rusty railroad spikes, especially after road grading. On a quiet day, while floating on the west edge of our bay, we can look into the water and see old timbers, cables, and planks, all twisted and half-buried in the sand and mud on the lake bottom. There are a number of deadheads still floating in the lake, still with their ownership stamped into the but-end. The logs float vertical in the water, change location depending on lake level and can be a problem for boat motors or swimming. A few fishermen use them as reference points as they provide a miniature eco-system for aquatic life. There is a rumor that an old engine fell from the trestle and is laying half buried in the lake bottom. (I have heard similar stories for many of the lakes in northern Minnesota).

Logger's Party Shack

Perched in the middle of the peninsula, just above the sand beach, is a large fireplace of yellow brick topped with a broken chimney. A log cabin along with the fireplace was constructed sometime after the turn of the century. A train hauled logs to mills in Bemidji while a gasoline-powered motorcar provided service for passengers, goods, and mail in those years. Some high-placed officials occasionally used this equipment to bring liquor and girls from Bemidji to Nebish and then east on the Whitefish Lake spur for weekend parties at the log cabin across from the trestle. One of the wives left behind in Bemidji somehow found out about this scheme and the following week, the cabin burned to the ground. This story is proof that some things never really change!

The McMansion

This property is truly a microcosm of the history of northern Minnesota in terms of ownership and utilization of resources. In a mere century, this lake has changed its focus from a Native American presence to logging, to farming, to a private cabin, to a mansion for the well-off. Here is a beautiful sand beach, maybe a quarter of a mile long, that leads to a steep hill covered with pine, birch, and maple trees. One can visualize Native children carrying buckets of sap from the maple trees back to the big kettle over the smoky fire. Loggers arrived and cut most of the white pine trees. A former owner attempted to raise silver fox but a few probably escaped into the wild and are the forefathers of the silver fox that we occasionally see now. Local farm kids used to walk from Hay Creek Road, through the woods and then boat across the narrows to the Fox Farm for a swim. When we first moved to the lake, the Fox Farm property, a 300-acre parcel, was known as the "Chumly Place" Mrs. Chumly, at 80 plus years of age and armed with a shotgun, once drove a DNR work party off the property. She subsequently

sold to a developer from near the Twin Cities who built a “McMansion”, 6000+ square feet of house, rumored, “to impress a girl friend!” The property eventually was repossessed by the bank and recently resold for near one million dollars.

Eagles

There is an active eagles’ nest in a white pine tree on the left island of Whitefish Lake. We do not know if it is the same pair that returns every summer but they have raised one or two young almost every year that we have lived here. The nest is easily visible from our deck in either spring or fall but optimum summer viewing is from a boat or canoe at the weed line of the eastern shore of the island. We keep our distance in the early part of the year when the young are just out of the egg but by the middle of July, the adult birds do not seem to care. By August, we do not see the adults nearly as often and I have speculated that they fly to other nearby lakes for fishing. The young grow rapidly and can be seen, late summer, practicing the art of flying. One of nature’s great sounds is in the early morning, just before sunrise, when the eagles chirp and cackle with a harp-like musical tone. Often these same verses are repeated just before dark. I like to think that the couple is first planning and then recounting the experiences and successes of the day. After all, they go fishing every day!

Doctor’s Island

We always referred to it as Doctors’ Island. You can see the main cabin of this old fishing camp hidden in spruce trees on the right hand side of the “look east” fetch of Whitefish Lake. Two doctor families from Rochester, Minnesota own the island along with a small landing in the far corner of my property. A few years ago while in the car, I tuned into the middle of a call-in show on Minnesota Public Radio. The discussion concerned mental health issues and how an individual needs to discover serenity in order to either overcome a personal problem or find fulfillment in life. A caller described and recommended a book “written by a woman from Rochester who spent parts of four seasons on an island in northern Minnesota.” I wondered if that might be the folks on Doctors’ Island. Thanks to Google, I found the book, Smithson’s Island, the Necessity of Solitude on Amazon. These neighbors visit the Northwood’s for the right reasons! Judy signed our copy, “To Harold and Jayne, who also appreciate the joys of solitude.”

Clowns

Others on the lake do not act like the year-round residents – they are clowns because of their bad behavior. They drag skiers and wake-boarders all over the lake with boats and motors much too big and noisy for this quiet lake. They run for hours and occasionally invade “our bay”. The last straw was when they did power turns around the weed pad that marks the sunken island in the middle of the bay. What is wrong with those people? Don’t they appreciate quiet? How about the loon nests, loon babies? These folks can irritate without even going on the water. They shoot guns, launch fire works, firecrackers, and hold late-night parties. Last summer the lake had “stereo wars”. Another resident carried stereo speakers to the beach and played loud

Classical music to combat the rap and heavy metal that was rolling across the lake from the east.

Wolves

An unexplained mystery to life in northern Minnesota is the hatred that many residents have for *Canis lupis*. Wait! My dog is a *Canis lupis*! But then, so is the gray wolf - we call them timber wolves. Many times I have heard area farmers comment, "Well something is chasing my cattle!" It is easy to understand their predicament if they are actually losing calves. Wolves will often devour every part of their victim and the DNR authorities require some physical evidence if there is to be any reimbursement. In the fifteen years of living at the lake, I have actually seen four wolves, all in the winter. There is one instance that stands out as my all-time favorite wildlife sighting. I was skiing on the Nebish trail and my dog, Toby, usually in the lead, lagged behind by a few yards. I moved at a moderate speed up a small rise on the eastern boundary of the first ash-swamp. When I crested the hill, a large, dark-colored wolf lifted his head from the soft snow on the left of the trail. I would guess that he had been after a mouse or some other fury morsel tunneling near a large stump. We were separated by not more than ten yards and it would be difficult to guess which of us was more surprised. We both froze for a few seconds before he made a giant leap across the trail and was out of sight before Toby joined me. My domesticated version of *Canis lupis* was totally unaware of the excitement or danger that he had missed.

Fishing

My Uncle Glen related that early logging camps kept a netting crew at this lake in order to provide fresh fish for their crews. Today, the fish of choice, at least in the winter, is the whitefish so the lake is aptly named. The whitefish-spearing season begins as soon as the ice is strong enough to support human traffic and most people quit just after the first of the year. The real enthusiasts hope to set up a dark house by the end of November but this year the ice did not firm up until the second week in December. The serious fishermen, the "pros", set up on the lake-side of the Point, the narrows that divides my bay from the main body of water. Some years, as many as thirty houses located here - a DNR employee said this over-fishing ruined the harvest in subsequent seasons. Volumes can be written concerning technique, equipment, and successes. Fish stories abound! My most exciting time was when a muskrat popped up by my feet for a breath of air. One season, a muskrat decided to utilize my house and every night drug weeds and mud up through the hole and spread the mess across the floor. This nuisance along with the smell drove me to a new location. Spearing is truly a northern Minnesota tradition.

Hunting

Of course we hunt! Our Blackduck School District even cancels school for a day - we call it "deer hunting Monday!"

I have the rack in the picture labeled, "The Big One". My west neighbor, Jack, took the picture from a house window that overlooks his deer feeding area. We once had

a young dog named Lady who was constantly on the prowl either in the woods or along the lakeshore. One spring day she came back to the yard carrying one of the sheds. I praised her and said, "Now go find the other one!" The next day she did. Unfortunately, she sealed her fate the next week when she drug in a newborn fawn.

Jayne, (my wife) was raised in a deer hunting family. She hates the taste of venison and her instructions for my hunting usually run along the lines of "Don't you be shooting some tough old swamp-buck!" Sure enough, the next hunting season "The Big One" walked out in front of my stand. I just watched. I already had his horns, no one wanted to cook and eat aged venison and I hoped that maybe my son would get a shot at him. He stood in the opening for perhaps a minute before he fled. Shane caught a glimpse of him on the trail but there was no time for a shot.

The Rescue

One springtime morning, I looked out at the lake and saw a brown head poking from a small opening in the rotten ice near the right side of the small island. A dog struggled to pull herself up-and-out with her front feet but then helplessly fall back into the water. The owners, Paul and Sarah, heard the same ruckus from their home and contemplated walking on the ice or possibly launching an old rowboat. Fortunately another neighbor, Randy, joined them and convinced them that the condition of the ice surface made either option just too dangerous. Jayne and I decided that maybe we could paddle our canoe through some open leads in the ice and approach the dog from the backside of the island. We ran to the lake edge, righted the aluminum Grumman from its winter resting place, grabbed paddles and life jackets and launched into the icy water in front of our house. The first lead was an open break, just wide enough to move the canoe with either traditional canoe strokes or by pushing along by digging the paddles into the ice. The lead ended in about thirty yards and was separated from the next opening by about eight feet of ice. The ice in this barrier was weak and honeycombed and we found that we could bulldoze our way through, breaking up the harder chunks with our paddles. Thus we traveled from lead to lead with brute force. We made our way around the left side of the island but when we emerged on the south, there was no dog. We both thought that we were too late. We sat in disappointed silence when, off to our left, the dog gave out a whimper. Her head was barely visible - she was totally exhausted and just barely hanging on. We carefully slid the sixteen-foot Grumman across the ice with backward pushes on the paddles until we were alongside the dog. Jayne grabbed the dog by her collar and pulled her into the canoe. She was shivering, obviously very weak and she just settled into a pile in the bottom of the craft. We carefully turned the canoe, dropped into a lead, paddled home and wrapped the dog in blankets. Paul and Sarah were knocking on the front door before we could make a phone call. Lots of tears and hugs! Paul and Sarah presented us with the canoe plaque in the picture.

Studley

Horses have always been a big part of my life and Studley was my pride-and-joy. When you see a horse standing, seemingly just day-dreaming, look hard because they are always observing something – a bird, a deer, something interesting. Studley commanded a pasture that is gradually overgrowing with tamarack, spruce and poplar seedlings. Rusty and broken barbed wire, some strung yet between trees and some buried under years of leaf-litter mark the boundaries of a past owner's dreams. Aldo Leopold again:

“I try to read, from the age of the young jack pines marching across an old field, how long ago the luckless farmer found out that sand plains were meant to grow solitude, not corn.”

Finally, let me explain how we came to move to Whitefish. My wife and I made a list of the features that would make a perfect place for our family. We placed an add in the paper and said we could accept two out of three - big trees, a place for horses, and lakeshore. Eventually someone suggested this land but unfortunately, it was not for sale! Jayne wrote the owner a “suck-up letter” to describe our family and explain our plans and goals for the property. The following summer, the owner came up from Iowa and actually interviewed us. She liked us and decided to sell! We had all three pieces of our ideal home and at a place so beautiful that it was once featured in a Hamm's Beer commercial.

Paradise is not without problems. A Lake Association will be organized this spring. A survey of interested owners listed damage by beavers and the introduction of exotic species as the chief concerns. I wonder if all of the owners will be committed to any kind of regulation? Most of the year-round residents prefer to be “left alone”. We are not shy about posting our land. KEEP OUT! NO TRESPASSING! The summer people are here for the fun. I try to understand the pressures of big city living but there is a distinct divide between the full time residents and the summer people.

My family has found that it is somewhat difficult to live in the wilderness – impassable spring roads, flooding, snow plowing, the long commute to work or sports, few neighbors, power outages, slow internet, high gasoline prices. You have to WANT to live way out here. It is a rugged life-style and requires hard work.

But on the other hand - just look east at the morning sunrise – PRICELESS!