

Lured back in

A WELCOME RETURN TO FISHING.

Aaron Heimann

The satisfying crunch of tires on gravel reached my ears first, quickly followed by the upturned corners of my mouth. The sound of the tread transitioning from smooth blacktop to loose, dusty rocks prompted this broad smile, for I knew if there was a place I would most like to be on this mild June day it would surely be down a gravel road.

The lake was one of Northwoods' legends. It was well-concealed by thick undergrowth beneath gently-swaying stands of towering white pine. We came upon it suddenly, and despite knowing our destination, I couldn't help but be

surprised to find the azure lake amid all the green. I wish I could say we had the lake all to ourselves that morning, but a truck and trailer told of another early-riser who sought similar solitude and relaxation. We had come to this spot

outside the town of Cable in Bayfield County to engage in one of the most time-honored of Wisconsin's pastimes: fishing.

Now, before you get the notion that this is the beginning of a "big fish" tale, let me assure you, it is not. With similar grace seen in a fledgling songbird tumbling out of its nest for the first time, the following depicts how an adult human can clumsily flap his way to the soaring joy and relaxation of a weekend of fishing.

I had made the drive up to Hayward from the family farm in Chippewa Falls in mid-June of last year for a chance to see some friends from college: Will Mayberry, Jake Maas and Christian Herrera. Such is life, we had dispersed after school, but Mayberry happened to have grown up in Hayward and has family there. What better place to meet for a summertime rendezvous than Hayward, and what better activity in Hayward than fishing?



The author with a black crappie.

To be sure, there is good reason for that gargantuan fiberglass muskellunge — a good fishing omen if ever there was one. Now, I am a 24-year-old guy who, as best I can recall, hasn't fished since I was 8 years old or so. Like any proper old geezer, I reminisce on the “good old days” of my youth when I would play at fishing. More than that, I remember that carefree, hopeful feeling of waiting patiently for an unseen fish to take a bite. So, with a 16-year hiatus, I literally wiped the dust from my tacklebox and went out with the intent of catching not only fish, but a sense of that light-hearted childhood.

Well-intentioned new fishing line had lain in the bottom of that tacklebox for about a year. I had optimistically stashed my rod and reel in the backseat of my car, thinking I would eventually get out on the water during my travels. Well, that never came to fruition, but not for lack of opportunity, mind you. There



A motor-free lake in the Northwoods.

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Christian Herrera rowing the fishing crew to shore after a successful morning on the water.

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was, I think, more a lack of confidence to go it on my own. Having an outdoor inclination, I relish any experience to have nothing but the sky overhead. There are some forms of outdoor recreation however, that require more finesse and knowledge than, say, lacing up a pair of hiking boots and hitting the trails. Fishing is one such activity.

That gem of a lake hidden down a winding gravel road was in fact the location of our second day of fishing. Our first day was quite a different affair altogether. The day prior to driving down that inviting gravel road, my friends and I sat in the aluminium boat



The time capsule tacklebox.

AARON HEIMANN

as it motored away from the dock. We had launched into the long freshwater maze of islands renowned for its fishing potential: the Chippewa Flowage. I finally reeled that new line onto my pint-sized fishing rod, and looked down to assess the contents of my kid-sized tacklebox.

My tacklebox was a time capsule of my 8-year-old self, with colorful lures and artificial bait clearly selected for their novelty rather than function or practicality. The bigger, more gaudy-colored the better. It would seem that I had a fascination with larger-than-life lures and I distinctly remember thinking that I *always* needed a bobber attached to the line, just like the cartoons. Picking through the contents, I could discern no organization whatsoever, except, perhaps from “cool-looking” on top to “dumb-looking” stashed away in a jumble underneath. With one of those sighs that is accompanied by a reminiscent smile and a shake of the head, I turned to my more experienced mates for guidance.

Luckily, Mayberry's tackle was chosen for effectiveness, variety, and, most importantly, was organized “to a T.” All types of lures were side by side, ranging from smallest to largest and then further subdivided by color. I left my tacklebox lid closed for the remainder of the trip, gratefully borrowing both his lures and his expertise. After some time, foreign jargon went from nonsensical to recognizable, and I knew what a Mepps™ lure generally looked like and, more spe-

cifically, how a #4 Black Fury behaved when you reeled it back in to the boat.

I was coached on the nuances of reeling in every type of lure we tied on our lines. There was jigging for the cold-water, bottom-dwelling walleye with a squirming leech on the end of a weighted line. I periodically jerked the tip of the rod up and down to give the leech a more appetizing, and lively, appearance. Casting and jigging, tying on new lures, baiting and rebaiting hooks, for the angler's experiential equivalent of a minnow, I got a whole lot of much needed practice — we all did.

You see, the rain began on our drive to the Chippewa Flowage that first day, but the clouds restrained themselves until we had motored far away from the dock to really begin unleashing their contents. Committed then to being wet, we just kept fishing. Waiting for that break in the clouds that never came, we cast out time and time again with nothing to show for it besides an increasing knack for that “perfect” toss. There were, to be fair,

cast, reel, this abrupt apparition dangling from the end of the monofilament line took us all by surprise. It was a nice largemouth bass, a fish of considerably fewer than 10,000 casts, but our first fish nonetheless and more importantly, our first “keeper.” Into the live well it went. Soaked as thoroughly as our newly-acquired denizen of the deep, we revelled in the catch. The bass on board dried our spirits if nothing else.

What happened next was my first hands-on lesson in choosing an appropriate lure for the target fish as well as the weather conditions. Following on the coattails of Mayberry's success, I quickly swapped out a highlighter-yellow and red lure for one that matched the one the largemouth had fancied: pitch black spotted with some blaze orange. I like to think that the second bass saw that lure sailing through the air above it, meeting it with its mouth open wide just as it hit the water. The fish nearly swam itself into the boat, and in no time at all it was in my hand and into the live well. It was my first fish in over a decade and it was

In my mind, and on my taste buds, that bass was perfect in every way.

Outdoor recreation, especially fishing, in Wisconsin is a rich part of our state's cultural heritage. There is a reason folks from less naturally affluent states take trips to our fine state specifically to fish our waters. Just as good as the fishing is the fact that local anglers are willing to share their knowledge with novices like me.

We cannot assume that by only supplying the nature, our young people will develop a love of the outdoors. An adult, mentor-figure, or respected peer can act as a knowledgeable mediator between the two. If you are reading this magazine, there is little doubt in your proclivity for being outside and loving some form of outdoor recreation. Share your interests with others. Some folks of a younger generation just might be unaware of what they are missing. Or like me, they might have an urge to cast-and-reel and jig but haven't taken the plunge, for whatever reason. Nurture a fondness of nature and you can leave the world knowing it is in good hands.

To my fellow fishing novices: cast aside those lingering doubts or feelings of inadequacy — get out there this spring thaw on the freshwaters of Wisconsin. You might not catch a thing. You might even get rained on. Regardless, I assure you that you will not regret your time on the water.

And conversely, to those skilled anglers reading this — be like the Mayberrys and invite a novice or beginner out with you. Sure, you might have to tie a few lures, bait some hooks, and (hopefully!) take fish off those hooks but you might just land the big one — a new-found convert to the sport you love and a future steward of our fine state.

That second morning of fishing was calm with a two-dimensional blanketing of clouds overhead but no rain. Looking out over that tranquil lake tucked away at the end of that crunchy gravel road, the four of us reluctantly made the first ripples by launching a rowboat. On that motor-free lake, we again baited hooks. The rest of the Mayberry clan had been there the previous afternoon and told of fish too numerous to tally. Black crappie were biting on their beetle spinners on what seemed like every cast, they said. Joining them, we were glad to be dry and hoped that the fish were still hungry. ❧

Aaron Heimann is a born-and-raised Wisconsinite, currently living in New Zealand on a one-year work visa.



Jake Maas rows while his friends fish from the stern.

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a few bites — nibbles, really — which could very well have been imagined but nevertheless motivated us enough to keep at it. More often than not, we were setting our hooks with gusto, not into the mouths of fish but a tangle of weeds or a submerged log. Mayberry reminded us that folks say muskie, that fish of fiberglass fame, are the elusive fish of 10,000 casts — what if one is lying in wait beneath that fallen tree?

We were trolling slowly beside an island's edge of overarching vegetation, when suddenly, a fish struck Mayberry's lure as soon as it hit the water. Having been lulled into a dream-like state of cast, reel,

cast, reel, this abrupt apparition dangling from the end of the monofilament line took us all by surprise. It was a nice largemouth bass, a fish of considerably fewer than 10,000 casts, but our first fish nonetheless and more importantly, our first “keeper.”

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