

This is one of the first autobiographical essays I wrote. It got me accepted into the Long Bridge Writer's Group, but, unfortunately, I could not pay the fee. So I taught myself.

Tell me how ya think I did!

## Catching Pike Fever

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My early childhood was spent camping, hiking, and living in houses surrounded by the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, with tall pine trees, clear streams, and untamed nature surrounding me, in places such as Montana, Wyoming, and Canada. The natural world just made me smile, as it all fell into place: fish swam, elk bellowed, the wind howled through the pines and valleys, while water gurgled down streams. In that world there was no disarray, none that lasted anyway.

During those early years, I was fortunate enough to have a step-dad who taught me how to fish for bluegills (using a hook baited with a worm, dangling from a bobber) and trout (by reeling a spinner through a stream — far simpler than fly-fishing), which immediately hooked me; at every chance I pleaded with my step-dad to let me fish. The surprise of finding a squirming, flopping, shinning and tasty living gem — both trout and bluegills are brightly and diversely colored and have a tender, sweet flesh — hanging from a hook that I tossed in and baited with an ugly little worm or a lure that looked like jewelry amazed me back then and excites me still.

As I grew older, we moved. My home grew troubled. My parents divorced and home was chaotic. I longed for and sought out the peace and sensibility of the natural world, where I couldn't get in trouble, didn't get agitated or befuddled by social misunderstandings. As I lived in a city surrounded by the Mississippi, La Crosse, and Black Rivers, I went from being a Rocky-Mountain-foothills Billy to a River Rat. Much of my free-time was spent wandering around those rivers and the many sloughs (mini-rivers) that leaked from and later rejoined Mother Miss; remnants from the days when the great

river flooded the whole valley, becoming a rolling Great Lake.

During one of my wanderings along the shore of Swift Creek, a slough, while I was trying to sneak up on and catch sun-bathing turtles, I spotted a strange-looking fish about two-and-a-half feet long, which appeared to be sun-bathing or snoozing in the shallow water next to the sandy beach I was on. I crept up on the fish, got a good look at its side, and realized that it was a northern pike, as it had a dark back and sides, pinkie-nail shaped white spots running down its sides, and black dots on its dark-red tail, and a wide, long, wolfish mouth. Northern pike are shaped like barracuda, only bested in size and ferociously handsome appearance and respect as a Wisconsin game fish by its larger pike-family cousin the muskellunge.

I'd never caught a northern pike before, probably because I knew little about them and lacked the special tackle needed to prevent them from slicing my line with the many dagger-like teeth that lined their mouths. Before seeing that fish, I'd only seen the species in outdoor magazines or on fishing shows. After seeing one in the flesh, I was in awe and my instincts urged me to catch it.

Due to many earlier attempts to catch a variety of fauna, I was savvy about wild critters' zeal to remain wild. So I didn't just grab at the fish with my bare hands. Its slime and slender body would allow it to easily squiggle free from my grasp. Instead, being an avid "McGyver" fan, I figured out the best way to catch the pike with what I had on hand: small trees.

Spearing the fish was out of the question. I lacked any means to sharpen a spear's tip, nor could I put a barb on it, both necessary to spear then hold the fish. Attempting to use a crude, wooden spear would probably only injure the fish and cause it to swim off and die, for no good purpose.

I didn't want to harass the fish, but wanted to catch it,

show others what I caught, and eat it. The instincts at play in me weren't going to be satisfied and, indeed, would be offended by my merely wounding the fish and it swimming off to die. I decided that a stick with a "Y"-shaped fork in its branches would be the best tool for capturing the pike. I'd use the pronged stick to pin the long fish to the sandy bottom and maybe break its back so it couldn't swim loose. The fish would be hurt, but not simply to hurt it.

Looking around anxiously, I located a good branch, keeping an eye on the fish at the same time. I broke it down to the size I needed, planned my move, the steps I'd take, then grasped the stick firmly with both hands, bounded from the shore to just about directly on top of the fish and thrust the "Y"-shaped crotch at the end of the stick down onto the middle of its back, pinning it to the sandy bottom of the shallow water.

I must have stunned the fish, it must have been dozing, or I broke its back, as its thrashing quickly subsided. Once its movements were feeble, I grabbed it fiercely right behind its gill slits, hefted it from the water, and tossed it ashore, where I put the stick in the fish's mouth and out a gill slit to carry it home.

My heart was beating fast. My eyes were focussed — I was experiencing the same thing the character in Castaway played by Tom Hanks experienced when he finally managed to start a fire on the island he was marooned on. It was exhilarating to have succeeded by my own desperate cunning.

Since then I've caught many more northern pike, the easy way: using a rod and a reel. Most of those fish I released, as I came to respect that freshwater tiger for its fierce beauty, its function in the natural world. Of course, when I brought that first pike home and explained how I'd caught it, everyone jeered me, saying that I was telling a fish story, that I'd probably been given the fish by some real fisherman. But we all know the truth, don't we?