

A HISTORY OF FISHING IN THE BRULE RIVER

Brule River Survey: Paper No. 3

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The famous Brule River, located approximately 30 miles east of the city of Superior, in the northwestern part of Wisconsin, is one of the better known of the important trout streams in the United States. Owing to the fact that the trout populations have apparently declined since the days of lumbering operations, it was deemed desirable to make a complete physical, chemical and biological investigation of the Brule River, with the aim of establishing a stream management program for the river. The investigational work started in October of 1942 as a cooperative project between the Wisconsin Conservation Commission and the University of Wisconsin. It was first necessary to review the literature and determine the known facts concerning past conditions in the river. The present report is a short resume of the history of the Brule River valley, with the stress placed principally upon the fish and fishing conditions.

The very earliest history concerns the changes in the river during geological times. Since any geological history is concerned primarily with physical changes, these aspects are omitted and will be covered in a subsequent report on the geology of the Brule River valley.

The more recent history of the Brule River valley begins necessarily with the story of the Indian. The earliest record is that of the Mound Builders, who apparently had an advanced type of culture and were proficient in the metal arts. They mined copper in what is now known as the Minong Range and at Manitou Falls on Black River, and used both fire and water in mining the metal. The copper was worked into various weapons, implements and ornaments and when one of their number died, various copper pieces were placed in the mound with the body. These

Mound Builders vanished completely before the year 1400 A. D.

The next group of Indians, of which we have any knowledge, were the Mascoutins, "People of the Fire," a branch of the Potawatomi, who lived by trapping beaver, harvesting the wild rice, spearing whitefish and hunting deer. About 1400, the Dacotah, "The Seven Council Fires," left their homes in what are now known as Virginia and North Carolina, and trailed the bison westward and came to Wees-kon-san. The Dacotah drove out the peace-loving Mascoutins. The next large tribes were the O-dug-am-eeg (Outagamie), and the O-saug-eeg (Sauk) tribes which were forced westward by the Iroquois. These three tribes shared the wild rice lakes around the the Bois Brule-St. Croix headwaters. They also trapped beaver and other small animals.

About 1400 A. D. the Ojibwa Indians migrated westward, being forced out by the Iroquois. They moved very slowly but eventually reached what is now known as Sault Sainte Marie, where they established their principal village. Even here they were attacked by the Iroquois so they continued to move westward. In 1492 they reached Shan-ah-waum-ik-ong (Chequamegon Bay) where they engaged in battle with the Dacotah and Outagamie tribes, who forced them to move off the mainland and withdraw to Mo-nung-wah-na-can-ing (now Madeline Island). They built a village on the island and planted maize and pumpkins. All of their hunting for game was done on the mainland. These hunting excursions into their own territory so alarmed the Dacotah and Outagamie tribes that they engaged the Ojibwa tribe in an immense battle during the year 1612. The Ojibwa, however, won the battle and gained a foothold on the mainland, thereafter spreading to the south and west. As they moved westward they again fought the Dacotahs for control of the rice lakes and the small game hunting about the Bois Brule, which they called the Wa-sah-que-da-ce-be, "Burnt River." This peculiar name, "Burnt River," must have been used because of some notable forest fire or fires in its valley, before the day of the white man.

By 1620, the Ojibwa tribe had control of most of the territory but about this time the Sioux tribe moved into the area and many fierce battles were fought, until a truce was effected in 1671. After 1671, the two tribes collaborated in their hunting of small animals and in the harvesting of wild rice from the lakes. The

Ojibwas carried furs from the Brule valley to the French on the St. Lawrence in eastern Canada.

An account of the discovery of the Brule River has been given by Francis Parkman, who was called by Fancroft "the greatest American historian." He narrated that, "Daniel Greysolon DuLhut, in June 1680 while Hennepin was in the Sioux villages, set out from the head of Lake Superior, with two canoes, four Frenchmen and an Indian, to continue his explorations. He ascended a river, apparently the Burntwood and reached from thence a branch of the Mississippi which seems to have been the St. Croix."

In DuLhut's own words he recorded in his journal in June, 1680, "not being satisfied with my explorations by land, I took two canoes with a savage who was my interpreter, and with four Frenchmen, to seek the means of making it by water. [Referring to a trade route into the Northwest]. For this purpose I entered into a river which has its mouth eight leagues from the extremity of Lake Superior on the south side, where after having cut down some trees and broken through about 100 beaver dams, I went up the said river, and then made a carry of half a league to reach a lake which emptied into a fine river which brought me up to the Mississippi."

In 1693, Pierre LeSueur was dispatched by authorities of New France to keep open and protect the old route through the Brule and St. Croix Rivers. He built a fort on Madeline Island to guard the north approach and another on an island in the Mississippi, below the mouth of the St. Croix and near the town of Red Wing, Minnesota, to guard the southern approach.

Jonathan Carver, the first English traveler in Wisconsin, portaged from the St. Croix to the Brule River and descended to Lake Superior. He reported a number of beaver dams. However, in another period of his travels he says "this river was so scant of water we were obliged to raise it with dams for passage." His trip was made in July, 1767. Incidentally Carver re-named the river Goddard's River for an early fur trader.

In 1782, Jean Cadotte used the Brule-St. Croix route. The stream was hard to navigate owing to the beaver dams.

In 1803-04 Michel Curot, a fur trader, established trading along the Brule and St. Croix Rivers. He carried on intensive trapping of beaver and the river was cleaned of beaver and many

dams were destroyed. No mention was made of seeing any fish. His first trip up the Brule River started on August 23, 1803 and the first day he traveled as far as the end of the first *décharge*.¹ The next five days were spent in navigating the first three *décharges*. During the next three days, travel was much easier and the party reached a point which they called La Grande Prairie.² The next day the party continued and passed what they called the first rapid. They moved through an area of quick water but no rapids and passed what is now known as Little Joe Rapids. Two days later they had arrived at a place which Curot called the "Rapide à Vassel."³ During the next day rapid progress was made in the flat quiet water and a point was reached a league and one-half below the St. Croix portage. On September 5, the passage up the Brule had been completed and the party started the portage over into the St. Croix. A total of twelve days was required for the trip from the mouth of the Brule to the point of portage into the St. Croix.

One of the first Americans to visit the stream was Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who was an Indian agent at Sault Sainte Marie. In 1831, his party came to the Brule and was guarded by Lieutenant James Allen of the Fifth United States Infantry with a number of troops. Schoolcraft speaks of moose hunting on the Burntwood River, while Allen says "the river is exceedingly cold and clear and is filled with thousands of real mountain brook trout." Allen had hard work descending the stream with awkward soldiers who were unaccustomed to guiding canoes in strong water. "Often," says Schoolcraft, "on looking down its channel there are wreaths of foam constituting a brilliant vista. This stream might appropriately be called Rapid or Mad River." Schoolcraft made no mention of beaver dams and apparently they had disappeared because of the thorough trapping of Michel Curot. Schoolcraft was the first to mention trout in the river. According to the records of the earlier explorers the river con-

¹ A *décharge* indicates a place where it is necessary to portage. The first *décharge* was about three miles above the mouth of the Brule. The bed of the river at this point was solid brown sandstone and the place is now known as Gregory Falls.

² Properly speaking there are no prairies on the Brule. This camping area is supposed to have been on the eastern bank above the mouth of the Little Brule River where the banks are somewhat flat.

³ Above what is now known as Nebagamon Rapids, the river expands into a number of lakes, Cochran's, Spring, Lucius, Big and Sucker. Falls Rapids, above Sucker Lake, although very short, are considered the hardest on the upper river, and these are probably what Curot called "Rapide à Vassel."

tained hundreds of beaver dams but no fish, although most of them referred to fish in the St. Croix waters, especially in Lake St. Croix.

From the time of the earliest Indians to the period of Schoolcraft the river had been called by many names: Nemitsakouat, Wisakoda, Bois Brule, Burntwood, Goddard, Brule and Mad River.

In 1846, John R. St. John was charting the country in the interest of mining companies and wrote a report on "A True Description of the Lake Superior Country." He writes of the Bois Brule: "The shore of the river is a sandy alluvium, as the rivers Montreal and Ontonagon, with the red sand rock, and the country of the Brule has the same general characteristics after leaving Great Lake Point, that marks the country of the Ontonagon, and the river itself, after leaving Keweenaw Point. Its mouth is thirty to fifty feet wide, sandy, and five feet of water on the bar. It surpasses all other streams in its brook trout, some of them, I have the assurance of Mr. Jacob, weighing ten pounds. Its waters colder and clearer, if possible than any other river."

In 1874, a Mr. R. P. Petre of Baltimore with his party, fishing the Brule, removed the barbs from their hooks because the trout were so easily taken that the time spent in removing the hooks from the mouth of the fish was considered time wasted. Mr. John Bardon of Superior, in the winter of 1877, saw "millions" of trout swimming under the clear ice of the Brule. He cut a hole through the ice and netted 1,500 pounds of trout without seemingly depleting their numbers. In 1878, "Long John" Murphy and his companion reported catching 500 trout by hook and line in three days.

In 1880, a prominent manufacturer, Samuel Budgett of Bristol, England, conceived the idea of improving the condition of some of his better employees. He purchased a large area of land at and near the mouth of the Brule River. He then selected approximately thirty families, representing various trades, brought them from England and started the first white settlement at the mouth of the Brule. He named the colony "Cleveland." The harbor at the mouth of the river was improved and fishing boats, nets, cooperage equipment and a sawmill were provided. Small farms were opened up and although the settlers

were a sturdy lot they were not successful and after a number of years a great many left and the colony disintegrated.

In a report by E. T. Sweet on the Geology of the Western Lake Superior District, published in 1880, the following description is given of the upper part of the Brule River :

“About four or five miles above the dalles on Sec. 30, commence the Upper Spring lakes. These lakes extend to within a mile of the dalles, and are usually merely former channels of the river. There are somewhat more than a dozen of them, each covering from three acres to a quarter of an acre. They are usually parallel to, and on the east side of, the main channel. They are not often more than five or six feet deep, but the water is very clear, and in the bottom of most may be seen jets of sand and fine gravel continually boiling up, varying in size from an inch to five or even ten feet in diameter. In passing over the surface of some of the larger lakes in a canoe, from fifty to a hundred of these springs may be counted. In these lakes are the breeding grounds of the vast numbers of brook trout that inhabit the upper waters of the Brule. I have seen them, upon a clear day, in these lakes, as thick as minnows in a common pond. The bottom of the stream above these lakes, and of the much larger lakes immediately below them, contain a deep, loose black mud, filled with insects and worms, the favorite food of the trout. It has been aptly said that this is the angler’s paradise. One may capture in a short time all that he can carry. Joseph Gheen, a half-breed Indian, has recently built a cabin upon Sec. 21, near the lakes, from which point he takes the fish during the winter months to Duluth and Ashland. About a mile below the Spring lakes, swift rapids are found about two hundred yards in length, and near the termination the river is only seven or eight yards wide. The fall of the river here is about fifteen feet, and the place is known as the Dalles of the Brule. The banks are of clay and boulders only, and seven or eight feet high. At the foot of these rapids is the third Pucwagawong [Chippewa Indian—a place where reeds or flags grow] or Flag lake. It is only 250 yards in length and perhaps 150 in width. From the foot of the third to the head of the second Flag lake there are rapids of not more than a hundred yards in length. The latter lake is a mile in length and from two to four hundred yards in width, with a depth of three or four feet. The bottom is very muddy, and it is said that during the summer, reeds, grasses, and moss form an almost complete mat over the surface of the water.”

The lakes referred to as having boiling springs and as being the breeding grounds of the brook trout consist of the spring ponds which were bought by Henry Clay Pierce and fenced off from the river proper some time shortly after 1905. It is interesting to note that the widespreads which are now known as Big Lake and Lucius Lake were reported as having a mud bottom and becoming choked with aquatic vegetation during the summer months.

About 1880, the Brule River valley was opened for travel. Railroads and wagon roads were built and the river was becoming known as an excellent fishing area. Trout were reported as plentiful, and all fishing was done from canoes and boats. About this time articles began to appear occasionally in the Superior papers with reference to the Brule River and the trout.

In June, 1884, it was reported that the trout fishing in the Brule River was excellent. In May, 1885, there appeared an article which stated that no finer trout fishing can be found anywhere than can be found in the Brule. Speckled trout twenty-four inches in length have been taken from this stream. The principal fishing grounds, from the town of Brule, were up the river about five miles by road, and about eight by river. These grounds are above the lower rapids and extend about six miles to the upper rapids. This is considered the best fishing area on the river, although there are trout in all parts. The bottom is sandy and rocky and the water is clear, cool and sparkling. The banks rise gradually from the river and are covered with gigantic pine trees. In one report of a party of three fishermen they state that in one day's fishing they caught 100 speckled trout and that on the next day they caught an additional seventy-four, one of which was sixteen inches in length. The trout were jumping out of the water in all directions.

In 1892 the village of the town of Brule was platted. The townsite was owned by a group of central and southern Wisconsin lumber operators. The business and other activities of the town were controlled by the Brule Lumber Company, whose holdings consisted of over 3,000 acres in the Brule valley, which was considered the richest and most dense timber district of northern Wisconsin. It was estimated that the company cut approximately fifty million feet of logs as a minimum. In the winter of 1892 about four million feet of logs were cut.

In an article dated 1893 it was stated that, "along the Brule River which flows through the Town of Brule, the timber is very heavy and is of a very superior quality. The Brule River is a beautiful stream and is celebrated for its trout fishing. Some of the finest specimens of trout ever hooked in the Northwest have been taken from these waters and as a result the river has gained a general celebrity for its beauty and limitless fishing resources."

In October of 1894 an article was written giving a resume of the season, as follows:

"The steamer North West has brought many eastern people to the Brule, and has largely increased the number of campers. It is estimated that nearly a thousand people have encamped on the upper Brule this summer. Taking the clubhouses in their order, going up the river to-wit: St. Paul or Winneboujou clubhouse, 50; Milwaukee or Gitche Gumees clubhouse, 30; Ashland or Missishin, 50; Lucius (public clubhouse on McDougall's land), 300; Tibbits camp (public), 60; Kline's of Duluth, 10; St. Louis, 22; White Birch, 50. This range of clubhouses extending along the river, from the St. Paul clubhouse on the north near the D. S. S. & A. tracks, south fifteen miles to the White Birch clubhouse near the Omaha railroad, covers practically, the fishing grounds of the Brule. The fishing laws ought to be further modified to prevent shipping at any season. One party shipped over 2,700 trout to Superior this summer, supplying three restaurants. Over sixty campers were on the grounds as early as May."

In 1895 the following notes were published with reference to the Brule. "The primeval forest overhangs the river on both sides and the picture as nature originally painted it remains intact. The rustic furniture and other handiwork of nature are the same today as they were when the red man alone paddled his canoe upon its waters". "The public and the clubhouse people on the Brule do not get on well together. The latter own a great deal of the land on the river and their enjoyment would be unalloyed if they could keep all other persons from fishing in the waters of the Brule. They will not let a person erect a tent on their lands." The record of one party of four men staying at Joe Lucius clubhouse was as follows: "Captain McDougall caught a fine string and some of them were big fellows. G. L. Rice caught 74, McHugh and Monson each caught as many as their con-

sciences would permit of." "Mr. A. W. Shaver caught 100 trout and then quit when they were biting the best, remarking to his guide: 'Bill, this is too much like club fishing; guess I'll quit.'"

The lumber interests started cutting in 1892 and had all of the virgin timber cut by about 1909. During this period, when the logging dams were in the river, the catch of speckled trout continued to decline. By 1906 many complaints were being made that something had to be done to save the trout. About 1905, Henry Clay Pierce started to build his estate and one of the features was a large fish hatchery where he produced speckled trout. "It is stated that in his ponds at the present time (1908) there are enough trout to put the Brule back in the class of the best streams in the entire country. They are of all kinds and sizes."

In 1906 an article was written on "The Boise Brule" in which are given many statements in regard to the fishing.

"It is the real and ideal home of the trout. In the days before logging dams were built it was filled with brook trout. An ordinary fisherman might catch a hundred fish a day with hook and line, old fishermen tell you. The upper river is surrounded by innumerable springs which form a natural home for trout. The logging dams have created great havoc among the fish during the past few years, as they interfere with the yearly migration of the trout, these fish following the habits of the salmon. The dams almost depleted the stream for the reason that there was no fish way and the mature trout could run out but could not return the next year. A few years ago rainbow trout were planted in the river, and these have grown and multiplied very rapidly. The fish do not migrate to and from the lake as do the brook trout (the present stock of rainbow trout in the Brule River migrate to and from Lake Superior). To a certain extent this drawback of the dams has been remedied, as most of the lumber is cut. It has been proposed and in fact is being strongly urged by a number of prominent people (notably Hon. C. D. O'Brien and Mr. Weyerhouser) that the state of Wisconsin take steps declaring the Brule River and its valley for a mile on either side a state park forest and fishing preserve. This would give to the people of the state, and country generally, one of the most beautiful resorts in the northwest, would prevent for all time the building of dams and cause the removal of present obstructions, and bring back to its original conditions the fairest river of the northwest, the Bois Brule."

In 1909, during the last part of July, the floods on the Brule were reported as follows: "The rain Tuesday started the floods which are reported to have destroyed some of Cedar Island. Last night the river was more unruly than ever and the waters were inundating the surrounding country. The loss to the Pierce estate alone is estimated at many thousands of dollars and other lodges and cottages along the shore have been wrecked by the rioting river."

Among the notables to visit the Brule was General Grant, who came here in the 70's on a fishing trip. Grover Cleveland was the guest of Senator Vilas at his lodge on the Brule in the 80's and Calvin Coolidge spent the summer of 1928 on the Brule and was entertained by Henry Clay Pierce.

In 1936, with the use of WPA labor, a project of "stream improvement" was started on the river. In that year a total of 232 structures, such as deflectors, bend covers and other "stream improvement" devices, were installed in the stream. In addition 13 beaver dams were removed. In 1937, the work was continued and 36 structures were placed in the river with 17 additional structures being installed in 1938, plus 1,829 yards of dredging in Big Lake and Lucius Lake. The cost of the "improvement" work was approximately \$40,000. In addition to the WPA program, a vast amount of work was done by the CCC, such as installing structures, planting willows and cleaning out large amounts of down trees and other materials in the river which provide cover for trout. The particular stress at this time was to convert the river into a comparatively "easy" canoe stream.

On January 12, 1938, the Conservation Commission issued an order, F-309, which prohibited all forms of fishing except flyfishing on the Brule river between Stone's Bridge and Winneboujou. This order had been issued as a result of a petition containing 83 names of property owners. Of the signers, 19 were from St. Paul, 9 from Minneapolis, 19 from Duluth, 4 from Lake Forest, Illinois, 1 from Washington, D.C., 10 from Milwaukee, 1 from Superior, and 20 from Brule. The order, however, caused such a storm of protest that on April 12, 1938, the Commission issued order F-317 which rescinded order F-309.

For quite a number of years complaints have been made almost yearly to the Conservation Department that something should be done to improve the fishing. As a result of a com-

plaint made in December, 1941, that certain species of fish other than trout be removed from the waters of the Brule River, a check of the available information on the Brule River was made at that time. It was found that the Conservation Department possessed very little factual data on the physical, chemical, and biological characteristics of the river; information which is absolutely necessary in order to set up and execute an intelligent and successful fish management program on any stream. It was also found that although a number of cursory examinations had been made of the river, no management program had been or even could have been made from these investigations. The usual result was to increase the number of fish planted. In order to determine the financial extent of the stocking, the plantings of trout during the period of 1937 through 1941 were checked. It was found that a total of 616,850 brook trout, 150,175 brown trout, and 464,850 rainbow trout had been planted. This amounts to a grand total of 1,231,701 trout of all species which consisted of 4,717 adults, 73,929 yearlings, 1,137,055 fingerlings and 16,000 fry. Based upon accumulative rearing costs a total of \$34,247.67 had been expended in rearing the trout planted in the Brule River over a five-year period. Thus a considerable expenditure of funds was made with indeterminate results and very limited information was collected as a basis for a stream management program.

As a result, it was recommended that a complete investigation be made of the Brule River with the aim of establishing a stream management program for the river. The Fisheries Board of the Conservation Department accepted these recommendations and submitted a resolution to the Conservation Commission requesting the creation of a fund of \$9,000 to permit a two-year survey of the Brule River to determine the present existing conditions and to then formulate a future fish management program.

The Conservation Commission acted upon the above resolutions at their July meeting, 1942. At that time they created a fund of \$9,000 to be used for a two-year study of the Brule River. So, to aid in the execution of this study, the Conservation Commission asked the University of Wisconsin to assist in the undertaking. As a result of the above actions a co-operative agreement was completed in August, 1942, between the Wis-

consin Conservation Commission and the University of Wisconsin for the detailed survey of the Brule River. The actual investigation started on October 1, 1942, and will continue for a period of two years, after which time, a tentative fish management program will be formulated for the Brule River based upon the critical examination of the results obtained from the surveys.

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