

The 2007 Robert Traver Fly-Fishing Writing Award

The results of the 2007 Traver competition have left us shocked—but only in a good way. If you'll remember, we announced earlier this year that we had decided to experiment with changing our 14-year-old "fiction" competition into a "writing" contest in order to open it to all comers—essays as well as short stories.

Although at first we had some deep doubts about tampering with tradition, it turned out to be the best thing we could have done. Not only did we receive several essays worthy of the award but, by some miracle, the quality of the fiction entries rose dramatically as well. Last year's relative drought has been followed by a deluge of fine writing on the subject of fly-fishing—so much of it, in fact, that not only are we able to present you with a special "reading issue" just like we used to do in the good old days, but we could not even fit all of the deserving stories and essays into one magazine. You'll find three Traver pieces in this issue: the winning essay, "Hemingway's Meadow," by Jeff Day, along with a fine essay about the magic of bamboo rods ("Lives of Fly Rods" by Donald J. Goodman) and an excellent piece of fiction ("Shake and Float" by Josh Greenburg). Yet another terrific short story, "Time to Kill," by Michael Baughman, will appear in a future issue.

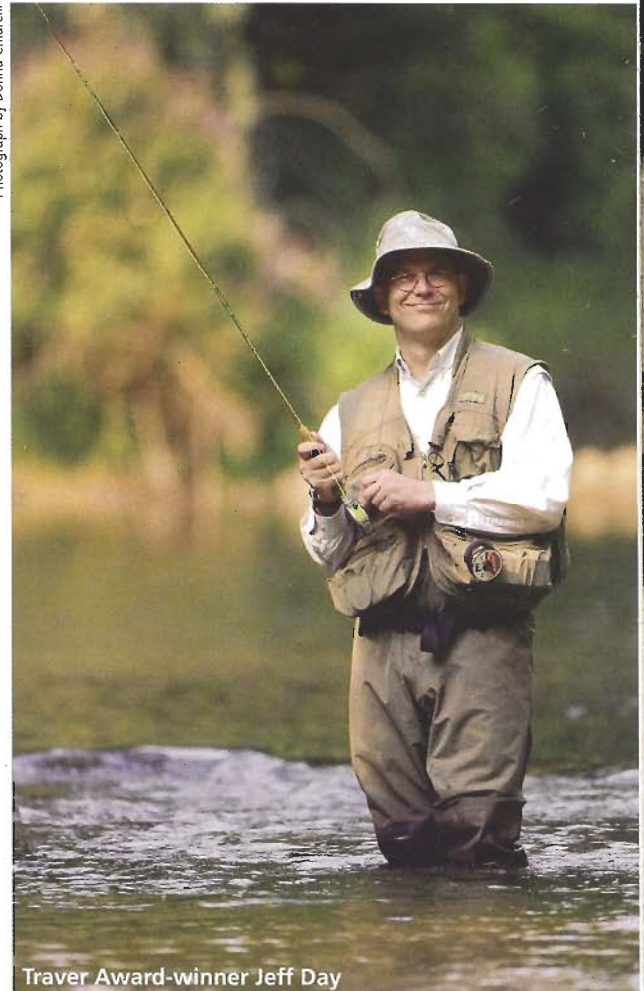
Traver Award-winner Jeff Day's life, by the way, is just as interesting as the essay he wrote for us. He is a woodworker and a home-improvement writer who lives with his wife and their three children in a 250-year-old farmhouse in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Jeff tells us that his first memory is of fishing with his father—and that his second is of reading Hemingway's "Big, Two-Hearted River."

As always, we have the John D. Voelker Foundation to thank for the \$2,500 cash award that annually goes to our contest winner. We are also grateful for the help of several of their board members in selecting that winner. This year, our panel of judges included the Foundation's Fred Baker, John Frey and Richard Vander Veen along with Nick Lyons, Seth Norman, Ted Leeson and *FR&R*'s editors.

The Voelker Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to furthering the memory and works of Robert Traver, pen name of the Michigan judge who wrote *Anatomy of a Murder*, *Trout Magic*, *Trout Madness*, and many other popular books. The Foundation's charitable activities include a scholarship fund for Native American law students.

Please enjoy our "reading issue," and don't forget to let us know how you like it. —*The Editors*

Photograph by Donna Chiarelli



Traver Award-winner Jeff Day

In Hemingway

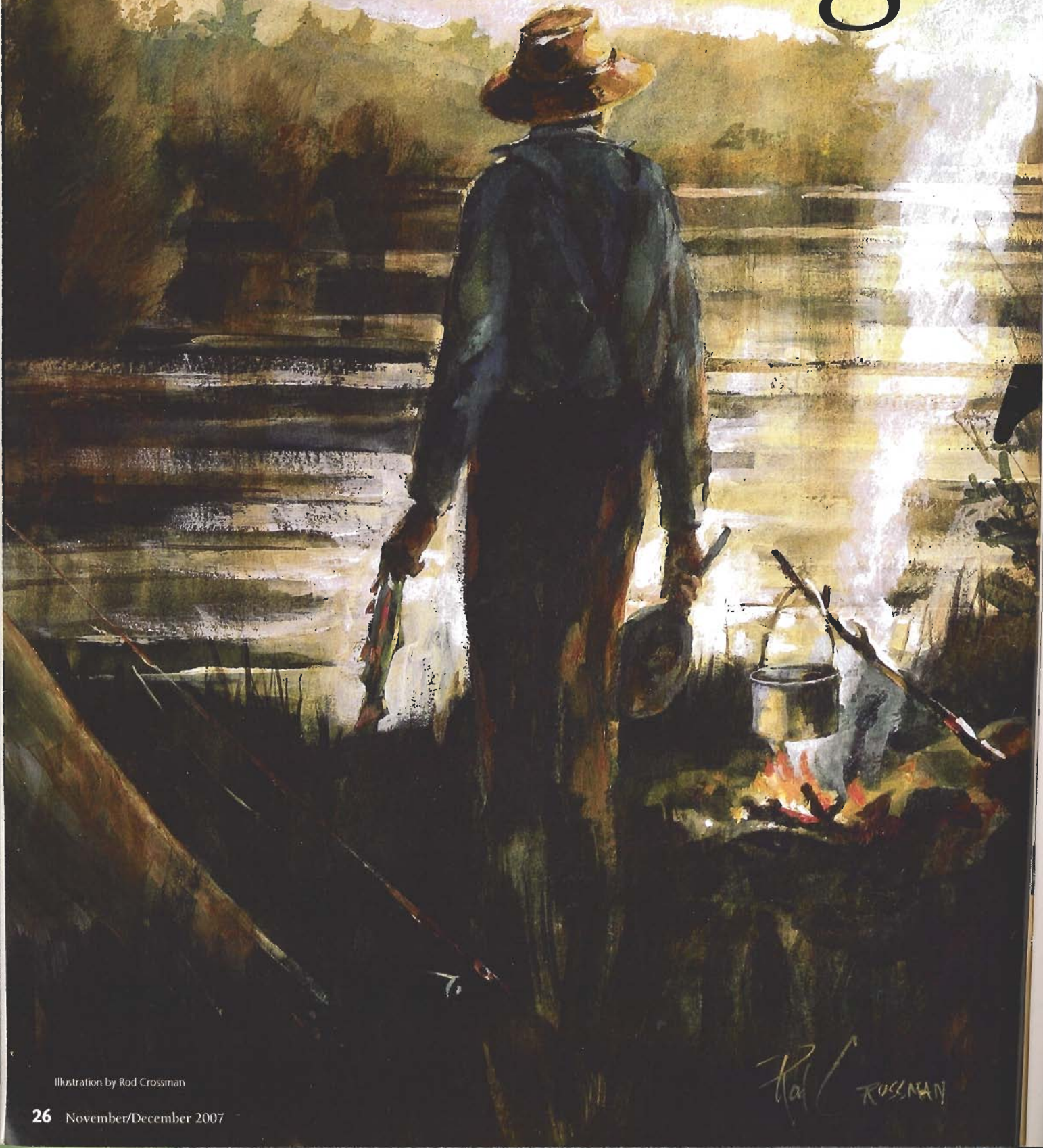


Illustration by Rod Crossman

Rod Crossman

ay's Meadow

The river, as Hemingway said, was still there. It was there in 1919, swirling against the log pilings of the railroad bridge in Seney, Michigan, while he fished it, feeding grasshoppers downstream with his fly rod and silk line. It was there in 1925, when he sat in a Paris café, writing "Big Two-Hearted River," the story of how Nick Adams found peace by fishing the river of his youth.

And it is still there in the summer of my fiftieth year as I unpack my rod and set up camp at the site where Hemingway camped, where Nick "came down a hillside, covered with stumps into a meadow. The river made no sound. It

was too fast, and smooth. At the edge of the meadow, before he mounted to a piece of high ground to

make camp, Nick looked down the river at the trout rising. It was a good place to camp."

By the map, the meadow is three-quarters of a mile long, and a quarter-mile wide. Behind me, at the southern edge, is the abandoned railroad grade that Hemingway followed out of Seney. Planted now

with red pines, the old grade turns and then heads northeast along the eastern edge of the meadow. Along the western edge is the narrow band of the Fox River, the river Hemingway fished, and which took on the name of the nearby Two-Hearted River when he wrote his story. Lined by alder bushes and the occasional tree, the river slopes to the northeast, more or less parallel to the railroad grade. Two sandhill cranes—four feet tall with 80-inch wingspans—make their way through the meadow. They walk by giving their call, a half gobble, half shriek, as if I weren't there.

Hemingway told Gertrude Stein that in "Big Two-Hearted River," he was "trying to do the country like Cézanne and having a hell of a time, and sometimes getting it a little bit." He had summered in northern Michigan in the days when it was as remote as Alaska is now, learning to fish from his father, and spending countless hours in the woods with the local Indians. He wove what he knew into his stories and told them like an Impressionist, in scattered points of light. An evening dew. The water bucket hung from a tree. The way you pitch a tent. Coffee, brewed to the recipe of a long-lost friend and sipped from a tin cup. "Two-Hearted River" is a hundred stories in one, layer after layer, like a Cézanne painting. Underneath it all is

By Jeff Day

what has to be the most literate camping manual in America.

You can see the pack as Hemingway describes it, the leather straps held together by copper rivets, the tump line around the head, the shape still molded to his back after he takes the pack off. The pack was a Northwoods favorite for nearly a century, and was the first pack I ever used, a Duluth pack, patented in 1882. It is still made today, and the one I am carrying is packed with gear Hemingway describes: Tin pots I bought from an Ohio tinsmith. A silk fly line, made in France. Vintage catgut leaders I bought from a fishing guide. A bamboo fly rod, bought at auction. A blanket roll. A bucket made of canvas.

I will spend a week in the meadow, trying to see it the way Hemingway did. There was "nothing but the rails and burned-over country," he wrote. "The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had left not a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House Hotel stuck up above the ground. It was all that was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground." Nick Adams, the sole character, begins a long, hard walk away from the devastation and towards the stream and the meadow where I am now camped. He has been there before and travels without a map. Trying to forget something he never names, Nick climbs a hill and then heads down to the stream, where the forest turns green and the water cool. There are two of everything, one good, the other bad—two ways to make coffee, two sides of the river, fish that inspire him, fish he kills. He loses the largest fish he has ever seen. He catches some smaller ones, and keeps two for dinner. Standing in the meadow, "he was there, in the good place." But he looks across the river at a swamp, where he sees life is hard, and the animals low and mean. He saves the swamp for another day.

Nick made camp slowly and carefully: The routine soothed him. I make camp carefully, too, but quickly, because I hear the river. Once my tent is up, I fill the bucket with water from the stream and hang it from a low branch. I step lightly on the grill to set the legs in the ground, and then put the pots on it. I spread blankets inside the tent, one folded in half as a cushion, the other folded on top as a sleeping bag. I button the tent, tie the pack to a rope, and haul it up 30 feet above the ground, where it is safe from bears. I look over the bank, fly rod in hand, and step in, still wearing my shirt, shoes, and pants.

In the days before waders and fishing vests, you waded in wool pants that helped keep you warm in

the stream. You stuffed your gear in your shirt pocket, or, if you were a gentleman, in your sports coat. Judging from Hemingway's careful description of Nick's gear, and from early photographs, Hemingway was a shirt-pocket fisherman. He used an old flour sack as a creel and grasshoppers as bait, keeping them in a bottle tied around his neck. Like the pockets in Nick's shirt, and probably Hemingway's, my pockets hold an extra leader, soaking in a tin between damp felt pads to make it supple; some hooks, and lunch—hardtack, smoked ham and dried apricots.

My rod is bamboo, wrapped with red and green bands of silk thread that will hold it together should the hide glue that holds it together dissolve. It's a Hardy, worth maybe \$200 or \$300. I bought it at auction for \$20. The silk line, one of about a thousand a year still made in France, cost far more. Nick paid \$8 for the silk line he put on his bamboo rod—half a workman's weekly pay in 1919. Wages have gone up, but the ratio remains constant, and the line I have is a present from my wife. Each line takes four hours to weave, during which time the maker repeatedly stops the braiding machine to add another strand of silk in order to create a tapered line that will land gently on the water. It's a honey-straw color, and the finish that makes it slide through the guides on the rod has a rich, waxy smell. If I want to make sure it lasts a long time, like Nick's line did, I will not only dry it out every night, I'll make sure that it is good and dry when I store it for the winter. An old silk line I once bought was typical of lines that were stored wet: It looked and felt like new, but had lost all its strength. A slight tug snapped it in two.

But my line and leaders are good, perhaps better than the nylon that replaced them, and soon I am catching plenty of fish. The streams I usually fish are full of rainbows and browns, but these are brookies with deep red flanks, pure white-tipped fins, and backs of mottled green and brown. I stare at them and wonder: *What was God thinking when he hid them in a stream?*

Back at camp, I change into dry clothes and hang my fly line, which is waterlogged and beginning to lose buoyancy, in the tree next to them. In the morning, when the line is dry, I'll grease it, and it will ride high on the water again. In the meantime, I start a small cooking fire.

Nick's first meal in camp, and by default mine, was spaghetti and beans mixed with ketchup. The

shiny tin pan turns soot black in the flames and I pour dinner into a pie-pan plate. The day has left me hungry, but the spaghetti and beans are a failure. Neither tin pans nor the giants of literature can save them. I promise never to eat them again, a promise that, by and large, I have kept.

There's a deep, red sky and Venus is rising in the west as I wash the dishes with hot water and a sliver of bar soap. There's no moon, and soon the Milky Way will be visible. If I am lucky, there will be Northern Lights, too, so I pull my blankets out of the tent, and stretch out to watch the sky. Sleeping bags existed in Hemingway's day, but were widely hated, because they were heavy and not much

Hemingway told Gertrude Stein that in "Big Two-Hearted River," he was "trying to do the country like Cézanne and having a hell of a time, and sometimes getting it a little bit."



warmer than blankets. "As to your bed," one old camping manual advises, "let us have one more whack at the sleeping bag—that accursed invention of a misguided soul. Leave your sleeping bag at home, or in the Minnesota woods or Adirondacks. Take a good pair of wool blankets."

I have taken a good pair of wool blankets (Nick took three), and in fact, they are more comfortable than a sleeping bag. Humanity has slept wrapped in some sort of blanket since the beginning, and the feel of wool, as opposed to the cold nylon of a sleeping bag, is comforting as I fall asleep. When I wake up, it is dark except for the stars. The Big Dip-

per has moved about a quarter of the way around the sky.

A great many things will wake me during my stay: A moose, snorting through camp; a bear, feasting on blueberries at the edge of the meadow; the howl of coyotes; and once the sound of a large, solitary trout, jumping and bellysmacking in the water. But what wakes me now, and what will wake me most often and most completely during my nights on the meadow is this: Since the beginning of time, no one, anywhere, has ever been as cold as I was in that meadow. The cold is deep and hard and slices through my body like a thin, metallic sheet of ice.

There are no Northern Lights.

Hemingway was 20 years old when the train pulled into Seney carrying him and two friends. "Seney was the toughest town in Michigan," Hemingway wrote in a draft of the story, and at one time it was: One street wide and one street long, it had 21 saloons. The three brothels in town competed with two more on the outskirts. With its wooden sidewalks and false storefronts, with the narrow troughs where the soil settled over the graves at Boot Hill, Seney looked and acted like a town from the Wild West. One bordello owner shot another to death; the survivor's father keeled over, dead in horror. The deceased's family murdered the survivor while the sheriff looked on. On calmer days, Snag Jaw Small bit the heads off snakes and frogs in return for drinks, and once taunted a barkeeper into feeding him by eating manure out of the streets. Old Light-heart lived in two sugar barrels turned end to end, ate raw liver, and lost his toes to frostbite. When drunk, Pump Handle Joe and Frying Pan Mag would nail his shoes to the floor, delighting in missing the absent toes. George Raymond looked on, reciting the *Odyssey* in Greek.

It was all about lumber. By 1929 the value of the lumber taken out of Michigan was twice that of all the gold taken out of California—and at the beginning of the Gold Rush, they were pulling \$50,000 of gold daily out of Sutter's Mill alone. The first loggers to survey the area around Seney found pine trees five feet to eight feet in diameter. Needles from the trees built a carpet a foot deep on the forest floor.

The lumber that rebuilt Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871 came from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Michigan lumber built structures in places as far away as Colorado, Wyoming and Europe. But by far the single largest log drive in Upper Peninsula history came in 1895, when a single company cut 185 million board feet of trees. Had the trees been loaded on a single train, it would have been 250 miles long. And then, like some bad cartoon joke, the trees that were eight feet in diameter were cut, shipped, milled—and turned into matchsticks.

The forest couldn't support the abuse. By 1900, the trees were gone, as were the 3,000 lumberjacks who spent winters drinking, fighting and logging around Seney. Across the Upper Peninsula, the slashings left by loggers were fodder for great fires that wiped out towns and burnt the forest floor down to the sand beneath it.

It is on one of those sandy plains, a northern

Serengeti, that I spend the night in my blankets. When morning comes I warm myself by the cook fire, and soon the camp smells of morning air, campfire, frying bacon and coffee. I sit on the bank, dangling my feet above the water, drinking my coffee, strong and black from grounds thrown directly in the pot and boiled.

The Fox is a small stream, 10 to 30 feet wide, dropping gradually, at an average of about five feet a mile. It is not a stream of *A River Runs Through It*, with rapids and waterfalls separating pools filled with fish the size of salmon. It is the stream of Nick's consciousness, barely a blue line on the map, a quiet stream, with a surface like moving glass.

Coffee gone, I step in again, flour sack over my shoulders, bottle around my neck. It is late August, the time of the year that Hemingway made his trip, a time when food is scarce in the stream. But the field is thick with hoppers that jump head high and blow into the stream or hit your face and fall stunned to the ground. I feed them downstream toward the moss-covered pilings that are all that is left of Hemingway's bridge and begin catching 8- and 10-inch brook trout. On a stream with a 7-inch limit, they are good-size fish. Any of them would fit nicely in my frying pan, but I let them go.

Below the bridge, the alder bushes have overgrown the stream completely and soon I am in a tunnel of alders. The air is damp and has the cold, moist smell of a trout stream, like the smell of a fall rain. The world has taken on the green of the alders. It is a close, comfortable stretch, perhaps 100 yards long and sheltered from the sun, an emerald world of its own, full of fish.

In the world outside the tunnel, I can hear a hunter training his dog in the high grass. He reaches the bank, somewhere so close that I can hear every step. I hear him talking quietly to his dog. I hear the dog panting. The bushes are so thick that neither of us can see the other, yet he doesn't seem surprised when I call up to him.

"What you doing down there?" he asks.

"Fishing."

"Nice stretch," he says. "Caught much?"

"Eight to ten inchers."

"Keep fishing," he says.

Did he think I could ever stop?

I work my way downstream toward the swamp that Nick avoided. The sun is high now, and washes the color out of sky and landscape. There is a second stretch of meadow to cross, and the grass is soon

thick and over my head, a trackless jungle. At 50, I do not have Hemingway's teenage strength: the grass wears me out before I am a third of the way downstream. Unlike Nick, I am not afraid of the swamp; I am afraid I will never reach it. Resting, looking into the stream, I see an enormous trout.

"Jo heesus and be Guy Mawd Fever," Hemingway wrote a friend. "I lost one on the little Fox below an old dam that was the biggest trout I've ever seen. . . ." The trout at my feet shoots for cover, hiding somewhere in the heart of the river, and I know we will never meet again. Yet I cast relentlessly against the inevitable—lifting the arm and elbow, throwing the line back, reaching, as the man who taught me to cast said, reaching back briefly as if to scratch my ear, and then sweeping forward, pausing so the line forms a tight half circle that moves forward, unfolds and drops silently in the water.

The fish is gone. Making my way back upstream, I can almost see camp when I come upon a pool off to the side of the main current and shaded by a tamarack. The fly snags deep under the surface on my first cast.

But—another Hemingway dictum—the bottom never moves. It is a fish, and I play him against the springy tip of the rod, which absorbs the shock of sudden turns. It is not a heroic fight—he pulls more like a slow-moving train than a leaping prizefighter. I look at him before I drop him into the flour bag over my shoulder. He's a 12-inch brookie, and a week in the woods deserves at least one trout cooked over the fire.

Back at camp, I hear the call of the cranes, somewhere out of sight. I strip the line off the reel and hang it up to dry, next to the clothes I've already changed out of. I hear the stream, talking quietly, as it flows around the pilings. I clean the fish on a piece of birch bark, and use the bark to start a fire. It is a male, with flanks the color of the evening sky. The fire burns to coals as I pour cornmeal over him through my funneled hands. The smell of the fire, the butter, the fish, and the corn meal are more than excellent: They are the river's answer to spaghetti and beans, hard tack and blanket rolls.

Once Hemingway left Sency he never returned, except in his writing, which brought him back often. In 1920, as a reporter for the *Toronto Weekly Star*, he wrote of a nameless stream in the Upper Peninsula "about as wide as a river should be, and a little deeper than a river ought to be and to get the proper picture you want to imagine in rapid succession the following fade-ins: A high pine-covered bluff that

rises steep up out of the shadows. A short sand slope down to the river and a quick elbow turn with a little flood wood jammed in the bend, and then a pool. A pool where the moselle-colored water sweeps into a dark swirl." A pool where I drink my morning coffee.

"Big Two-Hearted River" was one of the first successful pieces Hemingway wrote. He was penniless when he wrote it, unknown, and discouraged. Everything he had written had just been stolen from a suitcase his wife was transporting manuscripts in. With it gone, he felt the need to start all over.

"What did I know best, that I had not written about and lost?" he wondered. "What did I know about truly and care for the most?"

"There was no choice at all. I sat in the corner [of a Paris café] with the afternoon light coming in over my shoulder and wrote in the notebook. When I stopped writing, I did not want to leave the river where I could see the trout in the pool, its surface pushing and swelling smooth against the log driven piles of the bridge. The story was about coming back from the war, but there was no mention of war in it. But in the morning, the river would be there, and I must make it, and the country and all that would happen."

It may have been one of the last times he was truly happy. He wrote this poem, "Along with Youth," in Paris in 1923:

*A porcupine skin,
Stiff with bad tanning,
It must have ended somewhere.
Stuffed horned owl
Pompous
Yellow eyed;
Chuck-wills-widow on a biased twig
Sooted with dust.
Piles of old magazines,
Drawers of boy's letters
And the line of love
They must have ended somewhere.
Yesterday's Tribune is gone
Along with youth
And the canoe that went to pieces on the beach
The year of the big storm
When the hotel burned down
At Sency, Michigan.*