

The following is a transcript of Aldo Leopold's hand-written journal entries concerning a fishing trip taken on the Lily River, near Laona, WI in late June of 1927. The party included Leopold's sons Starker and Luna (then 14 and 12 years old respectively), his brother Carl, and his friend Tom Coleman. The original journal contains photographs and hand-drawn maps and diagrams; it can be viewed online through the University of Wisconsin Libraries Digital Collection. Leopold hand-numbered the pages in his journals. The text below is from pages 269-275. Explanatory footnotes were added by Kathy Miner, UW-Madison Arboretum, in February 2015.

The final page seems to represent Leopold's attempt to weave his daily observations into a free-standing essay.

Lily River Trip

There were only about twelve hours between the receipt of a letter from Carl saying he was too busy to go fishing and a wire saying he was on his way.

June 24, 1927 – a Friday morn – we set sail in Tom Coleman's car and reached Lily, Wisc¹ (via Oshkosh and Shawano) at noon. Three miles above Lily we went up a wood road along the Little Lily and spent two hours finding out the road was impassable and the creek too small for [casting?] flies. There we camped in an aspen grove at the mouth, thus:

[map and photo; map includes such details as "big hole", Footlog Riffles, and Driftwood Dam. Photo shows Leopold holding a small fish, with two other men making "size" gestures with their hands]

Fished until 8 o'clock and each got a few. Turned in very tired in a sudden rain and had a hot mosquito-y night.

June 25 Out before sunup – so early we had to make sure we had "valid daylight" – a phrase to conjure by the rest of the trip. They bit nicely for a while in the morning. In the evening the wind blew the creek full of mayflies and nothing would bite. The events of the day were a 9 ½" rainbow caught by Tom, and 10" brook by Starker, and a woodcock seen by Carl.

June 26 Slept till 6 o'clock. Each got a few in the morning – 21 trout so far. I saw two mother grouse with broods. In evening found a new and very pretty pool and riffle at the upper end of the farm below camp. There are shallow stretches above and below this but it is the nicest place we have found so far. Good campsite in bluegrass pasture full of enormous old white pine stumps.

[2 photos; one appears to be Leopold, the other is not identifiable]

June 27 In morning we all went to the footlog² riffle. Starker and I got a few but Tom and Carl had poor luck. We have about concluded that the big Lily is about the prettiest stream we have ever seen but contains only small fish. Ten inches is the best we have found.

¹ Lily: an unincorporated community in Langlade County, Wisconsin, located within the town of Langlade. Lily is located at the intersection of Wisconsin State Highway 52 and Wisconsin State Highway 55.

² footlog: chiefly midland & western usage -- a simple footbridge consisting often of a single log hewn flat on one side (Merriam/Webster online)

Boiled tea in a shady place by the creek, where a red squirrel tried to run Carl off the bridgehead. At lunch Tom proposed we take a flier at the Rat River this afternoon. Drove to Blackwell³ via Wabeno⁴ and learned from the section boss how to get into Flanner (Connor?) Lumber Co. Camp No. 14⁵, whence we walked a mile to the Rat, thusly:

[map]

We killed the better part of the afternoon finding out that the quiet ponds were no good and full of shiners, besides being too deep and mucky to wade. For half an hour in the evening we concentrated on the pools in the fast water below the [railroad] track and caught 7 nice fish averaging 8 inches. The Rat has more water than the Lily but is here narrower, deeper, faster, and badly choked by slash. It is unwadeable.

Had supper at Wabeno and drove to camp and went to bed. Had a bad night on account of “no-see-ums” which went right through mosquito nets and disregarded fly-dope.

June 28 Up early and packed camp. Heard a winter wren sing as we demolished sourdough cakes. A nice breezy morning.

Back at ten, with nobody scoring except Tom who got two ten inchers out of the Little Lily right below camp.

Packed and on the road by noon. Reached Madison 7 PM.

Total catch about 47 trout, 7 to 11 inches, mostly 7-8.

[photo – appears to be Leopold from the back, fishing]

³ Blackwell: a town in Forest County, Wisconsin, located within the Nicolet National Forest. Current population is about 340.

⁴ Wabeno: another town in Forest County, also located within the Nicolet National Forest. Current population about 1,200. High school team is nicknamed the Logrollers.

⁵ The Flanner and Connor Lumber Companies operated out of Blackwell during Wisconsin’s peak logging years; Connor is still in business. See www.laonahistory.com for more information and a photo of Camp #14.

The Lily.

This pretty river must have been named by some person other than the usual trader or surveyor, and for some reason other than the crass and obvious one that there are lilies in it – for there are none.

The Lily must have been named by some poet-voyageur, and for some more subtle and potent reason – the chance thought, for instance, that not even the Wolf [River] in all his glory is yet arrayed as one of these.

Our poet must have discerned the changeful moods which would have forever mocked the giver of a masculine name to the river. You may come upon her at some dancing shingle where irises and marigolds grow on little mossy islands, and nodding willows dip their branches from wide banks. But within the space of three casts you have passed into a long cool corridor where the current runs swift and dark and deep between the roots of alders and ferns, with here and there a spruce solemnly contemplating your not very solemn attempt to cast a fly. Soon you emerge upon a long pool curving in a wide trouty sweep upon a fallen balsam. What a line you could lay upon that pool, did not the balsam prevent your laying any line at all! Of course you could fish it downstream, but somehow you feel as it that would dampen the gay humor that felled the balsam in its particular place. The pool gives upon another shingle, in which you may cast high, wide, and handsome, but from which the Lily – except of certain rare and unpredictable evenings – withholds her trout.

One wonders what were the Lily's moods before they took her pines. A dark glory they must have been – in the clearing below the Big Pool there are stumps which our voyageur could barely have spanned with two lengths of his rifle. What domes those mighty columns must have held against the sky, to be reflected in the Lily! The pines are gone now, but bobolink hover over their blackened stumps and praise the bluegrass which has taken their place. Odd is it that birds, and rivers, should know what people don't – that bluegrass is the most praiseworthy thing that the white man has brought into this land; the thing that comes nearest atoning for what he has taken away.

[photo of one of the boys – looks like Starker – fishing in the river]

The Lily chooses her birds well. In the cool dawn a hundred whitethroats lament in minor chorus that as yet undiscovered tragedy that broke the heart of "Ah – poor Canada." An occasional winter wren breaks in upon them with so jovial a whistle that one is led to think perhaps Canada after all has outgrown her secret sorrow. During the day's fishing anxious mother grouse cluck to their hidden broods and redwings extoll the lush greenness of the little marshes along the Lily's banks. Not until the last evening light is upon the aspens do the thrushes begin. This also is the hour when fishermen go to sleep. Clear at first the ringing cadences, then dimmer with the waning sunset, until at last the windings and unwindings of thrushes' song merge with the windings and unwindings of the Lily and the long lines that fall unerringly upon her trouty pools in fishermen's dreams.

[photo, probably Starker again]