

# Hyrum and the River

(1866-1960)

We lived in the Saginaw Valley area where father worked as a swamper in the logging industry till around 1869 when we moved to the Au Sable Valley where father found work as a deadhead picker; a little more dangerous, but the pay was better. Lumbering was just open'n up there, so father knew there'd be work for many years. Most camp workers lived in the barracks but be'n married and all, father had a shack just east of Crawford; still later a cabin up by Chubb Creek, closer to the camp where he worked. Somehow father was never called to the Civil War. I'm not sure why ... probably cause he was supply'n lumber to the army ... he never talked about it much.

I hated the lumber'n industry, it took father away from home before dawn to after dark. Mom ran the house, but I was stuck with most of the chores along with the hunt'n and fish'n that father

had taught me early on, in order to put food on the table. There wasn't much time for school'n. I went when I could but my attendance was poor. During the summers I helped raise extra money for the family by cut'n wood, fence'n and butcher'n chickens. I spent what little free time I had fish'n on the banks of the Au Sable. I loved the river. For as long as I could remember it called to me. Even then, as a youngster, I knew in my heart that the river would become my love and my life.



In the spring of 1879, in April I think, the tracks through Crawford, now called Grayling, were finally completed for the railroad. The first train was pull'n into town. A real celebration is was ... they even closed the log'n camps for the day; a truly rare occasion. I was thirteen at the time, and remember it well. I've never seen such an affair like that before ... drink'n and holler'n and stuff. I didn't know at the time, but was soon to realize what changes that railroad was go'n to bring to my life.

At the age of fourteen my father arranged with Henry, the cook at the Luvells lumber camp, for me to go to work in the kitchen as a helper along with a few other boys of about the same age. The men in the industry were paid between \$1 to \$2 dollars a day, depending on their jobs. The kitchen boys were paid 20¢ a day with meals thrown in. The work was wearisome and hard; chop'n wood, stoke'n the fire, wash'n dishes and keep'n the cook's shack clean. We arrived long before sun-up and left long after dark. I'd usually ride in, and go home with father. Being huskier than most, I was taught to handle a wagon and team. I'd deliver dinners to the loggers who were working far from the camp. My work at the camp provided me a good sense of responsibility and the extra monies helped out at home.

The meals were simple and filling; nothing fancy. Hot cakes and salt pork for breakfasts, beans, fried pork or chicken for dinners. Lunches, if you got one at all, was nothing more than sandwiches or biscuits and a piece of fruit if you were lucky and if it was in season. The camp kitchen was a twenty-four hour operation. After the evening meal the night cooks would come in to bake bread, biscuits and pies for the next day. The one outstanding dish I do remember was vinegar pie. We never took it out on the wagons, but for those close to camp who could come to the shack for dinner, it was there! Henry was fond of me. Knowing that vinegar pie was a favorite of mine ... he always saved a slice for me. Come holiday times, he'd give me a whole one to take home along with some bread and biscuits.

I'd been working the camps for about two years. One Sunday, when I went to Grayling, I bumped into a man by the name of I.F. Babbitt, one of the local townsmen and big-time wheeler-dealer of sorts. Now, with the railroad in place, he decided to exploit the newest industry, hunting and fishing. The Au Sable River and its sister the Manistee were teaming with grayling fish. The fish would take most any bait and were delicious to eat. Babbitt was look'n for a man who could handle a team. He explained to me that there was no hotel or depot in Grayling. He was setting up hunt'n and fish'n camps along the main stream of the river and was look'n for someone to ferry his customers back and forth to the camps. I was to meet the trains, carry supplies and help with general camp duties. He offered a dollar a day with the stipulation that if I missed a train, I was fired! I was die'n to get away from the camp kitchen ... I jumped at the offer! Over the next couple of years Babbitt began to depend on me and we started to become close friends. Know'n my love for the river he eventually let me do some guide'n ... at first, just the women ... a little later he let me guide the men too! In just over a year's time I, Hyrum, was guide'n on a full time basis with friends and other area local guides like, David Shoppenagon, Henry Stephan and Babbitt's son Rube!

The town of Grayling was start'n to grow. The wealthy sportsmen began to pour into the area from the big Mid-Western cities like Chicago, Toledo, Buffalo and Detroit. Everyone came to fish the Michigan grayling. The fish were plentiful and good fighters. Fishing camps overflowed and boarding houses cropped up. Private hunt'n and fish'n lodges and clubs became the norm, not the exception. Now, as a guide I had no trouble finding work. In the off season I worked as a hunt'n guide or build'n long boats with Rube. These cedar boats were originally designed to deliver tools and supplies to the lumber camps but now were be'n purchased by fish'n guides and lodges. Although the grayling will take most any bait, a couple of my friends, Charlie Shellenbarger and Bill Christenson taught me a little about fly tie'n so I could make a few extra bucks sell'n flies to some of these fancy fishermen that come up dur'n the season. When times were slow, I always found work at the log'n camps ... but I really wanted most to work the river.

I saved my money, and in the winter of 1886 I asked Pricilla Cobb, the prettiest girl in town, to be my bride. We built our home on the north side of the main stream not far from the Babbitt camp where I started to work a few years earlier. Father was still work'n the camps, but now as a foreman, and mom found work as a cook and maid at the Rainbow Club which catered to the sportsmen who came up mostly from Detroit. They, too, were having a house built nearer to town.

For the next few years Grayling was really developing into a boom town. New businesses and buildings pop'n up everyday. Once in a while Pricilla and I would go to town on Friday nights just to hang out and watch the construction going on. The whole town was lit up with kerosene lanterns as the carpenters worked well into the night. Aside from the hotels and room'n houses we had two restaurants, three saloons, a mercantile with an apothecary, a barber shop, two livery shops and a bank. The railroad was even start'n on the train depot. Land on the riverfront was go'n quick and houses were everywhere. The fish'n business was better then ever ... they were literally fill'n train cars with grayling ... ice'n them down and ship'n them off to the big cities. Everyone in town was become'n a fishing guide. Lord knows there was enough business for anyone, like myself, who wanted to work. Log'n was still booming although the camps were relocated deeper into the woods now. Grayling was a city truly built on fish guts and sawdust.

And so things continued for several more years until the subtle changes on the river started to happen. While guide'n I couldn't help but notice that the fish were start'n to thin out and the timber was disappear'n too. Much of the land was stripped of its virgin pines, leaving the soil to erode and wash into the river. Homes on the river had stripped the trees from the banks exposing the river to the heat of the sun. I saw, on more than one occasion, logjams floating down the rivers. They tore up the banks and the bottom of the river so bad that it was just muddy water most of the time. The market fish'n cut into the fish population some'n horrible. My river was rapidly becoming defiled by both the lumber barons and the sportsmen. I had to make a living like every one else but jobs

were start'n to get thin. I don't really think we saw the end come'n until it was a little too late to do much about it. Lumber'n was still hold'n its own, but the grayling were disappearing faster than one could imagine. People were become'n concerned about the future of the sport'n industry in the area. Around 1889 or so, someone got the idea to plant German brown trout into the river. It was only about a year later that my friend Rube got the idea to plant some brook trout too ... only to be followed a few years later with rainbows. Well, it took some time, but finally the trout were catching on. Much to the demise of the grayling, the trout were compete'n for spawning sites ... and they were win'n. Bill Christenson told me that the last grayling he heard of being caught was down at Conner Flats around the 1908 ... just about the time we started to see a few automobiles around Grayling.

As the grayling became a thing of the past, the lumber'n was start'n to wane too. The last great log drive took place in the spring of 1910. Lumber'n continued, but the camps were thin'n out and the lumbermen were begin'n to move farther west to the next stand of virgin woods.

A few years later Rasmus Hanson, one of the local lumber barons, built a fish hatchery in town. He was in hopes of restore'n the grayling ... they never took. But for many years the hatchery supplied brown and rainbow trout to the river. I worked there for a while and I still did some guiding ... anything to keep me on the river.

By 1920 the log'n was done. The trout populations were on the rise and conservation practices were start'n to take place. Too little, too late. As the lumber'n faded so did most of the businesses, except those involved with fish'n and hunt'n. I eventually went to work for the county until I retired.

I still live in the house that Priscilla and I built on the banks of the Au Sable. I don't get on the water much anymore. I mostly sit on the banks and think on how it used to be. In those early days the river was good to me ... but that's all gone now. The grayling are gone ... the log'n is gone ... and most of the people are gone.

Oh ... how I wish I had another piece of that vinegar pie.

*Hyrum, and his love affair with the river is nothing more than historical fiction about a young man who grew up on the Au Sable River, here in Michigan. Other than Hyrum and Pricilla, the dates, the people and the events were real. If you were growing up during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Grayling, Michigan, this, very well could have been the story of your life...*

***See you on the water.....***

Tom Deschaine  
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