

My Early Life on Isle Royale
by
Laurie Snell

We find Isle Royale

In my youth we lived in Wheaton Illinois. There were three boys in our family. I was the youngest, brother John was two years older and brother Jud was four years older. Our father wrote children's books and our mother gave piano lessons. We went away in the summers because our mother had serious asthma. Until I was five we went to a small town in the Michigan Upper Peninsula called Hessel. When more cars came to this city mother's asthma got worse and so in 1931, when I was six, our parents looked for a place with no cars. They found Isle Royale, an island in Lake Superior that is 45 miles long and 8 miles wide at the widest point. There were no roads, stores, telephones etc. on the island but there were four resorts, a number of fishing villages inhabited by commercial fishermen mostly from Scandinavian countries, and a number of cabins where families spent their summers. Our father rented a cabin in a harbor called Snug Harbor that was the entrance to the Rock Harbor Lodge.

Snug Harbor turned out to not be snug enough for our parents. This was clear when my brother Jud and I went to get wood along the shore of the harbor.

While trying to get the wood into the boat, Jud fell and hurt himself so I had to row us back into the harbor and was a hero.

Shortly after that we had another crisis. Jud and I said that we were going fishing up Tobin's Harbor. Tobin's Harbor was on the other side of Rock Harbor. When we did not come home at the time we were supposed to, our mother went over the hill to Tobin's Harbor and followed the shoreline looking for us. She went in the direction that she thought was up the harbor. Walking along the shoreline without a path and with fallen trees is very difficult. She finally reached a fishermen's village where one of the fishermen, Art Matson, explained that "up Tobin's Harbor" was in the opposite direction from the one she had taken. When you think about it, it's not so obvious what "up the harbor means". Art took her to the other end of the harbor where we were having good luck with our fishing and had lost track of the time.

These episodes convinced our parents that they should move to a calmer place and so they rented a cabin in Tobin's Harbor and in 1934 Dad bought the cabin. At that time there was a lodge, 21 cabins and three fishermen families in Tobin's Harbor. From that time on we came to Isle Royale every summer. We came early and left late, often missing the beginning of school.

Our father loved to fish. He wrote two or three

books a year which provided a reasonable living for his family and allowed him to spend his summers at Isle Royale fishing, which was his great love. Here is his description of how he fished:

Three Thousand Miles in a Rowboat Address
by Roy J. Snell.

My fellow Tobin dwellers on Isle Royale in Lake Superior call me the Lone Fisherman. No doubt too they some times make it "That Fishing Fool". Either goes with me. I fish with a purpose, several in fact. And I have rowed my boat 3000 miles trolling for lake trout.

It's no slouch of a boat that boat of mine. Built for a fat man with a fat wife to use with an outboard motor. It is about a foot deeper than a regular rowboat and straight across the top. I've had a wave slide it twenty feet sideways on, but never a drop of spray has ever splashed into her.

Yes, we have weather on Isle Royale, all kinds, sudden squalls, long showers, and fog, also days of crystal clear with the lake flat as a skating rink and twice as shiny. That's what I like about our lake. It's alive!

For the most part I fish alone. With my pole wrapped against a stick set in the gunwale I can play the reel, letting out the line with my toes. When this is done I row steadily round first this rocky point then that one, allowing my herring-like lure to glide beneath the surface at a depth from 10 to 20 feet All

this can be done by the ganglia located on my spinal column. With my eyes fixed dreamily on the tip of my pole, I think out the next exciting chapter of some boy's mystery novel I chance to be doing, or simply meditate on the reality of the moment and all this on a bright day when the waves are not too high.

But there are other days, many others. Half the fun of trolling off the shoals of Isle Royale comes from outwitting the god of storms and snatching the fish from beneath his very nose.

Many an exciting moment lingers in my memory. There was the time when Jud, our oldest boy, had brought his bride to our island. Of course they wanted Isle Royale trout to take back. We hadn't had much luck, so I went out into an intermittent fog to see what could be done.

Blake's Point, as you may know, stuck out like a pointing finger, at the end of the island. It's a mile row there and back from our cottage but there's where I do a lot of my fishing. Fish are constantly passing round the island or resting beside Blake's extensive shoals.

By the time I got out there the fog had settled down and I could fish about a hundred feet from the shore, that was all. I trolled for an hour, no strikes. Then a good stiff squall came roaring in. If you know what a squall over shallow shoals is like, you know how easy the fishing was. But I fished and I'd let the wind blow me out until the high, rocky point was all

but out of sight in the fog that now cleared a bit and then thickened up again.

I was fishing on the side of the reef away from our cottage. The roar of the waves against the rocks was something to listen to. A little way along the sheer rocky shore there lies beneath the water the ribs of a wrecked steamer. She was loaded with canned salmon. Fishermen caught canned salmon in their nets for quite a time after that. You might think it foolhardy to fish at that spot in such a time. Perhaps it was. But I am not afraid of Father Superior.

I've rowed those shores 300 miles a year for ten years. The whole thing is a challenge. After all I'm sixty-six. It can't matter too much what winds and waves do to me, if they say I challenge and defy them.

"Getting pretty bad," I thought. "Better get round the point I guess."

That was old man caution talking.

But the boy in me said, "Just one more trip down and back." Just one more trip it was. And, just when the boy in me agreed that it was time to beat it, and just as I swung back, a big one hit my lure and you can tell the big ones. They come in slow and heavy, like half a cedar post. There you have what to me is a perfect moment in a very long hike, roaring, rushing waves, fog overhead, a point of land to guide you back if the fog didn't snatch it away, and a big fish, apparently well hooked.

Could I have shaken the fish loose and fought my

way to shore? Perhaps, but would I? Certainly not. I've never deserted a fish in distress yet. After one fleeting glance at that dark spot in the lighter gray, I dropped my oars, grabbed my pole, and began reeling in. There is such a thing as reeling with rhythm. I reeled with forceful rhythm. And there was not enough of playing that fish. I reeled him in, twenty-five, fifty, a hundred, hundred and twenty-five in nothing flat. Grabbing the gaff I hooked him and threw him in the bottom of the boat, rod, reel, hook and all.

I took a backward look. No land. Canada was forty miles off. The way the wind was blowing, it would take me there in time. I looked again. Yes, a spot of duller gray. Hurrah I grabbed my oars and rowed. The spot grew as I rowed. The waves roared across the reef. I had to cross that reef. Once the waves lifted my boat and slid it sideways. I thought, "Now where'll I land?" We missed the rocks, my boat and I, also the fish. In time I had beaten my way back to sheltered "Merritt's Lane," a narrow, mile lane. There the water was rippled and a gentle breeze wafted me homeward.

Well, there you have it, contrast battle royal, not with just a fish, but all that Farther Superior has to offer, you may have your trout streams and placid inland lakes, give me wide open spaces of water, then let come what may.

Getting to the Island.

We never had a car and so we traveled entirely by train. I loved this especially when we got to sleep on the train. So we took the train to Houghton Michigan. Here we would get a boat the next day going to island.

While in Houghton we got groceries to take to the island since there were no stores there. We stayed overnight at the Douglas Hotel. It was a wonderful old hotel (15 dollars a night) which included a great breakfast in a huge dining room.

In the early 1930's there was no boat that went regularly from Houghton to Isle Royale, but it was always possible to find a boat that would take us there. I remember one trip in which a fisherman offered to take us to the island from the nearby town of Copper Harbor. About half way to the island he had had too many beers and brother Jud had to take over steering the boat. We arrived at the island, but in Chippawa Harbor which was a long ways from Rock Harbor. We stayed there overnight and in the morning we were taken to Rock Harbor.

Shortly after we moved to Tobin's harbor, there were boats that went from Houghton to Isle Royale on a regular schedule. The first such boat was the USS Seminole, a former Coast Guard Cutter. It was a beautiful boat, long and narrow. The trip took about 7 hours and, when the water was rough, it rolled back and forth and we all got seasick.

In the early 40's Charlie Kauppi ran a boat to the island from Copper Harbor. It was called the Copper

Queen and ran on a regular basis until 1953. Kauppi was a wonderful Captain and we enjoyed taking this boat.

From 1920 to 1944 a boat called the Winyah came from Duluth, Minnesota. It went around the island three times a week. This boat had been an elegant boat that Andrew Carnegie had purchased for his wife. The Winyah brought mail and passengers. It stopped at all the lodges and at the fishermen's homes to pick up their fish and take them to the market. We could buy milk, eggs and bread from the Winyah.

The boats stopped at the Tobin's Harbor Lodge that was on its own island. Someone on the dock would take us to our cabin (coming to meet the boat was a social occasion for those living in the harbor). At the cabin we were welcomed by freshly baked bread made by Inez Matson. Also, when necessary, our dock had been repaired by Art Matson.

The island was a big change from the mainland. Our cabin was on a hill too high to pump water from the lake so we had to carry buckets of water up from the lake. The lake water was considered safe to drink in those days. We had an old-fashioned wooden laundry machine and Mother's weekly washing took place on the dock where we each took a turn at cranking the machine for half an hour.

We had a large wooden stove for cooking and a smaller stove for keeping us warm on cold days. We always wondered how our father got this incredibly

heavy stove up the hill – probably again with the help of the fishermen. We had to maintain a large wood pile for these stoves. For this we collected logs that washed up on the beaches and took turns sawing and chopping them.

We had Aladdin lamps for reading and for our parents' evening canasta games. At night it was amazingly quiet with beautiful sunsets and northern lights. The quiet was occasionally interrupted by the howl of a coyote or the call of a loon. Later when wolves came onto the island the coyotes disappeared. There were over a thousand moose on the island and so, while we did not see the coyotes, we saw plenty of moose.

We had to make the food we brought from Houghton last for the whole summer and our mother was a genius at this. She made bread regularly as well as sweet rolls that we especially liked. We called them stickies. We ate a lot of canned food and fish that we caught. We also picked large numbers of blueberries, raspberries, and thimbleberries. Thimbleberries make wonderful jam.

Large storms were common, and when this happened, we liked watching the waves crash against the rocks. Occasionally storms came up while we were fishing. As our father said, the best place to fish was at the end of the island called Blake's Point and here the waves came from both directions making it hard to row the boat and probably dangerous. However it is a short distance to Merritt's Lane where the wa-

ter would be completely calm. We loved to be out in storms and, for reasons I have never understood, our parents did not seem to worry about us.

Another potential danger was the fog. Heavy fog could come quickly. Once I had gone to Rock Harbor to pick up our mail, which included a Sears and Roebuck catalogue. We had an outboard motor boat by then and I was reading the catalogue on the way home. I was not watching where I was going and a heavy fog had come up. When I looked up, I had no idea where I was. Fortunately I could made a good guess from the sound of the foghorn coming from the lighthouse which was about four miles from the end of the island. If I had gone beyond the end of that island, I would have been in real trouble. This was pretty scary.

The fog never stopped the Winyah. When the captain could not see the island he navigated by the sound of the water splashing on the shore. I remember one foggy day, we were standing on the Matson's dock waiting for the Winyah and it was so foggy that we could not even tell that the Winyah had landed until we heard the captain say "Let's get going".

Working on Isle Royale

I have always liked to work. While in school I delivered papers starting at 4 in the morning and after school I worked in a drugstore. I continued working in a drugstore when I went to the University of Illi-

nois. One day the druggist asked me why I told people with a prescription to come back in fifteen minutes. I said “because that is what we did in my home town”. The next time I went home I asked the druggist I had worked for there why we asked the customers to come back in fifteen minutes and he said, “We want to have them think that we do something for their money.”

So it was natural for me to look for ways to make money at Isle Royale but not in a drug store. I first found that I could sell some of the trout that we caught to the Rock Harbor lodge for 10 cents a pound.

A popular hike followed a moose trail from the Rock Harbor Lodge to the end of Tobin’s Harbor. This trail was about a mile long and toward the end it passed by our cabin. So I put a sign on a tree offering to row the hikers back the rest of the way to Rock Harbor. Those who came to the resorts in those days were often not as accustomed to hiking as those who come today and so I got a lot of business. I charged a dime. One day, after I told a fellow the price, he said, “Young man I think that, when asked the price, you would do better to say”, “Whatever you think it’s worth”. I followed his advice and suddenly found myself getting dollars rather than dimes so I had my first Economics lesson.

There is a ridge that goes the length of the island called Greenstone Ridge after the green stones that are found along this ridge. On our end of the island there are two popular trails from Tobin’s harbor to

the top of the ridge. They both have beautiful views of the island and of Canada which is only about 15 miles north of the island. On a clear day they might even see Michigan which is 56 miles from the island. One is called "Lookout Louise". This name originated when Louise Savage, a child of one of the Tobin's Harbor families, got too close to the edge of the north side of the ridge which is very steep.

The other path is called "Mount Franklin" because at one time it was thought that, in the treaty of Paris, Benjamin Franklin had made sure that Isle Royale was in America rather than in the much closer Canada. This was not supported by Franklin's biographers and now they have found that the map used in the Treaty of Paris was not accurate and had Isle Royale closer to America than to Canada and that is a much more plausible explanation. Those staying at the lodge were encouraged to go on these trails, so I also became a guide taking people up these trails. For this I charged 50 cents.

But one of my best friends, Jimmy Lawrence, was even more of an entrepreneur than I was. He started a newspaper called Tobin's Talky and I assume he charged for this.

For a short period of time three Great Lakes tour boats, the Alabama, the North American and the South American stopped at Rock Harbor. When they came, about 300 passengers got off the boat to look around for a couple of hours. Jimmy suggested that

we sell moose antlers to the passengers. We did this for 50 cents an antler. When we ran out of antlers Jimmy said that he bet they would pay the same amount for moose teeth and he was right!

Incidentally, two of these boats came from Chicago and Wheaton is close to Chicago. My father convinced them to give us free rides to the island since his lectures on Isle Royale helped them get passengers. We got to sleep on the boat and we got off at the dock in Rock Harbor.

Having fun on Isle Royale

When we came to the Island and were living in Rock Harbor we took advantage of the Rock Harbor Lodge. The founder of the Lodge, Commodore Kneut Kneutson, came to Isle Royale in 1901 and by the time we came to the Island he was a pretty old man. However, he loved to play croquet and taught us how to play it. I got pretty good and could beat most anyone except the Commodore.

The house in Rock Harbor where we lived was bought by Coach Orsborne, a tennis coach. The lodge took advantage of this by adding a tennis court and having the coach teach tennis. My older brothers became avid tennis players while I stuck to trying to beat the Commodore. One day after we had moved to Tobin's harbor, while brother Jud was walking back to our cabin, he tripped over a moose sleeping in the path. Both were scared and ran, fortunately, in dif-

ferent directions.

Our mother enjoyed playing the piano for hymn sings at the Rock Harbour Lodge.

When we moved to Tobin's Harbor there were three fishermen families and 21 cabins with summer residents. The fishermen were Art and Ed Matson and Art Anderson. The families had children about our age and we became good friends. The fishermen had ice houses to preserve the fish and one of the big events was when Inez Matson made ice cream for all of us.

One day Art Anderson offered to take his son Jimmy and me to see the Passage Island Lighthouse. This was four miles off the end of the island. It guided the freighters as they passed by on their way to Canada and had a powerful light and a fog-horn that could be heard for miles. While we were there, a storm came up and we had to stay overnight. This was great fun for us but of course our parents were worried because they had no way to know that we were safe on Passage Island.

The water was too cold for swimming but we found a place on the rocks where rain water collected that was fine for swimming.

One of the big events of the summer was an annual regatta. This involved rowboats, canoes, sailboats and a variety of motor boats. No two boats were the same but this was solved by having different starting times. For example, there were two speedboats,

one from Tobin's Harbor and one from Rock Harbor which was the faster of the two. So they had carefully calculated starting times. My specialty was the sculling race. For this we had to use the oars to skull from the back of rowboat. I got pretty good at this and occasionally won. After the regatta we had a dinner featuring a roasted pig, on an island that's now called Pig Island. You can still see the evidence of this cooking on Pig Island.

Our cabin was on the main island. Many of the others were on their own islands. This was true of the Merritt family who were our nearest neighbors and best friends. They also had children our age. Their father, Glen Merritt, was a great story teller. He could tell stories about his ancestors' experience on the island back to the late 1800's. We heard these stories on the many nights the Merritts had a bonfire on their island to which the rest of the harbor was invited. They had some food and drinks that included marshmallows for us. Their son Grant carries on this tradition today.

Our father and Glen Merritt were great friends because of their common love for fishing. When Glen or our father caught a large fish (10 pounds or larger) they would invite the harbor to a dinner on the rocks where they would plank the fish, grill it on a wooden plank.

Our oldest brother Jud spent most of his time with Gale brothers John and Phil, Jane How, and Bill

Robinson. They called themselves the "Phantom Five" and had great times together. I can remember not being able to go to sleep because of the put-put of their boat taking them to their cabins at two o'clock in the morning. Their most famous mischief was to take down the flag that flew night and day from a very high pole at the Tobin's Harbor Lodge and replace it with the message, "If the owner did not take down the flag at evening and put it up in the morning they would suffer the wrath of the Phantom Five."

Brother John was the most adventuresome of the brothers and the high point of his Isle Royale days was when he stayed on the Island all one winter. He was also the best fisherman of the brothers.

The one thing that Jud wanted to do with me was to have me row the boat so he could try to ride a moose across the harbor. I never could row fast enough to catch up with the moose and Jud never forgave me for this.

You might think that we also spent some time reading our father's books but I have to confess that only recently did I actually read one of his books. This was when I discovered that he had written a book called the Galloping Ghost that involved so many things in my life.

The Galloping Ghost, Harold Red Grange, was a legendary football player for the University of Illinois. But he was also our Ice man and his father was the Chief of Police in our town. Further, when I was a stu-

dent at the University of Illinois, Harold Red Grange ran for the University of Illinois Board of Trustees. (He was required to remove the Red from his name to avoid having an unfair advantage over the other contestants). He was elected and, while on the board, made the motion to remove the President of the University that led to his removal, though he had been a truly great President when I was at the University of Illinois.

In our father's book, the Galloping Ghost, Red Grange is kidnapped, as part of a gamblers' plot, one week before the BIG GAME. He is brought by airplane to Isle Royale after everyone has left the Island and imprisoned in one of the cabins. He escapes and tries to hide in other cabins. I thought I knew the cabins well enough to be able to tell where he was at any given time, but this was not the case. So I guess our father used the writer's privilege to not be exact. Red Grange ends up on Passage Island and is rescued by Detective Drew Lane who has learned about the plot. He is flown to the university just in time to help his team win the BIG GAME.