

Wisconsin Fish Stories by Joe Hermolin

Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote “In the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.” But in much of Wisconsin, once the lakes thaw, some men’s (and women’s) thoughts turn to sport fishing, particularly on the [first Saturday in May](#) which signals the opening of fishing season.

Sports fishing has a significant impact on the economy of Wisconsin. A recent report, from 2020, by the [American Sportfishing Association](#) states that 1.9 million sports fishers spent \$1.5 billion in Wisconsin (\$2.3 billion including fishing related expenditures) and provided about 13,500 jobs.



Cedar Lake Lodge, owned by railroad tycoon Henry Clay Pierce where Coolidge set up the summer White House in 1928. Courtesy of the [UW Digital Collections](#).



Herbert Hoover in 1937, fishing in Wisconsin. Courtesy of the [UW Digital Collections](#).

Some well-known national figures have tried their luck angling in Wisconsin waters.

President Calvin Coolidge set up his [summer White House](#) here in 1928 so that he could trout fish on the Brule River. He stayed at the Cedar Lake Lodge owned by his friend Henry Clay Pierce.

Future United States president Herbert Hoover visited him there. It was a cool relationship and they fished in separate canoes. However, Hoover did return to fish Wisconsin’s waters at a later date.

Approximately a decade later, in 1946, after the end of World War II, future president Dwight D. Eisenhower tried his luck angling near Minocqua, returning in 1948 and again after his presidency in 1965 and 1967. In the 1960s he was honored by the Lac de Flambeau Ojibwe in a ceremony where they adopted him as an honorary tribal member.

Baseball legend Ted Williams and CBS news broadcaster Edward R. Murrow also casted lines Wisconsin waters.



Boston Red Sox legend Ted Williams and his Ojibwe guide Jack Eckl of Hayward, Wisconsin, holding 21-pound musky. Courtesy of the [UW Digital Collections](#).



CBS broadcaster Edward R. Morrow in northern Wisconsin. Courtesy of the [UW Digital Collections](#).

Many Ojibwe in northern Wisconsin quickly adapted to tourists, seeing an opportunity to earn money as fishing guides. In the years between the World Wars and after World War II, nearly every male Ojibwe at Lac du Flambeau spent some time as a paid guide.

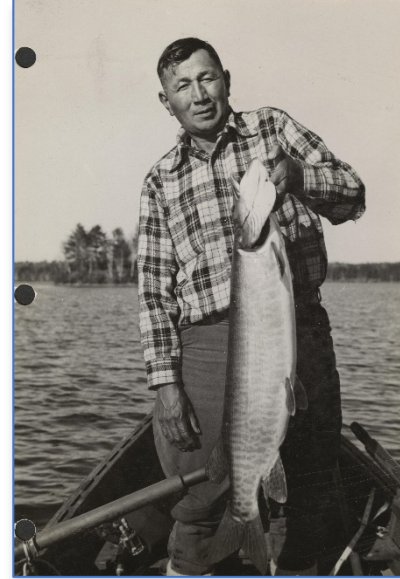
The workday began at 8:00am and involved preparing bait and gear, rowing and/or motoring the boat, and cleaning the fish. The going rate was \$5.00/day. Important to each outing was the “shore lunch” where the guide would prepare a meal of the fresh morning’s catch fried in lard, fried potatoes with bacon, and boiled coffee.

Louis St. Germaine, a Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe, acted as a guide for Dwight Eisenhower, Ted Williams, burlesque entertainer Gypsy Rose Lee and many other visitors to the Northwoods.

He was very well known in the region and his knowledge and skills led, in 1982/1983, to his induction into the [Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame and Museum](#) in Hayward for his work as a guide for 50 years.



Veteran fishing guide, Porter Dean, cooking shore lunch in Vilas County. Courtesy of the [UW Digital Collections](#).



Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame and Museum Guide Louis St. Germaine on Lake Pokegama. Courtesy of the [UW Digital Collections](#).

Small business owners profited from those attracted by the prospects of landing a trout or muskie, walleye, or bass in the many lakes and streams of the Northwoods. In addition to guides for hire and stores selling supplies, family-owned rental cottages were abundant.

Roads were few and often in poor repair in northern Wisconsin in the late 19th century and the tourism industry was not yet a major part of the economy. The influx of tourists was spurred by the extension of a network of rail lines that proliferated in the early 20th century.



Boy holding his catch for the day at Lakota Resort, Twin Lake, Wisconsin, 1920. *Courtesy of the [Monarch Library System](#).*



The Marinette County Chamber of Commerce issued this folding brochure in the mid-1920s. It celebrates the historical and recreational attractions of northeastern Wisconsin and encourages automobile tourists. *Courtesy of the [Wisconsin Historical Society](#).*

In one example, from 1917 to 1950 the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad ran “fishermen specials” from Chicago to northern Wisconsin: to the Cisco Chain of Lakes and Woodruff, and to Lake Gogebic in the Michigan Upper Peninsula at the state line, where they operated a resort.

From May 1 until Memorial Day and again from Labor Day until October 1 these trains ran only on weekends. But from Memorial Day to Labor Day, they operated daily except Mondays. The trains left Chicago in early evening and arrived at the lakes by early morning. They brought fishermen north and took them home with a special refrigerated section in the baggage car for trophy fish.

The state had long recognized the importance of fishing to the economy and made efforts to maintain good fishing stock.

Lakes and rivers of north-central Wisconsin were stocked with fish raised as fingerlings near Madison and transported (in grand style) in specially designed railroad cars, to be unloaded and used in northern waters.



A railroad car equipped to transport live fish fingerlings from a hatchery, being unloaded at the Antigo depot and transferred to trucks for delivery to lakes to be stocked. Courtesy of the [Langlade County Historical Society](#).

The University of Wisconsin-Madison has long maintained a [research facility at Trout Lake](#) in Vilas County to conduct research in limnology.

The idiom “Gone fishing.” describes a person who is unaware of the world around him/her. But fishing is big business in Wisconsin and a serious matter, as anyone who has ever wet a line in our many lakes and rivers will attest.

View a narrated video of this story and other exhibits that showcase Wisconsin history at [Recollection Wisconsin](#).



Additional resources

1. [Economic Impacts of Recreational Fishing, Wisconsin](#), American Sportfishing Association (ASA)
2. [The Coolidge Summer Whitehouse](#), The Calvin Coolidge Foundation
3. Reflections of the Lac du Flambeau: An Illustrated History of Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin 1745-1995. Compiled by Ben Guthrie, Written and Edited by Michael J.Goc.
4. [Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame and Museum](#)

5. Robert J. Poss, [One hundred years of railroading in Langlade County](#). Presentation to the Langlade County Historical Society 1982. Langlade County Historical Society archives.
6. Mid-Continent Railway Museum: [Special Issue: Badger #2 and the Fish Car Era](#)
7. [UW-Madison Center for Limnology](#)

About the author

*Guest curator, Joe Hermolin, is the [Langlade County Historical Society](#) president (a *Recollection Wisconsin* content partner) and Steering Committee member. Hermolin worked at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for many years in the Department of Biomolecular Chemistry in the Medical School. In retirement, he moved to rural Langlade County and developed an interest in the region's history.*