

# An Adirondack Reunion



by John Michael Vargo

The current was flowing softly underneath my borrowed kayak, as I set off up the west branch of the Ausable River!

My host's Tom and Rare Conway are two high school friends that have made their home here in the Adirondacks for the past 20 years.

Tom is a well-respected fly fishing guide with his own tackle shop "Two Fly" in the center of Wilmington, NY. The shop provides mostly fly fishing gear but with a selection of lures and bait for lure slingers such as myself. Tom was a contractor full time until his fishing business took off. Rare runs four air bnbs, two of which she built with the help of her son. I BORROWED THEIR KAYAK ON THE FOURTH DAY OF MY VISIT TO Explore AND FISH THE PLACID STRETCH OF the river from the dam inn Wilmington up to the gorge.

Paddling easily up river then casting my lure a white Rostertail reeling in just fast enough to give the spinner a lifelike effect

Until the momentum of the kayak slowed. Dipping my paddle and with a few quick strokes coasted and cast. There was only a couple in a canoe and another kayaker sharing the River with me on this gorgeous late summer morning. My fellow kayaker passed going down river, smiling and giving me thumbs up surely in the knowledge that we had found one of the planet's sweet spots at that moment.

Continuing upriver I saw a number of rises and had a couple of light hits but no solid bites. I would find out from Tom that late summer is one of little fly hatch activity, Good news in that I don't remember smacking a single annoying bug. Yet it might also be why no trout were interested in smacking my lure. As I paddled

around every bend in the River new vistas were revealed, These Mountains are amongst the oldest on earth. Once as high as the Himalayas. Today, worn down by millions of years of ice, wind and water to nubs of their once craggy heights. Still breathtaking in summertime grandeur.

I had arrived the day after Labor Day, Tom and Rare picked me up in Plattsburgh at the Amtrak Station. The train ride itself is worth the trip through the Hudson River Valley skirting Albany, the Mohawk Valley and then along the western shore of Lake Champlain.

Driving from Plattsburgh into the mountains I was struck since my last visit eleven years before by how many large new homes have sprung up. Nothing like the hardscrabble farms, rundown lodges and bars I remembered. My host's home, a 1920's era farmhouse has been beautifully renovated and enlarged since I last visited. Their two Shetland ponies, Nessie and Zowie were still as sweet as ever. After a reunion Libation we headed to "The Hungry Trout" for dinner. The "Hungry Trout:" is owned and operated by the bartender James Selkirk.

He is also the local judge and unofficial historian. I asked him what the Native American name Adirondack meant and he said, "the land of the bark eaters!"

Attesting to how hard it was to coax a living out of this northern wilderness. No bark was on the menu but my Rainbow Trout baked to perfection with a tasty chardonnay.

The next morning I woke to the crack of thunder and a heavy downpour. Rare was making breakfast while Tommy was deciding whether or not to cancel that morning's fishing guide trip. 'After breakfast and a lull in the storm I decided to walk to the River. Putting my small telescoping pole with spinning reel and a small

tackle box with lures hooks split shot and swivels into my fishing daypack. About a half mile down the road I was caught in another deluge Mountain weather is notoriously fickle. Seeking shelter I saw an octagon cabin with a shed roof over the front door. This was one of Rare's AirBnBs with a living roof cover covered in plants that upon first seen I thought was in dire need of repairs. The walls were log ends mortared together. Sawdust was used for insulation. The interior looked cozy with a kitchenette. The bathroom was equipped with an eco friendly toilet. The cloudburst letting up, I continued down the road in the direction of Whiteface passing a sign for a wild animal shelter. I decided to check it out. Although closed to the public that day the staff didn't seem to mind me wondering around the enclosures. Housed within were wolves, coyotes, a couple of black bears, a Lynx, Bobcat, a Fisher, and a Mink. With the exception of the wolves all still making the Adirondack park their home. There are also a number of aviaries with various raptors including a large collection of owls.

The day continuing to clear I headed on towards the Ausable and the hungry trout I hoped to catch. Near the restaurant with the same name. I picked up a half dozen worms on the shoulder of the road that have been washed out by the morning deluge. Arriving at the Ausable I had started to fish between the Restaurant and the motel. Casting my worm into the riffles then letting it drift down stream into a small eddying pool. After using up my worms I switched to a green mepps-spinning lure working down stream to a roaring cataract that plunged into the Ausable Gorge.

After losing my lure to a snag I packed up and headed down Route 86 towards town.

"Two Fly", Tom's shop, is right in the center of Wilmington. Walking into the shop Tom was talking to a friend as he tied flies.



"Bow". To The Mountain

I bought a hat and a lure and we talked fishing for a bit. Then I headed back to the house to meet Rare. I was making dinner that night so I needed to pick up some groceries.

Lake Placid is about 20 miles northwest of Wilmington and has the only supermarket in this part of the Adirondacks. Coming into town I saw preparations being made for the Half an Iron man competition being held that Sunday. The competitors would be swimming one point two miles across Mirror Lake then running thirteen miles, switches to bicycles for a 56 mile ride as far as Wilmington then back to Lake Placid for the finish.

Lake Placid was the home of two winter Olympics in '1932 and 1980 the year the US Hockey team won gold in what has been called the Miracle on ice. Unfortunately Lake Placid couldn't accommodate another Olympics due to the massive demand on infrastructure the modern games required.

The next day under clear skies I bungeed my fishing gear onto the back of Tom's bike and peddled south east toward the town of Jay and the East branch of the Ausable The road was almost empty of traffic and well maintained. A welcome change from the beat up crowded roads around my home in Westchester County,

Tom's bike was in good shape except for a derailleur that was slipping on the uphill grade. So after crossing the town line of Jay and continuing a mile or so more on a fairly moderate angle I came to a steep decent into the town of Jay proper. Knowing I would have to peddle back up the hill with a cranky derailleur I turned around and headed back to the west branch.

The East branch of the Ausable originates on Mount Marcy. The highest mountain in New York State. The same place the Hudson River springs from albeit on opposite flanks of the massive mountain. Making them Sibling Rivers of sorts. The two branches meet in the town of Ausable forks before pouring into lake Champlain.

Coasting into Wilmington on an easy descent I stopped at what I found out later was Mystery Point. This offered a spectacular view over the fields and forests of the Ausable Valley towards distant White Face Mountain.

I fished most of the day before the dam without success on both sides of the river. With the day waning, but still warm, I decided to head up-river to the Wilmington town beach. I changed into my swimsuit and jumped into the river and I jumped right out it was COLD! So breaking out my fishing gear I fished the rest of the afternoon then took a nap in the late afternoon. Sunrays was all I caught.

That evening after dinner Tom and I went back to the river where a dozen or so fly fisherman were casting into the water below the dam. About 100 yards up river a solitary fly fisherman was casting under the bridge, " that's Rachel" said Tom, as we watched her cast, back turned towards us, in the deep Blue Mountain. I realize he knew her by the style and fineness of her casting.

Paddling and casting and the following day blissfully continuing up river for 2 miles in my kayak to return them to this story's beginning. At this point the river split into a number of different channels. I paddled up a couple of these until I found the main channel. The current became much stronger and I knew this was where the river narrowed into the fast flowing gorge. The end of

up river paddling. I turned around slowly down stream cracking a beer and losing another lure without a bite. Coming back across from the previous day's short swim I carried and dragged the kayak across the Conway's neighbors yard putting it back in their yard.

Rare was gardening and putting stones into a wheelbarrow. I asked her what she planned to do with the stones she told me they were for a Labyrinth, a new project. Shooting pool that night at the Poorhouse, a local tavern, I met the owner of the downhill bike shop at Whiteface Lodge he invited me to stop by the next day and give one of his bikes a try.

The weather turned wet again the next day with rain blowing through the mountains. Parking Tom's bike at the nearly deserted lodge I thought the gondola was running. So I took a ride that cost \$18 with my veterans discount to the top of the little White Face mountain. Getting out of the gondola into a pelting rain I could see the murky vastness of the Adirondacks Park surrounding me. There were a few fellow sightseers bundled up against the blustery conditions on the peak. Summer was over.

Back at the lodge I met the owner of the downhill bike shop operating from May through October then he heads south and the shop reverts from bikes to skis. He lent me a bike for a quick ride up a beginner's slope to a small zip line and action park, with the rain starting to come down in a steady drizzle I returned the bike. Tom called after finishing his day and offered to come get me in his pick-up to which I happily agreed.

Rare had gone for the day to a pow-wow of indigenous people from around the world on the Canadian border and wouldn't be back till later that night. Tom feeling a little under the weather turned in early. I fell asleep with Neisse and Zoe whining outside my window.

The next morning I was making coffee when Rare walked in the kitchen wishing me a happy birthday. She handed me a pair of tie-dyed socks she had made of bamboo, who knew! After breakfast we tackled the one big chore of the week, which was to pitch Tom's 40-foot extension ladder on the gable end of the house nearest the chimney so Tom could give it a good cleaning before the coming winter. That done with no injuries Rare went off on a hike.

Tom and I thought of the recent passing of his brother and my friend John, a huge loss to all who knew him. That evening we would go into Lake Placid for my birthday dinner. So for the rest of the day I practiced on their lawn with Rare's fly rod I had been doing so all week never getting a chance to actually fish with it. Next time I thought when White Face is green.

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Whiteface in green.



Octagon by son and mom.