

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 Fishin’ 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 fool hardy 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 sing 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 quite your 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 "Merrit'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.