

**Here is  
the place  
Loveliness  
keeps house,  
between  
the river  
and the  
wooded hills.**

—Madison Julius Cawein



T-H Photo by Jon Jacobson

## The Upper Iowa: Residents fear government plan will destroy its majestic beauty

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It takes about five hours in the Upper Iowa River area to get accustomed to the idea that canoeists will always be called "canoers" up there. After that you understand that the assault on the King's English is of no concern to the people.

There's too much on their minds right now what with corn blight and high property tax and all.

And now it seems that the government wants to take thousands of acres bordering the river and designate the Upper Iowa a "scenic river."

The farm folks in those parts are quite sensitive about their river.

"Why, cripes," says George Smith, "I don't see how they can make it any more scenic or wild than it is right now."

You soon see, of course, that George does all his talking between the lines.

He really means: "It's all right the way it is so keep your grubby hands off my land."

That's what most of the farmers are saying. Except for Clifford Dawley. He says, "If the government wants my land, they'll get it somehow. Ain't no use fighting it."

Whether Dawley is a pessimist or a realist, he is certainly in the minority among folks who own land along the river.

They have even formed a group of sorts — the Upper Iowa River Preservation Association — to put up a fight.

About 150 farmers have joined the group in hiring an attorney and caravanning to Des Moines where they met with high-ranking officials.

"They were such gracious listeners," notes George's wife Thelma, who is just learning that politicians are among the world's best when it comes to listening.

And then there are more than 5,000 signatures on a petition to Interior Secretary Walter Hickel — "They've got to listen now."

It's difficult, though, to really chat with the people about the river and such. The government's plans are still not final so you don't know which farmer may lose what land for what purpose.

George, however, tells of one guy north of Decorah who stands to lose his entire farm except for 15 acres "and you can't make a living off that."

George himself, who farms about 800 acres, might be hard hit.

And John Malanaphy, who is called "Chuck" by a few lifelong buddies, could be all but wiped out if the government does what he figures it intends to do.

"I've got some cattle and 33 horses. If the government buys the land and ends my watering rights, I wouldn't know

what to do. I can't afford to drill all the wells I'd need."

John knows the river. His farm has been in the family for years. There's even a tributary called "Malanaphy Spring." So it seems natural for him to be concerned.

As a matter of fact, he was one of the first farmers to voice opposition to the plan and was elected head of the preservation group.

Until the government plans are more concrete, John and George and their friends can talk only in generalities.

"They're talking about fencing off the whole river. They say they'll put up the fencing and the farmers would have to tend to it after that," John says.

"You'd think they'd know you can't keep fencing in there. The spring floods rip them out every year. It's just crazy."

Then he gazes aimlessly until he's ready to talk again. John is deliberate like that. And thorough.

His manner comes out during a four-hour canoe trip down the river: A spectacular directed and produced by Mother Nature with special effects by Woodland Creatures, color by Autumn Leaves and distributed through the courtesy of River Landowners who "don't care if canoeers enjoy our river."

"The Upper Iowa" is quite a show. On a four-mile meandering stretch, the depth ranges from less than a foot to more than eight feet. The water, for the most part, is emerald green, clear and calm. A few ripples add a touch of adventure to an otherwise sedate outing.

Fish, mostly carp and bass, flop up through the surface.

Downed trees and mud nests provide mute testimony to the beavers and swallows that once populated the waterfront. Most of the wolves are gone, too. George says he has childlike pleasure in identifying sounds and trees along the way.

The banks are mainly rocky and timbered. In a few places corn fields come within 100 feet of the banks.

A majestic bluffline — about 50 yards high and 500 yards long — walls in the river at one stretch.

Rather than merely seeing all this, John notices and absorbs, captures and files.

He scans the shore and river bottom,

searches the trees and rocks; scouts for dangerous water.

He scrutinizes every inch along the way. As if he is fearful of never seeing it again. You can tell he's concerned.

"I hate to see it happen," he asserts, avoiding your eyes lest he lose his train of thought.

He talks of several thousand acres of good agricultural land that could be lost if the government moves in.

But still, no one is sure exactly what devious plans are in the making.

Whatever the plans are, they are to sure to spark John's ire.

He's not a violent man but he does get angry.

"It's I don't know just the thought of them coming in and condemning my land and taking it away. I can't even give it to my kids."

"Why can't they let it be?" he asks, not expecting a valid answer.

"Lots of people use it for recreation. Hell, on a good Sunday we count as many as 30 people canoeing through my stretch. We don't stop them. And we don't plan on it."

"The government can't make it any better than it is."

Another pause for another thought.

"It seems to me that the state has more land than it can handle right now. And with so many people in the world starving, it don't seem right to take that land out of production."

Pause.

"What's wrong with private enterprise handling recreation? Isn't that what this country was built on — private enterprise? Look at Spook Cave and Mammoth Cave. They're privately owned and well run."

He's left with more thoughts and so many things to say.

You leave the valley. And the Bluffton General Store where you can buy lunch for five persons and a round of beers for \$4.64.

And the steel bridges with plaques saying they were built in 1876.

And a bluffpoint area that drew an offer of \$7,000 for three acres.

And you still wonder what will happen to the pleasant river valley and its self-made people.

And you wish you could have found some comforting words for John and the others.

