A SENSE OF PLACE

by MICHAEL FURTMAN

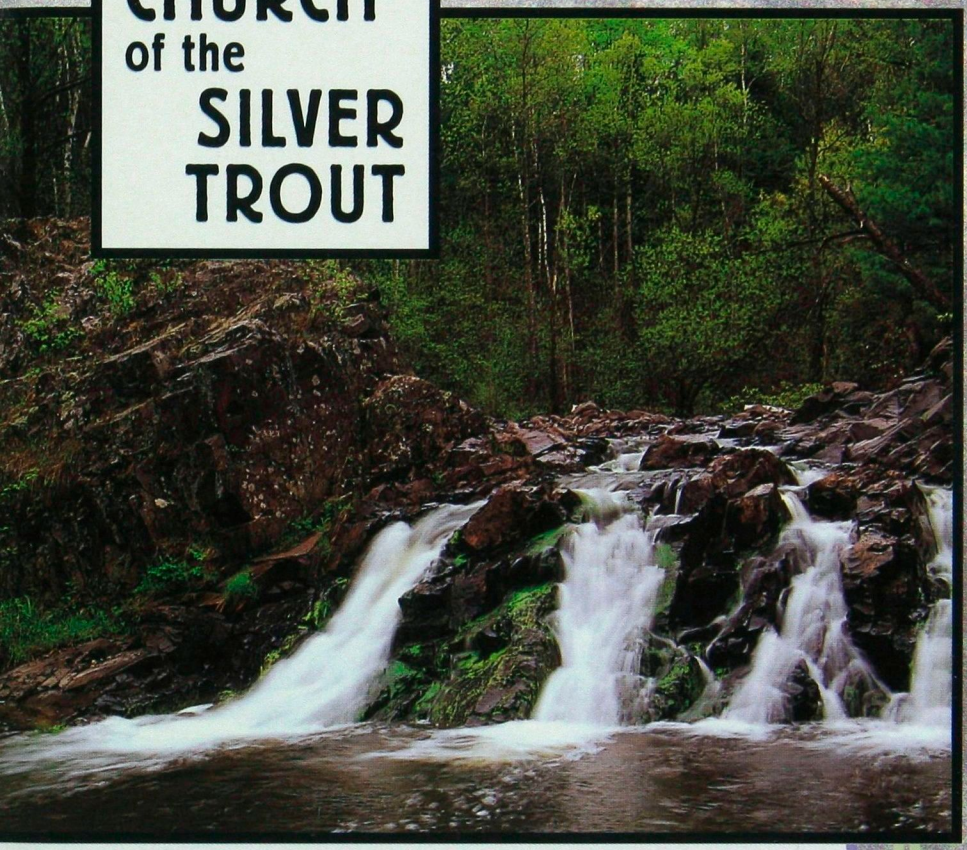
LESTER RIVER BY DUDLEY EDMONDSON

THROUGH COLD CANYONS DARK RIVERS RUN. Cascading from the Lake Superior highlands, swollen with snow melt or spring rain, rivers careen through ancient bedrock toward the massive lake beyond. Depending upon where they arise, the waters are either red with clay or stained brown by bogs, tumbling south between banks of pine, cedar, aspen, and birch. As the north woods slips the grip of hard winter, the sound of this running water is proof that spring has arrived. Green things burst through the dank bank soils; the woods smell of rot and moisture. Grouse drum in the surrounding forest. Reaching finally the greatest of lakes, the dark rivers plow into its clear waters, where rafts of ducks bob, awaiting lesser lakes' ice-out.

I go to these rivers not simply to observe. Into this wet, cold, wild world, I migrate each year, fly rod in hand and wader clad, to visit the church of the silver fish. It is, for me, a defining time.

For carried in these currents, along with branches, leaves, and ice, are odors we humans cannot smell. These scents tell of clear tributaries, of gravel spawning beds, of deep holes where fish can survive summer drought or winter ice. When these molecular messages reach Lake Superior, they are not all lost in its immensity, for some find their way to the olfactory

CHURCH of the SILVER TROUT



corridors of steelhead trout, pulling each fish to just that stream in which it was born and in which it finds the attributes necessary for survival.

Some as large as 10 pounds, steelhead are silver, hard, beautiful—bullet shaped, glistening, with large powerful tails. Heavy with eggs or sperm, these graceful and mighty fish ascend the streams, battling up cold and brawny currents, leaping falls as high as 10 feet, driven by the need to pass on their genes. They search for mates and a place, the perfect place, where they can

expel their precious cargo, thus launching a four-year cycle that results in adults like themselves. It is a marvelous orbit, unending, shaped by years of natural selection and journeys unchronicled.

As I struggle to acknowledge that I am now past the middle of my own journey, it amazes me to think that I've pursued steelhead for nearly 30 years. In my youth it was a passion as hot as a first romance. Attending the University of Minnesota–Duluth, I scheduled my spring courses around the steelhead run—keeping Tuesdays and Thursdays free for full days of fishing, blocking classes together on the other three days to leave half days for the river. Chaucer and Milton before noon, the Knife River and Silver Creek until dark.

As winter rotted away, I spent many cold nights sleeping in my old van on stream's edge, all the better for a few hours' fishing before work or class, and to beat the competition to the best waters. If a brother had been in jail (neither ever has been) and had called me for bail during April or May, he would have needed enough reading material to last until June.

I was not alone in this passion but was part of a large steelheading community. If you did not know someone's name, you knew his face and reputation. Mostly male, it was otherwise like any community. We had our church (the river) and our town hall (Jim's Bait in Duluth). We would gather on stream banks around campfires, warming hands, sharing laughs, beer, and smoked fish. Though the rivers were sometimes crowded, we fished side by side in a politeness probably not possible today, sharing the steelhead, which seemed limitless. Like

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Pentecostals gathered to hallelujah, we recognized each other's faith. We numbered in the thousands.

And like any community, there were good people (the "white hats," as they were known) and bad (the "black hats"); givers and takers. Givers organized to protect the resource; takers crept to the rivers at night with dark thoughts, gill nets, and weighted treble hooks to rip these gorgeous fish from the water. Everyone knew which color hat you wore. The sides sometimes came to blows, for our community even had its police, a posse of men who would wait in the dark to confront the black hats as they attempted their evil deeds.

It was a wild time, and a good time. Good to be 20 years old and to terrify yourself with a wild river crossing, to be young and foolish enough to wade upstream deep into a cold and slippery canyon, to climb down rotting rock embankments with your fly rod in your teeth, always to stand in frigid waters hard pressing on your thighs. This, for the chance to hook a fish as wild as yourself, but purer.

LIKE A BOOMTOWN GONE BUST, THIS COMMUNITY disappeared. Steelhead fell on hard times in the 1980s. Though not native to Lake Superior (these migratory rainbow trout were first brought here in the 1890s from their Pacific Northwest home), the species had flourished for eight decades before dwindling. There are as many theories for their decline as there are people who think about it, but I believe it had to do with our own greed (catch and release was unheard of), a burgeoning Lake Superior trolling industry that killed additional fish, and environmental changes such as the logging and road building that, by worsening runoff, might have limited reproductive success and increased mortality.

The men who fished for steelhead lingered for a few more years, reluctant to believe something this marvelous could disappear, but when streamside prayers went unanswered, they

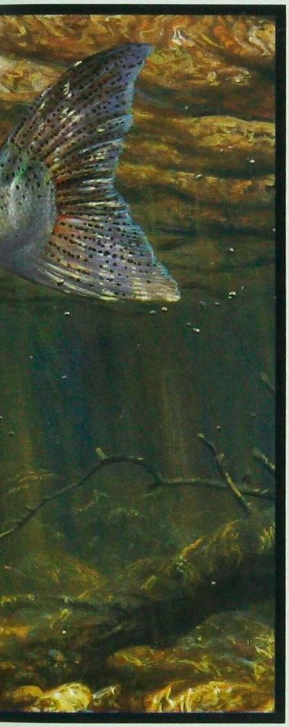
abandoned their church. What followed were sad and awful times. As a member of the faithful, I still searched for steelhead, often to be the only person on a stream. There were no boot

MARK SUSINNO, *ON THE RUN—STEELHEAD*, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND WILD WINGS, LAKE CITY

tracks, no laughs around fires, no fish caught. The rivers looked the same, but they were dead.

If one's faith is strong, hope never dies. After almost a decade of spiritually empty springtimes, to my delight and surprise, I began again to catch steelhead and see them leaping falls. Not like the old days, but enough to raise hope and fill a heart. Gradually, over several years, the runs strengthened. I could once again stand in the wan sun of a northern spring, watch the

roiling waters, and hold a legitimate hope of hooking a steelhead, the chance to feel the thrill of silver wildness trying to elude me.



As good as it was to see the fish, I was happy also to see some of the old community again. Once more I could round a bend in a stream to see the face of some man or another long absent. And there were handshakes, catching-up conversations, and happiness born of once again being on a living river.

If my youth's passion was to possess this life, my middle years' desire is to watch it flourish, to live beyond me. These mirror passions, one of youth, one of middle age, are but two sides of the same coin—life and death. Good that there should be times for both. Necessary even. Articles of faith on which the church is built.

Who knows why the steelhead rebounded? Recent laws that prohibit killing wild steelhead no doubt helped. Favorable weather played a role. New tools and approaches by the Department of Natural Resources surely aided. But this much I do know. Though we needed to give the steelhead a break, though we needed to protect them and their habitat, there is little else we know that they needed from us. What can we teach them that time has not? What can we do that nature would not? Steelhead will survive here if they should.

In the church of the silver fish, one needs faith in evolution and in the resiliency of nature.

In cold canyons living rivers run again. May it always be so. ❑