THE BLUE SUCKER AND A LOST AMERICA

AN ESSAY

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The men rode to the river in horse-drawn wagons. Some carried barbed fish spears—those who could afford them. The rest carried pitchforks and dip nets. Pioneer life was tough, but nature had a way of providing for them, as it had the Dakota before them. The great herds of Bison were gone forever, and to raise a strong family a man needed meat. Here, on the Mississippi River in springtime, it was hoped that nature would again prove to be kind. The men in the wagons were in dire need of food—the long, brutal winter had nearly killed them. If some source of spring bounty was not found, sickness and starvation might claim their families, their wives and children waiting at home. Each man was nervous, brows furrowed under their broad-brimmed hats, mouths frowning with worry in their tangled beards. Frowning, that is, until they crested the last hill. Until they came to the rapids. Until they saw!

Dakota traders had told the pioneer's grandfathers about this place, and the Dakota had learned about it from their own ancestors. It was learned by necessity, passed down from father to son like a family treasure. The river stretched wide here. Here lay a rushing rapid many miles long. All over the water, up and down and all across, they could see fins shining in the sunlight. Long, pointed, iron-grey fins, splashing and slashing across the surface, tipping and turning in the great rapid. The fins of great, large fish crowded together in the shallows. The Blue Suckers were here! The giant, mysterious, sweet-fleshed wanderers. They had scales the color of the stormy prairie sky, and fins the shape of a harvester's sickle. Where they came from, no one knew. But when the prairie flowers first began to bloom, the great fish appeared, as if by magic, to dispel the specter of starvation and usher in a new season of happiness and plenty. The men's brows unfurrowed, bearded faces smiled, they had survived. The Blue Suckers had come, so the winter was over and the luxurious spring begun. The men waded out into the foaming water with their implements of harvest, and around them surged a living mass of uncountable fish. The great river was alive with fish, from the east bank to the west, every inch of it packed solid with Blue Suckers. The men took them by the wagonload, by the thousands, but they left behind ten thousand times more. The sun set as the last Blue Sucker of the day is taken, a forty-inch fish weighing twenty-five pounds. The fish wriggled vainly on the barbed spear as the horses champed at their bits, anxious to begin the long trek back down the rutted road to the

Corey Geving grew up an avid angler, but differed from the pack in seeking not just game fish, but all species. He has kept over 40 species of North American fishes in aquariums over the years. He graduated from the University of Minnesota at Morris with a bachelor's degree in Biology. His passion for these lesser-known fishes led to the creation of roughfish.com in 1998, and he still serves as the webmaster. The poplar site promotes angling for and provides information on many nongame species, hosts anglers' species life lists and fishing trip reports, and provides active discussion forums. Corey hosts the annual Roughfish Roundup on the Root River near Lanesboro, Minnesota, each spring. The event is always heavily attended by anglers who covet the trophy awarded for most species caught, and enjoy *hors d'oeuvres* of deep fried "sucker balls" after the contest.

Illustration from *The Confessions of a Poacher* (Project Gutenburg: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/36970)

village. Torches faintly lit the way back from the spawning grounds, but the horses knew the way by heart. They have walked this road many times before.

At the village, wives and children and relatives gathered; a feast was in the making. The sense of happiness and well-being was palpable in the air as the wagons came home, laden with fresh fish. Many were roasted for a fresh springtime feast. The rest were preserved—pickled, dried, salted, brined, or smoked. Some called them "sweet sucker," for their succulence and flavor is unmatched. After the long, hard winter, fresh meat tasted all the sweeter. After fresh fish was delivered to every relative, every friend, every acquaintance, and every neighbor, the remainder was preserved and stockpiled against a time when a bad harvest or poor luck would make them hungry again. As they ate, they marveled at the way providence brought them sustenance. Such a miracle, such a blessing. They bowed their heads as the eldest man led the mealtime prayer. They offered heartfelt thanksgiving for life and health and family, and for Blue Suckers, the truest sign of God's mercy that they knew.

Next winter, on special days, the children dined on salted Blue Sucker during the long, cold nights. The sweet taste brought back memories. The men remembered the rushing rapids of the great river (Figure 1), the spring flowers blooming on the prairie, and the great mystery of the fish that appeared, always, to offer themselves up for the taking by the thousands. Stories were told, and re-told, on the darkest of nights when the hearth fire burned low. Stories of the mysterious, sweet, and providential fish, the miracle fish, the wanderers. They prayed to God, on those cold winter nights, that next spring would once again bring Blue Suckers in plenty. They prayed for the cycle to continue forever. They prayed that as long as old men could still teach young men to fish, the Blue Suckers would come from the depths to feed them. Each year their prayers were answered by these torpedo-shaped messengers the color of a stormy prairie sky, symbols of divine providence; sweet, strong fish with sickle-shaped fins, returning from all over the heartland of the new nation to the very places they were born.

In 1913, in Keokuk, Iowa, a project was completed that would stop this cycle and change the river forever. The industrial nation was hungry for power. The Keokuk Dam (Figure 2) was the largest hydroelectric project in the world. a titanic concrete monument to human progress. Over 4,000 feet long, the dam stabbed across the river with 119 gates of iron. The river was raised by 40 feet, and the ancient rapids were obliterated forever. The pathway of water was blocked as the great river had at last been tamed. Electric lights twinkled down, reflected on the slick, smooth surface of the tamed flood. People marveled at the wide, slow pool that replaced the rushing river that used to be

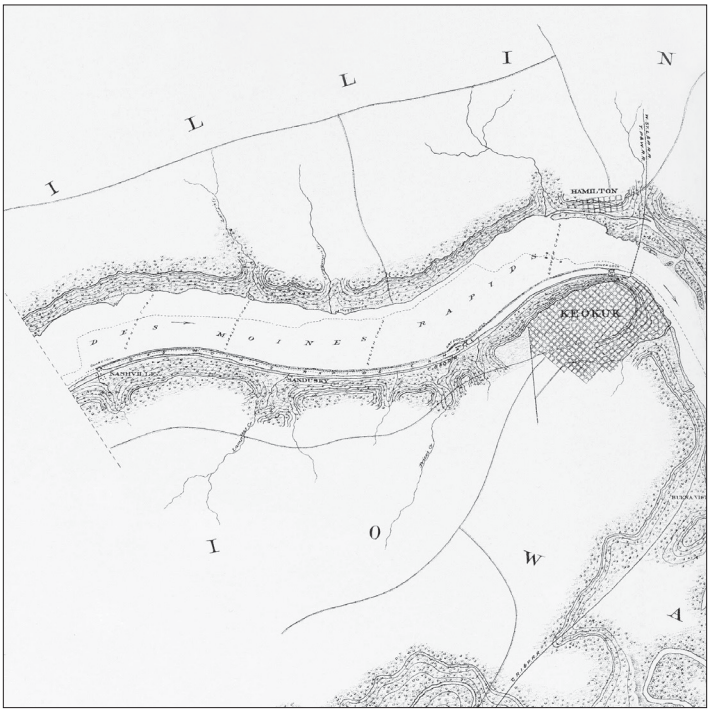

Figure 1. In the late 1830s, Captain Robert E. Lee (Army Corps of Engineers) estimated the length of the Des Moines Rapids as 11 miles, ending just upstream of Keokuk and falling 24 feet over blue limestone ledges. (Map circa 1878)

Figure 2. U. S. Lock and Dam 19 at Keokuk, Iowa (Photos by Konrad Schmidt)

there. They smiled and raised their glasses to progress. The greatest rapids on the greatest American river, conquered at last! For progress! For cheap power and transportation, for commerce and profit. Almost everyone smiled at the great achievement. Almost. A few shook their heads, a few frowned, grumbled, and walked away. A few—a very scant few—didn't see the great dam as progress. Of course, they were people of no economic consequence—naturalists, fishermen, and natives—so their opinions meant nothing.

For a few years the fish still came back to where the rapids used to roar. They milled about below the dam in their millions, their great fins sticking out of the water to shine in the sun. But the mighty river had betrayed them. The fishermen netted the fish below the dam and sold them at market. But each year, the fish in their nets were fewer in number. No young Blue Suckers appeared there. Finally, the last few fish—huge and scarred and immensely old—appeared so seldom that they became a curiosity, then a rarity, and finally an aberration. There were no longer enough of them to be worth bringing to market. More dams were built and the river became a highway. All of the spawning shoals were flooded over and covered with toxic mud. For the first time in a million years, the multitudes of fish no longer gathered in the old places. Old men with gray beards still talked about those bright, hopeful days of their youth, the first happy days of spring, when the prairie flowers would bloom and the Blue Suckers came and everything was right with the world. The younger men knew from the tales they had heard that those days were long gone; there were no sky-tinted wanderers left. They were all gone, gone like the endless herds of Bison and the sky-blackening flocks of Passenger Pigeons. They had dwindled away when the river was made deep and sluggish, its once-mighty rushing shoals thick with silt and choked with slime. With so many dams, there was nowhere left in the world for a fish that wants to swim a thousand miles of the Mississippi each year. Over the silt swam new fish, fish from the old world called "carp," fish that could live in a slow, muddy river where all of the rapids had died. These fish would be the new harbingers of spring, the new messengers of providence. Maybe someday, the young men thought, they could fill up their wagons with them.

But the great Blue Sucker is not so easily destroyed. Its long migrations are forever ended. Its populous dominance, like that of the Bison, is forever broken. But here and there they find small places, places where a great iron-blue fish can sometimes survive. Wingdams, built by man to channel the flow of the river form a small swift area during certain water levels. Around islands, ancient gravel beds are sometimes exposed by floodwaters, making a temporary

The author's first Blue Sucker, electrofished in Mississippi River Pool 2, Ramsey County, Minnesota, April 2007. (Photo by Jenny Kruckenberg)

shoal. And in certain wild tributaries, where rapids still exist that no dam has ever tamed, the fish still gather. Wherever water flows unharnessed and unbound, the wanderers still come seeking out and finding those places; the places where the rushing sound of water still rings out, where rocks still tumble and clash, where the current is still swift and the water pure. In these places the old fish come to lay their eggs and disappear, much as they have done for years uncounted. Some tiny fraction of their precious eggs hatch and grow and, therefore, the species continues to survive.

There are a few dedicated people who still seek out the great Blue Sucker. Why do we seek these beleaguered fish out, these remnants of a Lost America? Why do we want to catch them? Perhaps we think that this fish, the greatest fish of the greatest American river, should not be lost and forgotten. Perhaps we feel that the fish that saved our ancestors from starvation, the fish that our ancestors earnestly prayed for in the wintertime, the fish that those brave pioneers loved and honored, should likewise be celebrated by us. These fish have a grand and spectacular American wildness in them. Perhaps we simply seek them out because we love the places where wildness still exists in this world, and the things that live there are wild and free. We love the small places where the hand of man has not completely overwritten the hand of nature. We want to catch this fish, to hold it in our hands, to feel its scales, and to see it in all its sickle-finned glory. Perhaps when we do catch it we hope that we will catch a glimpse of a lost river, a great river, the greatest river of all. A river alive with great swarms of fish the color of the stormy prairie sky. A river that flowed through a long-lost land, a beautiful, lost America. We will look into that fish's ancient, implacable eyes and then we will gently place it back into the water and watch it swim away.