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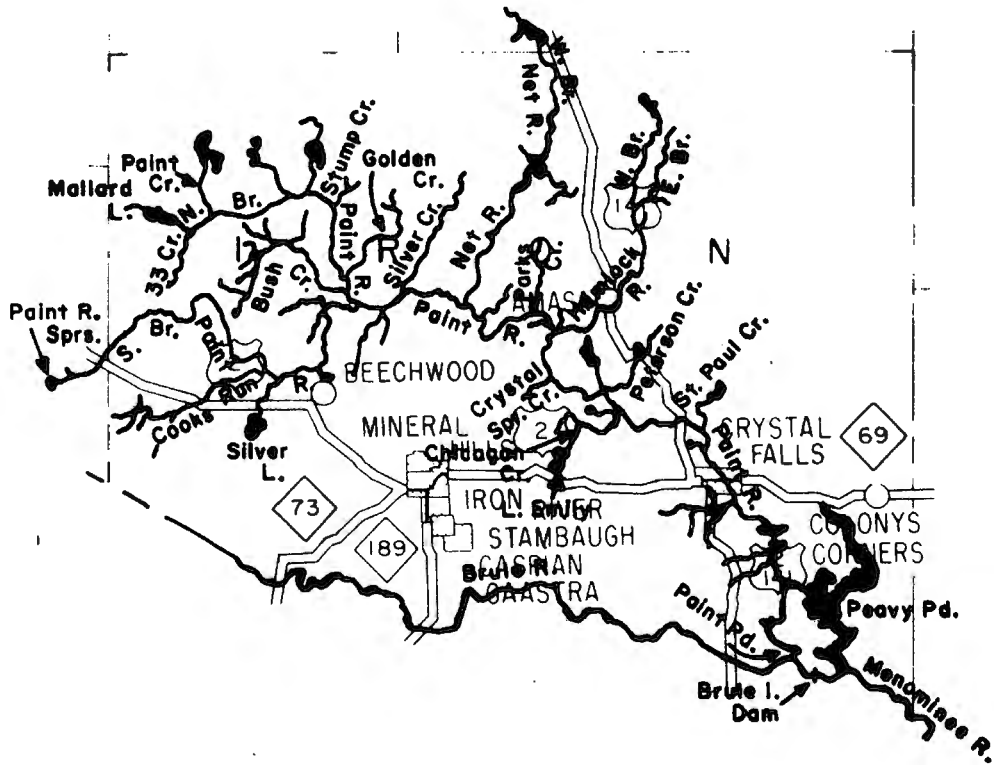
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SERIES: THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN

NO. 15 THE PAINT RIVER

Dell Siler, Fisheries Biologist

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The Paint River is the dominant river system in Iron County. It has been of prime importance to the area since the first explorers arrived about 1840. Its use over the years has followed a pattern similar to many northern Michigan rivers. It was first used by exploring trappers and traders then came the loggers, to whom it was so essential, and presently it is used by the public for a variety of water oriented sports and as a source of electrical power.

The name Paint is derived from the Ojibway word "Miskua," meaning "it is red" and this evolved to Paint. The red color is actually more of a rusty brown which the river picks up from the many lowland areas that it drains.

The main stream of the Paint is formed by two branches approximately equal in size, the North Branch and the South Branch. These two branches flow easterly through Ottawa National Forest and then converge to form the mainstream near Gibbs City. The main stream continues southeast until it meets the Brule and the Michigamme rivers, amid a mass of power dams and big water to form the Menominee.

North Branch of the Paint

The origin of the North Branch is not agreed upon by all local authorities. The most commonly accepted origin is the spring which drains into the head of Mallard Lake impoundment. The stream flowing from Mallard Lake dam tumbles over rocks and boulders for a mile or so before it takes on the characteristic slow, quiet flow of the upper north branch. The remains of a rustic old sluicing dam dating back to the "pine days" is visible from the USFS road 362 crossing. Thirty-three Creek joins the North Branch about a mile and a half below Mallard Lake. It is a slow moving silt and sand bottom creek that abounds with beaver dams and brook trout. The entire North Branch is primarily a brook trout stream in contrast to the South Branch where browns are quite common.

The brown waters of the North Branch are strengthened by a second sizable tributary, Paint Creek, a short distance below the Thirty-one Creek junction. Paint Creek is a faster flowing stream than the North Branch and is thought by some to be the source of the North Branch. For the next seven or eight miles the North Branch flows slowly east through low lying wild country. The bottom type is largely sand and silt with a few scattered rocky areas. Beds of tape grass are common in the silted areas. Lowland conifers and tag alder line the shore. Canoeable waters for average summer flow begin at USFS road 147 crossing. The river starts to change character gradually below 147. The bottom type becomes increasingly rocky and the gradient increases. The river turns south in the area of Stump Creek and broadens out considerably. Long, straight,

shallow stretches of slow water broken occasionally by narrow gravel ledges appear unproductive but brook trout are quite numerous along the tag alder edges and at the foot of the gravel ledges. Most of the North Branch receives only light fishing pressure. During the week a fisherman is likely to have the whole stream to himself.

Bush Creek, a sizable tributary just above the confluence with the South Branch, is a slow moving brushy creek with many tributaries. It drains a large area between the two branches and is stalked regularly by local bait fishermen.

At the forks where the branches meet, there is a small National Forest Campground which is the only designated campground above the mainstream.

South Branch of the Paint

The water of the South Branch originates in the southeast corner of Gogebic County at a place called "Paint River Springs." There is very little public access to the stream before it reaches the Elmwood area except the US-2 crossing. Lowland conifer swamps and private ownership are the reason for the limited access. This stretch undoubtedly supports a good brook trout population judging by its remoteness and quality of downstream waters. Practically speaking canoeing and fishing waters begin at Elmwood. Good catches of brook trout are taken between Elmwood and the first bridge downstream (USFS road 149). Between this bridge crossing and the mouth of Cooks Run there are three or four old logging dam sites for those who have an eye for history. The stream itself is very rocky with tag alder edges. This brings us to the mouth of Cooks Run which is indeed a noteworthy tributary. It is a very productive stream with a trout population split about equally between browns and brooks with an occasional rainbow. The lower six miles of stream are easily accessible to fishermen. The portion below Forest Highway 16 is canoeable except during periods of unusually low water.

This quaint little trout stream is fast moving and well suited to both fly and bait fishing.

During the summers of 1972 and 1973 an extensive stream improvement program was completed on the lower six miles of Cooks Run. The aim of this work was to increase the average size of the fish by providing instream cover of the type preferred by large fish. In addition, dense tag alder growth was cleared back to the banks, in many areas, to make the water more fishable. The deep, slowflowing meadows area, starting about one-half mile below Forest Highway 16, is in contrast with the rest of the stream but it is a preferred place for the evening brown trout fishermen. Good size brown trout are present throughout this tributary. The upper limits of the brown trout waters in the South Branch seems to be the mouth of Cooks Run. Below this area the South Branch is broad, shallow and rocky for several miles. Fishing improves as you progress downstream until the river turns north. The remains of old stream improvement structures are evident in this area. Many of them still provide good fish cover. Occasional rainbows may be picked up from here down to Crystal Falls on the mainstream.

One of the major landmarks on this section of stream is Uno Dam. It is a picturesque old logging dam flanked by large rock outcrops with an immense hole below. This area is privately owned which makes a canoe almost necessary for access. Below Uno Dam the river turns and flows north for about three miles. Stream improvement work is currently underway on Federal land in this stretch to provide cover and make the stream channel more suitable to fish during low summer flow.

Gold Mine hole, another South Branch landmark, is located just downstream from the USFS road 151 bridge. It is a large bend hole noted for its lunker browns and brooks. The name comes from an old gold mine located in a large rock outcrop 50 yards from shore. Evening fishing is a must here, but the no-seeums are so ferocious that they readily separate the men from the boys. Below the Gold Mine hole the river slows down a bit and the bottom type changes gradually toward sand. The river soon turns east again in the final stretch before it meets the North Branch. Fishing is fairly good in this easterly flowing portion but access is a problem. A crude man-made dam blocks the river a short distance above the forks. It may be easily crossed by canoers.

Mainstream

When the two forks meet the darker water of the North Branch seems to predominate. This is known as the Gibbs City area. Stone and log pilings dating back to the old logging days are evident between the forks and the old Atkinson dam remains. This is pretty big water with numerous deep holes. The river broadens out and slows down about 20 minutes float time below the Gibbs City bridge. There is about a 2-mile stretch here that doesn't look too good for fishing. The fishing picks up just below Blockhouse campground. Between this campground and the mouth of the Net River fishing is good for browns, rainbows and smallmouth bass. The water gets quite warm below this area during the long hot summer days and it is probably marginal for trout but marginal trout water often produces some trophy size fish. The smallmouth found in the Paint are real fighting fools and will put most trout to shame. Look for areas with large submerged rocks for best smallmouth action.

The mouth of the Net is another good area for bass and trout. The Net is a unique river that deserves to have its own story told in a separate report. It has the darkest water you will probably ever see in a river of this size. The stream itself is shaped like a string of black pearls. It is made up of a series of small lakes connected by short rocky rapids. The Net, for the most part, is wild and undeveloped. Good catches of smallmouth bass are taken from the lower section during midsummer on surface plugs. The Net takes its name from the meaning of the word nett i.e. clear. Old maps of the area show it spelled with two "Ts." Apparently Indians and early settlers kept the stream channel "clear" of log jams, etc. so that it could be used as a route to the northern areas. After canoeing the river this makes sense, as most of it can be canoed as easily upstream as down leaving only the narrow rapids to portage.

There is a lot of slow broad water between the mouth of the Net and Paint Dam. Fishing in this area is fair. Paint Dam was the site of a log

sorting dam constructed by the Menominee Boom Co. in 1865. The purpose of the dam was to provide a means of sorting the logs belonging to the different logging companies and to facilitate delivery to the mills. Each logging company was assessed about 12 cents per thousand board feet for this service. Millions of logs passed this way before the loggers were through.

A short distance above Paint Dam there is a small rapids which looks like it would be worth fishing. There are three rapids between Paint Dam and the Bates-Amasa bridge. The first is a short one which should cause no problem for the experienced canoeist. The second rapids is called Upper Hemlock Rapids. It is quite long and should be floated only by experienced canoeists with their life preservers securely fastened. The bottom rapids is Lower Hemlock Rapids. It is very long ($\frac{1}{4}$ mile) and should be shot only by those with a strong death wish. These rapids were probably even more beautiful and rugged before the early loggers blasted certain areas so their logs would pass easier. There are portage trails around all rapids but it is probably easier to "line" your canoe down using a pole to keep it off the rocks. The portage trail runs along the right bank on Upper Hemlock and along the left bank for Lower Hemlock. Fishing in the area of the rapids is reported to be good for rainbows and browns. Access is again a problem except by boat or canoe.

The Hemlock River, a major tributary, joins the Paint just above the Upper Hemlock Rapids. The Hemlock is a good brook trout stream and is accessible for 2 or 3 miles along County Road 643 and northeast of Amasa.

Canoes can be launched at Paint Dam and taken out at the Bates-Amasa bridge for fishing in this area. Between Lower Hemlock Rapids and the bridge, fishing is fair for large trout and good for smallmouth. The stream is quite broad and rocky. Below the bridge the river slows down for about a mile, then broadens out and speeds up a bit. This area is shallow with scattered boulders protruding above the water surface. The slow water just below the bridge is fairly good for northern pike and smallmouth. Trout diminish steadily between here and Erickson's landing.

Smallmouth fishing is good during the first part of the season in the area of Chicagon Slough and downstream to the US-141 bridge. Shortly below the 141 bridge the river comes under the influence of the Crystal Falls hydroelectric dam. These backwaters provide fair to good fishing for northerns, largemouth bass and walleye. Perch and rock bass are also taken. The dam is located on the site of the former Crystal Falls from which the town takes its name. Part of the falls or rapids are still visible below the dam. The mile or so stretch below the dam is fast, rocky water which harbors many species of fish including walleye, smallmouth, rainbow trout, brown trout and rock bass. The river gradually slows down over the next two miles until it comes under the influence of the Little Bull Diversion Dam. This dam can divert Paint River water into the Peavy Reservoir on the Michigamme or allow it to continue on down to the Brule Island Dam impoundment formed by the Paint and Brule rivers.

The Little Bull impoundment is long and narrow with a few large weedy bays protruding out from the sides. Largemouth bass, northern pike and walleye are taken here in pretty good numbers. Minnows seem to be the most popular bait.

It is very difficult to get a canoe or boat down to the Paint River below the Little Bull Diversion dam. The river is so rocky in this area it is not likely that anyone would want to float this section. Horse-race Rapids lies about two miles downstream and it is indeed impassable. It is a beautiful spot with high rock walls on either side of the gorge. The rapids is easily accessible by way of the Iron County Airport road off US-2.

The slow deep water below the rapids is a popular fishing spot for crappies, northern pike and walleye. There is an access site about a mile below Horserace Rapids on Paint River Pond. This impoundment is formed by the Brule Island Dam which backs up the waters of both the Paint and the Brule just below their confluence. The river below the confluence is known as the Brule until it meets the Michigamme and forms the Menominee.