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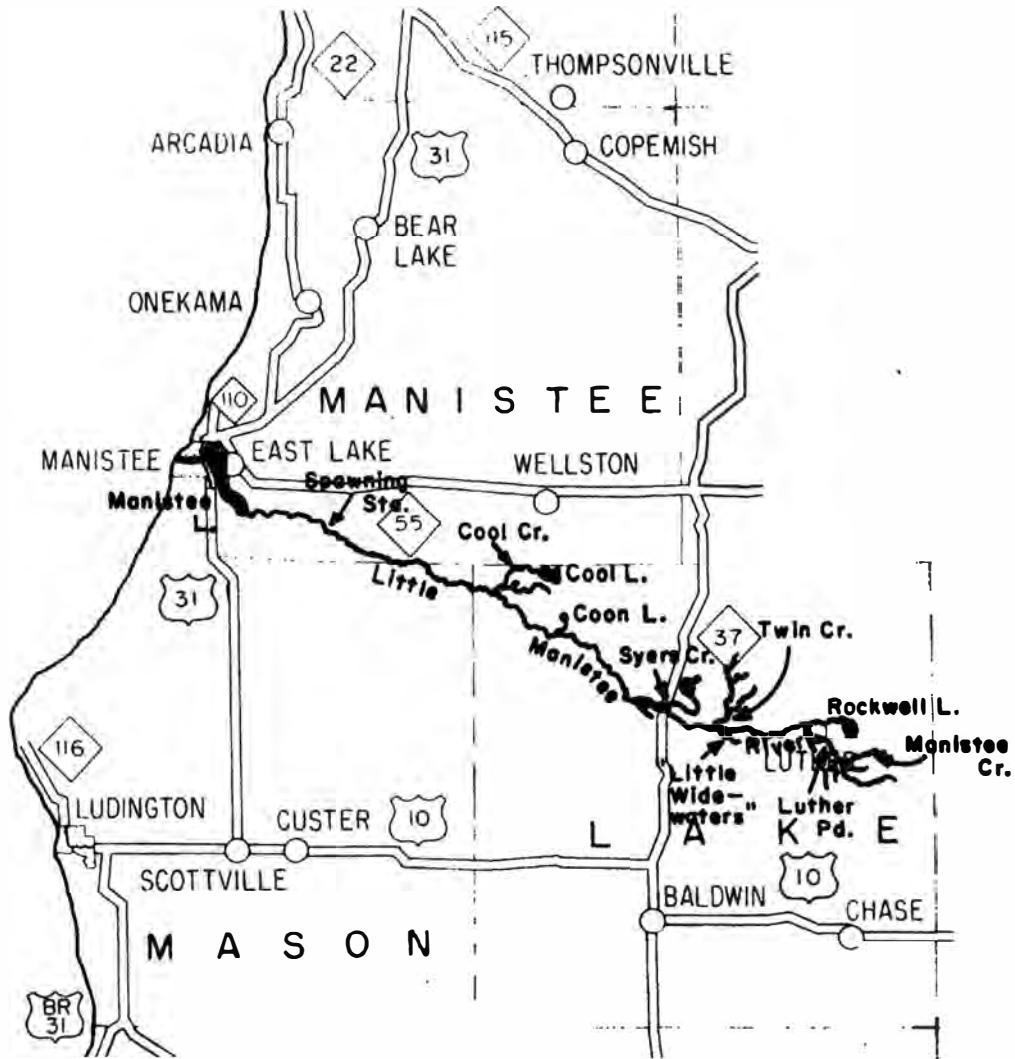
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SERIES: THE TROUT STREAMS OF MICHIGAN

NO. 16 THE LITTLE MANISTEE RIVER

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Nine Mile Bridge; Bear Track; Indian Club; Sawdust Pile; Old Grade; Carrieville - when mentioned to Michigan's inveterate trout fishermen, bring back fond memories of magnificent steelhead, wily brown trout, and surprising brook trout. Almost 100 years of waters have flowed past anglers' waders since the Little Manistee River first etched its reputation as "some of the finest fishing water in Michigan." The fish species involved have changed, the surrounding lands have changed and the fishermen's waders have changed, but the reputation still stands.

Lying between the headwaters of the nearby Baldwin and Pine Rivers in east central Lake County, the Little Manistee arises as a group of small spring-fed tributaries joining near the once famous lumbering town of Luther. Brook trout are fairly abundant in these headwaters and provide opportunity for the "brush angler". All of the riverfront lands above Luther are privately owned and should be respected as such.

The 25-acre Luther Pond, stocked annually with brown trout yearlings, is the only impoundment on the mainstream. Originally placed in 1880 to create a sawmill pond, and later remodeled for use as a gristmill power source, the dam was rebuilt several times until about 1930 when the present structure was finished.

Two small cold-water creeks entering immediately below the dam counteract any warming effect from the dam overspill. Brook trout inhabit the stream in fair numbers from Luther downstream as far as M-37 where they finally give way to browns and rainbows.

Approximately 20 miles of relatively narrow (15-25') and brushy rivers exists between Luther and M-37 with nearly half of the frontage in public ownership. Canoeing is practically nonexistent in this stretch due to the river's physical characteristics; thus allowing a disturbance-free fishing experience that is becoming rare in this day and age.

Natural cover and stream improvement devices (installed in the late 1950's) provide fishable hides for the resident populations of brown trout in the 10 to 14-inch range and brookies up to 12 inches. The late-June "caddis hatch" above M-37 is fair and draws nighttime fishermen familiar with the stream in hopes of catching the larger browns in a careless mood.

A wildlife waterfowl flooding, known as "The Little Widewaters", can be found on the south side of the river off Dillion Road in Section 17. Formed by a low-head dam on the headwaters of an unnamed tributary, it presents an excellent spot for naturalists or the angler's family to observe all types of northern Michigan wildlife.

Twin Creek, with its two branches, enters the Little Manistee from the north approximately 2 1/4 land-miles above M-37. Good public ownership along this small (10-20' wide), shallow tributary makes it ideal for the September grouse hunter who likes to fish for sizable brook trout while camping among large whispering pines.

From M-37 to Johnsons Bridge lies what many consider the heart of the Little Manistee system. Good access, either across public lands or private lands open to fishermen, is one reason why this is one of the more popular pieces of water. An abundance of gravel, interspersed with pools, attracts spawning steelhead during March, April and May. Although fishing isn't allowed until the last Saturday in April to protect these spawners, sufficient steelhead are normally present when opening day arrives to provide good action. The modest size of the stream and its clear and often shallow water make these trophy fish extremely wary and difficult to approach, but once hooked, the fight of a big fish is long remembered.

Seven miles of river, between Spencer and Johnsons Bridges, have been designated as "flies only" waters and offer the flyrod fan a wide variety of trout fishing experiences. Fair to good "caddis hatches" occur in selected areas above Indian Bridge with limit catches of 14 to 16-inch brown trout being the reward for the good nighttime angler.

The Indian Club, located in the middle of the flies only stretch, owns considerable frontage with an open-door policy to fishing sportsmen who respect the privilege of using private property for access. Camping, hunting or fire-building is not allowed on the Club property, but camping facilities are available at public access sites near Indian and Spencer Bridges, and on other nearby national forest lands.

The brown trout population in the Spencer to Johnsons Bridge area is excellent. Electrofishing surveys disclose healthy numbers of brown trout of all sizes. Admittedly, good fishing success rarely comes to the casual midday angler, but in contrast the skilled early-morning or evening fly caster usually returns home with glowing memories and a heavy creel, if he so desires.

One of the many sidelights to fishing the "Little River", as it's sometimes affectionately called, is the enjoyment of being among stately red and white pines that escaped the lumberjacks' saws. Logging drives, log rollways, and river clearing that accompanied timber harvest on other Michigan streams largely were absent along the Little Manistee because of its small size. Narrow gauge railroads were used to move timber to local sawmills and therefore much of the streamside pine was left standing. The "sawdust pile" on the Indian Club property is all that remains of one of these local mills. The absence of sunken timber logs and old eroded rollways again makes the Little River unique among northwestern streams.

Johnsons Bridge marks the upstream limit of water open to early spring and late fall steelhead fishing. Public ownership is somewhat limited from this point downstream, but access is available to most areas by foot travel. No major tributaries, other than Cool Creek near Eighteen Mile Bridge, enter the stream beyond Johnsons Bridge and the river remains wadable for its entire length.

In spite of the stream's small size, canoeing is becoming more and more popular in the lower half. Beginning or novice canoeists have little trouble navigating most of the lower stream until the stretch between Nine Mile Bridge and Six Mile Bridge is reached. Here swift current, sharp bends and numerous log jams keep experts on their toes and make capsizing by novices an even money bet. This stretch has a good gravel bottom and it is an important steelhead spawning area.

Most fishermen speak reverently of the good ol'days when fish numbers and sizes were greater than those found today, but at least in one respect the Little Manistee appears to be as good as it was in the past. Several times over the last fifty years, this stream has been the source of wild steelhead eggs used to stock other waters. Records kept as a part of these operations are about the only historical data available on fish stock abundance. Fox Bridge was the site of such a spawn-take in 1926-29 where an attempt was made to capture the maximum number of spawning steelhead during March, April, and May each spring. The total number caught ranged from 1,123 to 2,274, with an average of 1,688. A comparable average of 5,249 have been captured at the present spawn-taking station in Manistee County during the years 1970-73. Obviously some of the 1970-73 steelhead would not reach Fox Bridge, but it still indicates a healthy population. Over 15,000 steelhead were counted at the weir in one year (fall and spring of 1971-72). All Little Manistee steelhead result from natural reproduction (or straying) since the Little Manistee has not been stocked with steelhead smolts.

An interesting sidelight to the Fox Bridge operation in the 1920's was the giving away of the spawned out adults to local citizens, much the same as the salmon distribution program in 1969-70.

One disadvantage of this small stream producing large numbers of steelhead has been the increased attraction and overcrowding of anglers in recent years. Literally thousands of people, many from out of state, descend on the lower river during early April and saturate the limited public access areas. Overflow onto private lands and subsequent disrespect for private property have led to much posting, fencing and other efforts to control trespass.

The upstream limit during the early spring and late fall season was extended in 1973 from Eighteen Mile Bridge up to Johnson Bridge in one attempt to spread out this pressure. Further work is planned for marking and developing public access lands along this lower stretch.

In contrast to this overcrowding during the spring fishery is the minimal fishing pressure exerted on the fall migration. Recent numbers of steelhead passed upstream during the fall salmon egg-take have exceeded or closely equaled the numbers migrating during the spring run. These fall fish are considered to be in better fighting and eating condition and offer excellent success without any semblance of crowding, yet except for a handful of dedicated steelheaders, the fishery remains untouched.

The stream area near the Lake-Mason-Manistee County lines was some of the favorite fishing water of William B. Mershon, one of Michigan's first and foremost sports fishermen and conservationists. In his book, Recollections of My Fifty Years Hunting and Fishing, he tells of reaching the Little Manistee via logging trains and teams of the 1880's. In his first trips, fishing was only for grayling since brook trout had not yet become established. Grayling in this stream were among the largest he caught anywhere in Michigan, including the Pere Marquette and AuSable systems, with the biggest ranging from 1-1/2 to 1-7/8 pounds. Apparently the grayling fishery lasted only a relatively short time and was almost immediately replaced by outstanding brook trout fishing. The presence of this pioneer angler on the Little Manistee River attests to the magnificent fishing available in "the good ol' days."

Brown trout fishing below Eighteen Mile Bridge is not as rewarding as above except in scattered areas. Sand becomes more noticeable, particularly below Six Mile Bridge, and natural reproduction appears limited. In addition, the intense spring steelhead fishery takes fair numbers of brown trout incidentally which decreases the legal population left for a summer angler.

The Department of Natural Resources spawn taking station, located about five miles upstream from Manistee Lake, is the site used for obtaining Michigan's supply of steelhead trout and chinook salmon eggs for hatchery production. Although operated on a time schedule which depends on fish migrations, the station is open to the public whenever Fisheries personnel are present. Usually the month of October and the first two weeks of April are best for observing the operations.

A permanent weir installation blocks all upstream migration when activated during the months of March-April and September-December, but all trout are passed into upstream waters via an underground return tube as the egg-take proceeds. No Pacific salmon are passed into upstream areas.

Many new or inexperienced fishermen are often curious about the relative size of their first catches of steelhead in Michigan. The average "steelie" returning to the Little River over the past several years has been increasing in size, but appears to have leveled off in the 8 to 9-pound range. The majority of returning fish are four and five

years old with 5-10% being trophy six-year-olds ranging from 13 to 20 pounds. Each year at least one or two topping the 20-pound mark are seen and provide the potential for a once-in-a-lifetime trophy, excelled by only a small handful of midwest anglers.

Sandwiched between the traditionally famous Big Manistee and Pere Marquette Rivers, the Little Manistee established an early and enviable reputation among these giants, which it has held ever since. It managed to escape many of the ecological horrors common to other streams in the early days, but at the same time has developed problems not found on larger rivers. The niche carved by the Little Manistee in Michigan's angling history and its role in improving fishing in other midwest waters have been immense. With today's ever-increasing awareness of the value of such resources, with the continued establishment of sharp-toothed laws designed to protect such irreplaceable values, and with keen Fisheries management foresight, the Little Manistee will continue to supply treasured memories for those woefully deranged individuals known as fishermen.