



by George Vukelich

The Legendary Bois Brule River of Trout

MY FIRST GLIMPSE of the Brule River came some years back when I was teaching for the University of Wisconsin Extension Division in the northern Wisconsin towns of Superior and Ashland.

As part of the Extension's "circuit rider" service to the state, I was to be flown weekly from Madison to Superior, where I would teach a night class in Creative Writing, move on to Ashland for another class the following night, and fly back to Madison the next morning.

On the first week's trip, an early morning snowfall found me the sole passenger boarding the Greyhound bus to Ashland.

I sat behind the driver and we chewed the fat about the coming deer season, the hard winter ahead, and the fact that it was pretty darn nice of Greyhound to provide a big warm bus for one passenger, like a regular Yellow Cab.

We rolled along Highway 2, wet from melting snow, past telephone lines sagging under heavy snow, past bog lakes with their open surfaces sparkling in the sun, and then there was the single sign: *Brule River*.

I asked the driver if we could stop.

"There's a restaurant just the other side," he said. "We'll make it a rest stop."

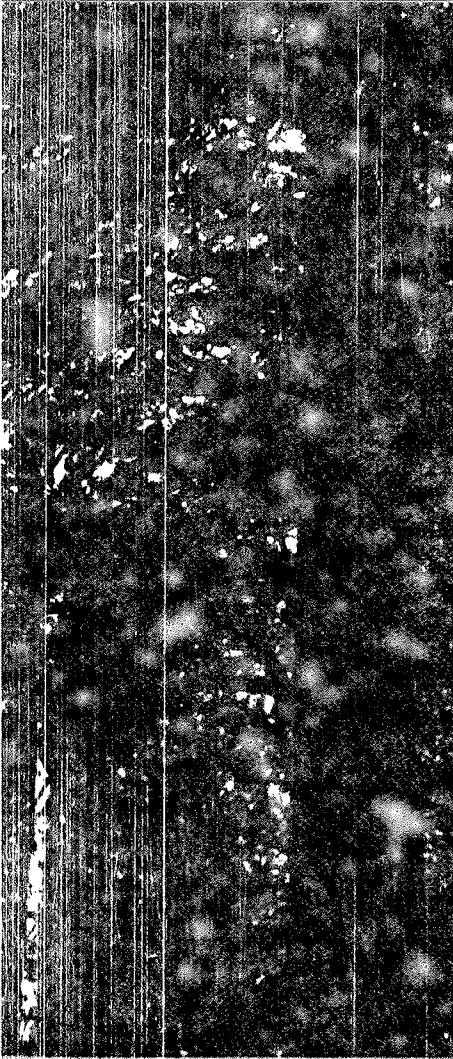
We swung into the parking lot, pulled on our galoshes, and walked back to the bridge.

"It doesn't look like much from here," the driver said as we watched the dark swirling water. "I fish mostly downriver on the other side, clear to the lake." He lit a cigaret and dropped the match into the restless current.

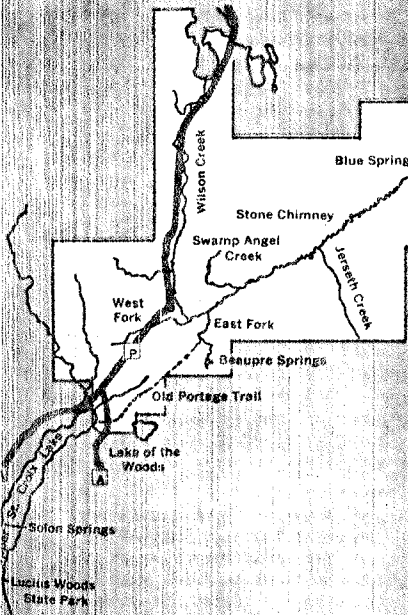
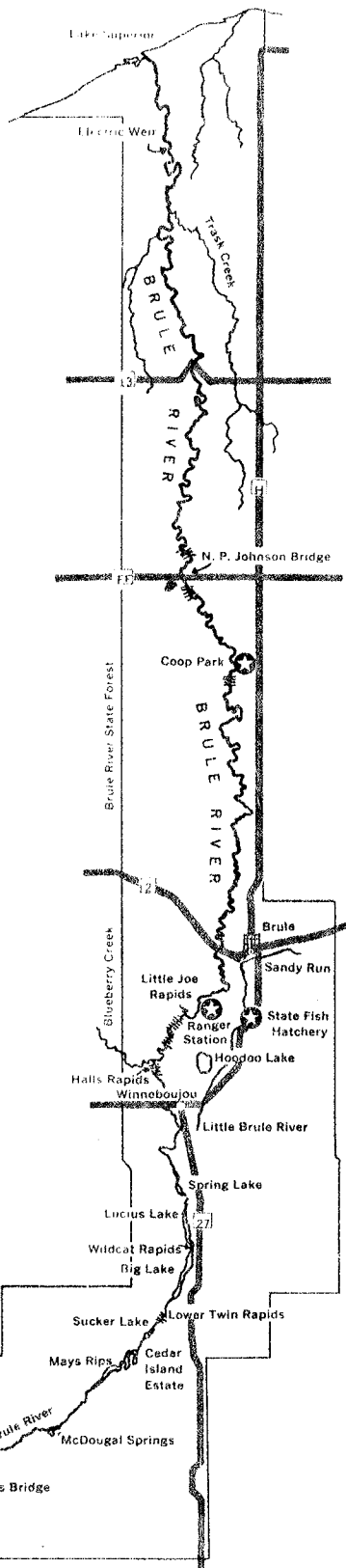
"I think I'd fish it if there wasn't a trout in here," he said quietly. "The river gives you the feeling of eternity."

Years later, in an October canoe trip down the river, I watched three mergansers burst like bombs from the stream as we drifted around a bend. They rose through a fluttering curtain of falling crimson maple leaves to disappear around the next bend, and I knew what the bus driver had meant. The Brule gives you a feeling of eternity.

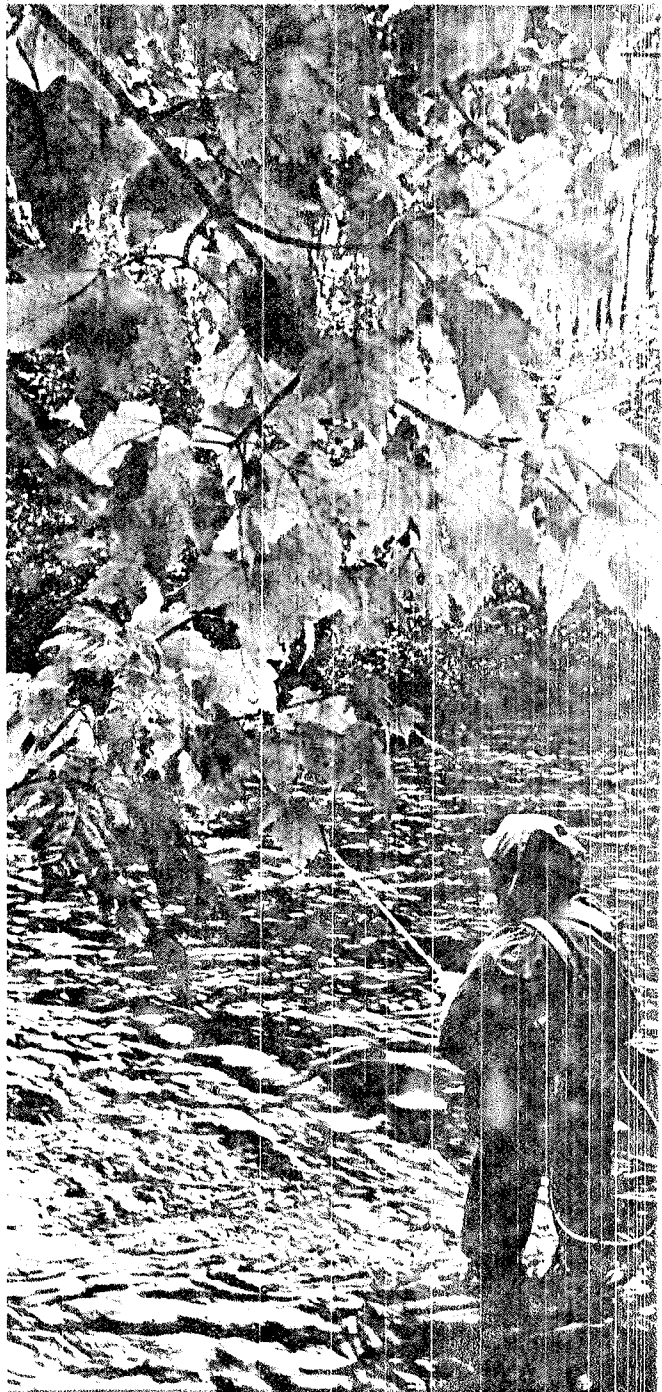
As rivers go, the Brule can be surpassed on a number of points by other Wisconsin rivers. The Wolf through the old Menominee Indian Reservation is certainly wilder, plunging through a rock-walled dells that will bring fear big as a melon to your stomach. The Wis-



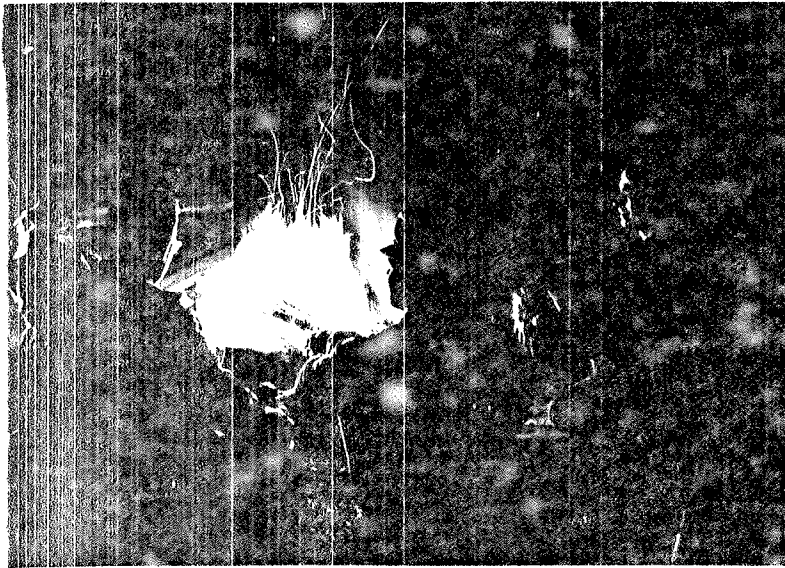
The Bois Brule River enters Lake Superior. The Chippewa called the Brule "the river of burnt wood" because its valley was constantly scourged by fires started by lightning bolts. The French kept the name, translated into their own language. In special spring and fall trout seasons, the Wisconsin Conservation Department permits fishing on the Brule from the mouth upstream to Highway 2. The prizes of these special seasons are the lake-run Rainbow trout which migrate out of Superior.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY FRED MOY



The Brule is truly one of the world's great trout streams. Presidents have fished here. And the globe-trotting jet-set sportsmen. And just plain fishermen who forgo a new suit in order to afford a good steelhead rod with plenty of backbone. The Brule is a fisherman's river. You can wade it. Or canoe it. Or bank-fish it. You can use a great landing net like the one shown here. The man who carries a hand net is either a greenhorn or a terrible pessimist. The outboard motor is forbidden here, and the river is a better place because of it. To enter the cold flow of the Brule in chest-high insulated waders is to leave the twentieth century. This is a timeless river.



The men who fish this river in the fall often wade in the season's first snow squall. They share the mystique of the brotherhood of the Brule.

consin River is certainly harder-working, draining a vast portion of the state, harnessed by power dams, and so broad in places that a .22 rifle slug won't carry across its width. But the Brule is unique.

The Wolf and the Wisconsin flow southerly. The Brule flows northerly.

In a sprawling spruce muskeg, nearly four hundred feet above the level of Lake Superior, oozes up the cold clear water that gives life to the Brule River flowing north to Lake Superior and to the St. Croix River, bound for the south and the mighty Mississippi. The Brule — St. Croix water route has always provided the shortest natural waterway between Lake Superior and the Upper Mississippi basin, and was used from time immemorial by the Indians.

The white men, the voyageurs, the explorers, the seekers from Europe, used this waterway to unlock the heartland of the New World.

Historians note that from earliest recorded history to present time there have been no fortresses established along the Brule, no great settlements, no towns. All the men who ventured there have come and gone even as the Indians, lingering along the banks only long enough to make a few bivouacs, erecting no permanent habitations, leaving no marks behind them except the ashes of their campfires. The hand of man is not apparent here, and perhaps that is why the feeling of eternity persists.

The first white man to see the Brule was the forty-year-old French officer Daniel Greysolon, Sieur Du Lhut. He came to the upper lakes as a result of the determination of Count Frontenac, New France's governor-general, to restore peace between the Chippewa and Sioux tribes, whose forays were jeopardizing French trade and missionary efforts. The basic quarrel between the Indians involved the series of lakes at the source of the St. Croix and Chippewa rivers, whose prolific wild-rice beds provided a substantial supply of staple food for both tribes.

Because both claimed the rich rice country, the valley of the St. Croix became dark and bloody ground, and it is written that the life of no man, Indian or white, was safe along the shore of Lake Superior.

In the spring of 1679, Du Lhut canoed into St. Louis Bay, and on the shore near the city that now bears his name, met the Sioux and made peace between them and the Chippewa over the rice country. Pleased by his favorable reception by the Sioux, Du Lhut determined to push out into the interior, hoping to head westward

to discover the great salt sea of which all French explorers dreamed. He set out the following spring.

The route Du Lhut took to the Mississippi Valley followed the present Brule River to its source, then continued by portage to Upper St. Croix Lake and down the St. Croix River to its union with the Mississippi a few miles below where St. Paul, Minnesota, now stands.

Du Lhut notes matter-of-factly in his journal.

"In June, 1680, not being satisfied with having made my discovery [of the Mississippi River] by land, I took two canoes with an Indian who was my interpreter and four Frenchmen, to seek means to make it by water. With this view, I entered a river which empties eight leagues from the extremity of Lake Superior on the south side where having cut some trees and broken about a hundred beaver dams, I reached the upper waters of said river and then I made a portage of half a league a lake [Lake St. Croix], the outlet of which fell into a very fine river which took me down to the Mississippi."

Du Lhut was to continue his explorations until 1696, when he was named commander of the important Fort Frontenac on Lake Ontario. A few years later he retired to Montreal, where he died in 1710, at the age of 74, one of the most respected citizens of New France.

During this time, the period of French rule in the New World, the Brule carried the canoes of Frenchmen of two distinct types — the fur traders looking for profit and the missionaries striving to win new souls for Christianity. The basis for the fur trade was simple: licensed traders were given permission to barter with the Indians in their area. In exchange for fur pelts which the Indians brought in, the traders gave trinkets, liquor, and firearms.

The Jesuit missionaries, convinced that the true mission of France in the New World was the conversion of the red man, became equally convinced that the rough-and-ready fur traders were damaging their chances for success.

The Jesuits believed that the solution lay in a return to the original trading procedure: all traders and trading posts should be pulled out of the interiors, and the Indians encouraged to bring their furs directly to Montreal. Free of the traders' evil influence, the Indians would return to simpler, healthier living habits. So figured the good Fathers.



Guide Roy Lyon maneuvers his canoe through the Brule's powerful current with the skillful use of two paddles simultaneously.

The Church brought great pressure to bear on the king, and the king, in 1696, pointing to a glut of furs in the warehouses, cancelled all trading licenses and prohibited all colonies from carrying goods to the Western Country. Central depots were set up at three points only—Detroit, Chicago, and New Orleans. The ill-fated experiment came to an end in 1714 and the fur trade flourished until the British defeated the French in a long, costly war, capturing Montreal in 1760. The dream of New France was as dead as the ashes of the campfires of the old voyageurs on the Brule.

The British were to hang on to the lucrative fur trade for the next fifty-four years. Not until 1814 did Britain, after its second defeat by the Americans, relinquish its claim to the rich Northwest fur realm.

Under the British, the fur trade reached its peak of prosperity. New blood and new money, bearing such

names as McLcod, MacKenzie, Henry, Todd, MacDonald, Fraser, and Frobisher, poured into the West. And the Brule had a new visitor who followed the same dream pursued by Du Lhut. Major Robert Rogers of His Majesty's Rangers traversed the Brule seeking the legendary "Northwest Passage," that illusive and indeed non-existent waterway which every explorer believed split the continent east-west somewhere near the Great Lakes region.

Following the War of 1812, the victorious Americans determined to take inventory of their resources. Lewis Cass, Governor of the Northwest Territory, was commissioned to undertake the project. In the Cass expedition, which got under way in 1820, were James D. Doty, expedition secretary and the future governor of the Wisconsin Territory, and a brilliant young mineralogist and naturalist named Henry R. Schoolcraft, whose keen eye didn't miss a plant, an Indian, or a rock.

It was on this expedition that Schoolcraft and the Protestant missionary William T. Boutwell tracked the Mississippi to its origins above the lake called by the French *La Biche*. *Veritas caput*, they named the river's source, "the true head."

Having paddled up the St. Croix to the memorable portage, Schoolcraft climbed the sandy ridge which rises sharply from the St. Croix. He looked down into the tangle of stunted spruce and tamarack wherein the Brule is born. Later he would record in his journal:

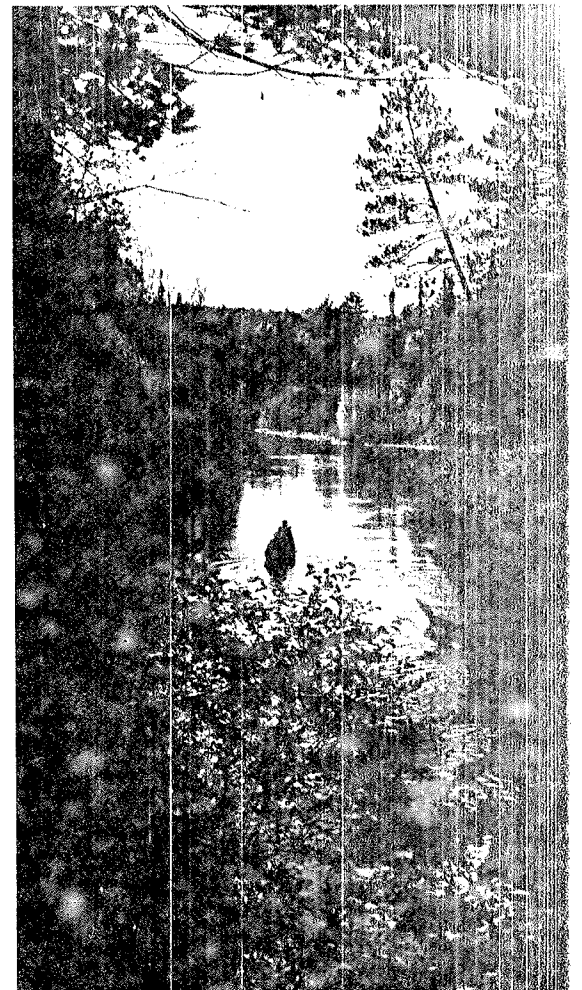
"The length of the portage is 3,350 yards. At this distance we reach a small, sandy-bottomed brook of four



There are fishermen around who admit they have been "visiting" the Brule for the last 40 years. They know the river as Du Lhut and the vanished voyageurs. They say they are trout fishermen, but that is not the whole truth. These men want something more. The Brule is a free river, unfettered, undomesticated; and that is why such men come here. To wade and fish and dream the old dreams.

A famous Lucius canoe. Made of cedar planks, ribbed with white oak, equipped with a live-box and comfortable seats for two fishermen, this famous hand-made craft is extremely durable, stable, and easy to manage in swift water.

A fall fisherman gills and guts an 8-pound "sea run" German Brown. The spawning "hook" on the fish's lower jaw assists in nest-building in the gravelly bottom. Oldtimers fish the Brule with spinners, nightcrawlers, salmon eggs, and the "spawn sack"—trout (spawn) wrapped and tied in pieces of nylon stocking.



t wide and a foot deep, of the most clear, crystalline water winding its way in a most serpentine manner through a boggy tract and overhung with dense alder bushes. It is a good place to slake one's thirst, but bears anything else than a stream to embark on, with poles and baggage. Nobody but an Indian would have named it."

An Army lieutenant, James Allen, Military Commander attached to Schoolcraft, went down the Brule with inexperienced canoeemen, and he writes less poetically of his journey:

"Below the Falls, the river was mostly rapids, which are of so bad a character, from the shallowness of the water, the strength of the current and the rocks with which they were filled, that to pass them with any degree of safety, we were obliged again to wade by the side of the canoes and to conduct them down; and even this means we could not save the canoes from great injury. We had to stop frequently to repair and before we had exhausted all our gum after which it required one man to bail constantly . . . and when we stopped at night, we were all in a sinking condition. The muskets, boxes, all our baggage, excepting the flour which was piled above everything else to save it, was lost thoroughly."

In these days of aluminum canoes and flotation compartments, it's difficult to appreciate fully the difficulty of negotiating the Brule with the old Indian birch-bark canoe. Though it was well adapted for lakes and deep waters, the frail shell couldn't long stand the pounding rocks and reefs in a shallow stream like the Brule. Usually, if the bark itself was not punctured, the sinuous gum which held the birch strips together would come loose, and the canoe would leak like the proverbial sieve. The Brule, rushing over shallow stony channels, is particularly hard on canoes. The river men who followed in Schoolcraft's wake, developed, by turns, the logue hollowed out from the trunks of pines, the app-prowed bateau, and the square-ended flatboat. It was not until the end of the century that Joe Lucius built the first of a new breed of Brule canoe. It is cedar planked, stoutly framed, and of an extremely shallow draft. The merit of the Lucius canoe is legendary. It enables one man to pole two fly-fishermen upstream, silently as a shadow, and to dart as quickly as a cut within casting distance of rising fish. The greatest testimonial to the Lucius canoes is that many are still in use on the upper Brule, complete with built-in gear-boxes.

After Schoolcraft and Lieutenant Allen had completed the inventory for the governor-general, there were other men who were concerned most with raiding the resources recorded therein. This attitude would add to the "cut and get out" lumbering, which, as the poet Pare Lorentz put it, "cut the top off Wisconsin and sent it down the river."

To make this legally possible, the federal government negotiated treaties with the Chippewas, who were, after all, the rightful owners. The silent Brule carried a new breed, the treaty-makers, the wheeler-dealers of their age. The treaties they concluded were assailed by men who were not fooled by the high-sounding language of the documents.

The Indians had no idea that they were ceding away their lands and that one day the Great White Father who talked so earnestly would evict them from their camps and streams and consign them wholesale to that ghettos called the Reservation. The treaty-makers are gone now to their rewards, and gone, too, are their ill-fated signatories; and the Brule remains. Silent. Eternally.

It was while the lumbermen were preparing to cut the top off Wisconsin (and they would use the Brule as a natural sluiceway to carry their logs to the river mouth) that the Brule began to achieve the reputation that it

holds to this day — its fame as one of the world's great trout streams.

Captain Alexander McDougall, a Great Lakes sailor, noted in his memoirs a laconic entry that would eventually lure a United States president to the fabulous fishing:

"In the early part of 1873," wrote Captain McDougall, "I went with W. Clow up the Brule River to a trapper's camp. We fished for about a week on the Spring Ponds [of Cedar Island]. There we caught eight thousand trout that weighed about four thousand pounds. I think we caught three-quarters of them on a barbless hook and a piece of buckskin for bait. I caught two bushels of fish in an hour."

As the Brule's fame spread, rich sportsmen staked out estates along its banks. The most famous of these was established on Cedar Island by Henry Clay Pierce, a St. Louis oil magnate, who, after buying out various partners in a rudimentary fishing-camp venture, started to build a showplace in 1890. His holdings grew to 106 forty-acre parcels, stretching more than a mile on both sides of the river. Equipped with power plant, stables, servants' quarters, zoo and private hatchery, this retreat lured President Calvin Coolidge in 1928 to set up a summer White House complete with fly rod.

In 1906, a group of Milwaukee sportsmen established the Winneboujou Club on a less grand scale. The Milwaukeeans seemed particularly concerned about maintaining the stream and forest unspoiled. Haskill Noyes, son of one of the founders, Judge George H. Noyes, became a member of the Wisconsin State Conservation Commission.

The sportsmen and the Brule trout supported a summer industry. Guides and caretakers, servants and cooks, were in demand. The redoubtable Joe Lucius who built his famous canoe in 1895 also built homes for the summer people, became the caretaker for the Winneboujou Club, and left to head the Forest Service for the State of Wisconsin. The first steel fire-lookout towers were built under his direction in 1911. Later he constructed ranger stations, and established the state's first tree nursery and forest headquarters camp at Trout Lake. He also designed screens and safety devices for railroad locomotives to catch and trap cinders and cut down the appalling forest fires started by the open smokestacks of the engines. Joe Lucius, more than any other man not excepting Du Lhut, Major Rogers, and the rest, exemplified the living spirit of the Brule.

Today, the trout fishing is not what it was in Captain McDougall's day. Some say it's been all downhill since a WPA stream-improvement project in the 1930's.

Now the Conservation Department manages the Brule like a mother hen on a clutch of eggs, and even stocks trout to supplement the native populations. And the state which controls the access to the Brule valley, keeps the motorboat — and consequently the marinas — out. Granted that nothing is as good as it once was, fishing on the Brule can still be spectacular. The fall migration of "sea run" rainbow out of Lake Superior still draws the "Brotherhood of the Brule" annually, some of whom have been visiting this river — boy and man — for forty years. And a 5-pound lake-dark "steel-head" will bring the same thrill, half-fear, half-exhilaration, that walled-in whitewater does.

Only last fall I saw an 8½-pound German Brown, bulging in a net like a submarine.

I've seen a rainbow half that size ricochet down the river with hook, broken line, and salmon egg dangling from his lip. And guide Roy Lyon of Brule has had clients boat 10-pound rainbows.

But the trout — even trout like these — are not the whole story of the Brule.

As my friend in the Greyhound put it: "I think I'd fish it if there wasn't a trout in here. The river gives you the feeling of eternity."