

Josie Creek

By Ken Kapp

Abe turns off County X onto the road for the Josie Creek campground in Rusk County. His smile becomes a big grin when he realizes they took the bump out of the bridge. He's thinking – *I knew I would get back. It looks much as it did 45 years ago when I was up here with Millie. Shouldn't be many mosquitoes or black flies this early in June. She always said, "Pray for a stiff breeze but don't forget the OFF."*

He pulls in front of the camp map, gets out, and stares up along the creek behind him on the right. A few steps to the left and he can see where the creek opens into the Flambeau Flowage.

Now he's talking to himself. "Don't think they had any campsites down there near the water back then. And it seems as if they doubled the number of sites going up along the creek. Hope it'll stay quiet. Noise is noise even with my hearing aids out."

He studies the site board and continues his conversation. "Pay station's new too. Didn't have any 'Camp Host' back then either. Hmm, J-17 looks good. I'll check it out and then come back, sign up for three nights."

He's smiling as he turns into the site, the can of OFF clanking under the passenger seat. He gets out, walks around, and sees there's room for his canoe next to the picnic table. *Three nights should do it.* With that in mind, he walks back to the pay station resuming his conversation.

"Millie would have liked this. We talked about coming back for years. Never managed. Always one thing or another: kids, grandkids, travel abroad, moving into one of those continual living homes. Then she ups and drops. Promised her I'd do this myself. Grandkids all citified – stuck to their cell phones and PCs or whatever they call them.

"If Millie were here, she'd find berries. Used to be wild strawberries in June, side of the road. Yeah, she'd tell me. 'Walk along the macadam and look for where the trees open. Strawberries need sun.' OK, Maybe I'll walk out to County X tomorrow morning before breakfast; see if I can find any for the granola and yogurt in the cooler."

Abe returns to his site, loosens the tie-downs for the canoe at the back of his wagon, opens the back door, and unloads his tent and camping equipment. *Yup* – he's thinking – *these new pop-tents are a piece of cake. Great birthday present. Glad Millie got in it up on the north shore. Didn't listen to the kids yelling at us, "Dad, Mom's going to be 64. What are you thinking?" Millie told them, "Well then, better do this before I retire and start Medicare."*

It's 5 by the time he finishes setting up camp. The cooler is on the picnic table. "Abe, you're getting old." He jokes, "Gather your deadfall while you can see," and spends the next 30 minutes collecting dead branches for the fire. He observes for no one in particular, "Finding free wood later in the season ain't so easy.

“Millie, I’ll start the fire the old way – one match challenge.” He balls a couple of pages from the yesterday’s *Pioneer Press* and tents small twigs and branches around them. Progressively larger pieces are stacked near the fire ring. He lights a match and catches an edge of the paper. “See, Millie, never lost my woodsy skills.”

He unpacks his precooked chicken from the cooler and continues talking to himself. “Always prepared. If it was raining, I could eat this in the wagon. Just crisp the skins on the fire grate as soon as I get embers.”

Abe takes a bowl of salad from the cooler. “Used your recipe for the dressing, Mill.” He gets out a bottle of Summit IPA and waits until the chicken skin crackles before taking his first sip and removing the chicken from the fire.

After cleaning up, he walks around the park shaking cobwebs from his memory. The few campers he sees wave and smile. One couple sitting in front of a small Winnebago invites him over to their campfire. The awning is out and strings of lights hang from the fringes. They’re impressed when he tells them he’s in a pop-tent by himself. He declines a beer and says he’s tired after the drive up. “Just going to finish my walk-around.”

He returns to his site admitting to himself that he’s feeling his age and reminds himself to police the area: *Abe, you don’t need any black bears for guests.* He sits at the picnic table. A book stays closed in front of him and the camp light unlit as the sun sets. He gets up with a groan, puts the book and light back in the wagon, and grabs his flashlight from the front seat for a last trip to the restroom. He recalls his thoughts last night in St. Paul. *Downside of old age got to pee in the middle of the night. Plenty of trees near enough.*

Abe’s up early the next morning. He walks to the restroom to wash and brush his teeth amazed he slept so well. He’s thinking – *You only got up that once to pee. Must be the fresh air. Only a little bit stiff. Shake it and walk out to X – look for strawberries. You might get lucky.* He laughs. “Millie, see what’s happened. Only way an old guy can get lucky is by finding wild strawberries for his granola and yogurt.”

He gets lucky and comes back with a handful of small berries.

“Ah, Millie, you would have loved this.”

He launches his canoe by 11 bringing along a small cooler and an old army canteen that he attaches to a cross-brace. He remembers his plan: *A slow paddle up to the birch grove; you’re Millie’s eyes now.*

He paddles along the near bank happy that his kids got him a light C1 canoe for Christmas five years ago. It weighs less than 45 pounds and once he maneuvers one end up on the rear car rack the rest is easy, even for a 75-year-old. His kids teased him, “We know you’ll work out the rest of the year just so you can canoe in the summer. There’re plenty of lakes in the Twin Cities. Look on-line and you’ll find a dozen people to paddle with. Or check the cards in the REI stores.”

Abe daydreams as he paddles along. The shallow sandy bottom and a birch tree that had toppled into the flowage wake him. He's puzzled and wonders – *it's like the last time we were there. Probably a different birch though.* He steps out in a foot of water and whispers reverently, "Millie, we're here."

He ties the canoe to one of the larger branches and brings the cooler to the bank, laughing, "Lunch break." Dangling his feet in the water, he slowly eats the BLT on sprouted bread and puts aside the apple for later. A few healthy swallows from the canteen and he's ready to explore. He dries his feet with a corner of his flannel shirt and laces up his sneakers. "Millie, let's see how many amanitas I can find. Not going to count those small brown mushrooms or the boletes. And I get a bonus if I can spot any old morels that the deer didn't eat."

Sure enough, within ten feet he spots three amanitas: skirted and boasting a yellow top with white acne. He smiles, continues to work his way to the small rill. It's still there: a deep cut maybe four feet across opens into the flowage. He makes his way uphill ignoring the several fat orange-brown boletes clustered around an aspen. He's muttering, "Wouldn't do to slip and get hurt here. Getting old. I was going to leave a note under the site permit: Paddling up to birch grove. Tomorrow I'll leave one about Blueberry Hill."

He's winded when he reaches the beginning of the rill 100 feet uphill. Basswoods, poplars, and evergreens have replaced the birches. Some of the ground is rocky or has loose gravel. "Mill, this is where we usually stop. I'm going to take a breather and go back."

He makes his way down to the bank. There's a downed birch in the water but no tethered canoe. He steps into the water, looks downriver, and spots his canoe around a small bend. "I was worried there for a minute, Millie. You could have swum the whole way back to Josie Creek in your day, not me."

He sits back on the bank, removes his wet sneakers, and takes out his apple. "It's a good life, Millie, a good life!"

Abe's tempted to lie down but decides he's better off napping in his tent without worrying about mosquitoes or other critters. "Millie, I just remembered those swarms of baby catfish." He rolls his pants above his knees. "I'll walk out and look for us both. Toss out the apple core first, maybe it'll work like chum and attract them, or maybe some crayfish will come crawling along. Should be able to see its tracks in the sand."

Abe waits ten minutes and wades out looking for his apple core. "Probably too early for catfish babies and crayfish. Yeah, the water was much warmer when we were here." He hears Millie reply, "It was the beginning of August, Abe."

The slow current makes for an easy paddle back to the creek. He's surprised the clock in the wagon says its only 2:15 when he drives down to the put-in. He slides the canoe in the back of the wagon. Two minutes later the canoe, paddles, and life jacket lean against the side of the picnic table. Ginger snaps and apple cider provide a quick snack. He shakes the cobwebs in his head and decides it's time for a short nap.

The travel clock next to the sleeping bags reads 3:46 when he rolls over and begins to stretch. "Millie, I'm going to see if I can find any coral mushrooms on the point trail. You always found a couple and they were delicious when you fixed them. I'll bring them back to St. Paul, dry them, and show you when I visit the cemetery."

Abe puts a plastic bag and his pocketknife in his jacket pocket. The trail to the mouth of Josie Creek starts on the right of the boat parking lot. The scramble is more difficult than he remembers. A hundred yards in under a dead hardwood trunk, he finds what he was looking for. "Thank you, Millie." He cautiously frees the small coral mushroom with his pocketknife. "This baby I'll wrap in a paper towel and put it in the cooler. I promise to get it home safely. Monday I'll show it to you, and see if I can't find a new home for it in a nearby park where they don't spray. Shame they spray in the cemetery, make more things dead. Who cares if there're a few weeds?"

He reaches the point, squints, and thinks he can make out the bridge on County I crossing the flowage. "Maybe I'll go to the Flambeau Lodge for lunch on Saturday on the way home," he tells himself sighing. "I checked; they now have a web site." He watches as the ripples on the river form white crests.

The wind picks up and the treetops begin a slow dance. Abe smiles and is happy he can still hear the rattling of the aspen leaves. He reaches the boat landing, turns around, and watches as dark clouds blow in from the north. "Maybe it's a good time to go into Ladysmith, grab something to eat at the diner on the other side of the bridge. I looked when I came in on Route 8. Don't think our waitress will still be there. She was older than me. Life moves on, Millie, life moves on."

Abe tidies up and leaves before six. The rain holds off. He's tired and lonely. He thinks he remembers their old shortcut to County I. Where X turns towards 8 he takes the gravel road going straight ahead. A few miles later it T's with I. He becomes philosophical, thinks – *Maybe a couple more trailer homes than before. None look great, but that's part of the American Dream I guess.* He passes a new sign to the Rusk County Airport and a minute later comes to the stop sign at Route 8. A right turn and ten more minutes, he sees the 35 MPH sign outside of Ladysmith.

The diner is open and the booths are occupied. Abe goes halfway back and sits at the counter. He declines the menu and says he'll have the special. He's puzzled; the waitress looks familiar even if she's about 30. He's puzzled. *She couldn't have been born when we were here last.* The clock behind the counter reads 7:21 when he finishes his apple pie. He leaves a tip under his plate and asks at the register if there's still an IGA in town.

"Oh, yes. It's a Super IGA now over on 9th Street. Make a left. Can't miss it. Thanks and come again."

He pulls into the IGA parking lot, changes his mind – *don't need more cookies* – and pulls around heading back to 8. A block short he recalls the old movie house and makes a right on Miner Avenue. The Miner Theatre is still there and open. He parks and walks around the downtown area. "Nothing much has changed, Millie, nothing much has changed."

There's still gray light but the sun has set when he pulls into his campsite. There's a damp chill in the air. "Millie, I think a small fire and a beer will do wonders to cheer me up and help me sleep."

The fire is down to small embers by 10:30 and two cans are resting comfortably on their sides alongside the fire ring.

Abe wakes early the next morning. "Big day, Millie. Going to paddle up to the bay across from the birch grove. If I can safely climb those granite boulders, I'll look for the wild blueberry bushes we found. Always wondered if we should have dug one up for our backyard. Never know now. Sad. But I guess that's life for you."

He adds a handful of raisins to his granola and yogurt and finishes the last cup of yesterday's coffee from the thermos. He's on the river by 10. The wind is negligible but he still makes sure to fasten his life jacket before starting out. "And, Millie, I left a note under the campsite slip. Old memory's not gone yet!"

It's almost 11 when he gets to the bay. He's in luck – there's a sapling growing out of a crack in between two of the boulders. He can see enough handholds and places for his feet to make it safely to the top. The tree feels secure. He double-wraps his rope around the trunk to be sure the canoe won't pull free. "Millie, ever think I was so brave? Here goes."

Abe makes it up with little effort and walks to the highest spot on the outcropping. As a joke, he puffs out his chest and with no reason whatsoever recites the lines from Shelley's poem:

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings."
Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!

He shrugs his shoulders. "I don't know what that was about, Millie. I suppose I could have yodeled. It just felt right. Give me time, I'll figure it out!" Smiling he skirts the outcropping and hunts in the undergrowth. Mentally he takes notes: *Still a couple of bushes with last year's blueberries that the bears must have missed. Poison Ivy hasn't gone away.* He goes into the underbrush and relieves himself in what he thinks is the same spot from 50 years ago. *Damn mosquitoes must be the offspring of the ones that got me then. Want some of the same rich blood.* He laughs. "Millie, the OFF is still under the passenger seat."

He paddles back to Josie Creek and passes a cluster of rocks breaking the surface of the flowage. "Hey, Millie, I think this is where I caught the bass that time."

He gets his station wagon and returns to the boat landing. A young man is backing his trailer into the water. As he unfastens the boat, he tells Abe, "Say, Old-timer, give me a minute to release my boat and move the car, and I'd be happy to give you a hand putting your canoe on top. You got the tie-downs with you?"

"Tie-downs are in back and I'm leaving tomorrow so that would be great. Thanks." Abe sorts out the ties, puts the paddles and lifejacket in back and is ready five minutes later.

The young man lifts the canoe. "Wow, this is light – pretty nice. Probably be easier if I put it up myself. Hope you don't mind. I've been canoeing ever since I was twelve; this one's a piece of cake."

Abe laughs. "Be my guest. If you want, come by to #17 later and I'll give you a Surly beer from the Twin Cities. It's good. Surly's a micro."

The canoe is up and tied down. "I'm going to pass on the beer. My wife's waiting at home for fish. But thanks. You have a safe drive back to the Cities."

Abe has a late lunch, cleans up, and snuggles down in his tent to nap. It's 2:30 when he wakes and decides he'll drive to the Flambeau Lodge. His mind is still half-asleep – *Piece of cake. Found the crossroad shortcut yesterday. Shouldn't take more than 30 minutes.*

On the way there, he pulls off Flambeau Road and stops at Big Falls Dam. He walks out on the embankment and looks down at the spillways remembering when he was there floating a bobber out hoping to catch supper to impress Millie. He hums to himself, *'Times, they are a-changin'*. "That was a new song back then, Millie." He stands there for a long time taking in the river and the surrounding forest.

It's after 5 when he gets to the Lodge. He goes in and asks for a 7-Up. "Would you mind if I drink it out on the deck? We were here 50 years ago and I'd just like to remember."

"No problem. If there's anything I can get you, let me know. You need a room for the night?"

"Thanks, no. I'm camping on Josie Creek like we did then."

"Good for you. Enjoy."

Abe watches as the sun drops lower in the sky. Suddenly he realizes it's getting late. He's saved the brats and beans for the last night. He tosses the can into the recycle barrel, waves goodbye to the Lodge, and hurries back to the wagon. He checks the tie-downs and pulls up to the road carefully.

He has the fire going before 7 and fifteen minutes later nestles the open can of beans in the embers. The brats are out and the buns sliced. Ketchup, mustard, and pickles are waiting on the picnic table. "Pickles are the greens tonight, Millie. A regular guy's balanced meal." He's on his second beer.

He cleans up as darkness falls, adds more deadfall to quicken the fire. He sits back thinking of the old days and what wasn't done. "Not that bad, Millie. We had a run for it at times, two good kids and the grandkids are doing well. Course there was always something and a few more years would have been a blessing." He pokes at the embers with his fire-stick – *Yeah, a few more years, a few more years.*

The campground filled up while he was at the Lodge. There's a cluster of college kids at the sites towards the top of the hill across from the restroom. The music is loud and the persistent bass could be felt down at his site. It's after 10 and he wonders if he should complain to the camp host. He thinks back years – *Well, you were young once. Let's see if they quiet down by 11, the time they posted for the weekend.*

He keeps the fire going and has another beer. By midnight, they've settled down. He walks to the restrooms by the boat landing to wash up. He's tired when he finally crawls into his sleeping bag. He has to get up twice during the night to pee and when he wakes in the morning, it's after 9.

On the way to the restroom, he smiles at the college campsites. There's still smoke coming from one of the fire rings. *Ah, youth – you can party hardy but eventually we all have to pay the price.*

Abe slowly has the last of the granola and yogurt before taking down his tent and packing up the wagon. He polices his site and is ready to go by 11:30. He looks around, removes his site slip and the note underneath about Blueberry Hill. "Great time, Millie, we really had a great time. Be back in St. Paul for supper and whatever they may have on Masterpiece Theater." He drops off his garbage at the dump station, the dead soldiers saluting as they rattle around the recyclable bin.

He's tired and stops for coffee at the diner on Route 8. The same waitress serves him at the counter. When she brings him a slice of pie to go along with his second cup of coffee he asks, "We were here maybe 50 years ago. There was a woman who was both the cook and waitress. I may be getting old but you remind me of her."

"Oh, that would be my Aunt Rose. People tell me I look like her when she was young. But gee, she and Tom are well into their 80s. Moved down to Arizona a couple of years ago. I took over and been living in their house up on the flowage, down Cherry Creek Lane. It's off I, north of Tony."

"I've been telling Millie what a small world this is. I just came from camping at Josie Creek."

Two hours later, he crosses the St. Croix River at Stillwater and decides he'll visit George on Monday. He's thinking – *I'll bring over a six-pack. Tell him about Josie Creek. Get to tease him again how he flipped his sunfish in the middle of the flowage. That was some struggle we had getting it upright again. I was impressed. But Millie had a laugh. Yeah, Millie had a laugh.*