

## A "River Road" Winter Adventure Mishicot to Tisch Mills

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Every year, in the weeks before Christmas, I interrogate my parents about the status of "the river." Is it frozen? Is there any snow? Now living in Minnesota, I eagerly await the trip back home to Mishicot for Christmas, and the family, friends, and food that await me. But I also have in mind the river, the East Twin. Growing up, my brothers and sister enjoyed many hours on the river, exploring it, testing it, and watching it change from swift and high after the spring melt off, to slow and low in the summer, to immobile and frozen in the winter. And every so often, for a few days in winter, a week if we're lucky, the river becomes a superhighway. For me, if the timing is perfect, December is warm, except for a few days before Christmas when the weather suddenly turns cold, hopefully subzero, to freeze the river into a slick, smooth icy sheet that winds for miles.

Christmas 1998 was one of those rare times. On the morning of December 26, my brother Scott, his two sons, my wife Ines, and I set out upriver from my parent's house on the edge of Mishicot. While putting on our ice skates, I had told family members not to be too surprised if they received a call from somewhere far up river. I don't think they believed me, for normally the old mill dam a couple miles upriver is distant enough before returning. I had other plans in mind, for we had near perfect conditions. Even the normally shallow and open spots were frozen over, so our progress could be rapid. Rounding the first few bends and entering the wind shelter of the upriver valley was enough to take the initial chill of the 18 degree temperature out of our bones. We passed familiar landmarks: the "point," the "landslide," the "old swimming hole" near the farm where my father grew up and swam the river with his siblings. My wife, four months pregnant, knew that little was going to stop us on this bright, beautiful morning, so she wisely turned around and headed back home, leaving us four to continue.

Justin and Jordan, 12 and 9 years old, kept up just fine. Jordan, however, had almost missed the trip. As we were leaving, he couldn't resist checking out the bridge just downriver from the house, and he ignored our shouts that we were going. We set off anyway. Thirty minutes later, as my wife was leaving us, she shouted at us to wait, and the little 9 year old, huffing and puffing, rounded the bend, having successfully chased us down.

Soon we were nearing the Hwy 147 bridge and the remains of the old dam and mill. We had explored this site frequently when growing up, so we quickly hopped over one of the old cement dam gates, around the open water of the one gate that was left open. We wanted to get to the more unfamiliar territory on the other side of the dam, which is usually accessible only in winter, since the dam and low water (and mosquitoes) prevent any exploration by boat in summer.

Soon we entered a cedar forest. No homes or farms could be seen, and before long we passed by the mouth of Jambo Creek. We began to hit a few open spots, shallow areas of small rapids where the speed of the water prevents it from freezing. Instead of turning around, we viewed these areas as challenges, as tests of our ability to read ice. Which way can we take around this open spot? Do we need to portage around the spots on the riverbank, or are the frozen areas near the edge of the river strong enough to hold us? The only real danger was wet feet: This far

upriver, the stream was never more than a couple feet deep. But whoever became too bold was in danger of frozen feet, which could cause a premature end to the adventure. Besides, the first person to go through the ice would have to endure the merciless taunts of the others. At the same time, we all wanted to prove our courage and daring, so we jumped across spots, got running head starts to quickly skim over thin areas, and took turns showing the others the best way. Scott or I, of course, usually led the way. Justin and Jordan, at most half our weight, couldn't tell us much about the safety of the ice. Besides, if one of them had gone through, we would have to answer to their mother upon our arrival back home, and I doubt that either one of us could have gotten away with blaming the boys.

The ice varied from milky white to crystal clear, the bottom perfectly lit up by the sun. In several spots we chased fish. It had been so cold that in some places the water had piled up and frozen in wave formation. Some spots were so clear it seemed the ice was barely there, but we tentatively tested it and usually found it to be at least a couple inches thick. Often, the only way to tell the thickness of the ice, other than chopping a hole in it, was by seeing how far down the cracks in the ice went. We caused our own share of cracks, since there were numerous times when our hearts skipped a beat as the ice fissured around us.

We neared the farm where Buffalo Don's water is tapped (though we couldn't see any buffalo). Later on, we came upon the riverside lodge of the 4-H Camp Tapawingo, where we briefly skipped up on shore to avoid more open water. At a few other places, deer trails served as convenient portages around open spots. For the most part, however, the river was frozen, and we marked our progress by the roads we passed under: Rockledge, Hillview, Tapawingo, Holmes, and then Hwy 163 and Zander Rd. Occasionally, we briefly explored tributaries of the river, in one place forming a small frozen waterfall as it fell into the river. Instead of going under the Zander Road bridge, we used a large frozen culvert underneath the road to avoid more open water. As we neared Tisch Mills, we could hear the chimes of St. Mary's Church near Tisch Mills playing Christmas songs.

At County Rd. B by Tisch Mills, I took off my skates and walked the 100 yards or so to the intersection at the center of Tisch Mills, for the pay phone I recalled being on the corner. Finding none, I entered the corner store, and the surprised owner graciously let me use her phone to call for transportation back home. While I waited, I inspected the historic store, being remodeled, while Scott and the boys checked out the remains of the old Tisch Mills dam and mill.

We had been gone only about three hours, but given the twists and turns, we probably covered about 15 miles, twice the 7 mile highway distance between the villages. In that time, the only people we saw were a couple children lobbing sticks on the river. And other than a toe or two breaking through, no one had to endure wet feet.

We might have gone further, but I was already late for another Christmas gathering, and the rest of the family back home had likely begun to worry about us. They were relieved to get the call on the phone, and surprised we had made it all the way to Tisch Mills. The boys welcomed the site of Grandpa as he pulled the car up, and the ride back to Mishicot was filled with the sense of accomplishment, exploration, and interdependence that one doesn't quite get from video games or TV watching. You and your kin, relying on each other, showing each other the way, through the countryside on the river that draws you further and further away, always wondering what is beyond the next bend, looking for the next challenge, perhaps startling a few deer, a cat or even a fox. For many, winter is a season to endure while patiently waiting for warmer weather, but winter can also be a unique and special time to get to know the land. Perhaps we should be more like the Dutch, the country that throws a national party in the unusual year when

it is cold enough for the canals to freeze. Thousands skate an 11-town route, enjoying the temporary highway, and a view of the land that is usually not possible.

The next day a couple of inches of snow fell, and the river became a palimpsest of animal tracks, forcing skaters to strap on slower cross country skies to explore it. Any more skating journeys will have to wait until at least the next year. [And indeed 1999 was also a good year, when we skated downriver to Two Rivers. The years since then, to date, have not allowed such journeys].