Flies only: early sport fishing conservation on Michigan's Au Sable River

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The University of Toledo

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A Dissertation

Flies Only: Early Sport Fishing Conservation on Michigan’s Au Sable River

By

Bryon Borgelt

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctoral of Philosophy in History

Advisor: Diane F. Britton

College of Graduate Studies

The University of Toledo

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This dissertation focuses on the earliest stage of fish conservation on the Au Sable River of Michigan. It begins with the popularization of the grayling fishery in the nation’s sporting journals, such as *Forest and Stream* and *Scribner’s Monthly* where Thad Norris and others wrote of the adventure and abundance of fly fishing on the Au Sable. By the 1890s the grayling were all but gone due in part to over fishing, commercial lumbering and the introduction of non-native brook trout. Despite the absence of the grayling, a sustainable sport fishing industry had risen from the ashes of the cut over lands of the Michigan High Plains. Early sport fishers had recognized man’s role in the loss of grayling and began their own versions of fish and stream conservation centered in the towns of Grayling and Lovells. Early fish conservation looked directly at protecting the resource itself, and not the modern holistic approach that encompasses the entire ecosystem. The first focus was to create state laws that closed seasons and promoted more sporting methods of capture such as the use of a hook and line. Then the state focused on the enforcement of laws with the game warden system. In Michigan, county game wardens, with full legal authority, could be hired by private citizens, clubs and special interest groups. This system pitted outside conservation agendas against a local reluctance to follow state laws. Another early fish conservation method was the hatchery system. Artificial fish propagation had been perfected in the US in the 1850s and was put
to use to bolster fish populations against natural threats and fishing pressure. Privatization had been one of the most basic forms of conservation. Keeping anglers and hunters off the water and land certainly meant increased wildlife populations. Anglers along the South Branch strung barbed wire across the river, violating state law which stated that navigable rivers were held in the public domain. In 1907, fly fishing anglers along the North Branch of the Au Sable sought a different form of restricted public access, the creation of the nation’s first fly fishing only regulation of public water. Under the direction of William B. Mershon, a wealthy lumberman from Saginaw, Michigan, and T. E. Douglas, a lodge owner on the North Branch, flies were the only legal method of fish capture on a large portion of the North Branch. Mershon first advocated for this legislation once he purchased several thousand acres adjoining the river as a means to protect juvenile trout and keep people off his portions of the stream. The law went in and out of effect between 1907 and 1928 and provided interesting commentary on the conservation movement’s struggle to form a cohesive identity. Although Mershon’s law was repealed due to a lack of scientific support, it did launch interest into the conservation merits of fly fishing and started the legacy of fish conservation for which the Au Sable is famous for and would eventually lead to the creation of Trout Unlimited.
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Introduction

Fly Fishing Conservation

\[\text{Fig. 1. Michigan Department of Conservation Crawford County Map from The Lovells Historical Society.}\]
Michigan’s Au Sable River has been an angling destination since the 1870s when it gained national prominence for its grayling fishery. Sport fishing authorities popularized the fishery in sporting periodicals. Soon recreational anglers took advantage of rail lines and headed North from Saginaw, Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland and Chicago. Within a few years the grayling population had crashed due to over fishing, logging and the introduction of non-native brook trout. The grayling’s extinction coincided with American advances in industry, technology, increased urban development and rapidly growing numbers of immigrants. Grayling was one species among several, including buffalo and the passenger pigeon that revealed the threats of America’s growing population and economic wealth. The angling public quickly realized these threats and advocated protection for sport fish. Early Au Sable angling conservation started a legacy of cold water fish conservation that survives to this day.

The Grayling, Michigan area had always been a place of outsider interest and intervention. This dates back to the area’s early logging days. This trend continued with fish conservation as outside experts from Saginaw, Chicago and Detroit sought to regulate the waters of the Au Sable, to protect them from natural and man made threats. This relationship put outside conservation against traditional, local riparian uses. Legal battles, court intervention, regulation, the hiring of loyal game wardens, the growth in the state’s Fish Commission and numerous fish protection laws ensued. The most controversial of the early fish conservation laws came from the influence of William B. Mershon, a wealthy box factory owner and investor from Saginaw. Mershon was one of the state’s leading outdoors men. He was known for his hunting and fishing exploits around the United States and Canada. Despite his numerous travels, the North Branch of
the Au Sable was one of his favorite destinations. In the 1890s he took his private train
car to Lovells, Michigan where he and his angling friends would spend days fly fishing
the North Branch. He eventually purchased several thousand acres along the North
Branch. Mershon quickly advocated for the stream to become fly fishing only. This
1907 law was the first time that a public stream had excluded traditional sport angling
methods other than fly fishing. The fly fishing only regulation highlighted the tension
between stream conservation from outsiders and locals who fished the stream primarily
for subsistence. The fly law was part of a larger debate in America’s angling
publications. Where trout subsistence fish or recreational fish?

Fish as food or fish as recreation was one of the main debates during this time
period. State and local regulations affecting the Au Sable River developed to favor
recreational angling as part of the broader conservation program. Conservation
emphasized over preservation. Conservation commonly refers to the wise use, or
regulated use of a resource to maximize its potential. Preservation calls for the complete
protection of the resource without any extraction or use. There were no serious calls for
preservation on the Au Sable, although Mershon did advocate preservation on a nearby
stretch of the Manistee River for grayling protection. Conservation was the name of the
game on the Au Sable. It took the form of state regulation, game wardens, artificial trout
propagation and the control of river access. River access has been one of the central
arguments of fish conservation. Early conservation sought to keep the general public
away from the fish through either the privatization of a stream or through narrowing
restrictions. The North Branch’s fly only law was viewed as part of this conservation
through privatization.
Au Sable River conservation had several general components. Regulation often came from outside actors. Laws and regulations were imposed by either the state, the Fish Commission, or outside angling interest groups and conservation leaders. These regulations emphasized the aesthetic nature of trout and trout fishing. Increased regulation and the passage of time moved trout further away from its subsistence relationship with humans and more towards a sporting relationship based on aesthetics. Scientific management coincided with governmental management. The scientific propagation of trout became the preferred solution to deal with the depleted grayling and trout streams. Finally, riparian access was regulated. Threats to the stream and fish were controlled through stream privatization, increased regulation and law enforcement.

Few things get a fisherman’s blood boiling faster than the loss of access to his favorite fishing hole. Follow any angler down to his favorite fishing hole on his local stream. This is the sort of place that he has gotten to know over the past decade or more of fishing. A spot where the current flows just right, between boulders and over gravel, sweeping just down stream in a narrow chute where summer smallmouth bass crash shad just before dawn. Or, the perfect riffle where reliable hatches are found every season along with the large brown trout with the scar across his back from when he escaped a predacious larger brother as a fry. Now watch that fisherman get his gear ready, run his line through the guides on his rod. He may patiently select just the right fly, or without thinking tie on the old reliable, one that has worked time and time again. Leaving the road he ambles down the well worn path, leading to the sort of spot where kids and families like to skip rocks, but one that most fishermen overlook. On his walk he may recall how last week the fishing proved to be tough. A few small fish were hooked, but
the larger fish that make this spot so special never appeared. Approaching the water he walked downstream of where most anglers concentrated. The water looked perfect, and it certainly held fish, but his honey hole had fish and did this spot one better, no fishermen. Rounding the last bend on the fishermen’s path, just on the inside of a deep curve in the river his mind played out his first cast. Then, his jaw dropped, his shoulders slumped and his stride stopped. There in the middle of his own stretch was an intruder. Standing smack dab in the middle of the stream, just above the fish hole he stood. His rod flexed with the weight of a heavy fish, pushing against the current and pulling against the all too familiar pierce of metal. Then the fly fisherman noticed a bait box sitting on the bank of the stream. A bobber flashed across the water surface as the angler fought the fish closer and closer. Soon the fish was subdued and brought to the net. That was when the fly fisherman noticed the stringer hanging from the angler’s wading belt. A metal clip was stuck through the fish’s mouth and out his gills. Tethered to the stringer the fish was put back into the water. The fly angler could not imagine a worse fate. Instead of being released back into the water, or even being subjected to a merciful bash on the head, the fish was given a slow, agonizing death. Weakened from the fight, underwater the fish was back in his element. Everything familiar surrounded him. His senses recognized his home, the same hole that he had grown large, the same hole where he returned every year after running far upstream to spawn. Here he was, left to slowly die, attached to this bait casting, hole stealing, fish monger.

Similar scenarios have played out over the centuries and across the continents. Through tradition, practice, or purchase, anglers have grown accustomed to calling a special piece of frequently fished water their own. Our human primordial hunter gatherer
emerges. Arguments can ensue, sometimes erupting into fights, but usually involving nothing more than name calling and a few choice words. In some of the most crowded streams tensions are usually eased. The spring pursuit of walleye in the Maumee River, an autumn saltwater blitz off Montauk, fall salmon runs along the tributaries of Lake Michigan, or the opening day of trout season in any state. These situations bring out the crowds, and most realize that they are all in this together. The fishing may or may not be good, but the crowds are expected and good manners usually prevail. The most tension seems to arise when the crowds are the smallest. A long stretch of a summer stream when the early season’s crowds have long disappeared can be ruined by the sight of another angler. In the case of private water, a pond of twenty acres or more may seem crowded if another angler appears on the far shore casting to largemouth bass hiding in the weeds. Those who are fortunate enough to purchase a stream front home on a famous trout stream may be infuriated to find a local fishing hole right out the back door.

Imagine the frustration and anger felt by the fishing public of Pennsylvania when a local stream was purchased and privatized for the creation of a private trout fishing club. The Little Juanita was a stream that had been brought back from environmental devastation by the state. Over the years Pennsylvania had stocked the stream, and over time with the improved health of the waters, a naturally reproducing trout population emerged. In 2001, Donald L. “Donny” Beaver founded the Spring Ridge Club, whose members pay up to $92,000 to fish private water in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Montana. In 2002, Beaver purchased a stretch of the Little Juanita called Espy Farm. This 1.3 mile stretch of water was near Spruce Creek and had been a traditional fishing spot for
In 2003 the commonwealth of Pennsylvania and a modern folk hero among fly anglers, Allan Bright filed a lawsuit over the privatization of the stream. Bright, a local fly shop owner, was disgusted by the privatization of stream access. The courts ruled in favor of Bright, stating that the river had been used as a traditional route of transportation as far back as the Revolutionary War, making its stream bed part of the public trust.

Beaver stated that his club certainly sought private access and the exclusion of the public, but only in the name of conservation. Leasing private sections of streams allowed families to hold onto their farms and property in an area of immense sprawl and development. These lease opportunities provide necessary income to pay rising real estate prices and preventing the growth of more suburban development. Private landowners were happy to get the economic incentives that came with the leases. Privatization kept the crowds and the garbage that accompanied them off their property. Anglers and other outdoor enthusiasts pointed to the Nature Conservancy and other nonprofit organizations that helped private citizens defray taxes while at the same time protecting access and the resource.

In 2008 the citizens of Ohio passed a measure granting Lake Erie property owners greater privatization of public shoreline. Backed by powerful real estate and homebuilders associations, the measure closed off traditional public access points along the shore. The mountainous west has also seen its share of property rights battles. Mitchell Slough, a portion of the Bitterroot River in Montana is a pristine spring creek famous for healthy trout populations. Charles Schwab and singer Huey Lewis joined efforts to have the slough identified as an irrigation ditch so that public access could be

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2 Ibid., 36.
banned. A portion of Montana’s Ruby River flowed through 4,000 acres of a private ranch, where the CEO of Atlanta’s Cox Enterprise fought to prevent access of local fishers.³ In 2002, Fly Rod & Reel magazine selected its most controversial Angler of the Year in its history by selecting television tycoon Ted Turner. Turner’s vast western landholdings had privatized millions of acres and prevented traditional public access. At the same time, the magazine honored his fight to bring back the westslope cutthroat trout.

In a similar vein, the members of Trout Unlimited, a cold water fishery special interest group, have waged an internal war over the issue of conservation and public access. Questions have focused on the cooperative relationship the organization has with private landowners. Spending money and resources on private water may be good for the fish, but does it aid the supporting fishermen who look at the organization as a means of protecting and extending public access?

Conservation is the regulation of a resource to maximize its greatest use and sustainability. Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the United States Forest Service defined conservation as the managed use of public resources for the greatest good and the longest amount of time.⁴ Conservation through privatization is one of the oldest, earliest and most basic forms of environmental conservation. Privatization through purchase and enclosure insures that the resource see diminished pressure. This form of conservation has traditionally favored the rich and powerful. It is a practice of conservation from the top down. Early trout and game clubs practiced conservation through privatization. The fishery was protected from the wanton demands of the general public to benefit members who bought shares of the club. Membership might be restricted based upon one’s

³ Ibid., 34.
monetary value and social status. Early clubs were found near urban areas such as Philadelphia, New York, and Cleveland.

The close proximity of the Catskill Mountains to New York urbanites made the Catskill Mountains one of America’s premier sites of rest and relaxation for upper class urbanites during the mid and late 1800s. There fishing clubs originated as camps for wealthy businessmen, their families and their friends. In 1890, George J. Gould bought 550 acres of land in the Catskills, which he eventually expanded to over 3,000 acres.\(^5\) Clubs began to appear as more and more men of similar backgrounds purchased land in both the Catskills and Adirondacks. The proliferation of such clubs was supported by the amount of industrial wealth that had been accumulated by upper class urbanites and the laws of New York state. Laws allowed the creation of clubs, where stock could be distributed, the club could contract debt and membership requirements could be strictly enforced.\(^6\) Over time, 30 clubs, mimicking the limitations and requirements of urban athletic clubs appeared in the Catskills.

Most of these early clubs fulfilled the same functions that urban social clubs did, they reinforced socioeconomic elitism and preserved urban social networks. Although these clubs provided elements of fishing and nature, their main purpose was the social functions they performed.\(^7\) Club houses were built that satisfied the discriminating tastes of the wealthy members. Fine kitchens and staffs provided the best food available. In 1873, Salmo Fontinalis was formed on the Beaverkill as the first club in the Catskills. By

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Ibid.
1883 a series of clubs were started by wealthy businessmen who could make the escape from Manhattan.\(^8\)

Construction of clubs and the fencing of miles of streams permanently changed the lifestyles of local residents. These people comprised an industrious group of working class men and women. Prior to the enclosure of their local streams they had fished at will to supplement their diets. To them, fishing was neither a sport nor leisure, but instead, a part of their subsistence lifestyle. When familiar streams and properties became enclosed and home to clubhouses and absentee landlords, conflicts arose. Oftentimes the locals would not let the enclosure of a stream impede their fishing, and would instead take on the title of a poacher. Individuals gained legendary status with their ability to thoroughly fish a club stream without being caught. Clubs took certain measures to defend their new investments. Most clubs had managers that lived on the club property. These managers or gamekeepers oversaw the property, took care of the maintenance, managed the workers, catered to the members and served as a permanent deterrent to poaching. To provide further protection it was rumored that some clubs constructed lookout towers and even let bulls loose on the property to ward off unwelcome guests.\(^9\)

Despite conflicts over enclosure, some historians have viewed the creation of these clubs as a positive development in angling history. The late 1800s was a time of wanton catch and keep fishing. Fish limits did not exist, and few states had fishing licenses. Americans had rejected broad scale private land management as a conservation plan. It smacked of its British origins where little public access to fields, forests, and

\(^8\) Ibid, 30.
\(^9\) Ibid, 33.
streams existed. Instead, Americans allowed public access to its resources without taking a vested interest in the conservation of those resources. A natural result was overuse and the destruction of the resource. Scientist Garrett Hardin wrote of the moral imperative of protecting the common good against the treats of the individual in his defense of the commons in his article, “The Tragedy of the Commons.”

Hardin called for moral authority to protect common benefits from the destruction of self satisfying individuals. Outdoors historian John Reiger, in his book *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* (1975), argued that it was the sportsmen themselves who came to the rescue of abused resources. He stated that the laissez faire attitude towards the country’s resources led to an abusive relationship between the public and its resources. In an era of weak government sportsmen turned toward private conservation efforts.

Clubs, especially those of Castalia, Ohio and Caledonia, New York perfected stream management. Clubs were responsible for artificial propagation of trout. They then had to maintain the streams to provide adequate trout habitat, which required near perfect conditions. Pristine habitats were especially important for the management of brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) or speckled trout. These trout, or more specifically charr, were the only trout native east of the Rocky Mountains. Brook trout required cooler stream temperatures and cleaner water than other trout species. Until the late 1800s with the introduction of Californian rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) and German brown trout (*Salmo trutta*), the brook trout was the species of choice for trout anglers. The management of these clubs would later served as an important contribution to the conservation movement of the Progressive Era. But conservation in club form was

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from the top down. It ignored the local anglers, and sought to preserve the fish for out of
town anglers with the resources to secure membership. They came to fish the stream a
few times a year, and cast over fat, hatchery bred fish. These early clubs cast their lot
with conservation through privatization.

Grassroots conservation was not unheard. Reports from the 1870s on the Au
Sable River in Michigan mentioned how guides tried to limit the catch size to ten inches.
Guides and polers supported an agreement that all fish under ten inches needed to be
released back to the water. This would make sure that enough fish returned to spawn,
and produce future generations. These guides clearly understood the nature of
conservation. They asked for the intelligent use of the resource so as to maximize its
return. Sustainability was paramount. The fish of choice was the grayling (*Thymallus
tricolor*), native to Michigan and nowhere else in the eastern United States. Hatcheries
had succeeded in artificially propagating brook trout, but not the grayling. Facing the
threats of over fishing, logging and competition from nonnative brook trout, guides
realized that their fishery was under threat. Unfortunately this conservation method did
not see the guides through. Grayling suffered, and were soon found less and less.
Grayling were popularized in the national sporting publications and by 1900 the grayling
was all but extinct in the Au Sable. Displaced by brook trout, anglers lamented the
grayling’s loss but delighted in the rise of the sporting brook trout.

Conservation from above continued at the state level in the form of special
interest groups and laws. States started their own conservation agencies. Early in their
development the state was often dependent upon the support and guidance of private
conservation leaders. As time passed and the study and advocacy of conservation
developed, states began to lead their own version of conservation. Laws were passed and enforced through an extensive network of state commissions and game wardens. Michigan founded its own Fish Commission in 1873 to regulate the whitefish industry near Detroit. The primary focus was on commercial fishing. Fish for were for food. A commercial industry depended on the proper management of the resource, and a growing public demanded an affordable source of protein. Over time the fish conservation agenda became heavily influenced by special interest groups seeking to promote fishing as a sporting activity. Sport fishing emphasized the fight of the fish, the method of capture, its beauty, the grandeur of the fish’s habitat and lastly, and perhaps least importantly, the actual taste of the fish.

In 1878 the Michigan Sportsmen’s Association met in Battle Creek to discuss methods of protecting the grayling from annihilation. Conservation was the topic of discussion. Anglers felt that grayling, trout and black bass deserved special regulations given their gamey nature. In Michigan, and around the country, a movement emerged among elite, wealthy urban anglers to move these game fish, with special attention to trout, from the table to the mantle. Trout species were not to be the foodstuffs of hungry populations. Perch and pickerel were fine food fish, but trout provided a greater benefit in terms of economics as a fish of elite status. Fishing moved away from sustenance. A new chapter in fish conservation was born. If conservation was about protecting a resource from the forces that threatened its untimely annihilation, then the movement sought to prevent this annihilation by declaring a war on nature. The natural enemies of brook trout were pike, merganser ducks, mink, and herons. Game wardens and anglers were encouraged to kill these pestilent creatures on sight. It was assumed that the natural
balance between predators would swing in favor of trout if the predators could be driven to the brink of extinction. Even the brown trout, which made its appearance in Michigan in 1883, quickly became the enemy of trout fishermen. Brown trout ate other trout and therefore threatened the brook trout population that had displaced and helped destroy the grayling population only ten years prior. In addition to natural threats, trout conservationists looked at the role that man played. Certainly logging had played a role in the destruction of grayling and early state laws sought to address this issue by mandating that all dams allow for the passage of fish. This proved to be one of the earliest fish conservation laws that addressed human destruction of stream habitat.

Additional laws struck at the consumptive nature of man. Streams were closed during spawning seasons. Size limits and creel limits were imposed. Early laws forbid spear fishing, the use of dynamite and netting on inland waterways. Those who wished to fish for their dinners or for the market were required to fish with a more refined tool, the fishing rod.

Commercial and subsistence fishermen were viewed as early threats to the commercial potential of a growing brook trout fishery on the Au Sable. As state laws mandated several forms of protection, the laws were only as good as their enforcement. The enforcement of state laws required local cooperation. County game wardens were hired to protect forests against fires, prevent out of season poaching of game, and to make sure that state fishing laws were followed. Historian Karl Jacoby traced the relationship between game wardens and the local population they were supposed to monitor. He found an interesting balance needed to exist between state mandates and local traditions. For the warden to push the laws too harshly brought anger and even violent retaliation.
from local hunters and fishers. A warden that favored the locals too much did not enforce the laws and did nothing to support state mandated conservation.  

A similar pattern existed in Grayling, Michigan. In some cases local courts were reluctant to prosecute or hold poachers accountable. Anglers refused to serve as informants for fear of retaliation against their property. Local governments did not reimburse some wardens for their services. Michigan law allowed private citizens, clubs and other organizations to hire wardens to patrol their grounds and property. These wardens were deputized and had the same rights as police officers. Anglers with money and resources contributed to a warden fund as set up by Mershon and T. E. Douglass. Douglass owned a lumber mill and was in the process of transforming from lumbering to the thriving trout tourist trade. He established one of the first lodges on the North Branch of the Au Sable. A warden fund was raised by collecting donations from anglers all over the state. Two of the first wardens along the North Branch were hired using this money. Erastus Purchase owned property along the South Branch and knew the area well. He enforced the new eight inch law on the North Branch. Under Purchase state laws were applied to all, both local and the trout tourist. This system shifted the power of local law enforcement to the outside, to those with the economic means to contribute to a yearly salary for the protection of a resource that they valued.

Another form of early fish conservation was artificial fish propagation. The manufacture of fish through the state and federal hatcheries replenished depleted supplies. Hatching more fish compensated for over fishing. Without consideration for the natural carrying capacity of a stream, hatcheries dumped millions of brook trout in

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Michigan streams and rivers. A recreational fish angling economy started with the popularization of the grayling and continued with hatchery fish. Anglers contributed to the local economy by employing guides, polers, boat builders, cooks, fly tiers, and rod makers. An industry had risen from the ashes of the burnt over pine lands and the trout industry required protection in the form of state laws and reliable enforcement in addition to a ready supply of gullible fish. In 1914 a cooperative venture between Au Sable sport anglers and the state was formed with the Grayling Fish Hatchery Club. This private club created a hatchery on land donated by one of Grayling’s leading citizens, Rasmus Hanson, a wealthy lumber baron. The state leased the hatchery from the private club. The club was able to insure adequate stocking of nearby streams and rivers according to their own desires. This relationship, like the private hiring of public game wardens, gave more control of the state rivers and streams over to a private group. Most members viewed their economic support of the club as a way to make sure that abundant trout were there for the taking when they vacationed. Others, such as Mershon, believed that their economic support of the club, and the stocking of state streams granted these private citizens a greater say in state conservation matters. This relatively small group of patrons had partially paid for the fish in the streams, therefore they believed that as an economically powerful minority, they could dictate conservation laws.

In 1906 and 1907 Mershon and some business partners and fishing friends acquired a large tract of property along the North Branch of the Au Sable from Douglass. Their initial hopes settled on creating a private club that would practice both forestry and stream conservation. This entered Mershon into the final period of stream conservation on the Au Sable in the early years of the river’s conservation history. Mershon and his
partners sought conservation in the form of privatization. Their form of privatization did not follow the traditional path of property acquisition. Although the group owned thousands of acres near the small town of Lovells, state law dictated that the stream itself and the fishing rights to it were held in the public domain. Other property owners along the Au Sable’s South Branch had sought to keep anglers off the river by posting their property and stringing fences over the stream along their property edges. Mershon followed a different method. In 1907 he summoned his personal connections in the form of conservation, politics, and business to have a fly fishing only law created by the state Fish Commission for the North Branch of the Au Sable. The regulation only affected his portion of the river. Mershon advertised it as a form of conservation, but among his property partners it was understood as a method to keep both local anglers and the growing number of trout tourists off the water.

The nature of fly fishing itself is class oriented. Skill, practice and money are necessary requirements for fly fishing, especially in the early 1900s. Even the most basic fly rods were more expensive than bait casting rods. Then, instead of earth worms which were readily available for anyone with a little time on their hands and willingness to get dirty, flies required skill and knowledge to tie. Flies could either be purchased from fly tiers or one could learn to tie them himself. Either way, flies were much more expensive than the basic hook paired with a worm. Finally, the art of fly casting was not the most efficient method of fish catching. Flies themselves carried little weight. To cast them the momentum must come from the weight of the line itself. Fine silk fly lines were paired with handcrafted split bamboo rods to cast finely feathered flies upstream to feeding fish. Most fly fishers learned how to cast with the help of someone else, and practice was
required. So, by the very nature of fly fishing, it was a fishing method that favored those with the time and resources to learn sporting fishing methods over the more reliable bait and hook.

The fly fishing law was in effect from 1907 to 1913, and again from 1925 to 1927. The prevailing attitude from those who opposed the law was that it benefited urban anglers who wanted to have the fish to themselves when they arrived on the North Branch. To Mershon the law meant a number of different things. On one level it protected his property and economic interests. The law, through proper enforcement at the hands of the county warden who was hired by the same anglers who supported the regulation, protected the smaller, juvenile fish from the bait fishermen. As a proficient keeper of fishing records, Mershon noted that bait fishing was more destructive to the fishery than fly fishing. Fly hooked fish were most often hooked in the mouth, and undersized fish could be returned to the water with a good chance to survive. Bait hooked fish often swallowed the bait and received mortal wounds in their gills or stomach. Small juvenile bait caught fish were to be released as well, but it was noticed that their chances of survival diminished. To Mershon and other advocates of the fly fishing rule the law appeared to protect the natural resource and kept fishing pressure down. To those who opposed the law it smacked of elitism and the appropriation of the river to the benefit of out of town anglers with the money and connections to steal the stream away from its traditional uses. Incidents of destruction on the stream in the form of dynamiting were reported to have increased during the periods of the fly law.

What do the early conservation methods of the Au Sable reveal about the historic trends in conservation? With certainty it can be stated that early Au Sable
conservationists did not trust the local population to wisely use the resource. Out of town anglers supported the broader conservation movement and the more specific and narrow growth of sport fishing. It reflected a movement of fishing conservation that grew from the destruction of the grayling fishery. Outdoors writer Charles Hallock spoke about the new model for sport fishers to follow. In describing the ideal model of a sport fisherman over the subsistence fisherman Hallock wrote, “He never feeds his passion to satiety, he is rather the conservator of the creatures he pursues. Self-interest makes him their champion and preserver. He has learned that he must not only protect them, but assist the natural process of reproduction if he would secure a continuance of his favorite pastime.”

Journals such as *Forest and Stream*, *Scribners Monthly*, and *Harpers Weekly* popularized the sporting gentlemen. The method of pursuit and the fight of the fish made for better reading than the tonnage of fish salted away for market, or packed into barrels for subsistence.

Angling for sport demarcated class distinctions. Early guides, farmers, and lumbermen in Grayling fished for subsistence to supplement their incomes. Efficiency was favored over angling aesthetics. Spears and dynamite were preferred over bamboo and exotic feathers when the game wardens were not present. Sport fishermen on the other hand boasted of their casting skills and the cat and mouse game between them and the fish. The journey to the fishery was as thrilling as the fishing itself. The experience mattered, not the marketability of their catch. Travel by steamers, trains, and then horse carts were part of the angling package. Heading to the northern Michigan woods created a sense of adventure that the nation’s growing urban population enjoyed reading about.

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Growing numbers imagined taking the trip themselves even if the constraints of their lives meant they would never go. They lived vicariously through the exploits of Hallock, Thaddeus Norris and other prominent angling journalists.

Historian Peter Schmidt wrote about the relationship between literature promoting a sporting life and the process of increased urbanization, where life was dictated by work and the clock. Schmitt stated, “Arcadia existed largely in the literary record. City dwellers recognized it only when they perceived their lives through literary patterns and symbols established by nature writers.”14 Although Schmitt defined his meaning of the Arcadian myth throughout his work, this was one of the few intentional explanations that he provided. The Arcadian myth was a concept, a way of thinking, and sometimes, a way of life. It was the emergence of a new way of thinking about rural and remote America that could only have taken place at the onset of industrial and urban growth. As a growing number of Americans took roots in cities, they lost touch with the countryside, and in doing so their concept of rural America become more and more disconnected from the reality. In looking for an understanding of how their concepts were shaped, one must turn to their sources of information. Most often their romanticized rural thoughts were based upon popular media, as found in literature and artwork.

Class linked the increased leisure time of wealthy America to the backwoods. Only the upper and middle class could afford the time and money to pursue the Arcadian myth. Country farmers and neighbors did not need to join in on this pursuit, they lived the reality of it on a daily basis.15 Average farmers had neither the time nor the inclination to read transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, David Thoreau, or

15 Ibid., 4.
Walt Whitman. It was a concept that was appreciated by the upper class, and with increased publication and class hegemony, became popular with the expanding middle class. Nature writing, following the tradition established by early transcendentalists, flourished in the middle of the nineteenth-century. While the transcendentalists romanticized rural settings in a philosophical style, later writers used the wilderness in a much more superficial manner. Schmitt’s explained that writers such as John Burroughs, Ernest Thompson Seton, and Charles D. Roberts sold millions of copies based on their romantic concepts of the physical environment. Tales of camping exploits were popular reading and promoted awareness for the American wilderness. Their messages were much more straightforward than the philosophical literary explorations of the transcendentalists. Later, as wilderness writing became more popular, a new breed of outdoor writers emerged. A new focus was placed on the battle between man and nature. At the turn of the century, authors such as Jack London, mostly wrote of fictionalized composite heroes. These novels focused on the disappearing frontier and the dilemmas that man faced on the edges of civilization. In these stories men had to not only fight nature, but also the inner weaknesses of humanity. Whereas the transcendentalists promoted respect for nature out of an appreciation for its ability to calm the human soul, the later novelists saw the wilderness as a place of contest and conquest. Each of these interpretations had an impact on the beliefs that urban Americans held about the wilderness. These writings helped to create respect and a desire for increased interaction with the frontier way of life.

\[\text{16 Ibid., 49.}\]
\[\text{17 Ibid., 129.}\]
Historian Leo Marx wrote about the relationship between pastoral landscapes and the urban growth of America. The rapid urbanization left a population disconnected with the traditional countryside that was part of America’s nostalgic past. Industrial and urban growth were rapid and transformed the landscape. Urbanites looked towards the countryside as a preserve of what once was. Marx wrote, “The soft veil of nostalgia that hangs over our urban landscape is largely a vestige of the once dominant image of an undefiled, green republic, a quiet land of forests, villages and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness.”\(^\text{18}\)

Crawford County was certainly not the green Eden that Marx wrote of. Logging had created a clear cut landscape of burnt over land, but the river held promise. Industrial development downstate, along the streams such as the River Rouge, destroyed local waterways. The Au Sable’s resiliency in the face of destructive logging and over fishing struck a tone with the likes of Henry Ford. Industrialization and job creation extracted a significant price on the nation’s urban waterways. Perhaps a portion of the love affair downstate anglers had with the Au Sable resulted from the nostalgia of what had been lost in their local waters, a chance for a river to be reborn. The Au Sable was an aquatic phoenix rising from the burnt over ashes of the land. The River Rouge was lined with factories and received daily flushes of waste and chemicals. It was sacrificed in the name of urban growth. No successful environmental rejuvenation short of mothballing the factories could save the stream. The Au Sable would be saved. The end of the logging era and the lack of urban development provided the ideal conservation project. The Au

Sable represented conservation possibilities that were impossible to realize in urban streams.

Upper and middle class urbanites had the ability to spend sums of money on hunts and fishing trips. Rods, reels, lines, lures, flies, waders, guides, and travel expenses all added up well beyond the price per pound of even the freshest and rarest fish at any market. Sport fishing emphasized the experience. Subsistence fishing was considered a backwards way of fishing. It emphasized efficiency over grace and skill. Netting, spearing and even plunking with a baited hook were seen as more and more backwards or of the folk tradition as the concept of sport fishing evolved. Borrowing a phrase and concept from English social historian E. P. Thompson, Karl Jacoby wrote about the moral ecology of conservation. In the moral ecology the elite often dictate the conservation movement, as was often the case on the Au Sable. Folk traditions, such as subsistence fishing and commercial fishing were set against outsider intervention and sometimes worked against the efforts of reform. The conservation movement was not always one sided. Sometimes the folk tradition was set to guide the conservation movement, shaping it in more subtle ways than outside methods. Guides who tried to impose an unwritten size limit on grayling well before state legislation provided a good example of local conservation in practice. Oftentimes, however, conservation was marked as a battle between locals dependent upon the natural resource and outsiders who sought protection based on aesthetic desires.

This moral ecology is an argument that runs throughout the early history of Au Sable conservation. A tenuous relationship between outsider intervention and local home rule runs throughout the Au Sable’s history. A commonality did exist between the

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19 Jacoby, 3.
different factions, the symbolic river economy. Locals relied on the steady stream of tourists that arrived to first fish for grayling and then trout. An entire economy was built around this trade, and fishing allowed for the permanence that early logging did not. Outsiders relied on the locals to serve them, care for them, guide them and serve as caretakers for the resource they both relied on. A fundamental basis for conservation on the Au Sable has been the link between conservation and economics. A basic definition of conservation is the regulation of a resource to maximize its greatest benefits. For conservation to work on the river it needed both the support of the local population and the outside conservationists. Grayling faced extinction at the crossroads of a perfect storm of destruction. The logging industry destroyed their habitat. Fishermen out fished the rivers to the brink of extinction. Finally, nonnative brook trout out competed the weakened grayling and stood in the path of any successful grayling rehabilitation. Both the locals and outside fishermen, i.e. conservationists, delighted in the introduction of brook trout. It provided a sustainable fishery and economy. Regulations such as size limits and closed seasons were imposed by outside conservationists, but were tolerated by the local population to protect their economy. Hatcheries were well supported by both groups as the most efficient and scientific method of resource sustainability.

Game wardens were part of this moral ecology. Depending on their source of income, wardens could serve either the local interest or the outside conservationists. Skilled wardens served both. The early Au Sable wardens were hired by outside anglers and conservationists to protect the fish from the abuses of local fishermen and traveling fishermen. A balancing act existed where the warden tried to hold the local population accountable, please his employers, and keep peace among all. The majority of the local
game warden funding came from outside anglers who visited the Au Sable on a frequent basis. They may or may not have owned property in the area or may or may not have been members of a fishing club. They were not the casual, weekend tourist. They had a vested interest in the health of the river. Additional funding came from some of the lodge owners who were dependent on the health of the river to continue attracting anglers. The targets of the game wardens and their financial backers were both locals and visiting tourists who did not adhere to the state conservation laws. Early wardens arrested game violators independent of their wealth or place of origin. This stage of conservation from afar links the local and the outside conservation movements. State law was only as effective as its local adherence and enforcement. Outside conservationists tended not to trust locally hired game wardens to adequately enforce state laws. Local courts were reluctant to penalize locals who were found violating the technicalities of state law. Early game wardens, such as Rube Babbitt, Jr. found a way to straddle the two supporting factions. The best wardens were locals who cooperated with both parties to see the implementation of conservation law.

As Michigan’s conservation movement progressed the State Fish Commission took a more favorable stance on sport fishing. Over time laws had reduced acceptable fishing practices to the rod and reel. Some, but not all of the leading advocates of sport fishing saw fly fishing as the most noble method of trout fishing. Hallock wrote about how the sporting society labeled the bait fishermen:

Some gentlemen, by no means pretentious or opinionated, delight to assert that since they became recognized anglers they have neither taken a trout or a salmon except with a fly. I doff my hat in reverence to the sentiment; it is the honest utterance of a justifiable pride. It is the spirit of the sangre azul, which dignifies the cultivated sportsman above the mere fisherman; the man of honor above the assassin, the Herod among the small fry, the
filler of pots and the defiler of closed seasons. Nevertheless, I cannot admit the implication that the man who habitually uses bait is considered a creel-stuffer, or deficient in the scientific accomplishments of the craft.  

Special interest groups began to appear. Their purpose was to promote the propagation of game, the creation of game conservation laws, and to further the sportsmen’s movement. An early sportsmen’s advocacy group was the Michigan Sportsmen’s Association. It asked its members to pledge never take more game or fish than could be conveniently used. Members were to restrain from participating in the destruction of nature’s natural supply. They were to prevent destructive hunting and fishing and to stand in the way of any legislative effort that would permit it. Finally, they were to never take game or fish except in a skillful manner.

Such organizations splintered sportsmen’s groups from the commercial fishery conservation movement that had started Michigan fish conservation in the mid 1800s. Historian John F. Reiger wrote that it was this splintered movement that pushed nature conservation on a state and national level. Using *Forest and Stream* articles Reiger demonstrated that a code of sportsmanship was created through the publication’s advocacy of ethical hunting and fishing practices. Leaders such as George Bird Grinnell and Hallock promoted the English fishing and hunting practices that looked toward sportsmanship and not as the harvest of meat for the home or market. Reiger wrote,

Farmers and ranchers made poor nature lovers, seeing wildlife only as competitors or sources of profit. Sportsmen on the other hand, regarded most animals and birds with nonutilitarian motives. Not depending on nature for a livelihood, sportsmen were the only large group of Americans who came to woods and fields for mainly recreation and aesthetic reasons.

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20 Hallock, 19.
21 Michigan Sportsmen’s Association to Dennis E. Alward, 9 May 1921. Box 42, Folder trout records. William Butts Mershon Personal Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan (Mershon Collection hereafter).
It is no wonder, then, that they would take the initiative in preserving nonsporting species as well as those traditionally pursued as game. Reiger overlooked the efforts of Michigan anglers to exterminate pike, merganser ducks and other nonsporting species that threatened brook trout populations. He did, however, identify the splinter between anglers of the sporting tradition and those of the folk tradition. As time passed on the North Branch of the Au Sable, the bait fisherman, due in part by efforts of Saginaw conservationist Mershon, came to be identified as the folk angling culture that threatened the sporting nature of the brook trout fishery.

Mershon was one of the frequent visitors to the North Branch that had helped to organize the payment of a game warden to look over the river. From a prominent Saginaw lumber and box family, Mershon had spent much of his life watching over his investments, hunting and fishing, and leading conservation measures across the state. Despite his memberships to some of the state’s most prominent fishing and hunting clubs, he returned to Lovells, Michigan several times a year to fish for North Branch brook trout. He and a group of his friends organized a private sportsmen’s club named the Forest and Stream Company, Limited. The club purchased a private railway car that could be attached to any train for a comfortable traveling arrangement. The “William B. Mershon” made yearly trips to the North Branch and served as a base camp for fishing exploits. A purchase of several thousand acres of land adjoining the river in 1907 led Mershon down a path of conservation that he had not pursued before. A long time advocate of out of state licensure, closed seasons, larger size limits, smaller creel limits, the increased power of game wardens, and numerous calls to reform the hunting laws for

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migratory waterfowl, Mershon was one of the state’s leading conservationist. He even advocated for the closure of a portion of the upper Manistee to protect some of the last few grayling in the Lower Peninsula. In 1907, in conjunction with his land purchase, Mershon looked towards an antiquated model of conservation, privatization.

Historian Patricia A. Stokowski, in her article “Community Values in Conservation,” identified three trends or stages in conservation. The first stage began in the late 1800s and represented the most basic form of conservation, the protection of landscape.24 Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the National Park movement fit this first category. So too did the private fishing clubs of the Adirondacks and Michigan. Privatization had been a tested model of conservation in New York where clubs demonstrated that private ownership of land and rivers had increased trout numbers.25 Mershon and his partners sought and succeeded in gaining increased control and regulation of the stream by persuading the state to pass a fly fishing only regulation. This removed the traditional subsistence use of the stream in favor of the growing political power of the sporting conservation movement. Those who opposed the law both at the local and the state level saw the move as a method of reserving the stream for elite urban anglers.

In the ensuing years that the law was in effect under Mershon’s influence, reports revealed that locals did carry out acts of vandalism against the stream as retaliation for the loss of their traditional rights. This was reminiscent of the actions taken in England during the enclosure movements as highlighted in E. P. Thompson’s Whigs and Hunters.26

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In the mid 1700s enclosure laws had allowed the gentry to create fish ponds to cover the common lands and therefore blocked tradition access to peat and other commonly held resources. Locals protested in the form of breaking the heads of the fish ponds and poaching the fish. The poaching went beyond the basic subsistence for the table. Poaching and vandalism were acts of aggression and retaliation against the gentry and their appropriation of common property.\(^{26}\) In essence, the North Branch and the fish in it were aquatic common lands. Closed seasons, creel limits, size limits, and game wardens had all been forms of conservation, but they were methods that still allowed access to the commons. Fish could still be taken by bait and hook and taken home. Conservation from above, from Mershon, Douglas, Hanson and others had taken a common right away. Michigan law had ruled that the water flowing through rivers and the fish in them were state property, owned by all. The new fly law had shifted access from all to the few who had the means, money and time to pursue fish on the fly.

Historian Louis S. Warren, in *The Hunter’s Game*, wrote on how the concept of the American commons has been narrowed in scope over time. Modern life saw the disappearance of the commons in favor of special interest groups, who took control of America’s natural resources for their own self interests. Native Americans were among the first to be eliminated. Subsistence hunters and fishers were moved off the lands as the sporting culture grew and it was realized that animals and fish provided greater economic returns as sport rather than as food. Industry took control of public lands and rivers as dumps for its sewage and air pollution.\(^{27}\) The fly fishing only regulation fit in this


narrowing line of historical access to America’s commons. As part of Warren’s definition of a conservation movement, the rights of local rule diminished as a national movement formed.

. . . the public was amorphous, compromised of nameless masses and bounded only by national borders. No local claim could transcend the public welfare; no local commons could supersede the public good to claim the public’s game. By abstracting their constituency in this way, conservationists had a powerful foil to spatially bounded local prerogatives. Where natural resources were concerned, proximity conveyed less privilege than ever before.28

In 1879 the famous land reform advocate Henry George strongly supported the American commons as a guard against the improper use of America’s resources by land speculators. One of the initial reasons that Mershon proposed the fly only law was to increase the value of his holdings. His initial partners were reluctant to pay for a membership for something that was already commonly owned and freely accessible to all. Mershon saw the fly only rule as a method of protecting the fish and a way to control the water. George offered an interesting comment on the ownership of nature. He wrote,

. . . If a pirate spreads his sails, the wind will fill them as well as it will fill those of a peaceful merchantman or missionary bark; if a king and a common man be thrown overboard neither can keep his head above water except by swimming; birds will not come to be shot by the proprietor of the soil any quicker than they will come to be shot by the poacher; fish will bite or will not bite at a hook in utter disregard as to whether it is offered them by a good little boy who goes to Sunday-school, or a bad little boy who plays truant . . .29

George saw private land ownership as standing in the way of the greatest maximum benefit of the land, or in this case, water. Historian Roderick Frasier Nash summarized George’s theory in regards to nature as, “The thrust of George’s tax-reform proposals was

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28 Ibid., 12.
to challenge absolute ownership of the environment in a manner comparable to the
abolitionists’ challenge of the ownership and exploitation of people.”30

Mershon’s interest in the North Branch went beyond his basic desire to catch
eight inch brook trout on a fly. It was about control, and the ability to carryout his own
version of conservation. A version that was untested and unproven. His basic
observations had led him to believe that fly fishing was better for the fishery. Private
clubs had practiced fly fishing only since their early days to make the experience
sporting. Never before had fly fishing been used as a form of conservation on public
water. In a swarm of controversy, Mershon had gotten his way. His observations
suggested that his form of fly fishing conservation did indeed benefit the fishery, as fly
anglers caught more fish each year. Overall fish sizes increased as well, suggesting that
more fish were living longer and thereby spawning more fish. The law did have an
unintended consequence that befuddled Mershon’s desire to keep down fishing pressure.
More and more anglers traveled to the North Branch due to the increased ease of
automobile travel and no doubt to the protective measures the stream offered fly
fishermen. In the end Mershon’s methods conserved more than the fish, but also the
sporting method of their capture.

This study tells the history of the Au Sable’s early conservation history.
Crawford County Michigan is home to a renowned legacy of fish conservation. It is the
source of the nation’s first public water fly fishing only stream. In 1959 Trout Unlimited
was founded on the banks of the Au Sable as a group of fly fishermen frustrated with the
state’s management of the river created their own special interest conservation group

University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 50.
dedicated to cold water fisheries. It was among the first areas to ban the killing of trout. The story began in the logging camps and burnt over land of the 1870s as grayling made the headlines of the nation’s sporting literature magazines. Soon anglers flocked to the region to take part in the extinction of this great fish. The magnificent stands of white pine and the grayling disappeared along side each other. Both were victims of greed and man’s overwhelming power to consume. Grayling’s former logging heritage played no small role in its fishing conservation. Mershon was joined by other former lumber men who were well versed in the growing popularity of a sustainable forest. Since they had missed their chance at sustaining Crawford County’s forests, fish received their fullest efforts. It is a story that is common to conservation history, of regulation from the top down. Power and money dictated the laws and their enforcement. Conflicts existed not only between local and outside rule, but between the working class and leisure class. The one continuity in the conservation legacy has been its economic focus. Advocates on both the local and state level looked to maximize the economic potential of the resource. Although Mershon’s early efforts were repealed, he did create a desire to study the potentials of his theory. Michigan ordered the scientific study of hooking methods on the mortality of released trout, beginning a long series of scientific study of sport fishing conservation.

Mershon and the preservation of fly fishing water followed with a larger, national progressive movement. Mershon himself identified with a progressive ideology, strongly objected to President Theodore Roosevelt. Mershon supported progressives in Michigan. His actions followed a progressive ideology with a fundamental belief in the regulatory power of government and a conviction in scientific management of resources.
This was demonstrated in his continued advocacy for tax reform to provide sustainable forestry in Michigan. It can be viewed that his actions on the Au Sable fell in line in the spirit of progressive action as described by historian Richard Hofstadter in *Age of Reform*. Hofstadter argued that besides a firm belief in the regulatory powers of government and a fundamental hope that science would create a more efficient economy that benefited the greater good, the progressive movement was conservative in its origins. Beneath the veneer of reform was a movement that actually sought a return to the traditional power structure that had favored generational political and economic power over the sudden rise in new industrial wealth and the political undermining of democracy through urban, immigrant political machines. Hofstadter summarized the Yankee-Protestant origins of progressive reform as a belief that;

. . . political life ought to be run, to a greater degree than it was, in accordance with general principles and abstract laws apart from the superior to personal needs, and expressed a common feeling that government should be in good part an effort to moralize the lives of individuals . . . 31

Hofstadter referred to the impossible standards of the Yankee-Protestant moral absolutism of the progressive movement. Aspects of this moral absolutism were evident in the fish conservation reforms of the Au Sable. The area’s reforms, largely created by outside urbanites, proposed to project a moral fishery that favored aesthetics over subsistence.

Mershon’s efforts to conserve the trout of the North Branch were as much about the fish as they were an effort to protect his preferred style of fishing. Fly fishing is and has been class linked. A preservation of his preferred style of fishing was a preservation of status and privilege to the detriment of lower class and less refined angling methods.

Bait fishing was often a method linked to subsistence rather than sport. Mershon lacked any other proven scientific support for his advocacy for fly fishing other than his own fundamental conviction that it was the least harmful and most refined angling method for the sporting nature of trout fishing. In the end, his support of fly fishing was an attempt to protect a tradition that his generation had emphasized as the most sporting of all. The fly fishing only ruling was as much an effort to protect the trout as it was a movement to protect a sporting way of life. Fly fishermen advocated for the continuation of the law stating that so many thousand of miles of trout fishing were available in the state that preserving one small stream in the name of fly fishing was not too much to ask.

Has Au Sable conservation mirrored the nation conservation and progressive movement? Historian Hal K. Rothman, *Saving the Planet*, stated that conservation was certainly shaped by the movement’s class origins. He wrote,

> For better and for worse, the values of progressivism were part of conservation: efficiency, equity, and social responsibility. Those who benefited from Progressive conservation were largely members of the urban middle class. Conservation’s blind spot obscured the travails of lower-income people and minorities. The movement’s roots were so firmly in the middle class, and the culture of the time so ignored the woes of others, that it is easy to regard the movement as the province of the elite. Such a characterization would not be entirely fair, but in many ways it struck the mark.³²

Anglers and self labeled sportsmen contested the fly fishing only regulations of the Au Sable conservation. The majority of the state’s anglers rejected the philosophy. It only found support in the minds of a few conservation minded anglers. The regulations pitted anglers and conservationists against each other. The advocacy of a few politically, empowered fly anglers ignored the traditional uses of both local anglers and tourists.

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In the end, the fly fishing regulations on the North Branch of the Au Sable reveal much about the conservation in Michigan. The reasons behind Au Sable conservation were sometimes murky. The actual motives for conservation are sometimes hard to see clearly. It is a history of loss and tragedy in the extinction of the grayling. It presents a lesson in class conflict and the disjointed views of the conservation movement. But, it is a rich history that has been well preserved, letting us to continue to review the wonderful history on one of the nation’s most beloved trout streams.

What is revealed is not one sided. Conservation laws were necessary and an important step towards creating the fishery that exists today. Neither the local poachers nor the law advocating outside conservationists were the winners or losers. A tenuous relationship between state regulation and local protection was molded during these early days. Even Mershon, who initially launched his fly fishing regulation as a method of control firmly believed in the merits of his theory. Time eventually proved him right.

The current study marks only the first portion of the Au Sable conservation history. The scientific research and "Fishing for Fun" programs of the 1950s, the growing awareness of the intricate aquatic ecosystem as part of the entomology growth of knowledge in the 1970s and the decisive battles between local organizations in the no kill debate of the 1980s need to be explored with further research.
Chapter Two

Fly Fishing Revolutions

The time span between the discovery of Michigan’s magnificent grayling and its untimely demise at the hands of human intervention witnessed some of the most drastic changes in the history of fly fishing. Revolutions in tackle technology, the artificial propagation of fish, fish conservation, the popularization of fishing in numerous periodicals, entomology, and the modernization of dry fly fishing changed the sport more so during these sixty some years than the sport had changed in the previous centuries. During this time America continued English fly fishing traditions. Doing so perpetuated class elitism that had characterized the sport across the Atlantic. In keeping with many English traditions America also offered unique innovations, especially in the field of tackle development. Shaped in part by the forces of immigration, urbanization and industrialization, fly fishing evolved with the growth and change of American society. Conservation replaced earlier hunting and fishing trends of destruction. A gradual shift towards fishing recreation displaced the market and professional fishers in both media and economic focus.

Any brief overview of fly fishing history must contain one of the earliest and most popular historical accounts of fly fishing. It comes from Macedonia from about 200 AD. A Roman by the name of Claudius Aelianus wrote *On the Nature of Animals*, which
contained a report of Macedonians fishing the Astraues River for trout with flies.\(^1\)

Although written accounts are few and far between in the time span between Aelianus’s account and the next significant written historical account, *A Treatise of Fishing with an Angle*, historian Andrew Herd firmly believed that fly fishing continued to diffuse following the fall of the Roman Empire and spread across Europe. Herd’s book, *The Fly*, provided an interesting and detailed history of fly fishing throughout history. His account of written records, tackle analysis and an overview of how the techniques of fly fishing have changed over the ages was one of the most authoritative sources recently made available. Herd shared his belief that early fly fishing did not carry the snobbish, elitist connotations that accompany the modern image of fly fishing. Instead, he stated that the sport diffused across Europe with the help of the working class. Herd writes “... fly fishing wasn’t practised by the few sporting nobles who might have had the leisure and ability to put pen to paper; it was the work of illiterate peasants who desperately needed food in order to survive.”\(^2\) Nomadic shepherders traveled throughout Europe, and often camped in the highlands that favored proper pastures but also ideal trout habitats. Trout would have been the most readily available fish, and were most likely a welcomed addition of protein to the herder’s meals. Besides, Herd stated that nobles were far more interested in hunting and falconry. While Herd’s theory was purely speculative, it was ironic that a sport highlighted by exotic, jet setting destinations and expensive rods and reels was initially dependent upon the workers of Europe for its survival.

If Herd’s theory was true, then when did fly fishing take its turn towards a more elitist stature? Herd once again offered a theory, this time he placed fly fishing history in

\(^2\) Ibid., 33.
conjunction within an era of dramatic change in English history. During a series of enclosure movements extending from the sixteenth-century to the late eighteenth-century, England witnessed a transformation in the methods of agricultural production. Agricultural mechanization and intensification brought economic change. The basic economic philosophy of English agriculture was transformed. During these two centuries the nature of English property rights became more and more restrictive. At the start of the sixteenth-century, most small landowners and tenants enjoyed common rights to pasture and waste. These lands allowed for the grazing of sheep, geese, hogs and cattle. From the mid 1600s until the mid 1700s the process of enclosing common land was carried out piecemeal by individual landowners and parishes around the countryside. In the late 1700s Parliament became involved, and thereby sped the restriction of common land rights. Enclosures had a direct impact on fishing and common fishing rights. As fishers were alienated from their traditional fishing grounds they found ways to express their dissatisfaction through trespassing, poaching, violence, and the destruction of fish ponds. Herd writes,

> With public access becoming more and more limited, fisheries began to acquire value and status, because plenty of anglers were prepared to pay for access to productive water that had previously been freely available. Rising rents were bad news for the common man, whose purse would not stretch to paying for good fishing, and who increasingly found himself barred from the best waters by restrictive laws such as the Waltham Black Act of 1722.³

³ Ibid., 120.

In retaliation to the Waltham Black Act, which called for the arrest of anyone blacking his face to conceal his trespassing, anglers and hunters sought revenge through property destruction. Historian, E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, wrote about Jonas Law, a Newbury barber and weaver who was indicted for burning the local fish-house and
destroying the pots of local fishermen who had taken the traditional fishing rights in 1725. This was his response to the Black Act.⁴ Herd’s theory highlighted the class distinctions that arose from the enclosures. Enclosure stratified the types of fishing. Enclosed private streams provided cash payments for the lease of fishing rights. Those who could pay did, and trout fishing shifted away from its more humble origins. Game fish waters were managed to protect the economic benefits of such waters. Waters that did not hold game fish were treated as common land, thereby creating a rough fishing class, who had been locked out of game fish waters. Herd states,

> In Britain, the middle of the century [nineteenth century] coincided with the beginning of the split in the ranks of fishermen which placed the followers of each branch of the sport firmly on either side of a social divide. Salmon and trout (‘game’) fishers became the sporting elite; a marked contrast to previous centuries when the vast majority of salmon were trapped, netted, or speared. The rest angled for non-salmonids, which became collectively known as ‘coarse’ fish.⁵

While Herd and Thompson provided historical commentary entirely within English culture, American fly fishing historian Paul Schullery picked up a similar argument with American fly fishing. American fly fishing has always had a strong tie to British traditions. Tackle, techniques and customs largely came from England, and it was not until the development of superior American fly fishing reels and then rods in the mid to late 1800s that a cyclical pattern of influence developed. America did not have the same enclosure movement as Britain (although Native Americans might well disagree) and most U.S. streams remained open to the public. Still, the status images of the British custom did permeate American fly fishing. Schullery wrote, “Men of tastes were presumably men of education and class; fly fishing has had snob appeal since the 1600s,

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⁵ Herd, 215.
and Americans were quick to latch onto that just as they latched onto multiplying reels, silkworm gut, and tapered leaders.  

American sporting media was written in the tradition of British sporting literature and valued modern advances in tackles, exotic fishing destinations, and the enjoyment of a spring day on the stream in the company of true sporting men. One of the earliest, more prominent sporting journals was the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*. It was founded in Baltimore in 1829 and closed publication in 1844. Fishing was secondary to the equine articles and occasional hunting article. Other periodicals and books appeared in the following years that highlighted fishing. In 1847 George Washington Bethune created an early American edition of Isaac Walton’s *Complete Angler*. Other books, such as Reverend William H. W. Murray’s 1869 *Adventures in the Wilderness, or, Camp Life in the Adirondacks* were part of the broad sporting literature movement that popularized angling destinations. The Adirondack Mountains and Maine’s Rangeley Lakes were two of the most popular topics for early American field journals. In 1873, managing editor Charles Hallock, announced the release of *Forest and Stream*. Based in Chicago, the journal quickly became one of the nation’s most popular sportsmen publications. Hallock announced that the purpose of *Forest and Stream* . . . will be to studiously promote a healthful interest in outdoor recreation, and to cultivate a refined taste for natural objects. We especially desire to make the Forest and Stream the recognized medium of communication between amateurs and professional sportsmen. All of us have something to impart, which, if made available to each other, will in time render us proficient in all those several branches of physical culture which are absolutely essential to our manhood and wellbeing, both as individual men.

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7 Ibid., 26.
8 Ibid., 84.
and as a nation. A practical knowledge of natural history must of necessity underlie all attainments which combine to make a thorough sportsman. It is not sufficient that a man should be able to knock over his birds dexterously right or left, or cast an inimitable fly. He must learn by study and experience the haunts and habits of the game or fish he seek. If he depends altogether upon his dog’s nose, or upon his henchmen, he will some day retire from the field in mortification and disgrace.10

Horses, which had been a more prominent feature of other journals, were only be covered sparingly. Hallcock wrote, that while horses were of the most noble of animals, their coverage was to be left to journals “... much more competent that ourselves...”11 A main focus was to be the preservation of forest, fields and streams.

To the forest, lawn and gardens we assign full place. For the preservation of our rapidly diminishing forests we shall continually do battle. Our great interests are in jeopardy—even our supply of drinking water is threatened, from the depletion of our timber-lands by fire and axe.12

*Forest and Stream* became one of the nation’s leading proponents of game conservation. While coverage extended across North American and around the world, the Midwest was a prominent feature. The streams of Northern Michigan provided early destination pieces and soon gained the attention of anglers from New York, Philadelphia, and other cities that had traditionally looked north to the Adirondacks or Maine. Philadelphian Thaddeus Norris, an already accomplished angler and fishing author (*American Angler’s Book*, 1864), announced his support of *Forest and Stream* in 1874. Norris wrote of the journal, “I hear it spoken everywhere in terms of high commendation, and will do all I can in its interest. I am not a shootist as you know, but, as you do know, most interested in angling and national and State fish culture. ...”13 Norris would go on and write his accounts of fishing Michigan’s Au Sable River for grayling in 1874. By then the Au

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
Sable and the grayling had received popular acclaim as a premier fishing destination that offered the convenience of railroad travel with the remoteness of a Northern Michigan lumber camp.

Advances in fishing tackle accompanied the popular growth of American angling literature. The mid 1800s also saw the emergence of full service fly fishing shops. The earliest shops carried English made rods and reels, and continued in the tradition of British fly fishing. Several shops were located near New York’s financial district, linking the growth of the industry to urban wealth. In 1832, an issue of “Spirit of the Times and Life of New York” listed available shops at 230 Water Street, 52 Fulton Street, and Wall Street. These shops linked urban anglers with a global market designed to meet the needs of fly anglers. Before the late 1800s most fly fishing materials had to be imported from abroad. Bamboo came from the Asia, hooks from England and Norway, rods and reels from England, and feathers for flies came from various exotic destinations. With the help of colonial exploitation, fly fishing supplies were made available to the most discriminating anglers.

The growing popularity of American fly fishing meant that a break from English methods and supplies was inevitable. According to Schullery, American anglers had made a distinctive break from English tradition by 1870. This coincided with the increase in American angling resorts, camps and clubs. American rods, reels, fly patterns and literature were becoming established. In fact, regional variations were beginning to

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14 Schullery, 37.
15 Ibid., 74.
Certain American innovations actually helped to make fly casting easier for the beginning angler.

The nineteenth-century saw a plethora of fly fishing tackle innovations. Most rods arriving from England were solid rods, made of greenheart and other woods. A group of American rod builders, focused on capturing the New York market, perfected the American bamboo rod. In 1844 Samuel Phillippe was one of the first American rod builders to use cane. Phillippe was a gunmaker in Easton, Pennsylvania. He had gained a reputation as an angler, and one of his fishing partners was Norris, the famed fishing journalist. Phillippe established a goal of producing the lightest fly rod possible and set out to experiment with bamboo to accomplish his goal. He experimented with two, three and four strip bamboo rods with ash butts. His four strip rods did not cast true, but in their early stages of development they were found to be superior to the three strip rods the British were creating at the time. Around 1848 he designed his first six strip rods, and sold them to Andrew Clerk & Co. in New York. Clerk supplied Phillippe with his bamboo, and New York provided a willing market. Clerk’s firm soon became the patron of some of the most famous names in American bamboo rod makers. In 1871, Hiram L. Leonard used this six strip bamboo process and broke from Phillippe. Bradford & Anthony, a Boston sporting goods store saw a rod that Leonard made for his own use and commissioned him to build rods. Finding more orders than he could personally fill, Leonard hired Fred Thomas, Thomas Chubb, Ed Payne, Billy Edwards, and Hiram and Loman Hawes. Each learned from Leonard and perfected the art of split bamboo before

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16 Ibid., 54.
17 Herd, 226.
18 Ibid, 227.
19 Schullery, 70.
20 Herd, 228.
moving on and establishing their own reputations as bamboo rod builders.21 One of the keys to Leonard’s precision was a beveling machine of his own design. The beveller cut the bamboo strips, creating more accurate cuts than any other beveller available at the time. Leonard kept the machine in a locked room and he only allowed his nephew Rube Leonard to use it. Leonard’s success was also due to his early adaptation of superior Chinese Tonkin cane over the more popular Indian Calcutta cane. He was also among the first rod builders to mathematically calculate compound tapers.22 In the 1890s, Edward F. Payne, who had worked with Leonard, started his own company. In the 1850s the Orvis company had been founded, and by the late 1800s, it began to produce more affordable fly rods for the American market. Leonard and Payne were the most desired rods. Most of these rods were beyond the means of the average angler. Leonard’s most affordable rod, built of greenheart with a bamboo tip was $25, far beyond the means of the working class angler.23 This further pushed fly fishing beyond the means of the average working class angler.

The development of American bamboo rods coincided with the marketing of silk fly lines. Silk lines made casting easier. The older horse hair lines were difficult to cast, and were better suited to the solid English style rods. Increased contact with Asia made silk more available and silk lines soon replaced horse hair lines. By the 1870s silk lines were preferred for their ability to cast into a breeze.24 By the mid 1800s the majority of silk lines were mass produced by machine. In the 1890s oil dressed lines became the

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21 Schullery, 70.
22 Ibid., 229.
23 Ibid. 65.
24 Ibid., 73.
most popular, and became a favorite among dry fly fishers.\textsuperscript{25} The expense and time needed to care for silk lines went beyond the care that was needed for the traditional horse hair lines. Silk had a tendency to rot out if not properly cared for. Anglers had to dry their lines and oil them on a daily basis to ensure proper casting and to prevent rot from setting in. Historian Andrew Herd describes the proper care required for silk lines at the turn of the century:

Many anglers ended up buying two lines, winding one of them on to the drier each night so that it would be ready the following day. Obsessional line care might have been a necessity, but silk offered so many advantages over the competition that fishermen were prepared to go to enormous trouble. A typical treatment involved boiling raw linseed oil and copal varnish until the mixture singed a feather, cooling it and then soaking the line in it for a week or more. On a fine day the line was stretched out between two posts and all the superfluous dressing removed with a cloth. A week of good weather was needed for the line to dry thoroughly and if it was rained on in the early stages the dressing was likely to wash off, which must have been a bit of a trial for anyone living anywhere in the British Isles. After another fortnight, the line had to be re-dipped in the solution, stretched and re-wiped, and allowed to dry again. And at the completion of all this patient preparation, conventional wisdom said that the line shouldn’t be used for six months, but was instead to be hung up indoors and put out in the open air whenever the weather was favourable. It was truly a time for patience.\textsuperscript{26}

Such measures were certainly beyond the means of the common angler. Whereas the newly developed tapered silk lines were vastly superior in their casting to the older horsehair lines, they were not practical for the working class angler. The lines were costly, beyond the means of many, and they were difficult to care for. Silk lines served as another barrier to common men and women to fly fishing. While the price of silk lines was prohibitive, their casting properties also led to another peculiar American deviation from an English innovation, the American style dry fly.

\textsuperscript{25} Herd, 245.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
The late 1870s have been characterized as the dry fly revolution. The new faster bamboo rods, combined with silk lines had made this revolution possible. American Theodore Gordon has been credited with the dry fly revolution in the U.S. Gordon learned about dry fly fishing from reading the works of Frederick Halford from England. Halford wrote *Floating Flies and How to Dress Them* (1886) and *Dry Fly Fishing in Theory and Practice* (1889). Gordon launched the American style of dry fly fishing through a series of articles. American dry flies had more hackle than the English style. English mayflies had been designed to float upon the calm waters of the English chalk streams. America had few chalk streams, or limestone creeks. American fly fishing mainly took place on freestone streams, where the trout were concentrated in oxygen rich riffles. The extra hackle was necessary to keep the flies afloat. Hence, within this era of modern fly fishing tackle, modern means of fishing were also created.

A 1902 account of grayling and trout fishing that appeared in *Forest and Stream* highlighted the popular and successful flies of the day. Besides the wet flies, such as the No. 10 Beaverkill and a No. 10 Wickham’s Fancy, the article discussed the use of a dry fly. E. Hough, a frequent contributor to the journal from Chicago wrote, “At last my companion produced from his plethoric fly-book an English Mayfly, of the cork-bodied, floating pattern.” This account probably came from the Black River, as it was one of the last streams in the Lower Peninsula to hold grayling. The English dry fly proved to be a very efficient pattern for Northern Michigan brook trout.

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Further improvements in fly fishing went beyond the rods, reels, and flies and were directed to the fish themselves. Dr. Theodatus Garlick became known as the father of American fish culture. His fertilized eggs began to hatch in early 1854 and Garlick quickly released his findings to the Cleveland Academy of Natural Science.\textsuperscript{29}

Eventually, non-native trout such as the rainbow and brown trout could be introduced to eastern brook trout streams. More significant, trout could now be introduced to habitat that had never before supported trout populations. This led to an increased diffusion of trout as a recreational species. Within a few years Garlick’s achievements supported the dispersal of North American trout species far beyond their native ranges. In Michigan brook trout were introduced into depleted grayling streams. Rainbow trout from California made their way east and were stocked in the lower sections of the nation’s best brook trout waters. Eventually European brown trout would cross the Atlantic and find their first North American home in Michigan. The global fly fishing revolution was on.

Besides the technical advances in tackle and fish rearing were the changes in the norms of fly fishing. During the late 1800s and early 1900s fly fishing underwent a transformation similar in significance to Herd’s explanation of the relationship between fly fishing and England’s enclosure movement of the 1700s. In the papers, books and journals that popularized the sport in America, fish conservation emerged as a major concern of the angler’s plying American waters. Trout and grayling were among the most prominent species to grace the pages of American sporting journals. Articles that had once focused on the bounty of a successful hunt or fishing trip began to call for restraint and conservation. Early examples from the 1870s provide numerous accounts of the relative ease at which anglers killed thousands of grayling within a few days. Reports

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
of several thousand pounds of salted grayling were not uncommon. Sportsmen delighted in the bounty of the streams, and saw subsistence fishers and market fishers as the main threats to the fish populations. As time passed the Au Sable grayling populations demonstrated the effects of market and recreational overfishing.

The old overindulgent kills were criticized. Game-hog or fish-hog came into use to describe those who kept more than their share. Creel limits were imposed, and size limits were created to protect juvenile fish. Anglers who abided by the rules, purchased or advocated for licenses were called sports. Sports emphasized skill over efficiency. Spearing, netting and dynamiting were considered the barbaric methods of ignorant natives or locals. Bait, while one step above spearing or netting, was considered inferior to fly fishing and was one of the preferred methods of meat fishers. Meat fishers were those who fished for the table, instead of the aesthetic pleasures of taking fish on a wispy fly rod and light line. Hough’s 1896 description of a trip to a private trout club in Northern Michigan highlighted the sentiments often voiced in popular game journals of the time. Hough was proud to have caught and killed a dozen trout in a day. Assuming that the readers would have thought this too low a number for a stream that was privately owned and stocked, Hough reminded them of the tactic responsible for their capture. He wrote, “But they were trout, honorable trout, killed on a fly in a stream which permitted a long cast and a chance to play a fish.”

Of course I hear a great deal of parties going out and catching a thousand trout and all that sort of thing, but that is not trout fishing. It is not sport to grub trout out with a worm or a piece of fin or a grasshopper, nothing to compare with such angling as at the Fontinalis. To any notion there is no sport with the gun which surpasses quail shooting over good dogs, and no

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sport with the rod like that of fishing for trout upon a good stream and with the fly. Rare indeed is the opportunity for the later.31

Fly fishing was viewed as the sporting method most worthy of the noble trout’s capture. Many private clubs demanded their members to adhere to the sporting guidelines that had been established in the columns of armchair anglers. During this time period fly fishing became equated with fish conservation. The theory was that fly caught fish rarely swallowed the hook as bait caught fish did. Fly caught fish, therefore, could be released back into the stream without any apparent damage. Trout clubs around the country required fly fishing in their waters, and in 1907 William Mershon announced in *Forest and Stream* that Michigan had adopted a similar rule for the North Branch of the Au Sable. The law was designed to protect trout from the increased fishing pressure of trout tourists. Although controversial, this law laid the foundation for fish conservation in Michigan. A legacy of cold water resource protection was founded on the Au Sable that influenced conservation within Michigan and eventually around the country. Other states began scientific studies comparing fly fishing to bait fishing in the 1930s. Michigan started its own in the 1950s under the direction of University of Michigan’s Sport Fishing Institute.

Why then were the developments of the late 1800s part of a revolutionary change? Fly fishing was part of the larger development of American society. The late 1800s marked an age of rapid industrial development, immigration, urbanization and a global economy increasingly linked by colonialism and new industrial growth. The new industrial development linked America to a global market. Exotic features decorated fancy salmon flies and trout streamers. Bamboo from China created lighter, faster, and

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31 Ibid.
more powerful rods than the traditional solid wood rods. Bamboo rods combined with silk lines allowed easier casting, which led to refinements in casting. Scientific work with artificial trout propagation spread fish far beyond their native waters. German and Scottish brown trout arrived in America. Eastern brook trout traveled west and Californian rainbow trout came east. The British took rainbows, brook trout, and brown trout to waters naturally devoid of trout in New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa. Fly fishing and trout were part of the new industrial world. The event most symbolic with industrial efficiency, urban development and the wonders of the world was the great Chicago Exposition. In 1893 Chicago opened its doors to the world as millions of visitors admired the latest innovations while wandering Frederick Law Olmsted’s gardens and marveling at architect Daniel Burnham’s White City. The Au Sable was linked to this celebration of American might. Foods of all sorts were gathered to feed the 27 million who entered the gates. Over 5,000 live Au Sable brook trout were sent to the fair by a man by the name of Knight near Grayling. Each fish brought him 10 cents and they were caught using a fly. Knight reported that the stream had so many brook trout that he fished with five flies on his leader. He ignored single hooked fish and only bothered to bring in doubles and triples.32

In addition to fresh Northern Michigan trout, the latest in bamboo technology was demonstrated to the public. The Romanesque-style Angler’s Pavilion highlighted the newest trends in American fly fishing. The A. G. Spalding & Bros. company brought thirty Kosmic bamboo fly rods out for the fly rod competition. The Kosmic rod was the creation of former Leonard rod makers, Fred Thomas, Eustis Edwards, and Loman Hawes. The new group broke from Leonard, created the Kosmic rod, joined in a

32 Fred Irland, “Letter 1-No Title,” Forest and Stream, November 1920, 600.
partnership with Spalding and gained national prominence with their success in Chicago.\textsuperscript{33} The Committee of Awards at the Exposition stated

The action of the various rods is superb, showing an equal and uniform bend with great elasticity and resiliency whether the rod be stiffish as in the bait rod, or very flexible as in the fly rods, and the poise and balance is good in all. Each rod is made to maintain and sustain all the emergencies in the casting of a fly or bait, or of playing a fish after being hooked.\textsuperscript{34}

The Kosmic rod beat out jewel encrusted Leonard rods. Anglers could purchase one of the $500.00 gold-mounted Kosmics.\textsuperscript{35} In addition to the latest tackle developments displays of fish and artificial propagation were there for the viewing. The exposition demonstrated that fly fishing was also part of the cutting edge of technical innovation and cultural relaxation despite its long history.

This was a time period of rapid change and growth. America rejoiced at its economic power. With growth came the pains of development. Labor strikes, urban unrest, crime, pollution, and the closing of open space accompanied American industrial development. The American bison faced extinction, along with the passenger pigeon and the Michigan grayling. The demands of industrial and urban growth, mixed with growing leisure time among an expanding middle class exacted a toll on American trout streams. Railroads linked Eastern anglers to Michigan’s streams in a matter of a few days’ travel. Large scale production of fishing tackle and the growth of mail order catalogs brought anglers the latest tools of fishing efficiency. The industrial age required American anglers to make an important decision. How were fish to be treated? Were they a food source? Grayling, trout, salmon, and bass, the most prominent of early


\textsuperscript{34} "Advertisement 8-No Title," \textit{Forest and Stream}, 18 August 1894, V.

\textsuperscript{35} “Article 8-No Title,” \textit{Forest and Stream}, 7 April 1894, 296.
American freshwater game fish had historical roots in the American market. Fish filled stomachs and provided income for those who harvested them. The growing middle class wanted to pursue these species as game. Matching fine crafted bamboo rods, hand tied flies, and imported silk lines against the best that nature had to offer. Streams across America could not sustain both. Sportsmen identified themselves as the protectors of game fish. They valued their aesthetic qualities over nutrition and market value. In terms of economics, the tide was turning. Sport fishers brought more money to the local economy than did market fishers. Areas, such as Grayling, Michigan became economic fish epicenters. Their local economies became dependent upon revenue generated from sport fishing. A period of economic transition took place, as local economies slowly switched from resource extraction, to resource protection.

Between the discovery of Michigan grayling and their extinction American fly fishing underwent tremendous change. Steeped in British tradition, Americans began to create their own style and practices of fly fishing. American rods and reels became some of the best in the world. The scientific work with game fish allowed for the diffusion of game fish throughout the U.S. As America both rejoiced and struggled with its transforming society, so too did American fly fishers. The transition from game and fish hogs brought a new tradition of fish and game conservation that placed anglers as the most willing to challenge the degradation of their resource. Coupled with these dramatic developments was the sport’s persistent movement towards economic stratification. By its very nature of aligning with conservation, the sport left many of its working class roots behind. Those who made a living from the streams were threats to the growing strength of the American recreational fishing industry.
Grayling, Michigan highlighted the national transformations in recreational fishing and fish conservation. The original bounty of the river seemed inexhaustible. The game and fish hogs delighted in their conquests on the river. Within a few years, however, the river withered to the pressures of industry and progress. The grayling’s extinction prompted recreational anglers into action. Their actions preserved the area’s recreational fishery and started a legacy of coldwater conservation that would eventually diffuse across the country.
Crawford County has a history centered on the natural environment. The forests and streams have always provided an ecological economy for the community. Logging

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focused on the streams, which were used to transport the logs downstream. Eventually permanent settlements established themselves along the important logging centers. Towns such as Grayling on the mainstream of the Au Sable and Lovells on the North Branch were linked to the outside world by rail roads. Early logging was not sustainable. Land was cut over, and the companies moved on. Smaller logging operations came into to harvest the remaining timber. The growing populations stayed, working for more permanent industries. These secondary logging companies focused on wooden boxes and floor boards. The secondary logging industry did not depend on the giant white pines that had once dominated the area. They could focus on a more sustainable logging program. The secondary logging barons became leading citizens.

Men such as Rasmus Hanson and T. E. Douglas provided jobs, guided local government, and donated land and money back to the community. They also helped to shape a legacy of conservation that grew out of their logging experience. These loggers followed the influence of Gifford Pinchot and called for sustainable logging practices. Sustainable logging would better support their business practices. Grayling supported semi-permanent mills where pines were turned into floor boards and then shipped south to America’s growing cities. The more permanent nature of their logging business influenced a conservation mindset that extended beyond the forest and into the local streams. Fishing and logging were linked and each promoted a culture of conservation among those who realized the economic benefits of sustainability. The disappearance of the native grayling coincided with the destruction of the area’s large pines. Forest conservation came too late to Grayling to save the magnificent pines, but it was believed that the fish could be saved.
In 1874 six families gathered in the Crawford railroad depot to discuss the newest scientific discovery. A group of experts in Washington D.C. had recently identified the strange looking trout that inhabited the local waters. The fish was silver in color, with a translucent, spotted, rainbow colored dorsal fin. In its appearance the fish did not resemble any other American fish the scientific community had known. Its manners and behaviors resembled the speckled trout, or brook trout of the East and North. Eating insects and taking flies, the fish acted like a trout. Inhabiting the cool, clear waters of the Au Sable River, the fish had grabbed the attention of anglers. At first local lumbermen and Native Americans had speared the fish in the clear water. Then grayling became part of the export fish market. The fish were sold to Bay City, Detroit and Chicago. In the early 1870s, locals had begun to guide anglers from regional cities like Saginaw and Detroit. These anglers used long, willowy rods, made from fine bamboo. Their lines were of silk, far beyond the means of many local anglers. These sport anglers delighted in casting two or three flies into the pools of fish. Then with shouts of joy, they wrestled the fish to their creels, where they were deposited after a fatal blow to the head. Or, the fish were stuffed into live wells where they managed to stay alive until so many fish were crammed inside that they suffocated to death. These outside anglers caught more than they needed. Many salted the fish by the hundreds and carted them off. Some sold the fish to far off markets in Detroit or Chicago. Many, however, gave the fish away. Some even left the fish to rot in the sand along the banks. In any event, the fishermen were happy to trade their cash for a chance to spend the week engaged in their piscatorial passion. Like the towering standing white pine, the fish brought people, money, and growth to the area. Some locals, such as river guide Rube Babbitt, M. S. Hartwick the
hotel owner, Eaton William the town’s only restaurant owner and the proprietor of the
town general store realized that this silvery fish meant money in the bank. Free time and
urban wealth brought adventure seeking anglers to Michigan’s frontier. To honor the
local species, and in a bid to capitalize on the fish’s fame, a meeting was held to decide a
new name for Crawford. It was decided that the town would be renamed after the newly
discovered fish, the grayling.

Common to Europe and the Arctic, the highlands of Michigan did indeed have a
unique species for the Midwest. The Michigan trout, or more properly, the Michigan
grayling (Thymallus tricolor) would play a significant role in Grayling’s history.
Situated in the central highlands of the Lower Peninsula, Grayling was located between
two significant rivers. Just a few miles to the west flowed the upper reaches of the
Manistee River. The Manistee was a large river that drained a significant portion of
western Michigan as it wound down to Lake Michigan. Running right though the town
of Grayling was the Au Sable River. Flowing east, it was the largest rivers to feed Lake
Huron in the Lower Peninsula. Only a few miles separated the two watersheds. The
highlands of Michigan were made up of sandy, loamy soils that slowly percolated cool,
clear freshwater that fed the two freshwater lakes that bordered much of the Lower
Peninsula. A fast moving summer storm, the type that could be seen and heard for miles
in the open vistas of Northern Michigan, deposited its condensed water vapor into the
two lake systems in the matter of minutes. The rain waters were soaked up by the forests.
The loamy soils cooled the water and slowly released it to the rivers. Lacking the rugged,
granite landscape of the continental divide, the Michigan highlands instead had towering
white pines, a rolling topography, swampy bottomlands and of course, long placid
streams. Their surfaces were calm, and failed to reveal the speed at which their waters rushed to the lakes. Stream beds of sand, pebbles and gravel contributed to their powerfully smooth flow. Instead of boulders and rocks, sweeping cedar trees broke the streams’ surface, providing ideal cover for the grayling.

The streams provided the necessary transportation for the lumber industry. Rivers provided traditional transportation over both short and long distances. The white pine carried the nickname cork pine, for the fact that it floated higher in water than other lumber, making it an ideal material for water transportation. Each year the lumbermen cut and stacked lumber during the winter, waiting for the spring log drives down the local rivers. At first the Manistee was the main river for log transport. Hanson and others sent the logs down towards Lake Huron where they were processed at mills in Manistee, Michigan. As development grew so did the number of mills. Grayling itself had several mills, with special emphasis on flooring. Logs were floated down tributaries such as the North Branch of the Au Sable to rail lines for transport to Grayling mills.

Logging dictated the settlement pattern of the high plains of Northern Michigan. Crawford County was characterized by pine barrens. The dry sand loamy soil provided excellent habitat for the pines and some mixed hardwoods. The highest praised pines were the white pines (*Pinus strobus*). White pines, or cork pines were perfectly suited for the early river lumbering that initially took place. The Norway pine or red pine (*Pinus resinosa*) followed the white pine in lumbering importance. Brush and jack pines (*Pinus banksiana*) succeeded in lesser quality soils, the outwash plains left by retreating glaciers. The swamps and riverbanks held forests of cedar, tamarack and spruce.¹

Settlement patterns followed the lumbering that was practiced at the time. Early white and red pine traditionally used river transportation. Small outposts were established along the Au Sable and the logs were floated down stream to Oscoda. With the dispersal of railroads, more permanent settlements were established. Railroad lumbering brought settlement into the forest. Semi portable mills were positioned and relocated near the greatest concentration of lumbering. Semi permanent railroads were established and the mills went to work. It was more profitable to mill the lumber in the woods than to transport the unfinished lumber. Slowly businesses and farms grew up around the mill sites. The permanence of the mill dictated the permanence of the small settlement.²

Growth in lumbering in the high plains of Michigan brought increased settlement. Settlement permanently changed the natural environment. Early settlement peaked around 1920 when lumbering moved after it had exhausted much of the white and red pines as well as the hardwoods. This left jack pines and other less valuable stands behind. The post lumbered forests were forever changed. Only remnants of the large white and red pines could be found in special preserves, such as Hatwick Pines. The slash and dash of the early lumbering economy promoted rapid and permanent ecological change, the sort that has accompanied human’s influence on nature throughout time. No attempt was made to rejuvenate the forest and provide a future supply of harvestable lumber. It was more economical for the lumber companies to continue on to find new supplies in the Upper Peninsula or to look west. The giant pines were gone, and with their disappearance the forest ecology changed. Fires were a regular part of any forest’s life,

but the post logging landscape provided rich fuel in the form of debris. Vandals, berry pickers, farm clearing operations, fires set by fishermen and sparks from railroads all supplied the necessary ignition to set the cut over land ablaze.³ The cutover scorched landscape was a composite of fire dependent trees such as jack pine, clear cut barrens and small scrub oaks and other hardwoods. The waves of fire helped diffuse the jack pine and burned up the smaller seed trees that had sprung up in the wake of lumbering. Aspen and oak trees also spread as a result of human interaction.⁴

Like the streams that had carried loads of lumber, with their bottoms scoured by yearly log drives and their waters stalled by dams, the forest were forever changed by the few decades of intense logging that swept through Crawford County. Fires cleared the landscape and changed the dichotomy of the forest, eliminating the old giants and putting aspens and jack pines in their place. Logging runs had cleared the river bottoms of grayling redds and choked the fish out of their traditional holes. Brook trout, like the aspens and oak, displaced the former species, insuring that the environment would never be the same again.

The landscape was all but worthless following logging. Many lumber companies left. Owners neglected their state tax payments and lands once again went up for sale. A push for farming was made in Crawford County at the turn of the century. It was assumed that soils that had produced such magnificent trees could naturally support a robust farming community. Overlooking the relatively short growing season, which only averaged between 70 and 90 frost free growing days, the land was planned for agriculture. Farming had accompanied logging into the forest. Small scale farming

³ Whitney, 677.
⁴ Ibid.
supplemented the logging camp and mill. Agricultural success was dependent upon the mill. When the mill closed and moved it took the railroad with it. Farmers could not find markets to support their meager harvests. There was an abundance of land available in the post lumbering era. The land was cheap and bountiful and the state worked hard to bring farmers into the area. The state did not understand the economic relationship between logging and farmers. Railroads and the state cooperated to try and promote long term settlement. In the summer of 1882 the State Land Office reported between 20,000 and 25,000 acres of land sold per month. Doubt existed even at that time about the sustainability of a farming economy as it was realized that the climate, soil and lack of markets worked against the independent farmer. Land was consolidated in larger holdings and villages began to disappear. Only towns located on permanent railroad lines survived. Smaller towns such as Lovells survived served by a railway line and a permanent mill. Grayling, the Crawford County seat had several mills and the main railway running north and south.

Recreation sprang up with the slow decline of lumbering and the absence of successful agriculture. With cheap land for sale, urbanites from Saginaw, Detroit, and Toledo began purchasing land and building cabins. Some, such as William B. Mershon, were lumbermen and well acquainted with the area. Others, such as the Stranahan family were part of the new automobile empire that emerged at the turn of the century. New automotive industry leaders such as Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, John Horace Dodge, and George Mason all found their way to the branches of the Au Sable and made the area their home in one way or another. A recreational industry was created. Rube Babbitt Sr.

5 Davis, 669.
was one of the first guides in the area, and took sporting men on grayling trips on the Au Sable and Manistee. A man by the name of Erastus Purchase owned a farm and guided on the South Branch of the Au Sable. He would eventually be employed by out of town anglers as a county game warden, hired to insure that locals and outsiders adhered to state game and fish conservation laws. T. E. Douglas of Lovells started a successful fishing lodge on the North Branch of the Au Sable. He took his lumber wealth and instead of moving on to virgin forests, found economic wealth in a renewable fishery supported by the planting of brook trout. In 1915 guests could pay dues of $25 per year to join his fishing club. Meals were $3 per day at the North Branch Outing Club. The guest register from June 10, 1917 listed Henry Ford, Edsel B. Ford, Mr. and Mrs. T. N. Hanson, Miss Virginia Hanson and guide Rube Babbitt as guests.

Private fishing clubs were also created. The oldest club on the Au Sable was the Recreation Fishing Club which started in 1898. Situated a mile upstream from Wakely Bridge, the site held a former loggers house. Frank Calkins of Gaylord, Michigan purchased the property from the state for the sum of $48.49, tax due for the years 1889 to 1893. Membership was limited to 12 and required a fee of $30. Officers and bylaws were created. In 1912 the property changed hands and eventually became known as the Rainbow Club. Cabins were built for the members and guidelines were created to regulate their sale and rental. The primary focus of the club was for fishing, and women were not allowed at the clubhouse until 1925. The laws were then amended to allow families to use the facility between August 1 to May 1. Trout season began on May 1. Families were not permitted to use the club during the season. These club rules were in

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8 Crawford County Avalanche (Grayling), 6 February 1997.
line with the rules that other private trout fishing clubs established around the country at this time. No doubt, the many trout clubs that were created on this famous trout stream at a time of a real estate glut were the same.

Private clubs, estates, and cabins all needed someone to care for them. Caretakers and cooks were hired from the local population. Often they were families who ran a small farm or worked in one of the mills. Farmers were the top choice since they could provide fresh eggs and milk. The Au Sable Trout and Game Club was located on the North Branch of the Au Sable River. In May of 1920 the private club arranged to hire a new caretaker. Robert Papenfus was hired. His pay was to be $1 per meal, and $100 per month during the six months of the fishing season. He was to be paid $65 in the winter months, or he could use the club’s connections and go to Detroit for work. Henry Ford promised him a job in one of his factories, or Mr. Papenfus could work in the Liberty Starter Company. William J. Hartwig, the treasurer of the club, owned the Liberty Starter Company in Detroit. The club directors arranged for the purchase of a Ford car for his use. Guests could arrange to use the car on their visits and be charged a determined amount per mile of use.⁹

Guides were needed to cater to the trout tourist and two families became synonymous with Au Sable angling. The Babbitt’s and Stephan’s gained fame for their knowledge of the local waters. Both families first came to the area as part of the expanding railroad service in the 1870s. Reuben Babbitt Sr. arrived in Grayling around 1875 with the Michigan Central Railroad survey. Around 1875 he started guiding fishermen down the river in search of grayling. His sons continued in his tradition and Rube Babbitt Jr. became a local legend. An 1879 *Scribner’s Monthly* article referred to... ⁹ William J. Hartwig to Henry Ford. 20 May 1920. Fly Fishing Museum. Lovells, Michigan.
Babbitt as the leading guide in the area. At that time the outdoors sporting journalist, Thaddeus Norris fished in Babbitt’s camp on the Manistee, near Grayling. The camp was a base for a commercial fishery that sent harvested grayling to Bay City, Michigan. Norris and his party caught over 500 pounds of fish and gave Babbitt three quarters of the fish.10 He guided for several years on the river and then around 1910 became a game warden. The Babbitt family continued to guide and serve as game wardens for several generations. The Stephan family arrived with Peter William Stephan who migrated from France in 1878. He worked as a master mechanic for the Michigan Central Railroad. He and his family of six boys and three girls settled downstream of Grayling on the river. His sons went on to become guides and claimed an important part of the local history.11 A prominent bridge crossing, Stephan Bridge is a still a favorite place for fishermen and the home to a modern fly fishing lodge.

Not all who found work with the recreational industry were men. For more than half a century Mrs. John Knecht, formally Mrs. John Stephan, provided food and care for the hunters and fishers that arrived at her recreational resort near Stephan Bridge. Her resort, Edgewater on the AuSable was along the banks of the river near the bridge that carried her late husband’s name. Born in 1877 in Washtenaw County she remembered the large white pine stumps that surrounded her home near Grayling. While her husband worked at a state owned hatchery downstream from their home near McGill’s Creek she provided bedding and food for visitors. Fishermen from the lower portion of Michigan as well as New York and Pennsylvania arrived in Grayling via the Michigan Central

Railroad. A horse and cart would pick them up and make the trip to the camp. Others arrived by boat and either used the camps as a dry overnight resting point or made it their base for an extended stay. Knecht fished and recalled putting her small children in a boat which she then pulled along with her as she fished in order to keep an eye on them. Women played an important role of the early recreational industry of the river, even if some of the private clubs barred their entrance. They had worked in the lumber camps to provide food for the lumbermen working in the woods. It could not have been an easy life to live in the woods, or along the river, cooking and caring for one’s own family as well as the fishermen and hunters.

Another industry that made the transformation from lumber to fishing was Au Sable River boat building. These boats have remained relatively unchanged over the century and a half of their existence. The length of the boats ranged from 16 feet to near 20 feet. At only a few feet wide they were long and narrow. With a low freeboard and flat bottom they were the perfect fishing boat for the placid waters of the Au Sable. Fly fishing by its nature required some distance between one fishermen and the next for danger of embedding a hook in a fishing partner’s eye. The length of these boats allowed the fishermen to distance themselves apart and still be able to fish while traveling down the river. The guide sat in the back of the boat and used a pole to move the boat through the water. The boat could be poled upstream against the current, or the pole could be used to stop the boat in its drift or to position it for the best cast. Chains were and are still often dragged behind the boat to slow the boat’s drift downstream. This slowed the drift of the boat and allowed the fly fishers to cover the maximum amount of water and

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repeatedly cast over a feeding fish if necessary. Secured fish wells were also constructed and designed to keep the fish alive once captured.

The traditional building materials were pine and cedar, both once naturally abundant in the area. The actual origin of the boats is somewhat of a mystery. Boats along these general design specifications no doubt have existed around the world throughout history. Lumbermen used similar boats to day work on the river. Early fishing boat builders included Chief David Shoppenagon, Arthur Wakely, Rueben Babbitt Sr., Rueben Babbitt Jr., Earl Madsen, Jay Stephan and Ralph Redhead. One of Wakely’s boats is on display at the Crawford County Museum and Jay Stephan who built 38 boats had one on display at the University of Michigan for a time. Three names surround the origins of the particular Au Sable design. The Crawford County Museum states that Wakely was the first to design and build the boat. An article in the *Avalanche*, the local newspaper, stated that Edward Auger may have been the first. He was reported to have built a 16 foot boat in the 1890s. Some dispute that Rueben Babbitt Sr. first created the boat in the 1870s. As a guide and fishermen Babbitt certainly would have had the need for such a boat, but Auger was a carpenter, so perhaps he had the necessary skills. The first known media report on the boats appeared in Norris’s 1879 *Scribners* article. He described a two week, 150 mile float down the Manistee, beginning at Babbitt’s camp using his Au Sable boats. Norris provided a thorough description of the boat:

The boat used in my first trip is worth description. It was built of white pine; bottom 1 inch thick; sides 3/8; 16 feet long; 2.10 wide on top, 2.4 at bottom, and with a sheer of three inches on each side. The bottom was nearly level for eight feet in the center, with a sheer of five inches to the bow and seven inches to stern. The live-box was six feet from bow, extending back two feet. The sides were nailed to the bottom. Its weight
was eighty pounds, and it carried two men—the angler and the pusher—with 200 pounds of luggage. With two coats of paint it cost about fifteen dollars. The angler sits on the moveable cover of the live-box, which is water tight from the other portions of the boat, and has holes bored in sides and bottom to admit of circulation of the water to keep the fish alive, and as he captures his fish he slips them into holes on the right and left sides.\footnote{Thaddeus Norris, 23.}

In terms of the boat’s origins, a likely possibility was that the modern Au Sable boat evolved during the 1870s and 1880s as both lumbermen and fishermen plied the waters of the Au Sable. Transportation was needed by both and it is hard to pinpoint the exact origin of creation. Guides to this day still use the traditional boat design, substituting the traditional white pine for marine grade plywood. Lacking the nostalgic charm of a horse and wagon, today’s boats are transported overland by Ford F-150s and Toyota FourRunners. The silence of an early Au Sable morning is often shattered by the crashing sound of metal as guides trailer their modern boats down washboard roads. Nevertheless, once the boats are in the water a distinctly continuous tradition of floating the Au Sable continues.

In addition to the boat builders, warden, guides, and housekeepers were the fly tiers, rod builders, and numerous other unnamed beneficiaries of the developing river recreational economy. Fishing provided a renewable and sustainable, extractive resource. What began in conjunction to the lumbering of the forest grew and developed long after the circular saws of Grayling stopped devouring wood. Logging and the mills consumed resources that took generations to renew. Following a practice of cut, log, mill and move, the state and private enterprise failed to plant the seeds for a renewable lumber industry. Fishing initially suffered a similar fate. The grayling recreational fishing rush burned through an entire fishery in about ten years. The first articles in national magazines
proclaimed and advertised the wonder of the Michigan trout, the grayling. By the mid 1890s the grayling were all but gone, and the lumber was following right behind. As the jack pines and aspens sprung up in the absence of the white and red pines, brook trout, rainbow and brown trout displaced the grayling. These new inhabitants thrived where the grayling had once dominated. In the grayling’s place these fish provided a sustainable fishery, in part due to natural stream reproduction, but largely due to artificial propagation. The recreational industry that was born in the pursuit of grayling in the shadow of the lumber industry continued and provided economic growth in the post lumber economy. With the lumber gone there was little else to sustain the local economy. The site and situation of towns such as Grayling and Lovells promoted their existence despite declining population trends. Serviced by railroad and in close proximity to rebounding fishing rivers, these towns hung on and refocused their industries from lumber to fish.

Conservation has been an important part of Crawford County’s history. A link between early deforestation and the remarkable conservation legacy that Grayling became known for can in part be explained by the recreational economy and lumber barons who were as interested in fly fishing as they were in lumber profits.

As the recreation economy grew conservation became a necessity, the only foreseeable method of gainful employment as fewer and fewer pines remained standing. The process was simple. Out of town guests arrived at the depot looking for fish, food and recreation. Provisions had to be provided, along with a room, a guide, flies, rods, a boat, tents, and local transportation. As long as the fish were there the money kept coming. The demise of the native grayling was unfortunate, but not the end of the game.
First brook trout took the grayling’s place, providing adequate sport and solace for traveling anglers eager to catch game fish in the truest sense of sport fishing. Rainbow and brown trout later added to the mix and the diversity of stream dwelling game fish. Initial conservation came in the form of privatization. Lodges, clubs and cabins locked up acres of stream access and prevented overland access to favorite holes and riffles. Private property owners took a keen interest in their land and replanted and rejuvenated it. The stream also held their attention. The health of the fishery was important. What point was there in owning property and making the annual trip up North if the fish were not thriving? Stream rehabilitation would eventually come, but the early focus was on the trout themselves. Artificial trout propagation had been perfected and the state actively stocked all streams. Realizing the important tax base that recreation provided, Michigan policy makers did all they could to make sure that traveling anglers would arrive at streams full of feisty trout. Local property owners invested in a joint venture with the state in a hatchery on the river in 1916. Guides and lodge owners alike supported hatchery operations. Guides were responsible for catching breeding fish from the Au Sable for the hatcheries. Henry Stephan reported that he had a contract with the federal hatchery at Northville. In 1896 he was hired to catch 5,000 trout at 10 cents each. In the month of June alone he caught 3,800 before a log drive plugged up the river for two miles above and two miles below.\(^\text{14}\)

In 1874 grayling and Grayling, Michigan were put on the map, beginning a legacy of outdoor recreation and conservation that would long outlast the log drives. A community was built around the sustainable resource the river provided. From canoeing to fishing the river kept bringing revenue to this small community along the Central

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 78.
Michigan Railroad. Lumber barons and camp cooks worked together to make sure that this resource was protected. Hatcheries kept the streams full and game wardens enforced state laws. Local judges ruled game violation cases and often balanced the local traditions against state mandates. A delicate balancing act took place between outside conservation from the politically connected, economically powerful and the local guide who spent most of his days on the water or in the woods. A unique legacy of cooperation, not without some confrontation, developed in Grayling. Grayling, searched for a conservation equilibrium, balancing home rule and peripheral intervention with an economic eye on the sustainability of a recreational fishery that could fill the void the extinct grayling left behind.
Chapter Four

*Thymallus tricolor*

Grayling, Michigan became one of the favorite destinations of traveling fly fishers. The cool waters of the Au Sable became famous for its prolific sport fish population. Grayling were pulled from the river by the barrel to satisfy commercial markets and anglers’ lust. Despite the apparent abundance of the fish in the early 1870s it was almost extinct by the 1890s. A perfect storm of environmental degradation swept through the Au Sable system as the result of human actions. Over fishing, both commercial and recreational, pushed the fish beyond its ability to naturally reproduce. The devastative impact of logging on the river and the riparian ecosystem jeopardized grayling spawning beds and traditional stream structure. The final blow came in the form of newly planted brook trout, rainbow trout and brown trout. These new interlopers outcompeted the grayling by seizing the best feeding lanes and choicest spawning sites. Trout fed on the grayling fry, making natural reproduction all the more difficult during these stressful times. The grayling extinction prompted recreational anglers towards conservation. It took the loss of one of the public’s favorite game fish species to awaken it to the threats man imposed on nature. Conservation was not solely altruistic. The town’s economy was tied to the fish. A successful fishery meant a successful, and sustainable economy in an area known for a primary economy. The grayling’s silvery sheen meant greenbacks in the pockets and accounts of Grayling’s current and future
populations. Unfortunately, the town’s namesake could not sustain the river economy that it helped to create.

Hanging over the door of the old Grayling Fish Hatchery was once a sizable dorsal finned fish for which the town was named and through which the stream gained its national notoriety. This particular grayling, or *Thymallus tricolor*, may have been the last grayling to be caught in the entire watershed of the Au Sable. In the 1930s a young angler pushed against the current as he made his way upstream. It was amazing how strong the current of the Au Sable ran. As he looked down from the bank the river appeared an undisturbed flow, as calm as a lake, with the slightest hint of movement and power. The smooth surface flowed with its micro currents that grabbed and dragged the fly line, spoiling a drag-free drift, failed to reveal the power of the stream. Only once in its waters did the angler recall the strength of the water as it pushed from the highlands of mid-Michigan on its winding course to the lake. Proper stream etiquette dictated upstream fishing, so the upstream wade continued. Just southeast of the old iron bridge, Bob Seager saw a fish rise. It was a sizeable fish, and pushed the water to the side as it took the surface flies. Smaller fish hit the surface with gusto and bravado. Slashing at their prey, they are easy to see by both angler and osprey. Larger fish conserved their energy as they sipped flightless insects caught in the surface film as they struggle to take to the air. Seeing the disturbance, Seager knew that he had to catch that fish. As his bamboo rod flexed and carried his fly to the target he measured out silk fly line in his hand so as to have enough of his tippet fall upstream of the fish. Doing so would provide a few feet of perfect drift down to the fish. Any drag on the part of the fly line and the many surface currents between Bob and his fish would pull the fly through the water,
creating a small wake, and alerting the fish that something was quite unnatural with this particular fly. One moment his fly was riding the flow of the river, and the next it was in the soft flesh of the fish’s mouth. Seeing his fly go under, Seager lifted his rod and felt the weight of the fish.

It was all over the river. It jumped 10 or 15 times. I landed it and did not know what it was, cause I hadn’t been fishing that long, and I not knowing what it was . . . I was a little ignorant and I put it in my creel. . . . I took it back into camp and Fred Allen, one of the old timers, said ‘Do you know what you got? It is a Grayling and it is a no no.’

The fish had already died, so there was little to be done with it. Seager and Allen decided to take it into Grayling. Seager did not know what ever became of the fish. According to local lore, it hung over the entrance to the hatchery, marking the historic legacy of this vibrantly colored coldwater fish to the throngs of children and their parents as they dumped bags of fish food into the cement spillways for the piranha-like brook trout, brown trout and rainbow trout that had never explored the great river beyond the confines of their cement lined tanks.

Grayling had a long environmental history in Michigan. Approximately 10,000 years ago during an ice age that greatly changed the home water habitat of the world’s fish populations, the fluvial river adapted grayling of Montana followed the receding glacial waters and found a new home in the till of Michigan. Eventually a permanent ecosystem to the grayling’s liking was found in a few select streams in both the Upper Peninsula and the Lower Peninsula. The Otter River which drained from the Upper Peninsula into Lake Superior, was one documented stream in the Upper Peninsula to have once hosted a wild and sustainable population of grayling. Numerous Lower Peninsula

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streams held the fish. Native grayling populations were found in tributaries to both Lake Huron and Lake Michigan.\(^2\) The most well known rivers included the Hersey, Au Sable, Manistee, Pere Marquette, Black and the Muskegon. These rivers, both large and small, were mostly spring fed and maintained a relatively stable temperature throughout the year. The aquifers moderated the temperatures during the summer heat and the cold of winter. Ideal water temperatures for both grayling and trout ranged between 55 and 65 degrees Fahrenheit. The boggy, loaming soils of the central Michigan highlands filtered the rain and snow runoff, slowing feeding the streams. For the most part, the streams ran clear except for the slight tannic tint provided by the decay of leaves in the bogs and swamps that fed the streams with cool water. Extreme changes in stream volume were relatively rare and only noticeable during a drought or a heavy snow melt or rainfall. Sand and gravel dominated the stream bottoms, providing excellent habitat for the streams’ biomass. Stream vegetation provided the base for the vertebrates and invertebrates that provided grayling and trout with rich supplies of protein. Grayling were most interested in the aquatic insects, such as the caddis and mayflies that provided the prolific hatches the Au Sable system had become famous for. Aquatic flies hatched from the river throughout the year. Although the Au Sable and similar streams provided an endless array of stream minnows, daces, sculpins, crayfish, and small freshwater fish known as scuds, the insects themselves provided the grayling with their most important source of protein. Lacking teeth of any significance, the grayling’s diet consisted of insects, and the diversity of the northern Michigan streams provided the year round food supply that was important for the grayling’s success.

The rich biomass, steady stream flows and moderate temperatures helped to explain the natural success of the grayling. Another important consideration was the lack of trout in these streams. For the most part, the streams of the northern portion of the Lower Peninsula, except those near Traverse Bay, held no trout. While no fish is celebrated more in the contemporary history of Michigan fly fishing, the brook trout was not native to the Au Sable system. With the exception of lake trout, northern pike, walleye, and muskie in the lower stretches, the grayling was at the top of the food chain. The upper headwaters that provided ideal grayling habitat did not have any other fish of significance to compete with grayling for food, shelter or spawning sites. The grayling was largely undisturbed until the post Civil War period.

Although the Michigan grayling was treated as a novelty, the fish had long been a part of the angling tradition of England. There they were found in most streams alongside brown trout. While settlers of New England, Long Island, and the Appalachians became acquainted with the brook trout, they did not find any grayling populations. One of the first recorded accounts of the European discovery of grayling in North America came in 1820 as reported in Dr. Edward Hamilton’s book, *Recollections of Fly Fishing for Salmon, Trout and Grayling*. Hamilton published his book during a period of intense interest in angling and natural history. He and his fishing companions found grayling in the Northwest Territory of Canada near Fort Enterprise in the Winter River.

In the autumn of 1820 we obtained many by angling in a rapid of the Winter River, opposite to Fort Enterprise. The sport was excellent, for this grayling generally springs entirely out of the water when first struck.
by the hook, and tugs strongly at the line, requiring as much dexterity to land it safely as it would to secure a trout of six times its size.  

Hamilton went on to describe the similarities and slight differences between what would be named *Thymallus arcticus* of Artic North America and the *Thymallus thymallus* of Europe. Hamilton also commented on the distribution of the fish and its supposed origins. One theory was that these fish were the same as the ones from Europe and that they had been transplanted by monks. Grayling were native the Rhine River, and their distribution across Europe was linked to the last ice age, similar to their distribution in North America. Hamilton doubted the monk theory and suggested that this was a new, native population. He wrote, “this is exceedingly doubtful, as it is a fish that would not bear the carriage from foreign countries at that time, and probably the monks knew nothing of the mode of importing the ova.”

Hamilton’s discovery preceded the Michigan finding by about forty years. Few early reports existed about the state’s grayling. B. W. Sperry, and early logger in Crawford County later recalled his early experiences with grayling. He wrote:

I knew nothing of the fish in the streams of that section, having lived before then in the southern part of the State; by my love of fishing and fish led me to investigate, and I discovered the waters to be teeming with what the lumbermen called ‘Sable River trout.’ . . .

My first attempt to secure them was quite successful. I found in the swamps a long, light cedar pole, just the right proportion for my purpose. I then fastened a good-sized pickerel hook to the large end of it, and thus equipped crept carefully down to the water’s edge, crawled out a third of the way across the river on a ‘wing jam,’ shaded my eyes with my hat and found I was right among them.

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4 Ibid.
When I slipped my pole in the water, the ‘trout’ moved slowed more to the other side (there were thousands of them), but after a few moments would return to the channel.

Lying on my stomach, with rod jammed well on the bottom to keep it steady, I bided my time. Soon a good sized fish hovered a moment over the hook, a quick upward jerk, and he was impaled and landed. I stopped to examine my prize, and while I did not know then his true name, his long dorsal, clean cut, stylish markings and racy proportions proclaimed him to be of royal blood. I added several more to the string, dress them, and on my cabin stove fried them in pork fat to a turn, and then and there ate my first grayling; how delicious they were to an appetite sharpened by out-door work, youth and perfect health.5

Michigan was within the reach of a growing Midwestern population. The Michigan grayling became linked to the development of the modern American economy. It initially found its importance as a food stuff for Detroit and Chicago. Market fishermen targeted the readily captured fish and sent it off by the thousands, packed away in salt, to be served at fine urban restaurants. Ports, such as Saginaw, made a steady business with cold storage holding a variety of wild game that became popular. A growing middle and upper class urban society craved wild game at their dinner parties. This was a class that was growing more and more disconnected from the natural environment as their world revolved around the factory, the workday, and the urban grid. Wild game dinners represented their attempt to reconnect to nature, and at the same time impress their dinner guests with the various dishes, such as grayling or partridge. It was not the local populations of small farmers, Native Americans, and lumbermen that consumed the grayling to extinction. The larger, unregulated market in part demanded extinction. The grayling’s fate was linked to the American quest to harvest the resources of northern Michigan. The grayling was a victim of this destruction, along with the white pine. In fact, it was very probable that many grayling were consumed within buildings

whose rafters and floorboards had once grown in the lands adjoining these native grayling watersheds.

While market fishing represented an important period of the Michigan grayling’s history, the esteemed status placed upon it by sporting men resulted in its national interest and scientific study. Grayling grabbed the attention of American sportsmen following its discovery by the scientific and recreational angling community in 1870. Credit for its discovery has been attributed to D. H. Fitzhugh Jr. of Bay City Michigan. Within William Butts Mershon’s personal collection of papers is an address given to the Michigan Sportsmen’s Association by L. D. Norris of Grand Rapids in 1878. The speech is titled, “The Michigan Grayling. What must be done to Prevent the Annihilation of this Excellent Food and Game Fish.”\(^6\) According to Norris’s report, Fitzhugh sent a specimen to the Academy of Natural Science in Philadelphia where Professor Cope named it *Thymallus tricolor*, the Michigan grayling. Two other sources pinpoint the naming of the fish in 1873. Charles Hallock, who gained his fame as a sportsmen editor of *Forest and Stream* published an influential book, *The Fishing Tourist*, in 1873 which commented on the mysterious origins of this new game fish. Hallock’s description stated that Fitzhugh sent a specimen to Thaddeus Norris of Philadelphia and Andrew Clerk of New York. Clerk owned a fly fishing shop in New York City.\(^7\) Norris was an accomplished angler whose popular *American Angler’s Book* 1864 was very popular among U.S. anglers.\(^8\) Debate among these angling experts took place, and it was decided

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\(^6\) L. D. Norris, “The Michigan Grayling. What Must Be Done to Prevent the Annihilation of this Excellent Food and Game Fish.” Address to the Michigan Sportsmen’s Association, 5 February 1878. Box 1, Folder William B. Mershon Early Family Paper of Augustus H. Mershon. The Mershon Collection in the Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. (Mershon Collection hereafter).


\(^8\) Ibid., 105.
that the samples were too decomposed to resolve the issue. Hallock wrote that he requested additional samples from Fitzhugh, who had them speared through the ice by Indians on Hersey Creek. A letter from Louis Agassiz in 1873 identified the samples as Michigan grayling and seemed to have settled the debate. Agassiz had long established himself as one of the world’s leading scientists. His work in ichthyology helped to shape his theories on an ice age and he was the professor of zoology and geology at Harvard. His identification of the grayling, before his death later that year, provided the final word on the fish and legitimately identified it as a distinctly Midwestern game fish.

Another source provided its own summary of the grayling identification. *Forest and Stream* was the country’s foremost authority on the sporting life tradition. It engaged its gentlemen readers in stories of African safaris, upland game shooting, the intricate detail of handcrafted Italian shotguns, the exuberance of a Quebec salmon camp, and more. In 1874 the journal published a story written by Hallock on the origins of the Michigan grayling, *Thymallus tricolor*. Hallock’s account provided more detail about the scientific nature of their study:

> From the wilds of the northern portion of the southern peninsula of Michigan there had come for many years vague rumors of strange and beautiful game fish known to the simple backwoodsmen by various names, such as the jack salmon, bog salmon, bog trout, and big scaled trout and these several names that attach to it, according to the respective localities in which it is found, indicate that these observing men have classified it correctly as one of the Salmonidae, although they had no means of ascertaining the specific name by which it has been known in parts of Europe. Now, however, that its true name has been discovered, those who have known it so long by all sorts of titles seem glad to accept it, and to learn that their favorite has a world-wide reputation—that its merits are recognized and acknowledged by men who have never yet seen

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it; for they have actually changed the name of the post office in Crawford county, which was formerly called Crawford to Grayling! Although the railroad company have not yet seen fit to accept the change, they will doubtless yield to the pressure of popular opinion and rechristen the young town after this popular fish.  

The article credited Professor Cope of Philadelphia with naming the fish *Thymallus tricolor* in 1870. Professor Agassiz cited Cope in 1873 by stating that Cope was the only American scientist to have seen the fish. *Forest and Stream* along with the *New York Times* relayed the scientific study of these early specimens.

This statement appeared in a note printed in the New York *Times* acknowledged the receipt of a pair of these grayling, male and female, which with others had been procured with much difficulty in the January previous for the editor of this paper, the *Forest and Stream*, at the editor’s request, and forwarded to him by D. H. Fitzhugh Jr. of Bay City, Michigan. They were speared by Indians through the ice in Hersey Creek, and sent to the rooms of the “Bloomington Grove Park Association,” of which the editor was then secretary, and after having been examined by anglers and experts, both English and American, the greater part were served up at Sutherland’s restaurant in this city, at a dinner partaken of by a dozen gentlemen who were curious to test its flavor and edible qualities. They were baked, boiled, and fried and pronounced better than salmon and of a more delicate flavor than trout.  

This account provided an interesting scientific study of this new fish. The dinner party that conducted the scientific analysis and taste test included a who’s who of American fishing tradition at the turn of the century. Besides Hallock and Mather, the party also included Col. Skinner of *Turf, Field and Farm*, another notable journal highlighting the best of the sporting life, the veteran angler, Hon. S. H. Ainsworth, and Seth Green, one of the nation’s leading authorities on artificial fish propagation who strongly influenced the federal fish hatchery program.  

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12 Ibid.  
13 Fred Mather, *Forest and Stream* 3, no. 18 (1874) : 276.
it was January, allowing the fish to retain its natural flavor without having to be preserved in salt or smoked.

The fish arrived full of eggs, as the grayling spawned in the early spring. This created a considerable debate as to when the fish actually spawned. The group examined the eggs under microscope and announced that they were near maturity. Estimates placed the spawning of the grayling in April. Hallock was printing his book, *Fishing Tourist*, at the time and halted the printing so that he could provide the latest grayling information to his readers. He estimated that the grayling spawned anywhere from February to April. Mather, a prominent sportsman at the time, who wrote two books, *Men I Have Fished With* (1897) and *My Angling Friends* (1901), was at the Sutherland’s grayling dinner and took a great interest in the fish. He continued to study the grayling, and ended up getting about sixty fish from the Au Sable which he raised alongside his trout. Mather pinpointed the exact date of spawning grayling to about April 20. Mather’s pinpoint estimate seemed a bit presumptuous given the various factors that influence the precise date and time of spawning, such as stream conditions, water levels, and weather, but it did demonstrate the great interest that this group of sporting experts and quasi-scientific notables took with the possibilities of this new game fish. The appreciation for this new fish was summarized by Hallock as, “the grayling, as Seth Green, Esq., has very truly said, is a most welcome addition to our list of game fish; and anglers ought not only to feel congratulated, but acknowledge the debt of obligation which they owe to the discoverer, whoever he may be.”

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14 Schullery 1987, 127.
15 *Forest and Stream* 1874, 168.
16 Ibid.
The interest in grayling among the angling urban elite was immediate and pronounced. Using the mediums of the day, such as *Forest and Stream*, the praises for the grayling were widely proclaimed. It immediately surpassed the brook trout and was placed at the altar of game fish along with the Atlantic Salmon and Black Bass. Anglers delighted in the methods of grayling fishing, which required long slit bamboo rods, fine leaders, and hand-tied flies. Part of the allure of fly fishing for some had been the gadgets and tools of the game. While grayling could certainly be caught with nets, a line and hook, and even dynamite, the gentleman fisherman took pride in the tools of his sport. Items from Orvis and Abercrombie & Fitch catered to those with the money and means to pursue the sportsmen’s life. In *The Johnstown Flood*, historian David McCullough commented on the appeal that fishing had for the affluent class.

Part of the increasing appeal of fishing seemed to be the multitude of trappings it called for. Where once the well-equipped angler needed only the simplest and most inexpensive sort of gear, now in the late 1880’s a whole line of elaborate and expensive paraphernalia was said to be necessary. Bait boxes, boots, collapsible nets, cookstoves, silk lines, creels, reels and casting rods that cost as much as twenty dollars, even costly books on the subject, were the sign of the true sportsman. All of which seemed to make fishing, and particularly trout and bass fishing, which were generally referred to as a ‘science,’ that much more attractive to the man of means. His interest in the sport not only showed his love of the great outdoors, but also that he had both the money and the brains to participate.17

Grayling habitat was far enough in the field to merit it as a destination fishery. Travel to Michigan was no easy matter, and even with trains, the best grayling fishing was still beyond the reach of most Americans. *The Fishing Tourist* stated that the best grayling fishing was 11 hours by train from Chicago. The Hersey River provided the closest access and was serviced by the Flint & Marquette Railroad. The next closest

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stream was the Au Sable of Grayling Michigan, which was served by the Mackinaw Railroad. At that time the northern portion of the Lower Peninsula was regarded as “virgin and desecrated only by prospectors and lumbermen who have a few camps within the wilderness.” The Au Sable was a world beyond the city streets of Chicago and Detroit and provided a rustic fishing destination, if not the wild countryside that Hallock promised. By the time the grayling fishery took off, the woods adjoining the stream were at the mercy of the lumberjack, and the wilderness became a clear cut quagmire of runoff and sand. Despite looking past the industrial logging of the country, northern Michigan and its grayling became a leading story of interest among America’s angling sportsmen.

Following Fitzhugh’s discovery and Hallock’s grayling feast, *Forest and Stream* sent Norris to the Au Sable for his account of this incredible fishery. Norris had gained fame and membership to the elite status of American sportsmen upon the success of his book *American Angler’s Book* in 1864. He was the leading advocate for adventure angling, taking to the field in pursuit of far off destinations, and new species.

In July of 1874 Norris joined Fitzhugh on a trip on the Au Sable. The purpose of the trip was to explore the waters downstream of where Fitzhugh had previously fished. The anglers hoped that by pushing further downstream they would get through the sections of the Au Sable near Grayling where over fishing had already had an impact on the stream. On July 30, the first day of the outing, the group paused at a likely looking stretch of the river to get enough fish for supper.

So we uncased our ‘artillery’ and ‘limbered up.’ At the second cast I hooked, and after that a sharp tussle landed a fish of six ounces or so. “Throw him in, said Dan ‘we keep nothing under a half pound on this trip.’ Well I looked at my first captive from snout to caudal, and as it was

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18 Hallock, *The Fishing Tourist* 1873, 207.
19 Ibid., 208.
During the second day of fishing, which was interrupted by an overnight rain at their camp, Norris found a particularly effective fly, the drab winged coachman. The method of the day was to fish several classic wet fly patterns on one line.

Sometimes three to five flies would be fished by one fisher at a time. Most contemporary fly fishermen rarely fish more than one fly. Using three or more flies was a successful method of fishing. Grayling were particularly attracted to the motion of the flies in the water, and the pull of the flies through the water by a hooked fish would entice other fish to hit as well. In the name of keeping the fishing sporting, Norris took one fly off, finding that it “kills them too fast. It’s slaughter.”

Following lunch the onslaught of the grayling continued. While one of the guides held an overhanging cedar branch back, Norris hooked fifteen fish in five successive casts. The fishing continued until evening when it was time to pack the fish, because they had begun to die in the live wells due to overcrowding. “With entrails out, heads off, salted down and pressed hard, we had two forty pound kits full, which, with those we had eaten and reserved for supper and breakfast, made our catch a little over a hundred pounds, gross weight.” It was a rather glutinous harvest for only the second day of a trip that had just begun to reach the waters where the best fishing was said to have been. On August 1 the party drifted beyond where the South Branch and the North Branch reach the main flow of the river, and

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
passed up some likely looking water because their wells were already full for the day. They were relived to find a wood-chopper’s hut where they “eased our consciences by giving away the fish in our wells.”23 The same scenario repeated itself the next day as the party looked for an excuse to fish on the Sabbath. Noting that there was a lumber camp downstream that could use the fish, the party once again filled their live wells to the point that fish expired from the crowded conditions and lack of oxygenated water. An estimated forty pounds of fish were donated to the wood-choppers. On August 3 the party reached their destination of Thompson’s landing. It was named for the Irishman who moved from Pennsylvania and acquired the valuable timberland on the lower portion of the Au Sable. His tavern adjoined the river and the road to Tawas City where the party loaded their boats and gear on wagons and departed for the city docks where they caught a steamer back to Bay City.

In all the party covered an estimated 160 miles of the river in six days. Their estimate of pure fishing time not spent covering water in the boat was a total of twenty hours. Their total estimated catch was two hundred and thirty pounds, and had the party spent more time fishing they were confident that much more could have been kept.

Norris wrote, “If the time spent in running the river had been devoted entirely to angling above the south branch I am confident we could have taken from six to seven hundred pounds.”24

The Au Sable was described as the perfect angling destination. Norris and his party only encountered one other fishing party on the river. Norris reported on the

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
Manistee’s grayling population in 1875. The railroads served his needs by taking him deep into the forests. Norris described early railroad travel:

We made our way to Grayling with our boats and camp equipments one afternoon, and the next morning we were on our way to Bay City by a poor ‘one horse’ branch of the Michigan Central Railroad, traveling on a freight train, (for the passenger train does not now run as far up that road as Grayling), stopping frequently to hitch on lumber cars, and occupying nearly nine hours in running ninety-two miles . . .25

Another article highlighted the railroad travel as well as the guides that awaited willing anglers. Forest and Stream stated:

Eastern sportsmen desiring to take this trip will find August the best month for grayling. Take Great Western Railroad to Detroit, Michigan Central to Bay City, thence north eighty-six miles by Mackinaw Division Michigan Central Railway to Cheney’s, where you will find Mr. Cheney always ready with teams to take you to the river. . .26

Norris’s 1874 report found that grayling were plentiful and of good size, varying from a half a pound to just over one pound. The stream near Grayling had some effects of fishing pressure, but a few miles down stream the fish were very abundant, and remained so all the way to Thompson’s. The only interruption in the fishing came near Thompson’s as the logging industry began driving logs down river in May. Grayling fled the main branch of the river to seek solitude and clear water in a tributary in May and June. In other portions of the river the party passed over stretches where the water appeared to be choked with fish. Fifty to a hundred were stacked in pools, and they were very eager to take the artificial flies. Norris found, “The grayling is the fish of the river.”27 Some suckers and shiners were found, but no other game fish. The grayling was king of his environment, and a handsome king at that. The beauty of the fish is

almost as important as its fight when it came to his ranking as a game fish. Colorful fish such as brook trout and brown trout were respected for their physical appearances almost as much as their willingness to take a fly, or the challenge they presented in their capture. The metallic scales of the grayling, matched with a colorful dorsal fin that had no match in the freshwater world, captured the imagination of Norris and his readers. He wrote, “I frequently held them for a while beneath the surface of the limpid water to admire the colors and motions of the dorsal fin. It looked like a beautifully colored leaf waving in the metallic spots. The pectorals and ventrals also exhibited pretty metallic spots.”

In all Norris had described the ideal setting for urban anglers. The river was reachable by train, within hours from Detroit, Toledo, and Chicago. Guides were readily available. The drift down the river was through unharvested, if not wild, woodlands. Most importantly, the fishing was phenomenal. Even considering the possible exaggeration, Norris’s account painted a picture of an inexhaustible supply of game fish. The grayling represented the ideal object to the readers of *Forest and Stream*. These men, and perhaps a few women, were looking for something more that a day of fishing. Grayling fishing on the Au Sable presented an escape from the day to day chores of urban life. The Au Sable was an opportunity to escape the crowds, the grime, and the crime of the city. Within nature one’s soul could be recharged. It was believed that game hunting and fishing made one stronger and more successful. Mershon, who was diagnosed with tuberculosis, found strength and rejuvenation in the outdoors. He wrote in an article advocating recreation, “. . . part of my financial success was due, like my success in finding health, to recreation-hunting and fishing. I learned the value of that, and soon found that a vacation taken regularly and an occasional fishing or hunting trip was a good

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28Ibid.
thing. I came back to work feeling keener..." No doubt Mershon shared this sentiment with many of the people who read Norris’s article. In effect, what Norris did was put out a call to the masses of urban sportsmen. In the few short years since Fitzhugh had sent specimens east, the grayling rush had begun.

Soon books focused on angling destinations found it necessary to include the grayling of the Au Sable and northern Michigan among its stories of Florida tarpon, Atlantic Salmon from Quebec, and the black bass of Adirondack lakes. Word had spread and the fishing pressure increased. Mershon, of Saginaw, through his box company, investments in mining operations out west, and lumber enterprises in the Upper Peninsula, had the time and the resources to spend in the fields, streams, and forests of Michigan, Quebec, and the Dakotas. A proficient writer, reader, and antagonist of local and state government through reprimanding letters, Mershon took personal interest in the wildlife of Michigan. His favorite topics included the extermination of the passenger pigeon and his fight to save the grayling from the same fate. Like Norris, Mershon took delight in the sporting nature of the grayling and all the trappings of gear, tackle and time that were required in its pursuit. Joining with the Michigan Sportsmen Association, Mershon and others called for the state to intervene and work to protect the grayling. Mershon had spent his younger days fishing the headwaters of the Au Sable and Manistee rivers near Grayling. Looking back on his early days of fishing, Mershon remembered how good the grayling fishing used to be before the demise of the fish.

What fishing we had? Grayling in quantity that now would be shocking. We would bring out on the logging train in the morning great chunks of ice. These were buried in the sand in the camping place and the fish at night were packed in a cool receptacle, so that they were kept in good

condition. Once I remember when we returned from one of these trips, three or four of us having been out there three days, and we had a wash tub full of grayling. There was wonderful fishing at this dam too. A great pool below it was literally alive with large grayling, but the taking of the big fellows from the comparatively still pool did not begin with the sport of wading the rapid stream and taking one here and there. If I had known how to scientifically fish with a fly in those days, I am sure that I would have had more sport, but ignorance is bliss and I didn’t know any better, or none of us for that matter, than worm fishing.\textsuperscript{30}

This blissful, wanton slaughter of the fish was carried out on the Manistee, as Mershon described above, and the Au Sable. By 1877 the sportsmen were having an impact on the Au Sable fishery. Mershon and his crew of sporting men came upon two parties of fishermen near where the North Branch joins the mainstream of the Au Sable. In all, Mershon estimated that 5,000 grayling were killed by these two parties.

\ldots while I was on the river in August last, two large camps, all non-residents and strangers (in old Roman times the word meant enemies) killed five thousand fish, not going beyond five miles of the mouth of the north branch. They salted and carried away at least half of them. Many were eaten, more were wasted. For two miles below their camps decaying fish whitened the stream, and the offal and fish entrails left unburied in camp tainted the air, as the dead fish poisoned the water. Now when it is remembered that a salted grayling is more tasteless than so many salted chips, and that these fish were carried away, not for food, but only because of senseless strife-that one party might outdo the other and furnish evidence that they had not magnified the magnitude of their catch, it will readily be seen how unsportsmanlike and wicked is such wholesale slaughter.

True, every fish they caught cost them from first to last at least ten cents, but it was a summer frolic of thoughtless business men-not sportsmen, to whom money was not consideration. The rule on the river, which the guides and the polers try to enforce, is to put back all fish below ten inches, yet in the strife between six or five boats as to who shall bring to the fish-pen the greatest number, the rule is disregarded and they take the benefit of a doubt-down to six or seven inches.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{30} Mershon, \textit{Recollections of My Fifty Years of Hunting and Fishing} (Boston: The Stratford, Co. Publishers, 1923), 158.

In 1873 fishermen were able to find grayling in large quantities in the main branch near Grayling. By 1877 there were few to be found within 20 miles by land, and 40 miles by river of the town.\textsuperscript{32} F. H. Thurston, a notable angler and outdoors writer, noted that by 1892 the grayling fishery was on a decline. Fish were now 40 miles downstream from where they used to be.\textsuperscript{33} In the matter of only a few years what appeared to be an inexhaustible resource began to show the effects of man’s actions on the ecosystem.

Three common explanations have been used to describe the grayling’s path to extinction. The latter decades of the nineteenth century brought a perfect storm of grayling destruction to northern Michigan. All three factors centered on the man’s activities, his greed, and despite warnings, the inability to collectively overcome the destructive acts of individual actions.

Scientist, Garrett Hardin, wrote of the destructive nature of individual actions to the detriment of collective wellbeing.\textsuperscript{34} In his article discussing threats of human overpopulation, he presented the tragedy of the commons theory. The individuals made logical decisions that benefited themselves, but might not benefit the broader population. This related to the Au Sable when individuals fished without limits in a stream with a naturally limited fish population. The fishery could withstand the indulgence when fishing pressure was low, but it was unsustainable once the pressure increased following 1874.

One of the factors that elevated grayling to the status of a prominent game fish was its willingness to take an artificial lure. Sportsmen held a higher regard for fish that

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” \textit{Science} 162 (13 December 1968) : 1244.
preferred lures and flies over stinking worms, leeches or other baits. Fly fishers ranked their fish according to their tendency to take a fly. Brown trout were towards the lower end of the scale, often feeding at dark and just as willing to eat their own young as to sip small blue winged olive flies in the surface film of a spring creek. Rainbow trout were known to take flies throughout the day. The brook trout of the east and cutthroat of the west thrived in pristine environments. Their streams were often tucked high in the mountains, where the biomass of insects is relatively low. They were, therefore, willing to strike about any sort of fly that drifted overhead. Despite their acclaim to crush flies with reckless abandon, both the brook trout and cutthroat trout could be very selective if the stream provided adequate food sources and there was moderate angling pressure.

Grayling, on the other hand, were known for their eagerness to chase wet flies, gaudy in color and unnatural in form. Perhaps this was due to the lack of fishing pressure in the few places they still called home, or maybe it was due to the lack of nutrients in their cooler and clearer waters. For whatever reason, it was quickly understood that grayling preferred flies, and were not shy about striking them. Because fly fishing was considered the most befitting method of angling for the sportsmen, the grayling proved to be the best match for the bamboo rod and dainty, hand tied flies. Norris wrote,

The biggest of them do not exceed eighteen inches, is very gamesome at the fly and bites not often at the minnow; is much simpler than the trout and therefore bolder, for he will rise twenty times if you miss him, and yet rise again. He is taken with the fly of red feathers and outlandish bird, and a fly like a great or small moth.35

Most modern fly anglers think of stealth when approaching a likely trout pool. Great care is often taken to keep the angler’s profile low so that the fish does not see him.

He must also be careful not to walk too heavily, kick rocks or send a wave out across the pool. Vibrant colored hat and bandanas are great for photographs, but are forbidden from the stream. Such care is often necessary to have a chance at a large trout in clear water. A misplaced cast or the fly hitting the water too hard might send the fish racing for the bottom. No contemporary, experienced angler would suggest that his guide hold back the branches of a cedar tree on the Au Sable so that he could get a better cast to the fish. One can only imagine a guide’s response to such a request. Pushing brush aside would scare every trout in that portion of the stream. Norris, however, found this practice necessary back in 1874, and it had no impact on the grayling’s willingness to grab his fly. As the grayling was liable to hit the fly time and time again, even inexperienced anglers found it very easy to catch fish after fish. Entire pools would be cleared, so that not one grayling was left. Norris wrote how he killed fifty grayling from one pool and noticed that the grayling had no fear of man or the boat. George L. Alexander, a Grayling man who fished the Au Sable commented in Mershon’s Recollections of My Fifty Years of Hunting and Fishing, “Generally it will take the fly or bait as quickly as it is presented, whether you are in sight of the fish or not; the motion of the angler does not frighten or even annoy it . . .”36 The grayling’s desire to chase the fly may have been what made it a great sport fish, but it was one piece of the puzzle that explained the complete annihilation of the species from Michigan. It could not survive the increased fishing pressure from so many vacationing anglers.

Grayling created a recreational and even scientific interest in the streams of northern Michigan, but earlier lumbermen raced to its towering white pine forests. The pine forests of northern Michigan were considered among the best in the world, and the

36 Mershon, Recollections of My Fifty Years of Hunting and Fishing, 1923, 170.
products they contributed to range from ships’ masts to wood flooring. The towering pines were superior to other forests in that their branches were high in the canopy, and each tree provided knot free lumber. The discovery of grayling was secondary to the lumber industry. Crawford, or Grayling as it was later called, would eventually serve as the hub for traveling anglers, but its establishment and industry centered on the railroad and lumber. Early anglers, such as Norris, were able to gain the necessary boats, guides and cooks from offshoots of the lumber industry. Men and women were eager to supplement their incomes by hauling boats back up stream, building boats out of the white pine, and cooking for fishing camps. Even one of Norris’s guides worked for the lumber industry, and used the fishing excursion down the Au Sable to estimate lumber lands.37

The effect of the lumber industry on the streams was obvious. The great floods of the lumber drives cleaned the river bottom, uprooted stream vegetation and silted over gravel. The effects on the insect habitat would have been disastrous. Burrowing mayflies and nest building caddis flies were among the victims of thousands of logs and debris rushing down the stream with the necessary wall of water released from an upstream dam. These unnatural floods would have been a stark contrast to the natural and steady release of snowmelt and rainfall into the stream systems by the aquifers. Anglers noticed the impact of lumbering on the fish. Norris wrote that the fishing fell off near Thompson’s landing where a dam was erected and lumber was stored in the river waiting for its downstream ride to the lake.38

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37 L. D. Norris.
38 Ibid.
Despite the early reports of an inexhaustible supply of fish, the grayling quickly demonstrated the effects of human activities. As early as 1875 reports indicated that streams near railroads had less fish. Norris found that the Au Sable and eastern streams had been “rapidly depleted for the Bay City and Detroit markets.” Sperry, the early lumberjack fishing fanatic placed the blame on the popular press. He wrote,

At that time there were countless thousands of grayling in the Au Sable. A few years after that, and while I was living in Bay City, Forest And Stream made mention of Seth Green and a party going to Germany to secure grayling for hatching purposes. Before the party left, however, some gentlemen from New York were up in the Au Sable River country and discovered that my ‘trout’ were the true grayling. Immediately, following that announcement there was a pilgrimage of fishermen to that stream from all parts of the country. Large camping parties from Elmira and Binghampton went there, with the result that in two years the stream was nearly depopulated of grayling. One party alone shipped out 1,500 lbs. of beautiful fish, so that for years thereafter where they once seemed inexhaustible, good strings could only be secured at the mouths of tributaries and other quiet spots known only to a few.

Mershon searched for answers as to the grayling’s demise, and he wrote about how the logging had covered the grayling spawning beds with silt and debris, choking out the necessary oxygen for the developing eggs. Because grayling spawned locally, and did not run up stream into small tributary waters as trout did, the spawning grayling faced the torrent of lumber floods head on. The main bodies of water where they spawned were the very same waters that were most often used by the lumber companies. In 1912 Mershon wrote,

Speaking of the Grayling, I have always had a theory that they were destroyed because of lumbering. You know the streams that they frequented were sandy streams. The fish were Spring spawners. In the Spring these streams were driven by loggers and in order to drive them

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39 Thaddeus Norris, “Grayling and Bass,” Forest and Stream. 9 September 9 1875, 65.
40 Sperry.
41 Mershon Recollections of My Fifty Years of Hunting and Fishing. 1923, 170. Mershon Collection.
successfully, they had to flood them once or twice every day and build dams at short intervals. Now how the Grayling spawn could have hatched when there was a log drive on in these sand bottom streams that were stirred up by the flooding of dams, was more than I could ever figure out.42

The dams placed throughout the entire watershed would certainly have had an effect on the fish and the insects. Dams held up water and slowed its flow. Logging dams had spillways over the tops of the dams. The water held behind the dam was relatively stagnant compared to the natural flow of the stream, and much deeper that the natural river flow. The stagnant water behind the dam would have warmed in the sun. The warmer water settled on the upper layer of the dam and then spilled over the dam, thereby providing a warmer source of water than the stream would normally have had. These dams heated the water beyond the normal range of temperatures that grayling thrived in. Even today, with much emphasis on returning the stream to as natural a state as possible, the heat of the late summer can push stream temperatures into the seventies, well beyond the acceptable range for grayling and trout alike.

The roughly thirty years of lumbering along the Au Sable certainly took its toll on the river and the grayling. As the sandy hillsides were cut bare the lumber industry moved to other less accessible stands of pine in the Upper Peninsula. In the wake of the industry, the stream could begin to heal itself, and some believed that the grayling were able to make a rebound. In 1892, Thurtson provided his readers with hope that the stories of abundant grayling catches would become possible again. He wrote,

\[\ldots\] the Grayling, another epicurean fish, which was only a short time ago apparently doomed to destruction, but which may once more become plentiful, as woodsman and log-driver have done their worst in and about

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the streams where the ‘banner-bearer’ makes his home, and must perforce
them to return to something like their former solitude. 43

Unfortunately the decline of the lumber industry did not lead to an automatic
resurgence of the dorsal finned game fish. A sport fishing industry had been created in
Grayling and other towns adjoining streams such as the Au Sable, Manistee, and Black
River. A healthy economy transforming from logging to recreational services focused on
cooking, boat building, guiding and all the necessary supplements of the adventurous
angler. The economy was dependent on the influx of urban anglers looking for
adventure in the field. The grayling was an economic lifeline in an area that had
witnessed the wealth of the lumber industry come and go. Farming provided little
opportunity for success with the thin loamy soils and short growing season. Ironically,
the rejuvenation of the clear cut forests would lead to a greater diversity of wild game,
especially deer, but fishing was still an important source of income. Urban anglers also
lamented the decline of the great grayling fishery. Something was needed to fill the void,
another finned species that thrived in cold waters, struck flies, and could live up to the
standards of sport that the grayling had earned. With scientific development of artificial
tROUT propagation, the introduction of brook trout, rainbow trout and brown trout seemed
like an ideal solution. The fish were well respected by anglers and provided ideal game
in the rapidly depleted grayling waters.

The trout quickly adapted to their new environment. Though brook trout were
native to Michigan, they were not native to much of the Lower Peninsula. As was too
often the case when non-native organisms were introduced into a new environment, their
success was at the detriment of the native species. Trout out competed the grayling.

43 Thurston, 13.
Trout occupied the best feeding lanes and holes in the river. They pushed grayling to the ecological periphery where survival was difficult. New predators were introduced into an ecosystem with a fixed amount of resources, and the grayling could not adapt to their new neighbors. Mershon recounted that the grayling population seemed to fall off in the Manistee after he and his fishing buddies noticed how plentiful brook trout were becoming.  

Mather’s observation on the grayling that he raised along side his trout supported Mershon’s belief that the trout had something to do with the grayling’s decline. Mather wrote, “My brother, who has had the care of my fish this season says that one trout will eat as much as six grayling . . .” George Alexander, from Grayling, stated that he had a strong belief that the grayling was making a comeback after the logging days. Although the trout may have had something to do with the extinction of the grayling, Alexander, like many anglers, believed that the trout were necessary. He told Mershon, “I am inclined to the opinion that even if the trout had not been introduced, the grayling would have disappeared or at least become very scarce, and its cold waters would be furnishing very little sport as compared to what it does as the present.” Mershon disagreed, stating in a much earlier correspondence in 1912, that the introduction of the brook trout certainly had something to do with the destruction of the grayling. One common belief was that the brook trout, which spawned in the fall, had a head start on the spring spawning grayling. Juvenile grayling were easy prey for the brook trout. Grayling had

44 Mershon Recollections of My Fifty Years of Hunting and Fishing 1923, 159. Mershon Collection.
45 Fred Mather, “Raising the Grayling,” Forest and Stream 3, no. 18,1874, 276.
46 Ibid.
little if no impact upon the trout since they did not eat minnows and therefore were of no threat to the newly hatched trout populations.

The year 1916 witnessed a series of articles in *Forest and Stream* that offered explanations on the causes of the grayling’s extinction from Michigan. Mershon mentioned that despite the rejuvenated forests and streams and the repeated introduction of thousands of Montana grayling, re-establishments failed. Dr. James Henshall, a federal superintendent of the Montana station, specialized in the artificial propagation of grayling. He placed the greatest blame on the introduction of brook trout and rainbow trout. He had found that grayling were depleted in waters that had never had any logging, but had been stocked with trout.

Because no one specific cause can be attributed for the grayling’s extinction from Michigan, humans must take the collective blame. An unregulated lumber industry that harnessed the power of the river for its own gain knocked the grayling population closer to extinction. Over the twenty to thirty year onslaught on the woods and water, the grayling sought shelter in tributaries and deep pools, only to be taken from the river three at a time by greedy anglers. Both commercial fishermen supplying Midwestern cities and the upper class vacationing sportsmen were to blame. Together they packed and salted grayling by the barrel. The final death blow came from finned competition. Growing numbers of trout, stocked in the Au Sable and countless other rivers to provide sport for visiting anglers, overcame the native population and pushed it over the edge.

Sportsmen such as Mershon, the loyal readers of *Forest and Stream*, and writers such as Hallock called for a number of measures to save their beloved grayling.

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Conservation in this era of early progressive ideology focused on legislation and procreation. The Michigan Sportsmen Association, a special interest group that sought the protection of sporting wildlife and regulation of hunting and fishing privileges, called on the state legislature to protect grayling. In 1875 a law went into effect in Michigan that banned the sale of grayling and created a closed season from November 1 to June 1, protecting the fish during spawning. In 1881 a six inch limit was imposed upon the keeping of grayling. No limit was placed on how many one could possess. From the descriptions of anglers from the era, six inches seemed to be a relatively small size, since most accounts had the average fish at a half to a full pound. In 1901 the Michigan Game and Fish Protection League, with the efforts of Mershon, called for the closing of the upper waters of the Manistee. *Forest and Stream* lent its support, but the law failed to get by Governor Aaron T. Bliss, who was indifferent to the measure. State senator Augustine Farr, whose district held the upper Manistee, called the stream his river and opposed the closure. Even if regulations had passed, the enforcement of such laws would have been difficult. Game warders were few and far between. It was difficult to effectively regulate the entire river system. Wardens were not a the single solution for the grayling’s demise.

In an address to the Michigan Sportsmen’s Association from 1878 a call went out for grassroots activity to save the grayling. Members were asked to not only contact their legislatures but to personally take up the fight to save the grayling. Circulars were printed from the Fish Commission and members were asked to post them along their favorite waters. They believed that with the help of the guides and polers who depended

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51 Ibid., 186.
upon the fishery they could raise awareness about the plight of the grayling. With popular support they could end the destruction. Guides and polers had an economic interest in protecting the resources, “. . . for however well they are paid, they do not care to destroy in one year the livelihood of three, and work from daylight to dark, coming in wet and weary, if they might avoid it. . .”52 As was often the case in an economically competitive market, the group hoped to act for the collective good, but when left to own devices, individuals acted out of self interest. In the end, the guides and the polers who very well may have tried to limit the slaughter of their livelihood by enforcing size limits, were unable to overcome a system that was bent on destruction. Even the individual members of the Michigan Sportsmen’s Association were guilty of contributing to the decline in the face of the obvious destruction of the fishery. Mershon, perhaps the most outspoken advocate of regulation and protection, failed to practice what he preached. A reader of Forest and Stream wrote to the magazine in 1905 in reference to where he could find some decent grayling fishing. The magazine referred the reader to Mershon, an expert on the topic. Despite Mershon’s correspondence in which he stated his belief that grayling were all but extinct in Michigan he did recommend that the hopeful angler try his luck on the Black River where the fish were getting scare, but the angler could find one or two in three days of angling.53 In 1906 he recounted how his fishing party on the Black River took one grayling. He wrote in a letter to a friend, “Morely took a – Grayling-that day about 11 ½” long; probably the last of his race. Next morning at breakfast it was religiously divided by Tanner, to whom it had been given, and we all

united in saying that it was sweeter and better than trout.”54 Ironically, this letter was written while Mershon was working on his book about the passenger pigeon, a bird that faced a similar demise to that of the grayling, and of which Mershon took particular interest.

Upon the initial discovery of Michigan grayling in 1870 there was considerable interest to artificially propagate the fish. Rather than looking at entire ecosystems and their total health, the common practice of maintaining a fish stock was to scientifically and artificially plant the river with hatchery raised fish. Green took an interest in grayling. Early efforts by Green and Mather did produce positive results. Mather was said to have been the first to hatch grayling in 1874.55 Mather introduced them to his streams and ponds and found that they did very well and in his opinion were superior to trout. “. . . they were larger at six months old than brook trout at the same age; this suggests rapid growth and early maturity. And I claim a great superiority for them in the fact that they do not eat each other.”56 Green was able to hatch some fish from eggs obtained from the Au Sable. The first eggs were said to have hatched in May 1874. By May 15 he had fish swimming. In December of 1874 the Fish Commission took interest in grayling and had 16 raised along side trout at the Pokagon hatchery.57 Despite these early successes, grayling were never mass produced like trout. Mershon and T. E. Douglas, a lumberman and lodge owner on the North Branch of the Au Sable in Lovells, both tried to restock the stream with grayling from Montana, but their efforts failed. The

55 Thurston 1892, 348.
56 Mather, *Forest and Stream* 1874, 276.
fingerlings that did survive were eaten by trout. In the end the grayling could not be
artificially manufactured like the growing number of trout that took up residence in its
streams. Whatever the specific cause for the grayling’s decline, the threshold had been
crossed and the hands of time could not be pushed back.

What did the grayling represent? *Thymallus tricolor* was yet another example of
North American wildlife that was celebrated as much for it beauty as for what it
represented. Like the American bison and passenger pigeon, whose numbers also
crashed during this time period because of the progress of American society, the grayling
was a symbol. It represented the possibilities of the American frontier, the beauty of
nature, and the consequences of modern life. In the office of urban America, where the
frantic life of commercial interests dictated time, the urban elite angler could take solace
in reading an article about a multiple day drift through wilderness, where men lived off
the land and the stream as they idled their time away. The grayling represented a place, a
state of mind, a way of being. The grayling was the delight of the sportsmen’s game.

The sun’s rays lighting up the delicate olive-brown tints of the back and
sides, the bluish-white of the abdomen, and the mingling of tints of rose,
pale blue, and purplish-pink on the fins, display a combination of colors
equaled by no fish outside of the tropics.

A commercial and recreational fishery had both pushed the grayling to extinction
and promoted an early fish conservation movement. Anglers hoping for the return of the
dorsal finned game fish called upon government intervention. New laws needed to be
passed to insure that public resources could not be exterminated by individual actors. A
grassroots movement emphasized the power that recreation fishers had to direct policy.

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58 Mershon *Recollections of My Fifty Years of Hunting and Fishing* 1923, 172. Mershon
Collection.
59 Fred Mather quoted in *American Game Fishes.* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company,
Publishers, 1892) , 349.
The private conservation movement sought to protect the fish for its aesthetic and recreational merits. Calls for increased regulation and protection heeded to a more immediate fix. Artificial propagation in the form of brook trout promised the quickest remediation. Grayling were difficult to artificially raise, but brook trout hatcheries were spreading across the country. The local river economy hoped that a brook trout salvation could save it from the threats of grayling extinction.
Artificial fish propagation became one of the most popular conservation methods from the late 1800s to the mid 1900s. Hatchery fish could be dumped into a river without regard for the stream’s natural carrying capacity, or native fish population. Trout spread far and wide across the country. The cool waters of the Au Sable promised some of the best trout conditions in the state. Hatchery trout promised to continue Grayling’s recreational fishing economy that had become dependent upon the depleted grayling. Both private and state organizations created trout propagation programs with a keen eye on the Au Sable. Artificially raised trout promised a quick fix to the grayling problem. It mattered little to the tourist industry that the native fish were gone. Sport fish were a commodity. Sports from Chicago, Detroit and Toledo spend their leisure time and money pursuing them. The local economy could not wait for a rehabilitated stream. Besides, cold water conservation was in its infancy, and lacked a sophisticated understanding of the ecosystem. Soon private bucket biologists planted brook trout in the Au Sable feeder creeks. The state cautiously started stocking. A unique partnership between the state and private trout philanthropists formed the Grayling Fish Hatchery Club in 1914. Fish propagation became a vital component in the formation of Grayling’s fish conservation legacy.

One of my favorite memories of the Grayling hatchery came from one of my yearly trips to the Au Sable. I was on my way to Wa Wa Sum and the hatchery would be
coming up on the right hand side of the road. An osprey appeared coming in from the north side of the road. Keeping my eyes on the bird, I saw it swoop down and grab its dinner from one of the cement lined races holding the oversized trout. In the next instant the bird climbed into the sky holding what appeared to be an 18 inch trout in his talons. Here it was, the genetically engineered fish, which some purist fly fishers call frankenfish, raised on fish pellets and not knowing of the world beyond the fifty yards of cement stream that he called home along with 30 other fish, was for the first time getting a view of the river that fed him with its cool currents and steady flow. Like a bear depending on the town garbage dump for food, the osprey had learned to take advantage of modern technology.

The Grayling Fish Hatchery provides a historical example of the trends in river conservation stewardship. Started in 1914 by a group of wealthy sport fishers, its original job was to replenish a stream that had been destructed by the progress of modern man. They had a tradition of fly fishing the Au Sable from the early days when the river was full of grayling. In the years since the heydays of grayling angling in the 1870s, the fishery had dramatically declined. The grayling were all but gone. A few remained in the river. There were hardly enough to find a spawning mate each spring. The more aggressive brook trout, rainbow trout, and brown trout sealed the grayling’s extinction. These fish were planted by pioneer bucket biologists who placed them in the tributaries and feeder creeks of the river, hoping that their plantings would take hold and fill the niche that the dwindling grayling population left.

The fish out competed the grayling for spawning sites, habitat and food. Making matters worse was the fact that these new species were carnivorous. The largest of the
trout had a diet that consisted of grayling fry. Each spring the young grayling hatched from their eggs and entered their new aquatic habitat. Grayling themselves were also carnivores, but lacked significant teeth, so they concentrated on insects and left their young alone. Trout were better equipped for chasing smaller fish prey. The largest of the brown trout were known to feed almost entirely on minnows and other smaller animals such as lizards and even small mice. Although the destruction of logging could be turned around with time, and the abuses of over fishing could be regulated with effective legislation and warden oversight, the devastation of the trout could not be overturned. Trout displaced the grayling as the stream’s apex predator.

The anglers of the Au Sable had enjoyed a history of fishing the river. Cottages and lodges had been established and were passed down from one generation to the next. Old friends set up yearly getaways to coincide with annual insect hatcher, or the regalia of the opening day of trout season in the spring. The river faced increased angling pressure season after season. This complicated the matter of fish supply. Towns such as Grayling, Roscommon, and Lovells became known as fly fishing destinations. Hotels, lodges and guides sprang up to serve the tourist industry. Fishing tourists provided a renewable income that could outlast the once dominant lumber industry. To simply sit and watch the river go the way of the grayling would have been irresponsible. The life of the river, the angling traditions of its fishers, and the economy of the area needed a solution, and a steady supply of manufactured trout seemed like the logical, scientific, and even moral course of action.

American artificial fish propagation, the formal term for artificially breeding fish, came from an unlikely place, Cleveland Ohio. Dr. Theodatus Garlick became known as
the father of American fish culture. A plastic surgeon from Cleveland, Garlick was a practiced fly fisherman and regular renaissance man. In 1839, he was one of the first Americans to produce daguerreotypes, an early form of photography.\footnote{Robert Behnke, “Further Adventures in Search of Ackley’s Farm,” \textit{Trout}, Winter 2005, 53.} Garlick put his mind to the artificial propagation of trout and in 1853, traveled to Saulte Sainte Marie on Lake Superior to gather 150 coaster brook trout to transplant to his associate’s farm.\footnote{Behnke, “About Trout,” \textit{Trout}, Spring 2003, 54.} Dr. Horace Ackley’s farm was located two miles from downtown Cleveland. There the two men constructed holding ponds and a spawning raceway, all fed by a spring creeks. In 1853 two trout entered the spawning race and were collected for their eggs and sperm. The fertilized eggs began to hatch in early 1854 and Garlick quickly released his findings to the Cleveland Academy of Natural Science.\footnote{Ibid.} Garlick’s work, along with Seth Green, who experimented with artificial fish propagation on Caledonia Stream in Long Island, helped to change the way that clubs, and eventually fisheries were managed. Clubs could now grow and raise their own fishing stock, and did not need to depend upon the natural reproduction. Eventually, non-native trout such as the rainbow and brown trout were introduced to eastern brook trout streams. More significant, trout could now be introduced to habitats that had never before supported these populations. This led to an increased diffusion of trout as a recreational species. A species that would displace grayling in Michigan.

Garlick’s early domesticated brook trout were stocked in nearby waterways, such as Cold Creek, a previously sterile stream that became a private club for upper class residents of Toledo, Columbus, and Cleveland. While Garlick’s importance as the first American to successfully propagate trout, Seth Green has been credited with a larger role.
in the history of artificial trout propagation and diffusion. Green had built a career as a commercial fisherman in the Great Lakes and took interest in the hatchery concept from watching salmon building their redds in Canada. He drew on these experiments with brook trout on a Caledonia stream. Soon Green became the leading figure in the spread of the brook trout. Working with the fertilized eggs, Green developed a process to ship eggs in large numbers. Soon his fry and eggs were readily shipped from New York to hatcheries around the country. 4 As hatchery brook trout diffused beyond their native range. Hatchery brook trout began displacing native fish around the country. Within their own native range the hatchery fish diluted the wild gene pool by spawning with the native fish, thereby contributing to the genetic homogeneity that has characterized brook trout around the country. In Michigan the brook trout out competed the grayling and pushed this native fish to extinction. The same happened to the cutthroat trout of the Rocky Mountains. There too, brook trout out competed the natives for food and resources, pushing cutthroats to the brink of extinction in many of their native water sheds.

Green became one of three commissioners of the New York State Fish Commission when it was formed in 1868. Within his one year of service he gained support from the state legislature to the tune of $10,000 for a fish propagation program.5 Upon creation of the program Green became the first superintendent of fish culture for the state and held the position until his death in 1888.6 His tradition of fishery management that continues to this day. Not until 1959 with the creation of Trout Unlimited, did the scientific and fly fishing community begin to diverge from Green’s

4 Nick Karas, Brook Trout (Guilford: The Lyons Press, 1997), 78.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
practice of stream management through hatchery stocking. Beginning in the late 1800s and lasting about 100 years a program that favored the science of a put and take fishery over the management of a natural ecosystem prevailed. Michigan, a leading state in the culture of fly fishing and sport fish management was quick to adopt the process of a put and take fishery as well as the more modern holistic method of management. With the near extinction of the grayling, the possibilities that artificial propagation offered started Michigan on its own path of hatchery dependence that mimicked the national trends.

Although brook trout have become one of the more enduring fish in the hearts of Michigan fly fishers, its native range did not extend to the streams of the Lower Peninsula where this speckled flanked fish has become a dominant cold water species. Prior to man’s disastrous relationship with the grayling, brook trout were limited to the Upper Peninsula and a few streams draining into Lake Michigan in the northern portions of the Lower Peninsula. These strains were probably Coaster Brook Trout. Coasters lived most of their lives in the bays and estuaries of the lake and move in and out of rivers to spawn and feed. They were larger than their stream brethren, but genetically similar. As for the rest of Michigan’s coldwater streams, such as the Au Sable, grayling dominated.

N. W. Clark of Clarkston, Michigan was the first person to hatch and raise brook trout in Michigan. He raised trout, salmon and whitefish on his property. The small private hatchery began brook trout production in either 1866 or 1867. Clark had gained his knowledge from observing Green’s operation in Caledonia. Clark moved to Northville, Michigan in 1873 to accommodate his growing operation. This larger property provided between 300 and 400 gallons of spring fed water a minute. Hatcheries
are dependent on a constant flow of cold water to property hatch the trout eggs. Stream
flow prevents the eggs from sticking together. Depending on the species, fry with their
yolk sacks hatch relatively quickly. A common flaw of these early hatcheries, was that
the trout rarely stayed where they were supposed to. Fry and smaller fish had a habit of
escaping the confines of the hatchery. They were content to make their homes in the
downstream portions of the waterways that hatcheries adjoined. From Northville and
other private hatcheries in Michigan escaped brook trout populated southern Michigan
streams.

The Au Sable’s remote location, and adequate supply of grayling did not
necessitate a hatchery. Based upon the brook trout’s sporting reputation, Clark and
Daniel Fitzhugh, were celebrated for being the first to release rainbow trout into the Au
Sable in the mid 1870s. Some other unknown individual deserves the credit for
introducing the brook trout to the grayling. The Michigan Fish Commission took notice
at the success brook trout were having in Michigan and mentioned in its 1880 report:

We have become satisfied that this fish is capable of a much wider range
throughout the state than formally supposed. Some having escaped from
private ponds into the different streams in almost all parts of the state,
have so grown and multiplied as to leave no doubt of the perfect
practicability of their successful introduction and propagation in nearly all
the smaller streams.

Following in the footsteps of New York, Michigan started its own state hatchery
program.

Commercial fishers’ interest in protecting the whitefish fishery of the lakes
resulted in the establishment of the Michigan Fish Commission in 1873. Based upon
Clark’s success, the state purchased a site at Pokagon, and began hatching whitefish and

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7 Ibid., 151.
8 Ibid., 149.
salmon in the same year. An article from Walter J. Huntsaker, a former president of the Michigan Fish Commission, indicated that by 1880 the state was stocking over 50,000 trout a year. By 1919 the state stocked 25 million trout every two years. The state also practiced the planting of trout fry. These were juvenile fish that were only a few inches long. Fry were often planted instead of adult fish for economic reasons. It was similar to putting cattle out to pasture to fatten. Instead of the open range the fish are put in the aquatic common lands of the state to take the abundance of food available. Keeping the trout in the hatchery to adulthood was expensive. The longer the fish were kept in pens the more food pellets they consumed and the greater their chance for infectious disease. Hatcheries were notorious for the spread of disease. Garlick and Green both made comments about preventing the spread of fungi and other diseases. Hatchery fry placed in a river also became more habituated to the natural environment than did adult plantings. If the fry were lucky enough to make it to adulthood they had spent the formative years in a natural stream, instead of a cement hatchery. These fish had to fend for themselves in the wild without the assistance of a hatchery and its daily feedings of fish pellets.

Michigan found its hatchery program to be successful and emphasis was placed on the stocking of brook trout. Hunsaker wrote,

Where grayling once had an exclusive home in the Southern Peninsula, he is known no more in all his silver rainbow beauty. Salvelinus Fontinalis occupies his place in as great, if not greater, abundance. Artificial planting in those former grayling waters, through the overturning of

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Nature’s plan by man, has been an unqualified success, so far as the brook trout is concerned.\textsuperscript{11} With the planting of brook trout beginning in 1879, the state had depended on the Pokagon station to support its brook trout program. Due to an inadequate water supply, however in 1881 the state established a new trout hatchery in Paris, Michigan that produced over 5,000,000 trout fry a year.\textsuperscript{12}

The planting of Michigan hatchery fish had one important stipulation, that the fish could only be planted in water that was allowed public access. Private ponds, streams or club waters were not supported by the state resources. Most private clubs purchased their trout from the state, raised their own, or purchased trout from several of the private hatcheries around the state. Few trout clubs were interested in the fry anyway, their members demanded large, easy to catch fish, which is what hatcheries are known to produce.

Distribution of the hatchery fry became an industry in itself. Michigan quickly realized its importance in the sport fishing industry and the value of vacationing anglers finding Michigan streams full of trout, if not grayling. The planting of trout in the thousands of streams around the state was dependent upon the cooperative nature of the railroads and sport fishermen. Michigan’s railroad companies recognized the possibilities that sport fishing offered as a business venture. Anglers of wealth and means had flocked to the state in search of grayling, and the same could happen with trout. The Flint & Pere Marquette Railway planted fish from both Michigan’s Paris hatchery and the US Fish Commission’s federal hatchery in Northville, Michigan. In 1874 the railroad company’s superintendent, Sanford Keeler, purchased a railway car he named the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 148  \\
\textsuperscript{12} Robertson, 6.}
“Peckanese” and began to plant trout. The “Peggy” as it became to be known was a hybrid between a car and an engine—a small locomotive with a car attached directly to it. The “Peggy” could function on its own, and was not dependent on the usual railway traffic for its trout plantings.

Sportsmen were notified of plantings and volunteers helped to carry the trout, which were usually kept in milk canisters, to the stream. The railroads allowed the Fish Commission to transport fish in ten gallon milk canisters in baggage cars. The railways also leased entire baggage cars to the Commission during the five month planting season. In 1888 the Fish Commission, following in the footsteps of the Flint & Pere Marquette Railway, purchased its first fish car. The car was 55 feet long, 9 feet and 8 inches wide. It had five berths for sleeping, a kitchen, a hot water system, and an office. Lockers to hold the 10 gallon canisters lined the entire length of the car. Plenty of ice was held in the car for the regulation of water temperature, and aeration was provided to keep the trout well supplied. The car was later damaged but repaired and renamed “Fontinalis” to honor the brook trout legacy. The car was used until 1912, when the “Wolverine” took over. This new car had a much larger capacity which it needed to meet angler demand. The fish car averaged 25,000 miles a year. By the early 1920s the railway car was phased out as trucks took over the job of carrying hatchery fry through the woods of Michigan.

More often than not, the trout that were loaded into the chilled milk containers of the “Fontinalis” carried the same name as their transportation to their new watery homes.

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14 Robertson, 10.
15 Robertson, 11.
Brook trout were the favorite of fishermen and hatchery managers alike. The best strains of hatchery to river brook trout were hardy, resistant to disease, and most importantly, grew fast. Fishermen preferred brook trout to the rainbow and especially the brown because the brook trout was eager to take flies. In 1888 Michigan’s romance with hatchery brook trout, which began innocently enough with Clark’s early hatchery success, became a full blown love affair, with brook trout being released into every stream, creek, and ditch that looked remotely trout like. A 1881 report from the Superintendent of Michigan State Fisheries realized the economic potential of a hatchery program. He wrote,

Not less than 1,000,000 brook trout fry should be hatched yearly for Michigan streams, which would, aside from the luxury placed upon on tables, invite the sportsmen at the proper season from the less favored adjoining States to our wooded streams, furnishing transportation to our railroads and money to our citizens.16

The State had witnessed the success of private hatcheries and the railroads. Inns, taverns, guides and all the necessities for the traveling angler were dependent upon the fledging grayling fishery and brook trout propagation.

Unregulated, unsupervised, and unorganized, Michigan’s sport fishing program needed to be centralized and coordinated, and that is just what the Michigan Department of Fisheries intended to do. Trout became a commodity. Michigan and other states invested heavily into brook trout propagation, more so than any individual could. Their fish hatcheries could mass produce the fish, and then load them on to their state’s specialized railcar and ship them off to the four corners of the state. Soon, every river, even those devastated by logging and over fishing, rivers that could not support a native,

16 Superintendent of Michigan State Fisheries (Lansing: W. S. George & CO., State Printers and Binders 1881), 15.
natural population of grayling, could be stocked full of feisty brook trout. Anglers continued to purchase train tickets, book rooms at lodges, hire guides, purchase breakfast before heading out for the day, get a warm meal and a bit of whiskey to take off the night’s chill. Guides would continue to be employed, and perhaps most importantly, property adjoining the clear waters of the Au Sable and other streams would see more cabins and lodges along their clear cut banks. Disease resistant fingerling brook trout, fat from hatchery food pellets, were the promised solution to the crashing grayling fishery and the industry that depended upon it.

While brook trout were certainly planted in the Au Sable by private bucket biologists prior to the state’s intervention, Michigan carefully waded into these waters, the hallowed grounds of the grayling. Anglers had sought the support of the state to replenish the Au Sable. Although some grayling survived in the river in the mid 1880s, their numbers were greatly diminished due to fishing pressure, logging and the introduction of non-native brook trout. The state had received petitions for stocking for several years, but hesitated to place brook trout in the most famous grayling river in the United States. In its 1880 report, the Fish Commission wrote,

It is a matter that the people should know, that the brook trout is the natural enemy of the grayling. It is quite true that the adult fish live in seeming good fellowship together, the trout deeming it prudent to refrain from attempting to swallow a neighbor fully his own size and weight, and more than his equal in strength. But the tender young grayling, with their slender, translucent bodies, furnish a toothsome morsel for his troutship; and, be assured, he does not hesitate to take it. For this reason good grayling streams should never be planted with trout; and it is hoped that the people will have such care to preserving of the grayling as not to allow it to be wholly destroyed.17

17 Ibid., 19.
This report was written only six years after Norris and his exploratory grayling fishing expedition had salted away hundreds of pounds of grayling over the course of a few days of fly fishing. In those six years the grayling’s survival was threatened.

In 1884 the Commission responded to angler demands for the planting of the spotted, green backed trout. Rueben Babbitt, originally from Grayling, was sent from his work at the Paris Fish Hatchery to the river to secure adult grayling. These adults were to be taken back to the hatchery were they could be bred and eventually be used to establish a grayling sanctuary in another Crawford County stream, the Manistee River. The Manistee also had a thriving grayling population. Perhaps due to Norris’s article and the train station being conveniently located in Grayling, right next to the river, the Manistee grayling fared somewhat better than those in the Au Sable. Unfortunately for the Manistee grayling, logging and fishing pressure increased there as well and another river’s population was forever lost. Babbitt conducted a study on 20 miles of the river from Grayling. He was unable to find a single grayling to capture for the state’s hatchery program. That was all the proof the state needed. Following the advice of D. H. Fitzhugh, who had popularized the grayling fishery and planted some of the first brook trout in the river, the state reluctantly agreed with the public, the Au Sable needed to be stocked with brook trout.

Michigan sold the Au Sable grayling out for a more consistent, and economically stable brook trout fishery. The grayling population depended upon natural reproduction. Environmental degradation threatened natural reproduction and made it unstable. Could nature be trusted to sustain a fishery that was threatened by over fishing, non native species and angler lust? The state had grown accustomed to the revenue from out of state
fishermen. Logging and fishing were the economies of Grayling, Michigan. White pine was being wiped out and loggers looked to other stretches of the state to fuel their operations. The logging economy was moving. Brook trout, however, were a renewable resource. The process was simple. The fish were hatched in the fall at the state hatchery. Within a month or so the fry and larger fingerlings were ready to be planted all around the state and millions were shipped each year. Once in the stream, the trout were safe from fishermen because the season did not begin until May. The rivers provided all the necessary nutrients, and because the trout were selectively bred for growth, they quickly reached the legal size, depending on the year, of six to eight inches.

The average life span of a hatchery trout was only expected to be two years. Those that were fortunate enough to overcome the numerous odds against their survival, could spawn and contribute to the stream bred brethren of the hatchery. The Au Sable was too large a river to be left to chance and nature. Science, state management and a panel of experts would pick up where nature had left off. The Fish Commission found that the Au Sable, “is the largest and most important stream of the lower peninsula capable of rearing and supporting a large supply of valuable food and game fish.” The progressive faith in science and government regulation signaled the failure to protect the Au Sable grayling. An artificial, hatchery raised, brook trout legacy began to unfold.

Brook trout were the first game fish to be artificially propagated in the US, but not the first trout. Brook trout were not members of the trout family, but closely related to artic charr, bull trout and the river wolf of Mongolia, the taiman. Anglers looked to both California and Europe for the next great freshwater game fish. California trout, mountain

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18 Superintendent of Michigan State Fisheries (Lansing: W. S. George & CO., State Printers and Binders 1885), 33.
trout, or rainbow trout, became the next experimental hatchery subject. Rainbow trout proved to be just as capable as the brook trout in the hatchery and in the stream. Rainbows added to the sportsmen’s mix that Michigan streams provided. Their silvery sheen was reminiscent of the grayling, but their rainbow hue ran down their flanks instead of some oversized dorsal fin as it was with the grayling. Rainbows had earned a reputation as being eager to take a fly, with abandon equal to the brook trout, but nowhere as reckless as the grayling. The added bonus to the sportsmen’s special was the rainbow’s propensity to leap and jump when hooked, something no self respecting brook trout would ever do.

In 1876, Fitzhugh, the same Au Sable guru who introduced the world to the grayling and first introduced brook trout into the stream, secured rainbow eggs from the McCloud River in California. The eggs were hatched and planted as fry in the river, probably with the help of Frank Clark. Clark was the state’s leading fish propagator and he soon obtained 125 yearling rainbows from a private hatchery in California. These fish were used as brood stock, the base of the rainbow breeding population. Clark was no longer dependent upon California or other states for rainbow eggs, but could generate his own hatchery supply. A generation later, these fish produced fry for the Au Sable.

The state began to breed rainbows in 1880 when the Fish Commission received 2,000 rainbow eggs from the McCloud River.¹⁹ From these fish the state began to build its rainbow breeding program, which it used to populate rivers in both the Lower and Upper Peninsulas. These fish became the basis for the state’s steelhead fishery that eventually became a significant sport fishery of its own. Ernest Hemingway popularized

¹⁹ Robertson, 20.
Michigan rainbows when he wrote about the magnificent rainbow fishing he had at the rapids in Sault Ste. Marie.

Rainbows became very popular with the fishermen of both private and public water. They fed during the day, grew to sizes much larger than the brook trout, and did well in the cool streams of Michigan. While brook trout became the most popular fish among the fly fishers of Michigan, the rainbow established a phenomenal steelhead fishery that rivaled the declining wild runs of the Pacific Northwest. The arrival of the brown trout proved to be the most controversial of the trout to be introduced to Michigan.

Unlike brook trout and rainbow trout, there were no domestic sources of brown trout eggs in North America. Hatcheries, both private and public, had relatively easy access to eggs and fry from the eastern brook trout populations and the west coast rainbows. Brown trout were native to Europe, commonly found in England, France, Germany, northern Spain, east to Iran and south to the Atlas Mountains of North Africa. Before artificial propagation diluted the genetic pool, genetically distinct variations abounded, with distinct strains inhabiting different streams separated by only a few miles of mountains or forest. European propagation created a brown trout that was as equally adapted to the hatchery as brook and rainbow trout in the U.S. This process created a brown trout that was a genetic hodgepodge, bred to fight infectious disease, and to put on rapid growth while being fed a steady supply of hatchery fish pellets. Speaking about the genetic diversity that characterized the brown trout of Europe, compared to the brown trout that would eventually populate American streams, the well respected, contemporary fish biologist, Dr. Robert Behnke wrote,

I consider our North American brown trout to be an ‘all purpose, generic’ type of trout resulting from the mixing of several different life history
forms. Perhaps because of this early mixing of different forms, the brown trout stocked so widely in North America had a broad base of hereditary diversity (heterozygosity) that facilitated adaptations to new environments.²⁰

On February 23, 1883, the German ship Werra arrived in New York carrying 80,000 brown trout eggs. These eggs had been arranged by Fred Mather, who had taken part in the identification of Michigan grayling, and who had been appointed as a special assistant to Spencer Baird, the U.S. Fish Commissioner. Mather oversaw an exhibit at the International Fisheries Exhibition in Berlin where he met Baron von Behr, the president of the German Fisheries Society. While private arrangements had brought brown trout to the Old Colony Trout Ponds in Plymouth, Massachusetts around 1880, this new arrangement would be the first official government interest in raising European brown trout. The earlier private shipment was not propagated, nor was it distributed, meaning that it marked the arrival of the first source of what would become the widely distributed brown trout in America. This shipment contained both stream and lake dwelling trout.

The number of eggs overran the capacity of the federal hatchery on Cold Spring Long Island. The remaining eggs were divided between Clark’s former Northville hatchery in Michigan which was then a federal facility, and Green’s private hatchery in Caldonia, New York. On February 5, 1884, 70,000 additional eggs arrived, and were sent to Northville and Caldonia. From these eggs came the first stocking of European brown trout in American waters by the federal government. Arriving on a federal fish

stocking train, 4,900 brown trout fingerlings were placed in the Baldwin River, a tributary to the Pere Marquette in Michigan.\textsuperscript{21} Behnke wrote, 

The Pere Marquette originally contained grayling and the 1884 stocking of brown trout initiated a history of brown trout contributing to the replacement of native American salmonids-grayling in Michigan and Montana, brook trout in many Eastern rivers, and especially cutthroat in the West.\textsuperscript{22} 

Soon the brown trout were found throughout Michigan’s streams and rivers, including the Au Sable system. Anglers were initially excited by the prospects of this new game species. Brown trout are known for their ability to reach mammoth sizes. Although different strains varied in their type and shade of coloration, browns were commonly characterized by a buttery brown color, with black spots and orange dots circled by bluish halos. As large and a beautiful as browns were, they quickly fell out of favor with the anglers that had dispersed this new immigrant.

As one of Michigan’s leading conservationist, William Butts Mershon, who also owned a large tract of land on the North Brach of the Au Sable, often shared his opinions with friends, local newspapers, the general public, and on an even more frequent basis, with the Michigan Fish Commission. A famed grayling angler, who was on the river at the same time that Norrish explored the Au Sable for \textit{Forest and Stream}, Mershon had fought to have a portion of the Manistee River closed to angling to protect the last remnants of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula grayling. Brook trout were his favorite grayling replacement. His seven miles of property upstream from Lovells, Michigan provided some of the best brook trout water in Michigan. In cooperation with T. E. Douglas, a one time lumber baron and then owner of a prominent fishing lodge in Lovells, the two had

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
ordered the stocking of the North Branch for years with help from the state. In 1912 Mershon noticed that rainbow trout began to appear in the stream. He found that they competed with his brook trout for food and tended to push the brook trout out of their holes. The thought of brown trout entering his stream frightened Mershon even more, because browns were known to cannibalize a stream, eating anything up to one third their size. Working with the Au Sable Trout and Game Club in 1912, Mershon and his property partners arranged for a screen to be placed at one of the dams to prevent the migration of any rainbows or brown trout from the lower portions of the river into his section of stream. In requesting this screen Mershon violated one of Michigan’s earliest trout conservation laws, written in 1861, which mandated that chutes be placed to provide passage over all dams. In 1877 the state even provided a model for dam owners to copy, but the measure was not enforced.

Mershon’s sentiments about the brown trout mirrored what many sporting anglers felt. In his memoir of fishing and hunting he commented on Michigan’s stocking of brown trout after the federal hatchery had stocked the Pere Marquette. The brown trout arrived in Michigan at the same time as the German carp, which was also initially praised by the public, but soon fell into disfavor for its propensity to overpopulate rivers and lakes. Mershon wrote, “Here arrives also the year of the German Brown trout (it seemed a pretty good year for Germans); for the Commission put into the state’s waters in 1889

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23 William Butts Mershon to W.J. Hartwig, 15 July 1912. Box 32, Folder William Butts Mershon Correspondence Papers. The Mershon Collection in the Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. (Mershon Collection hereafter)  
[1883 marked the first federal planning of brown trout] its first hatching of browns-20,000 fry which went into the inlet of Deer Lakes at Boyne Falls.25

Stocking brown trout continued on and off in Michigan and around the country during the early 1900s. Initially they were out of favor with fly fishermen, not only because of the fish’s cannibal ways, but also because the brown proved to be especially difficult to catch. The largest of the brown trout feed primarily at night, and would much rather eat another trout or a mouse swimming across the surface than a small fly. This aggravated the fly fishing community, until Theodore Gordon popularized fishing small flies for the finicky brown trout in the U.S. Gordon was an accomplished fly angler and writer from the Catskills of New York. His style of dry fly fishing, where the fly pattern was an adult fly that floated on the surface, did a much better job of catching the challenging brown. The timing of Gordon’s refined angling methods coincided with the introduction of the brown and the perfection of split bamboo fly rods that allowed for better casting and more precise presentations of the fly. As time went on the brown gained more support among anglers, and its stocking continued.

Mershon, however, and the anglers of the North Branch of the Au Sable, continued to resist the state’s stocking of the brown trout in their waters. By 1926 Mershon and other prominent angling citizens from Grayling actively opposed the state’s stocking in certain portions of the Au Sable watershed. This argument overlapped with the state’s purchase of the Grayling Fish Hatchery Club. This club was organized by residents from Grayling, such as the Hanson family, and prominent fly fishers, such as Mershon. Members cooperated with the state and in effect, were paid by the state to

operate the facility in the form of trout to be stocked. Brook trout were the favorite, and
the North Branch received almost nothing but brook trout. In 1926 the state took over the
hatchery and began to follow its own plan of stocking, which included planting browns in
a larger area of the Au Sable. This enraged Mershon and others who feared what the
brown might do to their brook trout fishery. Brook trout were seen as the rightly heirs to
the graylings’ throne and no coup in the form of a German fish was going to spoil things.

In 1925 Mershon found the first browns in his section of the river. In his fishing
ledger he wrote, “THIS IS THE FIRST YEAR WE HAVE NOTICED. THE BROWN
TROUT. . . . 5” to 6” we have hereafter(?) taken an occasional 7” or larger-not many but
this year we get many under 7”. Showing the pest is here. Is he the English Sparrow,
Starling, Carp, Pheasant, et. Et.”26 In 1926 Mershon feared two things for his river. One,
he now lacked control of the river’s planting because the state had taken ownership of the
private hatchery. Two, lacking control over the planting, brown trout and rainbow trout
would begin to show in the river according to the Fish Commissions plans. Mershon’s
control, his ownership of the North Branch of the Au Sable River was being threatened.

Writing to the Fish Comission in 1927, Mershon explained his opposition to the brown,
which he had earlier expressed to Dr. Metzelaar, one of the members of the commission:

I have always objected to the planting of brown trout because once they
get into a native trout stream the brook trout are sure to go. Once Dr.
Metzelaar asked why I objected to the brown trout. I asked him why it
was that I, a native of the United States, loved the Stars and Stripes better
than I did any foreign flag. The brook trout is the trout of our country, and
I naturally object to its extermination by the importation of a foreigner.”27

26 Mershon, Box 42, FolderAugust 15, 1917 Trout Records. Mershon Collectin.
27 William Butts Mershon to the Conservation Commission, 17 May 1927. Box 20, Folder
Mershon wrote “I cannot help but resent as an interloper the brown trout and the rainbow just the same as I resented the coming of the carp, the English sparrow, the Bolshevik and the Mafia, the Socialist and all these other kindred pests that came from Europe . . .”28 Touching on nativist sentiments, Mershon wrongly asserted that the Au Sable was a “native trout stream.” Brook trout were no more native to the stream than were these new interlopers. Mershon mimicked the sentiments of so many other Americans who resented the throngs of European peasants making their way to America. The socialists, Catholics, communists, from Germany, Italy, Russia, had pushed and displaced true Americans from power and influence. Angler resentment of German brown trout followed the broader feelings of American society. This was, after all, a period of progressive reform, when democracy was to be restored and ripped from the claws of corrupt political machines. Immigration reform was to be based upon one’s natural state of origin. For the first time America systematically restricted the immigration of the world.

Progressive historian, Richard Hofstader, believed that the progressive movement was nothing more than a conservative, East Coast reaction to the influences of the new American society. Immigrants, working with political machines, had disrupted the historical mantels of urban politics. Political machines were viewed as democracy run amuck. The new wealth of the captains of industry also threatened traditional power. Oil and steel produced men fair richer and more powerful than any member of Congress or inhabitant of the White House. These fears culminated in an organized effort to limit the effects of runaway immigration. The only way to restore American society and virtues

was to limit the influence of these powerbases. One wonders how Thomas Nash would have cartooned the German brown. What would his features have been? One can almost imagine an image with Lady Liberty and the American brook trout cowering in the corner as the muscled, glowing eyed, German brown trampled on the American flag as he and his cronies flexed their muscles in their new waters. To American anglers, the brown represented more than just a threat to the American brook trout, but also as another reminder of the European influences that threatened to displace their idea of what America represented.

What Mershon and others hoped to create through the state’s hatchery program was a fishery that was fisher friendly. Grayling were the preferred fish, especially among the fly fishing angling elite, but the grayling was all but extinct in Michigan by the time brown trout started to make the Au Sable their own. Brook trout, the newly crowned prince of the Au Sable, was a crowd pleaser. He grew fast and strong in the private and public hatcheries. A steady supply of new fish were manufactured each year to supplement angler pressure on the natural reproduction. Brook trout played by the rules. They were known to chase flies with reckless abandon. Putting up a good fight, their oranges, greens, and olives were the delight of Winslow Homer watercolors as well as the hot oil of a frying pan. Light lines, with gaudy colored wet flies were the order of the day, and the brook trout responded. No self respecting Au Sable brook trout would resort to slurping small mammals in the dark of the night. These eight inch stream beauties kept bankers hours, unlike their newly arrived German neighbors. Mershon, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, and the rest of the crowd from Saginaw, Detroit, and Toledo were quite content to make their way to the Au Sable for a little weekend recreation with the
dependable brook trout. It was easy to see why Mershon momentarily forgot about the once dominant grayling in describing the Au Sable brook trout as native. The river was still there, the lodges were booked, rods were ready, flies had been tied, guides hired, business arranged, what was the difference of the fish of choice was native or not? They were eager to take the fly, a joy to catch, plentiful due to millions of hatchery fry, life was good.

This was the most popular sentiment among the common angler concerning hatchery fish at the turn of the century. Hatcheries were the consensus. Thaddeus Norris, the same who wrote the tell all article on the Au Sable grayling, wrote that hatcheries were the most logical solution to the country’s struggling fisheries. A lack of state and federal government oversight had resulted in the destruction of natural reproducing fisheries. The numerous dams and spillways constructed all across the country prevented the migration of spawning fish on almost every significant river in the country. Norris saw this as an epidemic, one that was too large to systematically be solved. Dams abounded on rivers such as the Au Sable. Why force the construction of fish passages or the removal of the dams? The dams all served a purpose. It would be costly to fight each individual dam owner in court. Someone would have to regulate the dams and do so with authority. Why not find a better solution, a more economical solution? Hatcheries provided the answer.

Artificial propagation provided higher rates of maturity, therefore larger fish. The cement lined walls of the hatchery, with carefully constructed nets that prevented birds of prey for stealing easy meals, and where the fish were grouped according to their age cohort, provided the most secure method of fish rearing. All the dangers and pitfalls of
the natural world were eliminated. Food abounded for all, and the health and safety of
the fish was the concern of paid professionals. Finally, it made economic sense in the
market. Norris wrote, “If trout, seventy or eighty of the fry may be grown to weigh a
pound or more, in three years and are worth seventy-five cents or a dollar a pound in the
market.” 29 It was a rare sentiment when David Starr Jordan and Barton Warren
Everymann lamented at the decline of the wild brook trout charr in America. Jordan, the
president of Leland Stanford University, and Everymann an ichthyologist with the U.S.
Fish Commission wrote, “Not all the trout will cease to be. They will still be hatched by
machinery and raised in ponds, fattened on chopped liver, and grow flabby and lose their
spots.” 30

29 Thaddeus Norris, American Fish Culture (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1874), 14.
30 David Starr Jordan and Barton Warren Everymann, American Food and Game Fishes: A
Popular Account of all the Species in North America North of the Equator, with Keys for Ready
Identification, Life Histories and Methods of Capture (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1905),
209.
Chapter Six
River Police

Threats to commercial and recreational fisheries were too much for private organizations to handle. The guides’ failed grassroots effort to protect the grayling demonstrated that conservation needed greater organization, strength, power, money, and clout. During the late 1800s Michigan developed a state regulatory commission to protect the state’s fisheries. The state built upon the influences of various private conservation organizations and worked with them in forming new policies. Conservation was to become a cooperative venture between the state and private conservationists. Government directed conservation did have similarities to private conservation. It deepened the fracture between outside conservationists and local subsistence anglers. Laws were created at the state level and enforced by state employees. New state conservation laws made traditional angling practices and made them illegal. It made new crimes out of old practices, like fishing with spears or even fishing with bait on the North Branch of the Au Sable. One branch of state conservation that highlighted the tension between locals, outside conservationists, and the state was the creation and application of the state game and fish wardens. The Au Sable wardens had to walk a fine line between adherence to state laws and allegiance to locals. As government conservation evolved the line swung further away from both local pressure and private conservationists. The growth of professional, scientific conservation moved the practice away from its grassroots base and towards government control. Over time the cooperative balance
moved more towards governmental dominance as the state became more able to chart its
own course with its own professional conservation agenda.

By 1870 an entire industry stood on the verge of destruction. The once
magnificent schools of whitefish that inhabited the Western Basin of Lake Erie, the
Detroit River, and Lake Huron were on the brink of crashing. A Detroit based fishing
industry faced collapse if something was not done to protect its resource. The whitefish
population’s decline could be traced to over fishing and urban growth. In 1835, 4,000
barrels of salted whitefish were taken from the Detroit River alone. This was roughly one
third of the entire catch for the year. An introduction of more effective netting techniques
increased the total catch over the next two decades, but by 1870 it became apparent that
the whitefish was a threatened species. Artificial fish propagation was the conservation
method of the day and a private effort developed among the Detroit whitefish fishing
fleet.¹ It became apparent that the environmental dilemma they faced could not be solved
through private efforts. Instead, the state government was needed to fund hatchery
developments and to legislate conservation efforts.

The Michigan State Legislature convened in 1873 and immediately addressed the
commercial fishing issue. With the support of Governor John Bagley, the Michigan Fish
Commission was formed. The first board consisted of Governor Bagley, George Clark,
and George Jerome Niles. In 1875 the board created three commissioners who were to
serve various lengths in term. The primary focus of the group was to immediately
address the commercial food fish issue in the form of artificial propagation. The first

¹ Russell Robertson, “A Review of Fishing and Fish Culture During Michigan’s Early Years.”
state fish hatchery opened in 1873 at Pokagon in Cass County.\textsuperscript{2} It focused on whitefish and salmon, both important to the commercial fishing industry, but not all that important to the then developing sport fishing industry. All early fish propagation efforts were primarily directed at commercial fishing. A hatchery was established in a rented building in Detroit at the corner of Joseph Campeau and LaFayette. Another hatchery was established in 1886 in Petoskey, Michigan for whitefish propagation.\textsuperscript{3} In the early 1890s a hatchery was opened in Sault Ste. Marie capable of producing 30 million whitefish eggs a year. Brook trout production also started at this hatchery.\textsuperscript{4} This marked the beginning of state sponsored fish conservation.

The state’s Fish Commission grew from the influence of sportsmen conservation which advocated the scientific and systematic management of a resource. Sportsmen conservation called for the scientific management to maximize the resource, namely game. It was often directed by special interest groups and prominent individuals. The Boone and Crockett Club was one of the earliest sportsmen conservation organizations. It did not promote the protection of all species, mainly those that its hunters and fishers could target. On a more local level, the Michigan Fishermen’s Association was a popular sportsmen conservation organization within the state. Often times the conservation agendas of the various sportsmen associations conflicted with each other. For example, the passage of state regulations banning the spring hunting of migratory birds was a controversial law that had various organizations acting in the name of conservation on both sides. The same battles and arguments took place on the national level with federal regulation of migratory bird hunting under the initial Weeks-McLean Act in 1913 and

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 6.
later with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. The issue divided sportsmen and the industries they supported such as the firearms industry.

Sportsmen conservation has had a mixed past. Historian John F. Reiger’s history, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, stated that sportsmen were dedicated to protecting the rights of nature. He wrote,

> Farmers and ranchers made poor nature loves, seeing wildlife only as competitors or sources of profit. Sportsmen, on the other hand, regarded most animals and birds with nonutilitarian motives. Not depending on nature for a livelihood, sportsmen were the only large group of Americans who came to woods and fields for mainly recreational and aesthetic reasons. It is no wonder, then, that they would take the initiative in preserving nonsporting species as well as those traditionally pursued as game.5

Reiger’s argument does find examples in Michigan in the intermediate stages of stream conservation. Early sportsmen had fished the resource to extinction, but later sportsmen trends shifted towards conservation. These sportsmen were most concerned with the protection of their specific species of interest. Game did not provide an economic or utilitarian use, but the commitment to protecting a group’s favorite species, brook trout for example, often meant the protection of that species to the exclusion of competing interests.

The protection of Michigan recreational species came in several different forms. One method was to insure enough game for everyone. This concept has already been addressed with both the private and public development of a hatchery system. Another method sought to exclude aspects of nature and the public that threatened the species.

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This resulted in the attempt to exterminate threatening species such as wolves, coyotes, and Northern Pike. The belief that fewer predators would result in greater numbers of deer, elk, or brook trout was misguided, but strictly followed throughout much of the early sportsmen conservation movement. John Baird, Director of the Michigan Fish Commission responded to a request to look into the Merganser Ducks that had been eating brook trout fry on the North Branch of the Au Sable. Baird wrote, “I really think that it would be better if half of the game wardens were put to work in exterminating predatory animals than in trying to arrest men for technical violations of the law.” The previously mentioned angler hatred of the brown trout seems to defy Reiger’s logic as well.

Michigan sportsmen also practiced conservation in the form of legislation. They used the Michigan Fish Commission and the state legislature to enact laws that focused on creating out of state fishing license, mandated fish passages for all waterway obstructions, closed angling seasons, bag limits and size limits. Each of these laws sought to protect the fish population so that all who wished to angle for them had the opportunity.

Why were wardens given such strong powers? Game conservation laws were relatively new to Michigan and America at the turn of the century. The earliest laws were created in the Colonies to protect spawning mackerel and deer populations in the spring. Prior to the mid 1800s, few states had game and fish laws. Most human populations were used to hunting and fishing unfettered by state and local restrictions. Fishing for local inhabitants not only provided a little rest and relaxation but also food for

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the table. Market hunters and fishers worked hunted and fished for pay. Not all local inhabitants were interested in the joyous pleasures of casting a fly rod for small trout but instead looked for more reliable angling methods. The use of nets and spears had a long tradition of use before the state limited their applications on many inland waterways. In 1873, Michigan closed inland waterways to netting during the months of March, April and May.\(^7\) This was one of the earliest state fish and game regulations. In 1891, the use of spears, dynamite, explosives, and artificial lights was prohibited.\(^8\)

What dynamite lacked in aesthetic qualities, it made up for in its ability to produce food. The practiced dynamite angler carefully lit his “lure” and tossed it into a pool that was a likely spot for trout, bass, grayling, or other species. The concussion blast from the explosion stunned or killed the fish and they floated to the surface. There the angler used a net to gather up his catch. This method did not provide a means to sort through and selectively harvest mature fish. Large and small were all the recipients of its fatal blow. Netting at least harvested fish of appropriate size. An interesting comment from a commercial fisherman in New York revealed one opinion of anglers who looked at fishing as a form of entertainment. This individual felt that waters that were commercially fished with nets produced plenty of fish by keeping only the larger fish and letting the smaller fish reproduce. He noted that waters with recreational angling often needed to be supported by stocking programs, and even then lacked in fish. He stated the following about recreational anglers:

However if the fish were put here for the purpose of providing sport for pleasure seekers, the net would not be the proper equipment for they prefer to torture the fish for the fun they get out of it. A fish as well as a

\(^7\) Ibid., 20.
man has a sense of feeling and suffers after being hooked, and the longer this period of torture can be extended, the more fun the so-called ‘sportsman’ can get out of it. I believe God created fish for food for mankind and not to satisfy a depraved and perverted mind.9

A tradition of angling and hunting, regulated by custom and guided by natural observations had kept game and fish populations in check. The onset of modern technology, combined with a surge in population growth and expanding markets necessitated the creation of state fish and game laws. Hunters and fishers serving the urban markets of Chicago, Detroit and Toledo deployed the newest technology in order to capitalize on growing demand. Pothunters as they were called played their role in the grayling and passenger pigeon’s extinction. New technology in the form of guns and nets allowed for larger kills in the fields and streams. In 1875, laws aimed at market fishermen banned the selling and buying of fish during closed seasons.10 Just two years prior to this law the fishing for brook trout and grayling was restricted to a season between June 1 and October 1.11 Also in 1875, the sale of brook trout and grayling to out of state parties was outlawed. In 1907 Michigan reiterated the ban on out of state sales of brook trout and whatever grayling one could find, and also added bass to the regulation.12 The market and local subsistence fisherman certainly took a toll on the state’s resources. The whitefish of Lake Erie, Detroit River and Lake Huron arrived at the brink of extinction because of commercial fishing. The grayling of the Au Sable were reported to find a very popular in Chicago. In the minds of the state’s sportsmen, commercial and

10 Ibid., 22.
11 Ibid., 21.
12 Ibid., 179.
subsistence fishing needed to be regulated, and the regulations needed to be enforced through game wardens.

Just as responsible for the destruction of Michigan fish and game was the rush of adventurous sporting men. Railroads and a changing economy allowed both the convenience and time to take the woods and streams of Northern Michigan. Their destruction of fish and game in the name of sport caused widespread damage, perhaps more so than the pothunter. Every week during the season fishermen departed from cities throughout the Midwest on trains to Grayling. There, scores of fishers set out with their parties and their guides to take part in an angling tradition. Every fish of legal size was kept in the era prior to size limitations and creel limits. While some fish were cooked in bacon grease over campfires, most were packed in salt, or worse, buried in the sand along the banks. Sport fishers often blamed the pothunters and the local subsistence fishers, but neglected to look in the mirror and take responsibility for their own actions.

According to Reiger, sportsmen followed some sort of unwritten moral code for their streamside conduct. He suggested that leaders such as George Bird Grinnell and Charles Hallock promoted the English fishing and hunting practices that looked towards sportsmanship and not the harvest of meat for the home or the market. Unfortunately for Reiger, a universal code did not exist in the streams of Northern Michigan. Unity could not be found among the Au Sable anglers. Three classes of Au Sable anglers emerged. The first contained locals who mostly fished for subsistence and did not adhere to the new laws coming out of Lansing. The second group was semi-local. They owned property in the form of a vacation home or lodge. They followed and helped to direct many of the state’s conservation laws. Finally, the third group was made up of fishing
tourists. Some fished for sport and others for the table. They were a mixed group. Some supported conservation, others did not. Like so many spawning trout trying to protect their redds, the competition created turf wars.

In the battle for control of the local waters, the sportsmen had the upper hand. Personal, business, and political connections and influence allowed them to direct conservation measures that aimed at treating fish and game as commodities rather than sustenance. Efforts along the Au Sable seemed to have combined the three stages of game conservation according to George Bird Grinnell. Stage one sought to reduce the level of killing to protect game for the specific special interest group. Sportsmen anglers achieved this by banning means other than hook and line for fishing. Stage two involved the sentimental protection of game. This called for the protection of game for the pleasure of having the animals to look at and enjoy. Bag limits first went into effect in 1903 with a creel limit of 50 game fish. At that time food fish, such as walleye or perch were unregulated. The third stage focused on economic protection. The fish were viewed as a resource that acted as an asset to the community in the form of tourism. Money spent on the resource was viewed as an insurance policy for the resource to exist in the future.\textsuperscript{13} The Au Sable was the only stream in Michigan to carry an eight inch limit on rainbow, brown and brook trout in 1901.\textsuperscript{14} William Butts Mershon, Northern Michigan’s leading conservationist and one of the largest trout water property owners on the Au Sable system favored Grinnell’s final stage of game conservation. He disagreed with locals, farmers, and even the Michigan Fish Commission for their view that fish were to serve as a food source. In his mind, the brook trout had a higher calling as a

\textsuperscript{14} Peterson, 178.
sports fish. He stated, “. . . the largest interest the public has in these natural resources that are so attractive to non-residents who come to Michigan to spend their money because of the fishing, boating, sailing and outing in the forest and stream.” The fish were a resource that brought anglers and their money to the towns and villages along the Au Sable. In order to keep that revenue flowing, measures for the protection of the resource needed to be passed and enforced.

The enforcement of the state laws proved difficult. Game wardens were on the front line of state conservation. They were hired to insure the application and adherence to the laws. The protection of game, fish and the prevention of forest fires were the main duties of these wardens. Wardens were first appointed by the governor in 1873 and were paid an annual salary of $1,200.00. Representing the people of Michigan, wardens could bring any violator of state game laws to court in any county with the same power as an attorney general. In order to conduct their investigations, wardens were allowed to:

Search any person and examine any boat, conveyance, vehicle, fish box, fish basket, game bag or game coat, or any other receptacle for game or fish, when he has good reason to believe that he will thereby secure evidence of the violation of the law; and any hindrance or interference or attempt at hindrance or interference with such search and examination, shall be prima facie evidence of a violation of the law. . .

Any and all suspicions were open to the wardens’ investigation and search without a warrant. Wardens were given the same power as police, and could arrest without warrant any person deemed to be in violation of state game and fish laws.

Sportsmen had an advantage over both commercial fishers and local population because they could independently hire their own game and fish deputy wardens. State

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15 William B. Mershon to J. T. Winship. 11 January 1905, Box 29, Folder Nov. 16 1904-Aug. 7 1905, Mershon Collection.
law indicated that, “The said game and fish wardens may be employed by individuals, clubs and corporations interested in the enforcement of the fish and game laws. . .”

This allowed private citizens and clubs the ability to control their own waters with the full enforcement of state law. Whereas in other states clubs hired individuals to look over private waters, in Michigan they employed and deputized individuals of their choice. Any transgressions against the law or any interference with the duties of the warden could result in a minimum $10 fine and a court hearing. Those who could not pay the fine were to be held in jail until the fine was paid. This also meant that private citizens and organizations had the ability to make sure that state laws were carried out on public waters of their concern, all financed through private money. Why did the state relinquish control of deputy wardens to the private sector? One important reason was the lack of funds available to the Fish Commission. Most money was spent on the propagation programs. The state did not have the necessary funds to man a statewide warden system until 1913 when it passed the out of state fishing license law.

Two examples out of Saginaw and the Au Sable’s North Branch revealed the division between game wardens, conservationists, and local traditions. Saginaw was an important port for the exportation of game from the Michigan interior. Several cold storage sites held the fish and game, which were then loaded onto ships for urban ports such as Detroit, Toledo and Cleveland. Between his salmon trips to Canada, hunting trips out west, and frequent trout trips to Lovells, Michigan, Mershon called Saginaw his home. He frequently made it a point to write to his local government to address the

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18 Ibid.
19 Peterson, 180.
problems that he appeared to witness on a daily basis. Some of his favorite complaints centered on people walking on the grass at a local park. He was also distressed by the number of red squirrels found in the local parks. Black squirrels had been planted at his bequest, but the red squirrels seemed to be winning the battle over their claim of Bliss Park. Something more disturbing than the squirrel species at the local park caught Mershon’s attention in the spring and fall of 1906.

Mr. Summerfield had been appointed as the fish and game warden for Saginaw County. He was employed by the state, and in Mershon’s eyes was caught up in the party politics that dictated political appointment. Political patronage lead to a warden system where men were appointed due to political affiliation rather than the ability or knowledge to carry out their profession duties. In an earlier letter, Warden Charles H. Chapman commented on the inability of many of the state’s wardens. He wrote:

In addition to all this we are handicapped by having to accept for county wardens men totally unfitted for the really important work they are charged with-via-to investigate in a thorough and intelligent manner all reported violations in their respective counties, and secure such evidence as will insure a successful prosecution of willful violators. . .

Mershon found such disappointing ability in Summerfield who seemed incapable of carrying out the enforcement of state laws. All around him Mershon found abuses in the sale and possession of game birds out of season. For example, dinners that he was invited to served fresh partridge out of season. He came across information about birds being sold by market hunters to out of state buyers. The birds were reported as being poached out of season and then shipped out of Saginaw to states such as New York.

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Market hunters had a practice of going out in the field and killing as many bird as possible. Because Michigan had a bag limit of fifty birds at that time, the market hunters hired men to come along and pick up fifty birds each and place them in a valise. The birds were then transported to Detroit, Port Huron, Bay City, or Saginaw. Mershon had gained information from a porter about the illegal practice and shipments, and his report to the state had stopped one illegal shipment to New York.

The problem with enforcement of the law was the lack in the ability of the county warden to follow the spirit of the law instead of the letter of the law. In the eyes of a conservationist the spirit of the law was to protect wild game. Wardens who followed the letter of the law were willing to look the other way as long as individuals adhered to the regulations, such as the fifty bird bag limit. Tackling the systemic problem of market hunting proved too large an issue even for the most willing county warden. In this case of the illegal sale of out of season partridges, neither Merhson nor Chapman could gain enough information to bring the suspected parties to court. Speaking with the local wardens Chapman found that in their minds they were powerless to address any of the suspected illegal activities. Procuring satisfactory evidence and winning a court battle was a difficult procedure, especially when the market hunters had few willing witnesses.

Chapman followed up on a lead that would have provided the name of the men who made the illegal purchases. He wrote:

I assured the parties that no action would be taken which would implicate them in any way or lead anyone to think that I had received information from them. However, they yet seem to be very much afraid that something would be done, if they told me the name of the market in Detroit where the partridges would be purchased, implicate them.23

23 Ibid.
Retaliation from convicted transgressors was a possible scenario, or at least a legitimate fear in the minds of local wardens. At the same time that Mershon was trying to battle the market hunters of Saginaw, he was reminded that game laws were being violated on the North Branch. There too, the enforcement of game laws was confronted with the possibility of retaliation carried out against those who tried to uphold the state rules.

The North Branch of the Au Sable had a deputy warden whose salary was largely paid by out of town sport fishermen. The private payment for the warden’s work was one method of making sure that the wardens carried out the expectations of their job. The surest way to separate the warden from the influence of politics and local interest was to link his economic survival to the goals of sportsmen. T.E. Douglas, a former lumberman and owner of a successful fishermen’s lodge on the North Branch collected dues from those interested in protecting the watershed. Concerned anglers paid $15 a year towards the warden fund. This built a coalition of willing contributors to a loyal game warden. State laws were enforced by a local warden, against local offenders, paid by out of town sport anglers.

The sportsmen’s warden did not find similar support among the local people or the local legal structure. A division was evident between those who wished to conserve the river and its trout resources, and those who felt that conservation laws limited their tradition of access to the stream. To non conservationists, fish were food and despite laws indicating that they needed to be protected, there seemed to be a lot of them swimming in the local rivers. A report to the state mentioned that retaliation was a problem on the North Branch. Mershon wrote about out of season fishing:
A gentleman from Grayling told me yesterday that within a week he had seen three trout in the possession of a man on the North Branch that weighed 4 lbs. in all and these three trout were taken out of the North Branch near the bridge at Lovells; that they were fishing right along; and that he had not dare to make a complaint for fear they would burn up his mill.24

Additional complaints indicated that individuals were still using dynamite to fish. Dynamiting had long been outlawed in the state. This fear of retaliation no doubt had an impact upon those who wished to enforce the laws.

While retaliation was one factor that worked against the game warden system and state laws, the reluctance of local courts to hold game violators accountable also limited the scope of the conservation laws. One especially effective game warden by the name of Erastus Purchase was successful in breaking up a ring of out of season deer hunters. While fines could have totaled $50 per offender, the local “weak-kneed justice” fined the poachers the minimal $10.25 This indicated that local sentiment of the game laws was not in line with what the state and the out of town conservationists believed to be important. An infraction of the law had been made, and the sentence had to be handed out, but the judge kept the fine to the minimum amount allowed by law, suggesting that such infractions were of relatively minor concern.

Historian Karl Jacoby detailed the work of game wardens working in New York’s Adirondack Park. He described the progression of game wardens working within this extensive stretch of land. The Adirondacks were surprisingly similar to the Au Sable. Both had witnessed unregulated logging that moved out after the easy logging concluded. Outdoor recreation tourism sprung up in the wake of logging. Wealthy industrialists

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from urban areas, Detroit and New York, purchased lands, lakes, and stream front property. Private clubs and lodges appeared to serve the sportsmen and their desire for productive hunting and fishing. The local population was dependent upon the new industry, but also used the traditional methods of a subsistence economy. Rivers provided fresh fish, and the forest provided wild meat, berries, and nuts. In response to environmental threats, conservation from the outside in the form of state laws sought to regulate land and water usage. Jacoby wrote of these new laws found in New York,

Law and its antithesis-lawlessness-are therefore the twin axis around which the history of conservation revolves. To achieve its vision of a rational, state-managed landscape, conservation erected a comprehensive new body of rules governing the use of the environment. But to create new laws also meant to create new crimes.26

Dynamiting and fishing out of season had been accepted practices in both New York and Michigan before the states outlawed these practices. Some locals followed the new laws, but others continued their traditions by defying the laws and an institutionalized concept of conservation.

Laws were created at the state level, but the enforcement of the law was local. Both conservationists and locals agreed on one thing, the best game wardens were local game wardens because, according to Jacoby, they knew the landscape and the people. They were familiar with the habits of the local fish and game as well as those who hunted and fished them. They also knew the likely violators. The need to find a local man to carry out the warden job was evident in Mershon’s desire to find someone who knew the area and who would not have a problem enforcing the law. The two men that Mershon advocated the most, Purchase and Rube Babbitt, were both natives of the area and knew

every bend and twist in the Au Sable and its branches. On the other hand, local fishers and hunters also wanted a local to carry out the warden job. In their minds, the best wardens were those who were reluctant to enforce the state laws or to prosecute offenders. The best wardens might offer a warning or suggest that someone not be caught fishing out of season. Locals often sought methods to control game wardens who would not cooperate on their terms. A community might ostracize an uncooperative game warden or study his habits so that they knew how to avoid his patrol. Jacoby wrote that the relationship between the local population and the game warden was “an expression of how locals thought the relationship between foresters and local people should function—were likely employed as a way to reinforce community solidarity while also nudging present foresters toward more accommodating modes of behavior.”

One method of control on the Au Sable was for locals to refuse to reimburse the game warden for expenses incurred during the enforcement of his job. According to state law, counties or private organizations were responsible for the county wardens’ salary, but the county had to reimburse the local warden for expenses. In January of 1906 the Crawford County Board of Supervisors refused to reimburse Warden Purchase the $11 for services rendered that he had submitted in a request. The same request had been refused for the previous three years. Any number of factors could explain the specific reason that Crawford County failed to reimburse its game warden. The end result was that the county did not see the merit in taking care of its game warden. The balance that Jacoby spoke of in the Adirondacks between the local warden and the local people was not in synch. Purchase was known to rule the river with an iron fist, taking in anyone

27 Ibid., 37.
who fished out of season, kept short fish or fished by illegal means. He closely adhered to the game laws. In his mind an eight inch rule on the Au Sable meant exactly eight inches, nothing shorter would do. Warnings seemed infrequent and court appearances were often. It appeared that Douglas, Mershon and others who were concerned about protecting the Au Sable trout from local over consumption had found their man.

Purchase had a reputation as being an able and competent game warden, just the type of warden who would follow the state rules without impunity. Purchase had been a warden before, but was forced to resign due to a lack of local economic support. Fortunately, he found a loyal benefactor in Mershon, someone who favored his version of conservation law. Disappointed with the lack of enforcement around Saginaw and the North Branch, Mershon wrote to the state requesting the hiring of Mr. Purchase in 1906:

I have a letter from T. E. Douglas, Grayling, Michigan this morning in relation to the fishing of the North Branch of the AuSable. He says, ‘We are sadly in need of a game warden. It is too bad to have so small fish taken. I was talking with Rube Babbitt to-day; he runs the Club House on the main stream at Stevens Bridge and he says they are taking everything from 4’’ up.

There is a man there named Purchase who was Game Warden once and he was the only good one I know of in the State of Michigan. He was not afraid of a soul and would stop everyone and search their baskets and boats; but on account of no salary allowances, he resigned. If he could be reappointed I would guarantee to pay $100.00 towards his yearly salary, for one year at least & run the chance of getting my friends here in Saginaw to chip in this amount.

Violations of the fishing laws have been very open this year. Mr Callan of Saginaw told me, a week ago, before the season opened, he was at Clare and saw a man catching trout, he actually saw the trout taken out of the water. George Morley of this city told me that on either April 28th or 29th he was told by an acquaintance in Saginaw that he had that day received a fine mess of trout from some up country friend of his.
The limit as to length has very little attention paid to it on the North Branch of the AuSable. A game warden would make an example of these law breakers with the greatest ease if he had any disposition to do so.29

Soon Mershon’s personal friends were sending their payments to Douglas for the North Branch Protection Fund. A month later Douglas collected a total of $191, $10 to $15 at a time. Most sportsmen anglers made the trip to the North Branch and stayed at Douglas’s lodge or traveled with Mershon in his personal railway car, which was specially equipped for extended hunting and fishing trips. Adding $15 to their bills of $50 for such a trip was well within their means.30 From whom did the streams need guarding? The benefactors of Warden Purchase believed the greatest threats came from the local population and the uninformed traveling trout tourists. Purchase quickly got to work. One of his first jobs was to post signs informing anglers of the Au Sable’s special 8 inch limit, one inch longer than streams in the rest of the state. He also wasted no time in taking in fish law violators. Douglas wrote to Mershon to inform him of Purchase’s effectiveness, “He has convicted nine and got them all scared. One man would not allow him to examine his creel and it cost him $14 just the same.”31 As Douglas had the greatest stakes in Purchase’s work, his support of the new game warden revealed a perspective not mentioned by Jacoby in his study. As an outfitter, Douglas was a local who served out of town fishermen. Some of these fishermen were among the ranks of Mershon, completely committed to stream conservation. Others were merely tourists, hoping to have a weekend of angling fun and arrive home with a full creel.

31 Ibid.
Douglas could not afford to alienate his clientele. At the same time, he needed to protect the resource that brought anglers to his establishment. Douglas was an ardent supporter of the hatchery system. It made sense with his business plans. A yearly planting of 100,000 hatchery brook trout guaranteed that his guests had a moderate chance of success. The eight inch limit law helped to make sure that some natural reproduction took place, which bolstered the stream population. A game warden was needed to prevent locals from dynamiting his resource to bits in the off season.

Douglas’s support suggests a link between economics and conservation. Contemporary studies have found a link between special regulations and increased monetary returns. Anglers are willing to spend more money to travel to a destination that they feel is protected, that offers them a better chance at success, or even a larger than average fish. Although there were no such studies in the early 1900s, Douglas understood the linkage between conservation and the money his guests were willing to spend for a quality fishing experience. Special regulations and a serious game warden favored his guests and their angling interests.

It seemed that Mershon and Douglas had found the perfect solution to game violations along the Au Sable. Mershon was happy to hear that game laws were enforced and prosecuted, even if local economic support was lacking, and Douglas could promise his anglers the opportunity to fish a stream that was held to the highest conservation standards. Personally, Mershon could not have been happier, that is until one of his close friends found himself on the wrong side of the law.

1906 he fished the North Branch while Mershon was away fishing for salmon in Canada. During his time on the North Branch, Purchase stopped Hunsaker, as he tended to do with everyone, and inspected his creel. In measuring out all of the fish, which may have been many since the creel limit for the Au Sable and all of Michigan streams was 35 fish a day, with a total limit of 100 fish in possession, Purchase found one that did not measure the full eight inches required for possession of an Au Sable trout. He arrested Hunsaker and charged him with violating the state fish law.

Mershon was outraged that a personal friend of his, someone he knew to be supportive of game conservation, was found to be in violation of the law. He wrote to C. H. Chapman:

Now I think that it would be a good plan to caution Purchase not to be too technical; where the intent of the law is not violated, he should not split hairs. Almost everyone will sometimes get a trout in his basket that, after it has shrunk a few hours, will be 1/8” scant. Technical enforcement of this kind in a case like this only puts both the law and the enforcement in disrepute.\(^{33}\)

Douglas entered into the argument by siding with Purchase. He wrote to Mershon stating, “. . . Mr. Hunsaker got caught but if he takes his chances of keeping short fish and gets caught he is . . . to stand the consequences than a man that counts in the mill.”\(^{34}\) Mr. Hunsaker had sworn in his trial that the fish was short at 7 ¾ inches. Douglas felt that even among the rich and influential guests that visited his river, the rules were the same and all should be subjected to the consequences if they chose to violate them.

Mershon was not of the same opinion. Suddenly the warden that he had championed for his reputation of stopping everyone on the stream had targeted the very


men who paid his salary. Mershon hated it when a warden served the interest of the
guides, market hunters, and the local population, as was the case with his disdain for the
failed Saginaw warden system, but he expected preferential treatment when it applied to
those who were supposedly on the right side of conservation. Mershon had an angry
reply to Douglas’s defense of Purchase. In a letter marked confidential he wrote:

I have yours of the 26th to Mr. Purchase. I am a little surprised also that
the question of veracity comes up and I must say that I believed Mr.
Hunsaker in preference to Mr. Purchase. Mr. Hunsaker told me positively
he had but one fish that was short and that fish was supposed by him to be
8 inches long. It was a fish he had caught early in the day but later on
when he showed his basket to Mr. Purchase, this one fish was found and it
was somewhere from 1/8 to ¼” shy but a very fat fish and it looked bigger
than it really was. Now if Purchase is going to split hairs and be a crank, I
do not care to contribute anything more for his support. If a man is
intentionally taking short fish, I do not care whether he is the President of
the United States or a mill worker, he should have the same treatment.
The State Game Warden does not intend to make any exceptions on
account of person,-that I know-whether it is his own brother or an utter
stranger, if they were violating the law intentionally or the intent of the
law and the State Game Warden, Mr. Hunsaker, and myself and every
other decent sportsman want to see the law impartially enforced but there
is no need of taking advantage of technicalities and having the law
executed by a crank. There is nothing that will bring the game laws to
disrepute more quickly and make them obnoxious and entirely without
enforcement more surely than to stand on a miserable technicality. On the
same technicality Purchase could come down here and arrest me for
having stuffed birds in my office. Or if you kill a partridge in season and
should keep it one hour longer than the law allows, he could hop on you
for that.

The intent of the law is to stop shooting out of season, shooting for the
market; and having for its idea the protection of game. The trouble with
you is you have just gotten Mr. Purchase’s side of the story. I had an idea
that he was a broad-gauge, practical game protector but instead of that,
from what has not developed, it seems he is a technical crank. I know a
man not long ago who had nine fish in his basket that were short fish. He
did not catch him though he had just as good an opportunity. Unquestionably the fact that there is a game warden up in that part of the
country is doing good and frightening many people who otherwise would
be depleting the stream and making a practice of taking short fish or
beyond the limit. But set yourself right on one thing; there is not one of
the gentlemen whose names you have mentioned, who has the slightest idea of having any partiality shown and they all believe what is commonsense enforcement of the game law is best.

Mr. Hunsaker said he did not find fault at all and it was better to be on the safe side than not but he did know he was conscientiously trying to obey the law; if Purchase would be as particular with actual violators as he was with this one technical case, neither the nor any of us would have any kick coming.\(^35\)

In all it appeared that Mershon did not win this argument and that his man was set with the intent of enforcing game laws, whether the violators were mill workers, the President of the United States, or Mershon’s personal conservationist friend. Over time Mershon got over the Hunsaker issue and supported Purchase’s work. The following summer Purchase fell victim to personal health issues and died in a sanitarium in Detroit. Reuben S. Babbitt of Grayling was hired to take Purchase’s place. Babbitt had guided on the local Au Sable waters, was a caretaker at one of the main branch clubs, and went on to become the most famous of the Au Sable game wardens.\(^36\)

Babbitt gained a more famous and lasting reputation than Purchase. Babbitt was something of a local legend in Grayling. His family was one of the first to capitalize on the grayling fishery as his father was a market fisher and guide for out of town sport anglers. Pictures abound of him fishing in the old days, accompanied by Henry Ford and other prominent anglers. Grayling has adopted him as a major historical figure. Babbitt’s legacy was shaped along the same principles that shaped Purchase’s. A code, a balance needed to be maintained. Perhaps Babbitt found the balance that had evaded Purchase.

\(^35\) Mershon to T. E. Douglas. 27 July 1906. Box 29, Folder Feb. 26 1906-July 26 1907. Mershon Collection

\(^36\) Pierce to Mershon. 16 August 1907. Box 3, Folder William B. Mershon Personal Papers August 1907. Mershon Collection.
The county warden system highlighted the division between a state and an outside conservation agenda. The state legislature created conservation laws that may or may not have meant much to local fishers and hunters. Local adherence to such laws was largely based on honor. Those who agreed with the spirit of the laws adhered to them, those that did not were kept in line out of fear of enforcement. Areas such as Saginaw had a county warden that served the people. By looking the other way on some infractions, he maintained a balance making sure that the folks who paid his salary were content. A similar balance existed in Grayling, but the relationship there was based on commercial and recreation interests. Douglas needed to make sure that his guests were able to enjoy the quality fly fishing experience that they had paid for. Mershon wanted someone who would follow the state conservation laws to the letter. Purchase did not seem to indicate that he owed his allegiance to anyone but the state conservation laws, as was demonstrated by his refusal to back down with the Hunsacker situation. Local authorities opposed the outside influence by refusing to reimburse Purchase for his work related expenses. Local judges assigned only the minimal penalties as allowed by law.

The State of Michigan passed a series of laws aimed at conserving their valuable natural resources. Its warden system provided the police power to the fields and rivers. Conservationists such as Mershon had persuaded the state to allow private clubs, organizations, and citizens to employ deputized local game wardens. This took the power and regulation away from the local population and placed it in the hands of those with the resources to direct their own agendas. In the end the local warden system was about control and access to state resources. Over the decades the state had appropriated the power to regulate local resource management, and by allowing for the removal of
local control over game wardens, the state had in effect given control of those resources to special interest groups that often were motivated out of economic or private interests rather than an active interest in conservation.
Chapter Seven
The Grayling Fish Hatchery Club

Just over fifty years had passed since Thaddeus Norris popularized the grayling of the Au Sable in his *Forest and Stream* article. During that time waves of fishermen had descended upon the river, and like the lumber barons working the adjoining land, had stripped the stream bare of its natives. The state formed a Fish Commission, established state hatcheries, and planted brook trout throughout Michigan. A drift down any of the branches of the Au Sable in the 1920s would have been far different that of the 1870s. Forests had been clear cut, dams constructed and the forest replanted with deciduous brush and jack pines. Cabins, lodges and clubs sprouted besides the forest growth, with names like Wa Wa Sum, Oxbow Club, Camp Shappendon, and Camp Bell.

The prominent Grayling Fish Hatchery Club played an important role in shaping the fishing history of the Au Sable and its tributaries. Between 1914 and 1926 this club was privately owned, yet cooperated financially with the state to stock the streams as the members saw fit. In effect, by stocking the local streams, the club members exerted considerable control over this public resource. Dictating what types of fish were planted where, the hatchery served as a conservation measure that assured semi-local control over the state’s rivers and streams.

T. E. Douglas, a former lumber man who had the foresight to appreciate the potential recreational benefits of the North Branch of the Au Sable River, catered to the fishing tourists with his North Branch Outing Club in Lovells, Michigan. Douglas owned
thousands of acres of land adjoining the river both upstream and downstream of the town. This allowed his guests unequalled access to the river. In cooperation with William B. Mershon, a figure who had made himself one of the leading conservationists in the state, Douglas sought to make the North Branch of the Au Sable not only one of the finest brook trout streams in the state, but also the most popular with the tourists who frequented his establishment. Mershon, along with auto industrialist Henry Ford, Ford’s tire partner, Harvey Firestone, and Rasmus Hanson, Grayling’s leading citizen and owner of a lumber flooring company, all frequented Douglas’s establishment. Mershon took particular interest in the North Branch, and often sided his own private railway car at Lovells. Working together, Mershon and Douglas sought to protect the stream’s brook trout. Through hiring a game warden, promoting favorable fishing restrictions, and the frequent stocking of brook trout, the two used the North Branch as their own laboratory of brook trout conservation.

Part of the plan to create the greatest brook trout stream in Michigan was dependent upon a hearty planting of brook trout each season. Douglas and Mershon made yearly pleas to the state for more and more brook trout fingerlings. Beginning in 1899, Mershon kept detailed accounts of how many North Branch fish each member of his party caught. He also made comparisons from year to year, and in his mind believed that the stream was under threat, and no longer lived up to the standards of the good old days. Increased numbers of fishing tourists were considered the greatest threat. They often fished with bait which killed large and small trout alike. While keeping the tourist off the stream seemed like an unlikely solution at the time, the one factor that Mershon and Douglas agreed upon was that the stream could use a greater supply of fish. Hoping
to plant as many as 100,000 brook trout fingerlings a year, Mershon wrote tirelessly to both the U.S. Fish Commission and the Michigan Fish Commission. The North Branch was considered one of the best trout nursery streams in the state. It was shallower and smaller than the main branch. As a tributary, many fish from the main Au Sable ran up the North Branch to spawn each year. The small feeder creeks draining into the North Branch provided excellent habitat and cover for juvenile fish. North Branch fish were not known for their size. Instead, it was the relative ease at which they were caught that attracted so many anglers. Small, young fish were much easier to catch than the larger adult fish who had their wits sharpened over a few seasons of survival.

In order to keep anglers coming back, a fair amount of angling success was needed, which meant fresh batches of hatchery brook trout. If only the state and federal government could have met the demands. In 1906 Mershon pleaded with the George W. Bowers of the U.S. Fish Commission for more brook trout for the North Branch.1 While the number of planted fish increased over the years, the quality of the stocked fish declined in Mershon opinion. In 1912 the size of the fish concerned him. The stocked brook trout only seemed to reach a maximum length of eight inches. An eight inch maximum length was a concerning matter in a stream where the regulations fluctuated back and forth between seven inches and eight inches. A fish that barely reached the legal limit was not much of an attraction to the tourist fisherman who hoped to fill his creel. Eight inch fish were the approximate size and age when brook trout could reproduce. Mershon demanded that the state address its deficiencies with its stocking program. He demanded larger fish “instead of the cheap stuff that comes from the East-

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liver fed weaklings.”2 Instead, he wanted the state to start experimenting with fish from Lake Superior. These fish were known for their size. Known as coaster brook trout, these fish migrated between large bodies of water and streams. Populations had been found in Lake Superior and Lake Michigan. What Mershon did not understand was that these fish were large not only because of their genetic heritage, but also because of their environment. It is doubtful that they would have done as well in the shallow, sandy North Branch. Mershon and Douglas wanted a lot of big fish. Streams can usually only handle one or the other. A lot of small fish, or fewer large fish. The fishermen of the day did not understand this, they believed that through proper management and a well supplied hatchery system, the resource could reach its maximum potential. Fishermen had a goal of a North Branch filled bank to bank with large brook trout. Nature planned on a stream that held a lot of juvenile trout, providing a nursery for the Au Sable system.

The tide was turning in favor of the anglers’ wants and needs. In 1914 wealthy, prominent anglers of the Au Sable joined the state in establishing a hatchery in Grayling along the main branch of the Au Sable. In May of 1914 a special meeting was held at the Rainbow Club, a private fishing club east of Grayling, to discuss concerns about the declining Au Sable fishery. From this meeting the Grayling Fish Hatchery Club was formed on 20 acres donated by Hanson.3 There the East Branch of the Au Sable provided the necessary cold water supply to replenish the developing fish eggs.

Later that year the directors held a meeting in Detroit to lay out their plans. Marius Hanson and Rasmus Hanson were both from Grayling. Mershon was from

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Saginaw and S. Johnson was from Detroit. Rasmus Hanson was elected president and
Marius, his son, was elected as the secretary and treasurer. Mershon was elected as vice
president. Shares were sold to those who wished to join the club. Sales of shares was a
common practice among private clubs at the time.

Fishing clubs had a vibrant history in the United States. Their history ranged
from the country’s first club outside of Philadelphia to the posh resorts of the
Adirondacks and Catskills, which had a large influence on the developing customs of
Northern Michigan.

Private fishing clubs were common to the Grayling area. The Grayling Fish
Hatchery Club was something all together new and different. It was not focused on
fishing, but instead provided fish for the public access streams in its immediate area.
Michigan already had several private hatcheries. Some of these were market oriented,
raising fish for sale to private clubs or for consumption. Many others were owned by
private clubs to restock their own waters. The Grayling Fish Hatchery Club did not have
any private stream or creek property. Its members fished public rivers and streams. State
riparian rights prevented the privatization of these streams. The public could enter them
at any traditional access point such as a bridge crossing. Water flowing through
navigable rivers was within the public domain. If the state would not stock its rivers to
the liking of these fishermen, they were willing to take matters into their own hands.

Shares were sold for $10 each and maintenance shares at $5. Calling on the
fishermen of Michigan, Mershon asked for anglers to take personal responsibility for the
renewal of their streams. He wrote, “If everyone will help boost we will soon have our
streams filled with the finest game fish that swims, and the pleasure derived in catching
them will smooth out your wrinkles, bring color to the cheek, sparkle to the eye and lies to the lips. Come on now, let’s all go to it.” In this cooperative, joint venture with the State of Michigan, the Michigan Fish Commission sent Phil Zalsman of Grand Rapids to take charge of the construction of the hatchery and the planting of the fish. Hanson promised prospective members that they would begin planting 2,000 brook trout the very next trout season.\(^5\)

In an audited report from 1920, over 250 members owned stock in the club. These members ranged in the geographic origin from Chicago, Grayling, Toledo, Gaylord, Detroit and other Midwestern points.\(^6\) The majority were from outside of the Grayling area, and most resided in urban areas. The membership ranged from angling celebrities such as Mershon, Douglas, and Henry Ford, to hundreds of lesser known fishermen and women. The hatchery club was a grassroots organization that was supported by people who took an active interest in the angling experience that Northern Michigan could provide.

The Grayling Fish Hatchery Club represented a unique partnership between a state agency and a private group of angling conservationists. It demonstrated an early stage of sport fish conservation that looked at the conservation of the resource through protection and propagation. Hatching fish by the millions was believed to be the best method of caring for the resource and providing for the public. These actions mirrored the progressive belief in government action and scientific management. By cooperating with the state the hatchery could better manage a fishery than the natural stream. The

\(^4\) Marius Hanson to William Mershon. Undated. Box 27, Undated Correspondence 27-4, Mershon Collection.

\(^5\) Ibid.

perceived solution to stream inadequacies was not found in stream habitat, fish structures, spawning sites, erosion control or even water quality. The surest solution was to secure more and more fish. The only factor restricting the productivity of the streams was the inability to plant more fish. The 1920 report found these statements:

We feel that we should hatch more eggs each year and have applied to the Michigan Fish Commission for double the number of Fontinalis eggs which we have been receiving but owning to their inability to secure them we have only been receiving about three million whereas we can handle at least five million, and in addition thereto we can also handle five million of Rainbow eggs but receive only about one million each year.7

The same report stated that the club had taken an interest in Rocky Mountain Whitefish to populate both the North Branch and the South Branch of the Au Sable. The directors of the club had hoped to use the whitefish as food for the trout. The prolific breeding whitefish were to be easy prey for the more desired sporting fish. The report stated:

The question of supplying food for the fish in the rivers is going to be one of great importance, for the increased number of fish planted as well as the numbers that spawn naturally in the rivers will require more food than what is to be found in the streams.8

For the directors there was a fundamental belief that scientific efficiency could provide what nature could not. The solution for too few trout, hatch more. The solution for smallish trout, breed larger strains. The solution for a lack of girth on the planted brook trout, plant more feeder fish. This was stream management and conservation in its most primitive form.

The Grayling Fish Hatchery Club represented the early roots of other conservation organizations of the Grayling area such as Trout Unlimited, and the Anglers of the Au Sable. These later organizations were focused on the health of the entire

7 Grayling Fish Hatchery Club Officer’s Report and Report Audit 4.
8 Ibid.
ecosystem, and lobbied to prevent the stocking of the Au Sable with hatchery trout. Distinct in their methods, the hatchery club of old and the modern conservation organizations of today were similar in many ways. Both found their support among a broad population of supporting anglers, concerned about the health of their streams. The Grayling Fish Hatchery Club responded to its concerns by pushing the state into action. The cooperation between the club and the state saw nearly 15 million brook trout fry planted between 1915 and 1920.

The club was privately managed for 12 years. In 1926 the state sought greater control of the hatchery. The state made an offer to purchase the club for $10,000 or to sign a new lease granting the state complete control over the hatchery. In the words of club president, Rasmus Hanson, the purpose of the club was never to act as an investment opportunity for its members. Instead, it was a unique partnership between private citizens and the state. In a way, it was an act of good citizenship where the anglers gave back to the state and nature with their donations. The site was owned by the club and rented to the state. In exchange, the state provided the club with the necessary resources to keep it at full operation. As the Fish Commission developed its staff it felt better equipped to manage the site and dictate the hatching and planting agenda for the Au Sable and Northern Michigan. John Baird, of the Michigan Fish Commission explained to Mershon why his men were more capable of the efficient management of the hatchery than were the volunteers of the club. He wrote, “Whether we are planting them right or not, is debatable, but as you probably know, we have more practically trained men on our staff than are on any other staff in the State. I suppose you will be surprised to know that

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9 Marius Hanson to Mershon. 11, May 1926. Box 20, Folder May 1926. Mershon Collection.
10 Grayling Fish Hatchery Club Officer’s Reports and Report in Audit. Period from May 15, 1920 to June 30 1924. (Saginaw: C. G. Touse C.P.A), 4.
we have in this Department, twelve college professors. . .”11 The Fish Commission was coming of age. Working with the University of Michigan it had created an organization that was professionally trained and scientifically guided. Adequately funded through the sale of out of state fishing license, it no longer needed the resources of Grayling’s trout philanthropists.

As a collective body the club served the best interest of the angling public, one member, William B. Mershon the vice president, eventually came to believe that the actions of the club served as an extension of private interests opposed to the State of Michigan. In his battles over the fishing rights on the stretch of the North Branch of the Au Sable River that flowed through his extensive property, Mershon used the actions of the club to try and assert his right to declare law on the river as opposed to the state. Mershon had supported the passage of a fly fishing only regulation on the North Branch during two periods. Between 1907 and 1913 he was able to secure passage of this regulation preventing bait fishing until the state legislature overturned the law. In 1926 the Fish Commission once again supported the fly only regulation, only to repeal it during the next season. Among Mershon’s numerous arguments with state officials, legislators, governors, and the Fish Commission was an altogether interesting and new tact in 1927 when the law was repealed once again. Using this new argument, Merschom brought up the work of the Grayling Fish Hatchery Club. Perhaps the recent sale of the hatchery to the state was a sore point for Mershon, but his remarks were telling in what they revealed. By 1927, when the fly ruling was removed, all the brook trout in the North Branch were either hatched naturally in the stream, or had been hatched from the egg

trays in Grayling. What this meant to Mershon was that these were not the state’s fish, but instead the private property through the club’s efforts. The state lacked the right to dictate what sort of angling methods were legal for their taking. He wrote that the river retained, “our own fry, and our own fry only, in the North Branch of the Au Sable.”\(^{12}\) He went on to further write, “. . . the rights of the property owners and the former stockholders of the Grayling Fish Hatchery were not considered when the Conservation Commission abrogated the order that compelled fishing with the fly only and taking eight inch fish.”\(^{13}\) In effect, Mershon viewed the hatchery’s work as an extension of his domain, his private influence over the streams of Northern Michigan. The hatchery was fish conservation in his form, following his mindset. Perhaps the stream was public property, but not the fish. The fish were paid for in part through private ownership. What right did the state have to regulate this resource, to offer it up to whatever bait fisherman stumbled his way to the banks of the North Branch?

Mershon’s final exertion that the state lacked the right to regulation fishing on a public stream came and went. The state did not see the merit in Mershon’s belief that the privately bred fish were a private resource in a public stream. Instead, the state brought the entire system under the common law fishing regulations that had affected the rest of the state and ended the fly fishing only rule.

The Grayling Fish Hatchery Club set conservation on the Au Sable in the same direction as much of the country when it came to cold water game conservation. Trout were viewed as a premier game species that brought a lot of economic stimulus in the form of recreational spending. Anglers demanded fish, and the ability to catch them with


\(^{13}\) Ibid.
relative ease. A stream like the Au Sable could not naturally replenish its trout populations given the tremendous fishing pressure the stream saw each year. The hatchery system provided the numbers that kept anglers coming back year after year. Hatchery conservation was designed to serve the fisherman and not the resource. The Au Sable had trout planted far beyond the natural carrying capacity of the stream. The types of fish that were planted followed the popular trends at the time. Brown trout went in and out of fashion depending on the mindset of the angling community. Grayling were treated as an exotic curiosity, but no serious efforts sought a permanent foothold for the grayling to make a legitimate comeback. Brook trout and rainbow trout were the favorite among anglers, who preferred them to other species based on their willingness to take flies and their propensity to succeed in hatcheries. Hatcheries continued to be the main source of trout in many of the nation’s most popular streams, especially in the East where fishing pressure was the greatest. Naturally sustaining fisheries would not and could not succeed until fishing transcended toward catch and release.

The public’s attitude toward hatcheries changed as recreational fishing gained support in the 1950s. Divisions appeared in the ranking of game fish. In addition to preferences for brook trout over rainbow trout, naturally reproduced fish began to outrank hatchery raised fish. Stream bred fish were thought to fight better, be healthier, and look better too. The broader fishing public placed greater emphasis on a naturally sustainable fishery. Natural reproduction was a key indicator of the entire river system’s health. Therefore, a naturally stream bred fish was part of something much larger, a healthy ecosystem. Threatened species, such as grayling or cutthroat trout, became especially
prized. To the more aware anglers, a trout was no longer just a trout, but was an indicator of society’s treatment of nature, the proverbial canary in the coalmine.

The Grayling Fish Hatchery Club represented the shifting of fish conservation from private to state regulation. Part of the progressive reform advocated for larger government regulation to supplement the private efforts. As the conservation authority of Michigan grew and developed it exerted its influence over traditional private conservation interests. Conservation know how and power shifted away from grassroots organizations towards a reform minded government. Mershon’s advocacy for conservation his way, as opposed to the state’s conservation agenda, would again take center stage as Mershon promoted his fly fishing only law, which he believed was the single most important conservation regulation the state could adopt.

Today the Grayling Fish Hatchery Club is one of the more popular summer tourist sites in the area. Families and anglers can tour the facility and feed some of the fish kept there for information purposes. Visitors learn about the river and its conservation history. The site is another reminder of Grayling’s dedication to preserving its history.
Fly fishing only was a rule created in many of America’s private trout clubs. It was viewed as a conservation measure that clubs used to protect their juvenile fish. Fly fishing only was preferred based on an understanding that fly fishing did less harm to trout and grayling. The notion of fly fishing only regulations came from the nation’s private trout clubs where such laws were common. Fly fishing only emphasized the sport of recreational fishing. The practice also helped to conserve the various clubs’ trout populations. Many fly anglers thought they were at the forefront of fish conservation. The nature of their sport tied them to the water and the environment. Trout required cool, clean streams during a time when deforestation and urban growth threatened streams across the country. To fly fish for trout was to understand the natural rhythm of the seasons. Insects composed a large part the trout’s diet. Flies were tied to imitate the stages of insect development. Trout swallowed flies less frequently than bait. Fly caught fish were less likely to die once released. In 1907 the North Branch of the Au Sable became the first public stream in the country to require fly fishing under the guise of conservation. This was the first time that government dictated fish conservation picked the only legal method of capture. Earlier laws excluded spearing and netting, but the progress of conservation moved toward a more narrowed focus. This new law, gained through personal influence and political connections, highlighted the Au Sable divisions between the state, outside conservationists, and local subsistence fishers. The fly fishing
only law privatized a public, state resource to the benefit of the few over the access of the majority.

Lovells, Michigan is a small town about 20 minutes from Grayling. The drive from Grayling to Lovells reveals the economic nature of Crawford County. Along North Down River Road the drive passes the historical Grayling Fish Hatchery. Out of town historic lodges with names like Wa Wa Sum are set back from the road, with views of the mainstream of the Au Sable. A fly shop or two sits along the road, and a sign leading anglers to Rusty Gates’s Lodge, a Grayling fly fishing institution, appears at Stephan’s Bridge. Tanks and helicopter gun ships practice in fields adjoining the county roads. This makes for some interesting views as sand blows across the road, kicked up by the massive machines in training. Small dilapidated homes and trailers set on blocks of land near the highway, revealing the economics of an area still dependent on the very same resources that brought its prominence. Eventually the drive turns north, between the North Branch of the Au Sable and West Branch Big Creek, another significant tributary to the mainstream of the Au Sable. A glimpse of the river comes here and there, but most of the views are of jack pines, small pine trees that cannot compare to the towering white pines that dominated prior to the logging days. A sign directs canoeists and fishermen to Dam Four, the old site of the Au Sable Trout and Game Club. This was Henry Ford’s old club. The club no longer exists, and the dam has been removed, but today it is a popular public access site for canoeists and anglers. As the road approaches Lovells it turns, and the North Branch Outing Club stands in view. This is the refurbished Douglas lodge, which is popular with modern fly anglers wishing to take in some of the historic charm of the stream and its brook trout. The village does not contain much, a few homes, a park,
and the fly fishing museum. The museum is run by a staff of volunteers. Each year it highlights a different historical aspect of the Au Sable fly fishing history. The log structure holds videos, maps, historic photos, and mounted brown trout. Driving north from the museum are various access points to the North Branch. Often there are fly fishing anglers, sitting on the tailgates of their trucks, wearing the latest fly fishing attire from Simms or Patagonia. Flies are swapped and stories shared about the day or evening’s angling success. North of town lies Shupac Lake, home to crystal clear water, loons, bald eagles, bass, perch, and trout. In all Lovells is a beautiful area. It has fostered and maintained its fly fishing heritage since its early days as a lumbering town. Today anglers can still book a trip with the North Branch Outing Club to take a guided float trip in a traditional Au Sable guide boat down the North Branch, casting a fine bamboo rod for brook trout, in the tradition of Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone and Thomas Edison.

William Butts Mershon, Saginaw’s lumber baron, box company owner, and western mining investor, made a business and recreational proposition to his friends including Charles W. Ward the President of Cottage Gardens of Queens, New York. Ward was a member of the U.S. Forestry Commission, and a personal friend of Mershon. He had another close friend in F. B. Squire, of Cleveland, Ohio. Squire was an executive in Standard Oil of Ohio, one the world’s largest and most powerful companies. Charles Davis of St. Paul, Minnesota was the father in law of Fred Weyerhaeuser, part of one of the world’s largest lumber companies with land possessions all over the United States. Mershon knew these men through business, conservation and his hunting and fishing travels. They had the resources and time to spend weeks on some of the most expensive fishing beats in the world. Salmon fishing in Quebec and hunting trips to Yellowstone,
South Dakota and Manitoba had bonded them. No doubt, their common commercial interests also brought them together. They knew how to run a company, manage large sums of money and how to walk the fine line between labor appeasement and labor unrest. Through their various backgrounds they understood one thing, money. To spend money was to invest money. These men had built empires based upon property acquisition. A unique opportunity developed in 1906 and 1907 that allowed these men to pursue their passions of fishing, conservation, and investment opportunities.

By 1906 Mershon, Douglas and their acquaintances had brought much of the Au Sable under their control through county warden Purchase. A state law allowed private clubs, organizations and citizens to hire deputized county game wardens if the county would not provide the money. Mershon started a fund, which Douglas kept, to pay Purchase for his patrol of the river. Purchase enforced state fish conservation laws such as the 8 inch limit with impartiality. This warden system favored state control through state laws over local defiance of state regulation. Warden Purchase provided Mershon with a great deal of oversight and control over the Au Sable River near Grayling and Lovells. The major threats to Mershon’s version of fish conservation were from out of town fishing tourists, those who came up for a few days, not the sort of repeat vacationers such as Mershon, who visited the river several times a season every season. These anglers first arrived by train, and then as time went on arrived by car. The ease of transportation and the fine lodgings at Douglas’s lodge seemed to bring more and more anglers every year. These additional anglers put increased fishing pressure on the resource. Additional plantings of hatchery trout were gained, but Mershon believed the additional pressure was too great for the river. He especially despised the bait fishers,
those who fished traditional rods with worms often used to bait the fish. Plunkers, as bait fishermen were often called, did not have the same elite status as fly fishers in the world of the sportsmen. Bait fishing required less skill and fewer of the accoutrements that accompanied fly fishing.

Mershon despised bait fishermen for what they represented. To him they were weekend fishermen, fresh from the city. They knew nothing of the stream they were fishing, the characteristics or history of the trout. They left trash on the banks and started fires in the fallen timber. Bait fishermen kept short fish, and did not value the resource for the same aesthetic reasons that Mershon and his fly fishing friends appreciated. The bait fisherman had little in common with him, a refined, accomplished fly angler. They were more likely to work in one of his factories than to chair the board of a national industry. It was the bait fishermen that Mershon believed was the greatest threat to the North Branch brook trout population. Speaking of the North Branch that he once remembered, Mershon wrote the following in his autobiographical recount of his hunting and fishing days:

After the grayling were nearly gone, the only remaining ones being in the Black River, we began fishing on the North Brach of the Au Sable, the most wonderful trout stream in the world in its day, and it would be yet if it were not fished to death. It has been advertised and commercialized until at the present time during the trout season one cannot make a cast without hooking someone on his back cast. They fish with spinners, trolling hooks, worms and minnow, as well as flies, and it just can not stand it anymore, but when I first knew it, it was a wonder.1

Mershon loved the stream and visited it several times a year. He had other travel opportunities and he had a membership in a private trout club that promised large, hatchery raised fish, but he continued to revisit the Au Sable and take an active interest in

conservation measures that he believed benefited the stream. With his support special
regulations stated that only fish eight inches or longer could be kept. He had been the
first to put up money to hire a local game warden to make sure that people fished only
during the legal season and by legal means. It appeared that he had done everything that
he could to protect this resource until a unique opportunity presented itself in the fall of
1906.

Douglas had a large tract of land that bordered both sides of the stream for several
miles below and above the town of Lovells. This was land that had been cut over.
Douglas, Mershon, Hanson and other lumber men specialized in harvesting the smaller
growth that was left after the most productive lumber was initially harvested by larger
companies. This smaller lumber was suited for flooring or box making. Douglas had
been in the lumber business, but made the transition to tourism as the economic
productivity of his lands diminished over time.

At the turn of the century the logging dominance that had been Grayling’s
economic backbone was on its way out. Forest productivity was declining. Lumber
companies looked to unload their lands with an eye on profit. Real estate schemes were
launched that offered affordable land to the growing lower Michigan population.
Advertisements promised high yields and profitable returns to those interested in farming
the cleared lands of the north. Lumber barons put vast amounts of land up for sale. Most
of the families that headed north in search of productive farmland must have been
disappointed with the poor soil and short growing season. Farming never took off as it
was expected, but the real estate call went out and land was purchased.
In November negotiations started over the stretch of property from one mile upstream of Lovells down to Dam Four, the site where the Au Sable Trout and Game Club held its property. This excluded the town site, buildings and Douglas’s lodge. Mershon thought highly of the land and believed that it would make a good fishing club for him and his friends. While Mershon stewed things over, Marius Hanson tried to prompt Mershon to act stating, “This land is now in great demand for farms and it will be no trouble for us to sell it out in small farms at a good price as a large portion of the land is black muck land and the higher ground is gravel loam which raises fine crops of all kinds.”² Hanson may not have had a solid understanding of farming, but he did know business. His company hoped that his friend and sometimes business partner would make the purchase to create a fishing preserve in the form of a fishing club. The stream was in great condition and the small streams that fed into it offered an adequate water supply for a hatchery. Hanson suggested that the state might even be willing to build the hatchery if Mershon and his friends wanted one. Hanson’s suggestion that the site would make a good fishing preserve illustrated an early concept of fish conservation. Private clubs, such as the early clubs of the Adirondacks and the two clubs on Cold Creek in Ohio, were viewed as conservation organizations. They maintained the stream, built their own hatcheries, and acted as guardians over nature. It was conservation through privatization. This is the most basic method of conservation. Shutting the public out from the resource certainly protected it from use and abuse. Fish preservation in Crawford County, as opposed to conservation, called for limited or zero use of a natural resource. A trout preserve, in the literal sense, would not allow fishing by any person, by any

² Marius Hanson to Mershon. 15 November 1906. Box 2, Folder June 1904-Jan. 1907. William Butts Mershon Personal Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan (Mershon Collection hereafter).
means. Private clubs, on the other hand, only conserved game and fish for those with the social connections and wealth to gain private membership. A club on the North Branch could follow the same concept along some of the feeder creeks.

Michigan riparian law stated that all navigable streams were held in the public domain. Based on the heritage of English common law, Michigan followed the concept that fish were not private property. Fish lived in water, which like air was owned by no one in particular, but owned by all. No one could claim the exclusive right to fish on a public stream on the basis of land or stream ownership. As long as the water was public the fishing was public.\(^3\) On the basis of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 all navigable waters within Michigan, as a portion of the Northwest Ordinance, that fed the St. Lawrence were common highways. In 1860 in *Lorman v. Benson* Michigan surrendered its title to the submerged soils of inland navigable waters, but held that communal transportation, navigation and fishing rights were to be preserved.\(^4\) The key determinate of a stream’s navigability was often tied to the area’s logging heritage. The log drives of the recent past were still fresh in the minds of the local loggers. Mershon, Hanson and Douglas had each participated in logging and knew that the North Branch had supported these drives proving that the North Branch was in fact navigable and open to the public.

Protection was on Mershon’s mind from the beginning. He quickly wrote to both Hanson and Douglas discussing the importance of protecting the stream and controlling the resource. To Hanson he wrote, “This would make a fine fishing and hunting preserve

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\(^4\) Ibid.
if it could be protected or even partially protected.”

In writing to Douglas he stated that ownership of the land was of the utmost importance. He and the men that he fished with looked for “some proposition from you looking to controlling it entirely for a fishing and game preserve.”

Protection in what form? How did Mershon want to protect this portion of the stream? What was he protecting it from? He had never proposed any sort of protective measures for the North Branch before, although he had fished there for years and kept detailed accounts on the numbers of fish that were caught and kept. No, to him protection meant privatization. What Mershon and his partners hoped to do was to privatize this public resource in the name of conservation. The method of privatization revealed much about influence, power and conservation in Michigan. The process caused a division between Mershon and Douglas, who had been partners in Au Sable stream conservation.

From November into the winter Mershon worked among his friends to gain the financial backing to establish a club on the North Branch. Initial interest focused on the public access to the stream. Members hesitated to support an arrangement where by spending several hundred dollars or more they gained land, but no more access than the average fishermen spending a small amount on room and board at Douglas’s lodge.

Privatization was desired, but it was all but impossible to guarantee, given Michigan’s navigable riparian rights. In writing to one prospective member Mershon stated that he hoped to have 15 members of the future private club. Each member was expected to pay $1,000.00. The issue of public access was difficult to get around. After all, the public

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did have access and would continue to have access. Mershon could not prevent its access through private ownership. Instead, he hatched a novel scheme to prevent much of the public from using the stream. This plan was aimed directly at the weekend bait fishers that angered Mershon so much. He wrote,

That we could not prohibit the public from fishing on the stream and it would not be policy to antagonize the public by so doing but that we could get a law passed, prohibiting all fishing except with a fly; That we could afford to keep a Game Warden there so that the State law could be enforced.\(^7\)

Writing to a future club partner, Mershon stated that his childhood friend George Morley hesitated to make the investment since he could not be sure that it would be protected. In response to Morley’s concern and in an attempt to win Squire’s support Mershon explained his fly only idea. He wrote, “I do not think we could prevent people from fishing it but we could make it a fly fishing stream and could regulate the fishing to some extent . . .”\(^8\) Fly fishing was Mershon’s proposed privatization plan. On a stretch of stream from Lovells down to Dam Four fly fishing would be the only legal method of fishing if he got his way with the state legislature. From Dam Four on down the stream would be open to bait fishing. Asking for Douglas’s support, Mershon began a letter writing campaign to state legislatures and members of the state fish commission.

Mershon sold his fly fishing only proposal under the banner of stream conservation. He stated that bait fishing caused permanent damage to the fishery by indiscriminately killing fish. Spear fishing, he wrote, at least allowed the fisherman the ability to select the fish before killing it. Bait fishing attracted all fish, large and small.

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\(^8\) Mershon to F. B. Squire. 10 January 1907. Box 29, Folder Feb. 26, 1906-July 26, 1907. Mershon Collection.
Fish caught on bait often swallowed the baited hook. When the hook penetrated the stomach or gills it caused permanent damage. The fish might swim off when released, but chances were that it would later die. From personal experience Mershon told the State Game Warden that he had to release 125 fish to catch 25 that were of legal length. A fly hooked fish had a much better chance to survive the release than a bait hooked juvenile fish. Hoping to gain the game warden’s support, he asked him to write a letter endorsing Mershon’s plan to the Fish Commission.\(^9\) Mershon never mentioned his proposed club or the piece of property he wished to buy.

Mershon next focused his letter writing campaign on the state Fish Commission. Writing to A. S. Bunting, the Fish Commission Chairman, he asked for help in conserving the trout on one of the best trout streams in the world. Stating that most of the fish caught on the North Branch were below eight inches but larger than seven inches, he asked for the Fish Commission’s help in gaining legislature support for his conservation measure. He stated that locals along the river were in favor of the bill, specifically mentioning Douglas. He appealed to the national importance the river had by writing,

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\text{This is a national stream in its importance, a stream that belongs to the whole State of Michigan and not just to the residents in that locality for the State of Michigan stocks the Au Sable and its is to the Au Sable that not only the citizens of our own State go during the fishing season but it attracts those from all over the United States and it means a great revenue to the State because of the number of people who patronize the railroads, the hotels, livery stables, stores, guides, etc. during the fishing season.}\(^{10}\)
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Mershon may have been trying to appeal to the democratic principles of Michigan’s common riparian rights, but he did so at the expense of the locals without their realizing


it. In his mind the “residents in that locality” did not have the right to dictate how the stream was to be used. Instead, the out of town trout tourists, men who had the time and resources to learn fly fishing, and practiced fishing for its aesthetic nature rather than as a food source had a greater right to the stream than they did. These were the beliefs that guided Mershon’s actions throughout this process of land and law acquisition.

With the Fish Commission on board and the support of his letter writing friends, Mershon next turned to state politics. Believing that the Fish Commission was going to review his fly fishing only law Mershon wrote to his friend and business acquaintance Watts Humphrey. Prior to their trip together to investigate Mershon’s mine in Brisbee, Arizona, Mershon asked Watts to draft the fly fishing only bill for the state legislature.11

The winter state legislature session proved to be a very busy time for Mershon. While trying to gain support for his fly fishing only bill he was also at work on a net ban on the Saginaw River and a tax reform bill on standing timber. The net fishermen were a commercial organization and worked with their representatives to stall the bill in committee. His timber tax reform bill hoped to prevent the taxing of standing timber. Mershon held a large tract of uncut land in the Upper Peninsula, in the name of conservation and personal economics he hoped the state legislature would not financially punish him for uncut timber. He was not planning on making the forest a preserve. The plan was to avoid paying taxes until he was ready to harvest the timber in a more environmentally sound way. A perpetual forest, where old and new growth were mixed and the forest could be perpetually harvested, was his goal. The plan was largely influenced by German and French forest conservation and the Yale Forestry School. Did

Mershon see similarities between his forest and his stream? In both he hoped to protect the natural resources with efficient harvest. He wrote,

. . . it will do more good than a State Fish Hatchery. The worm and bait fishermen kill a great many trout but if they fish with a fly, then the trout will be replanted and instead of depleting the stream fishermen will be restocking it by putting back fish that are going to live instead of those that are going to die.12

The fly law, however, was gaining support due to Mershon’s reputation as a conservationist who deftly used his personal and business connections.

Working his connection with Douglas, from whom he had yet to purchase the proposed land site, he asked for local legislative assistance. Representative Double from the Au Sable district area was asked to introduce the bill to the legislature. He stated, “I think it would be better to have him, coming from that district introduce the bill than to have some outsider.”13 Cleary he understood the importance of local support, or at least the appearance that locals supported this measure.

Throughout the early spring the arrangements for the purchase of the land continued to be negotiated. The fly fishing only bill worked through legislature committees. Not much transpired until May when the sale of the land became finalized and the bill moved towards the late stages of voting. May also marked the beginning of the Michigan trout fishing.

Mershon had found it more difficult than he expected to get 15 members of his proposed trout club. The main issue was the control of the stream and the fishing privileges the club would have. Discussing the issue with Douglas, Mershon wrote,

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Even though the public own this stream and it is free fishing, the State ought to do this because it is the great breeding ground for all the Au Sable waters and thousands of fish are being taken by the worm fishermen. One man yesterday had 9 undersized fish and he said he might as well keep them because hooking them killed them anyhow.\textsuperscript{14}

The bill passed the house and went to the state senate. Mershon asked Douglas to call on all of his friends to write letters to the state in support of the bill. He added, “Of course, I would not care to be known in it yet for if they thought we were going to buy it for club purposes, there would be a howl.”\textsuperscript{15} Here he was trying to keep his true intentions from showing while convincing other fishermen, sport anglers who were going to lose access to one of their favorite streams, to support his fly only measure. He wrote to one of the proposed partners and reminded him to keep their plans quiet. Local support was also needed. Mershon wrote, “The object of the measure and the change in ownership, etc. is not known and I have had this thing worked through the local representatives in Legislature.”\textsuperscript{16}

By May 20 the finances had been arranged and the purchase was about to be made. In all an agreement between Mershon, Douglas, and Hanson the total purchase amounted to $15,000. The purchase included 40 acres downstream of Dam Four, 1320 acres above Dam Four and 160 acres of Love Farm. The total purchase averaged $10 an acre. Besides the finances, the fishing access rights were also negotiated. The land excluded the Lovells town site and traditional access points. Douglas wanted to make sure that he and Hanson had access to the entire property, which Mershon seemed to be willing to concede. In exchange, Mershon wanted exclusive access through the town site.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Mershon to F. B. Squire. 16 May 1907. Box 29, Folder Jan. 15, 1907-Aug. 30, 1907. Mershon Collection.
It was agreed that, “they will give us the exclusive fishing right fronting the town-site and agree that when they get through with the town-site, they will offer it for sale to sue if we want it and give us the first chance to buy it.”

Mershon then made sure that Douglas would offer the land to him and his partners in the event of Douglas’s death. He wrote to Douglas stating that the fishing rights of the firm of T. E. Douglas & Co. were to terminate at the death of the three members and were to be used only for personal use. The rights were non transferable.

These latest negotiations revealed Mershon’s true intent with the North Branch. Conservation was certainly part of his agenda, but it was only to benefit him and his immediate partners. He sought to prevent traditional access to the stream of bait fishermen through is proposed fly fishing only law. His concession of allowing Douglas and Hanson to access the stream through his land was only for personal use. Douglas, whose income was dependent upon boarding anglers and guiding their fishing, would not be able to take his guests through Mershon’s new property. Finally, Mershon sought to prevent future fishing through the traditional access points of the town site. Two methods of stream privatization were in motion, the privatization through conservation and privatization through the more traditional land acquisition.

Once Mershon’s purchase was arranged he turned his full attention to the State Senate, the final hurdle for the fly fishing only regulation. He still tried to get local support for the bill. George Alexander, a local fisherman of the mainstream, was asked to write to the senate. Mershon called on Douglas to gain additional support, “Whatever is done must be done at once and the more people up in that country that you can get to


advocate the passage of this bill, the better it will be. Anything we can do down there does not count for much for they think it some selfish motive that actuates it.”19 Mershon’s impatience grew and despite his reluctance to reveal his selfish motives he wrote to the chairman of the Commission on Fisheries. He said that the bait fishermen that he knew were supportive of the measure, that they “admitted it would be a good thing and they had to fish with the fly, they would just as soon do it . . .”20 Appearing to concede a point, he offered that perhaps just the portion above Dam Four needed the special regulations. Bait fishermen could still have access to the stretch below the dam, providing plenty of the stream for them to fish, while protecting the trout nursery above the dam. Mershon was only interested in the special regulations being applied to the upstream portion of Dam Four since this was the stretch that he owned.

While the bill worked through the senate some signs of opposition or at least some hesitancy to support the bill appeared. F. B. Dickerson, the former Fish Commissioner of Detroit said that he supported the conservation merits of the bill, but that he worried about local families who wished to fish the stream and could not afford fly rods. Dickerson wrote to Mershon stating that he supported fish conservation. He hoped to see the office of the game warden taken out of political influence and he hoped to see additional conservation measures taken. To him, the fly law seemed a logical form of protecting the state’s trout population and that the law should go into effect on every stream in the state. The only problem for Dickerson was, “. . . I do not think that it can be accomplished for the reason that children and women of families along these streams

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The legislature heard about Mershon’s purchases and some members worried that this was designed to limit local access. Working to ease their concerns, Mershon stated that he had bought up almost all of the land in the proposed special regulation stretch, therefore, there were hardly any locals to exclude. In the 10 miles of stream above Lovells there were only three families. The Love family and farm had been bought out. According to Mershon, the next ranch, which was owned by an outsider, was good for nothing “except to raise bonds on.” Below Lovells there were four families. The Ernest family had four children and took in fishermen boarders. The next family was headed by a man who Mershon had seen plunking the water with worms from shore. Just down stream was the property of Charlie Kuehl, a fly fisherman from Saginaw. Next was the

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Kellogg family who also took in fishermen, Mr. Kellogg was often seen fishing with a fly. Finally there was a man named Frazer who Mershon never saw fishing. According to Mershon, anyone who lived in town would be moving on as soon as the lumber mill shut down, so there was no reason to worry about them.\textsuperscript{24}

Despite the hesitation of some of the legislature, the fly fishing bill did pass through the senate and became law. Mershon had succeeded in taking what should have been a local matter to the state and securing its passage. He found his success in using his political, professional and personal influence along with his legacy as an important wildlife conservationist. Under the guise of local support, this man from Saginaw successfully privatized his stretch of the North Branch through state conservation laws. The law had passed with considerable debate and opposition at the local and state level existed. Controversy followed the bill out of the legislature. Charles S. Pierce, the State Game and Fish Warden wrote to Mershon about the measure, stating,

> It looks to me like and act to prevent people who live in that section from catching trout, and permit them to be caught by the fellows from the cities who go in there. There may be some reason for it, however, that I do not understand. The bill evidently went through as a local act without anyone knowing what it was. It looks to me like a good act for the legislature to repeal at its next session.\textsuperscript{25}

In his response to Pierce’s criticism Mershon reminded the warden that he had a long history of trying to promote fish and game conservation. After all, it was Mershon who had tried to have the upper waters of the Manistee closed to fishing to protect the last few grayling. He wrote, “People who live in that section can just as well catch trout

\begin{footnotes}
\item[24] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
with a fly as they can with a worm if they will only try it and if they cannot get them that way, they have no business to get them at all.”

Pierce conceded that perhaps the fly only rule would benefit the smaller trout, but he could not help but to maintain his conviction that the law had something to do with closing off traditional access for local bait fishermen. He wrote, “. . . it struck me at the time as though the one kind of bait was that generally used by the city fellows and the other by country fellows, and that this law was to prevent the settlers without reason from fishing.”

The land was sold, and the law secured. Mershon and his partners had gained a promise to be the first to purchase the remaining property from Douglas when he decided to sell. They gained the exclusive fishing rights to Douglas’s property, in exchange Douglas and Hanson could access Mershon’s property for their personal fishing only. Finally, the state backed his proposal and his stretch was fly fishing only. The final detail to arrange was to make sure that the new law was followed. Mershon hired Elmer Bowman of Vanderbilt to act as caretaker for the property. He was to live on the property and would be paid $25 a month. Bowman could be deputized as a county game warden to make sure that the new fly law was followed.

The fly law went into effect and Mershon and his partners focused on replanting their property with trees. Hoping to make their investment pay off the focus of their Au Sable Forest Farm was to replant the property with pine seedlings from Ward’s Frederick

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property. Over the next three years 1,300,000 seedlings were planted with an expense of $35,000. The goal with the plantings was to demonstrate what could be done with forestry conservation. Mershon hoped that someday the lumber would prove to be a valuable investment for future generations. The reforestation process proved to be a challenge with droughts, fires and difficulty in finding buyers for the seedlings.

While forestry was the expressed reason for the land, fishing was still the major component. In April of 1912 Douglas put additional land on the market. In keeping with his promise to Mershon, he did offer the company the first opportunity to buy the land. This entered Mershon and Douglas into a series of heated arguments that permanently altered their relationship.

As the two negotiated a price Mershon laid plans for the site. If Douglas came down enough he hoped to tear down the buildings that sat on the town site. Tearing down the buildings would help to prevent any additional resorts or lodges from opening. In addition to the Douglas lodge another lodge opened with a Mr. Underhill as the owner. This meant that additional anglers would be making their way to the North Branch.

Mershon and Davis offered $8,000 for the land, buildings and town site. Ward, formerly of the Au Sable Forest Farm project had expressed interest in starting his own lodge. These two new potential lodges, joined with Douglas’s lodge seemed to suggest that the fly fishing only rule had made the stream more popular than ever with trout tourist. Added by the ease of automobile travel, Mershon worried that with additional boarding houses that there would be “... so many people fishing up there that the fish

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would soon be exterminated.”31 He was primarily interested in making the additional land purchase to prevent the construction of any more boarding houses along the river. Mershon asked Douglas, “Would you consider a proposition from us to take everything so that the town itself would be cleared out and we could fence it in and keep it bare of buildings. . .”32 Sensing that with the recent interest in constructing additional lodges his land was worth more than Mershon’s offer, Douglas refused the $8,000.00. Mershon’s angry response to his business partner demonstrated his inability to cope when things did not go his way. He wrote to Squire, “Some fine day they will all burn up and I think we can gradually get our heads together and fence our property and keep the interlopers out.”33 When Mershon heard that Douglas has pursued selling the land to another possible lodge owner by the name of Michelson he could hardly contain his anger. Had Douglas forgotten his agreement with Mershon, Davis, Ward and Squire? Mershon expected Douglas to sell off the remaining land and move on once the lumber ran out, but instead Douglas stayed and planned on making a living off the river. Mershon wrote to his business partner Ward that Douglas had been “. . . violating their contract with us and getting our money under false pretenses, selling us the fishing rights and then going to work and completely ruining it by advertising the fishing all over the country and bringing people there and taking in boarders.”34

Mershon retaliated. Perhaps alluding to his hope that all of Douglas’s property would burn, he ordered for his maintenance workers to allow the brush to grow over. He

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
told Douglas that the brush would provide better cover for birds, but as Mershon knew, the brush also contributed to forest fires, something the area had been prone to over the past few years. Mershon and Davis also ordered for the construction of a fence around their property and for the placement of no trespassing signs along their land. He also called on the State Game Warden to send county warden Rube Babbitt to head over to the North Branch to investigate the decline in trout. Mershon suspected that Douglas and his borders were to blame for the decline of the fishery. Mershon even suggested that the best thing for the river would be to close it for a season or two. Calling on the intervention of the game warden and the proposed closing of the river were aimed directly at the lodge owners. Underhill’s lodge was just getting up and running, a closed season would end his business. Douglas had a following, and perhaps his customers could fish Big Creek or the main branch, but it was also certain that the closed stream would have devastated his business. Once again, under the guise of conservation Mershon hoped to block broader access to his own advantage.

Mershon was not the only one upset by the new lodges. The Au Sable Trout and Game Club was also distressed. As a response the club made some of the same moves as Mershon. It sought to purchase additional acres below Dam Four. The private club property was posted with no trespassing and more money was pledged for the local game warden.
So the private clubs were losing control of their river at the hands of a growing trout tourist trade. Douglas and Underhill had found ironic success in Mershon’s fly fishing only regulation. It brought more anglers. Anglers were willing to pay more for what they assumed would be a quality fishing experience.

If 1912 proved to be a disappointment for Mershon, 1913 had much more in store for him and the North Branch. In the previous year holes in the fly fishing only law began to emerge. First, it was rumored that local game warden, Rube Babbitt refused to arrest anyone fishing the North Branch with spinners.\[38\] This sort of spin fishing was different than the modern form of spin fishing in which an open faced reel is used to cast lighter lures. The spinners that Mershon referred to were either cast with casting reels or with fly rods. The smaller, and lighter spinning lures were attached to fly lines and cast with the fly rod. These fly cast lures had spinners, propellers, fins, and other attachments.\[39\] Babbitt refused to arrest people fishing on the North Branch with spin fishing lures because they technically were not breaking the bait ban.

Spin fishing proved to be the least of Mershon’s worries. Apparently some well connected bait fishermen had been caught and fined the previous trout season on the North Branch. Mr. Jackson from Chesaning, near Saginaw, and Mr. Heim of Saginaw had both been charged in the previous season with violating the bait fishing ban. They fought the rule with a petition and political connections. Jackson came from a wealthy farming and lumbering family. Through his political connections Jackson gained the support of State Legislator Nash, from the neighboring town of St. Charles. Nash

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introduced a bill into the state legislature to repeal the fly fishing only regulation. A petition was also being passed around by the locals of Grayling and Lovells that sought the removal of the ban. Mershon heard that even Hanson and Douglas had signed the bill.

Mershon responded using the same techniques that had gained passage of the original bill. Frantically typing letters he appealed to his connections across the state to oppose such a bill, while at the same time attacking anyone who considered supporting it. Mershon called on W. J. Hunsaker, the very same man who was arrested by Warden Purchase for keeping a short trout in 1906. Hunsaker was now a member of the fish commission and held considerable influence over conservation legislation. Mershon asked Hunsaker to look into the law and apply pressure, but to leave Mershon’s name out of the discussions unless it was necessary.

He defended his personal interests by stating that the measure did nothing to personally benefit him. He wrote to Hanson that “Personally I can get all the fishing I want most anywhere, but I do think that trout fishing is a mighty good thing for the public . . .” He wrote that the only change in the fishing law that he favored was a reduction in the daily bag limit from 50 fish to 25. The fly fishing law benefited the stream and brought more anglers to the area. His records indicated that 30,000 fish a year were caught by North Branch fishermen. Due to fly fishing, nature could restock these fish

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naturally. Bait fishing would have killed far more fish as bait fishers would have released mortally wounded fish.44

By attacking those who opposed the law Mershon focused on the out of town bait fishers and the locals, which he referred to as natives. The natives had launched the petition to remove the law. In Mershon’s eye they opposed the law because it prevented them from spearing pike, suckers and carp. If the law had to be changed he felt that perhaps an amendment could be made to allow the locals to spear. He figured that lumbering was on its way out and that few natives would be left in the area in the coming years anyway.45 As for the bait fishermen, Mershon attacked with anger and passion. He wrote,

So it is not to be wondered that most of those that shoot and fish, only see enjoyment in this sport because of the pounds of fish or number slaughter; they have no poetry in their souls, they never hear a bird song or listen to the music of the water’s ripple, for their nostrils are not grateful for the incense of wild flowers, but it is meat, meat, meat by the pound. . .46

He added that “. . . the intelligent one-tenth has got to look after the other nine-tenths.”47

Mershon’s final argument sought to appeal to broaden the definition of conservation. Stating that conservation benefited all, and provided food for all, he could not understand why the state was willing to open the river up to destruction. Ignoring the fact that he had tried to purchase as much land as possible to prevent the public access, Mershon stated that the fly fishing only law benefited the larger public. A trout stream with the proper regulations would produce a great deal of food for the public. He wrote,

47 Ibid.
“You have a committee to investigate the high costs of living, but for Heavens Sake: let’s raise what we can on our water and land where the game and fish cost nothing and furnish cheap food for the people.”48 The senate may have been thinking along the same lines by asking why a fly rod was a necessary tool to feed one’s family.

In 1913 the state legislature repealed the fly fishing only regulation and once again the North Branch was open to bait fishing. Mershon and his partners had been defeated by local opposition and a politically well connected opponent. His partners lamented that the community was against them. Squire wrote to Ward stating, “I think there is a spirit in the air at present against all such people as we are, in fact tending largely to Socialism. If they could divide our property, they would do it in a minute.”49

For twelve years bait fishing was allowed on the North Branch of the Au Sable. In 1925 and 1926 bait was once again outlawed on the North Branch of the Au Sable. This time the ban only lasted two years before the Michigan Fish Commission repealed the limitation. The commission could do so since its powers had grown since 1913 and the fishing regulations came under its jurisdiction instead of a state legislature ruling.

Dr. J. Metzelaar, of the Michigan Department of Conservation had written to W. F. Vandenberge a game warden in Lake County to ask his opinion of the fly law because opposition had been raised. Vandenberge called for two forms of trout conservation. The first was to continue the fly fishing regulation. In his mind it only affected one stream in the state and it protected the stream from bait fishermen, which in his mind were meat fishermen. In his stretch of the Pere Marquette he and five other wardens had

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patrolled 36 miles of stream. During their patrol the only found 23 trout taken in one day. In his mind the North Branch of the Au Sable hosted many more fishermen in a much more confined area of water. In doing so the stream had a higher concentration of trout due to stocking and the fly fishing rule. He also stated that the law was popular with the property owners along the river. Their rights needed to be protected and they seemed to be in favor of the law. Regarding equal access for all he wrote, “To repeal the fly order may be fair, but fairness in all things may not be good at this time.”

The second form of conservation that he advocated for was an increase in length of the trout season. At this time, due to the increase of naturally reproducing rainbow trout the state was considering pushing the opening day back to later in the year. In a convoluted method of thought, Vandenberge felt that moving the opening day up instead of back would actually bring about less fishing pressure later in the season. He felt that starting opening day in mid April would bring more fishermen out in the bad weather that characterized early spring in Michigan. Therefore, later in the season the angler would remember the harsh conditions and probably not go back out fishing. Vandenberge’s opinion may not have been the most informed opinion for the commission to listen to. As a game warden his job was not to get people out to fish. His job was to prevent them from breaking state laws. The fewer fishermen on the water the better.

L. J. Young the Director of Department of Conservation was the driving force behind the removal of the bait ban in 1927. He felt that the measure was unfair to the state’s fishermen and that lacking any scientific proof to support it at that time, there was no reason for the North Branch to be closed to bait fishermen. In terms of preventing bait

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fishing as a method of stream conservation, Young disagreed with Mershon. He felt that preventing bait had been detrimental to the stream as angry anglers, alienated from the stream, expressed their resentment through destructive stream behavior. He wrote,

. . . it is probably of some advantage to the trout to have bait fishing eliminated, but there certainly is room for argument on the proposition that closing the streams to one kind of fishing or another is regarded by a great many people as a case of unfair discrimination. As a result of their feelings in this matter, they are driven to serious violations of the law in the way of dynamiting and netting so that there is some doubt as to whether the net result is greater safety to the fish or not.51

People alienated from nature reacted against it, sometimes violently. The bait fishermen who cared for the river, and the locals who had traditionally fished it, were legally fenced off from their resource, and responded with more destructive behavior than they would have had bait fishing been allowed to continue.

Young was not against fly fishing. He had gained his experience in the West and had witnessed fly fishing as the only trout angling method that was used. He was surprised by the use of bait for trout. Nonetheless, Young understood that Michigan required conservation through education. Legislative action could only take conservation so far. At some point in time the public needed to be swayed into support. Legislation and law enforcement would not succeed in the long run. Young informed Mershon that through education more Michiganders would turn to fly fishing.

As was it was in 1913, Mershon fought the 1927 decision to restore bait fishing to the North Branch. This time, instead of calling on his friends for their support, he made the fight personal and started his own letter writing campaign with the commission. He used his usual argument that conservation was a movement of the informed and

knowable against the will of the majority. He wrote the “Commission bowing to the will of the majority in this instance it is defeating the whole purpose of the Commission’s efforts in furthering the best interest of the sportsmen of Michigan.”

He asked the state to protect the trout “against the encroachment of natural as well as the artificial enemies of the brook trout. I refer to the pike, pollution, runways, etc. etc. as the natural, and to the bait, spinners, etc. etc. as the artificial enemies.”

The board did not agree with Mershon and the reign of the bait ban on the North Branch ended. Fish Commission board member Harold Titus from Traverse City, Michigan provided Mershon with the final ruling of the board. He was personally frustrated with Mershon’s view of conservation. Calling Mershon’s conservation legacy into question he responded to Mershon’s anger over the ruling stating that “One of the great obstacles to progress in Michigan is that some many ‘conservationists’ want conservation only for the other fellow.” This statement referred to the board’s discussion of delaying opening day, which would serve as a conservation measure by delaying the harvest of the state’s trout for all fishermen. Mershon had opposed it. Titus saw the fly law as partial to fly fishermen, whereas the delayed opening date was much more egalitarian. In Titus’s mind, Mershon favored conservation so long as it favored his special interest. Perhaps the fly rule did serve as a conservation tool, but where was the scientific support for it? Titus stated “Until such a time as we can prove the relative destructibility of the fly and the bait-spinner combination I shall believe that all should be

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restricted equally." This final proposal was echoed by the rest of the board. Scientific study needed to be conducted. Perhaps flies did save more trout than bait caught fish, but practical conservation in the name of progressive ideology placed great faith in the scientific management of resources. Mershon’s conservation relied heavily on personal politics.

How should the legacy of Mershon’s bait fishing bans be remembered? He was one of Michigan’s great conservationists and sportsmen. The passenger pigeon, the Hungarian partridge, the grayling, and the brook trout all received his full attention. He was an advocate of public hunting preserves, but was also believed that private preserves and clubs played an important role in conservation. In the end his theory on fly hooked fish as opposed to bait hooked fish was accurate. The 1950s focused on the scientific study of recreational fishing pressure. Studies proved that fly fishing was less lethal to caught fish than was bait. Attitudes on natural reproduction and hatcheries also changed. Conservation perceptions critical of hatchery management and favorable to recreational angling influenced the founding of a special interest group called Trout Unlimited in Grayling in 1959. The organization would go on to become one of the world’s largest and most powerful cold water fish conservation organizations. It was formed by a group of anglers from Grayling who fished the special regulated Au Sable and valued recreation and catch and release over catch and kill.

Mershon may have never imagined a day when catch and release would become policy on his Au Sable River. He may not have approved. Mershon certainly like to keep his fish. His legacy did shape trout conservation in Michigan. The question must be asked, did his actions of 1907 to 1913 and 1926 and 1927 benefit the fish, the public,
or his own self interest? Mershon never mentioned special regulations in the nine years or so that he had religiously fished the North Branch before acquiring property. The extent of his conservation efforts on the river focused on brook trout stockings and the hiring of game wardens. He did not ask for any special regulations until he needed to convince his partners that they had a solid investment in the North Branch property. A special guarantee needed to be made, special access had to be insured. Keeping bait fishers off the stream was as much about protecting the stream as it was protecting his investment. That is not to say that over time Mershon did not see the merits of the bait ban and firmly believe that it was a conservation tool. He kept detailed records of the fish caught, and from his observations, he believed that the bait ban benefited the fish. Scientific research of the later decades would support his theory. A Fish Commission, pushed and prodded by Mershon, would remove the bait ban but also ordered scientific study to take place.
The popularity of fly fishing carried on despite the downward effects of the Great Depression. The number of Americans picking up the fly rod or spinning rod only increased during the post war economic exuberance of World War II. Spinning tackle required less skill to cast than a fly rod, and could cast smaller lures than traditional bait casting outfits. This helped to make spin fishing outfits popular on the nation’s trout streams. At the same time the costs of fly rods declined. Cheaper mass produced fly rods from companies such as South Bend made their way to many rivers. Paul H. Young of Detroit gained a following during the Depression with his affordable split bamboo rod, the Prosperity Rod. The rod sold for $10 along with the $22.50 Ace and the $42.50 Dry Fly Special. After WWII Payne continued with some of his most famous rods, the Midge, Perfectionist, and the Parable Series. Payne was able to keep his rods affordable by having South Bend and Heddon manufacture the tapers for him.¹

Payne’s rods were favorites among the thousands of yearly anglers who made the trip to Grayling each year. Affordable personal transportation and improved rods, combined with tremendous economic growth and increased living standards meant heavy pressure on the Au Sable.

The increased popularity and affordability of fly fishing created changes in angling attitudes. Michigan’s “Fishing for Fun” program emphasized the recreation

¹ A. J. Campbell, Classic & Antique Fishing Tackle (Globe Pequot Press, 2002), 179.
value of trout. As a game fish, trout were part of the overall aesthetics of nature. They were something to be pursued, played with, brought to the hand, admired, photographed and released. They were too valuable for the table. A study conducted by the *New York Times* found of 43 former bait fishermen, 39 switched to fly fishing for sport. Despite catching about two thirds less fish, the anglers liked the challenges the angling method provided. This led to an increase in personal fly tying and increased interest in fly fishing. The *Times* stated, “. . . the happiest angler is the man who gets the most out of his sport with the lowest cost in fish.”

Anglers needed to look for rewards other than a full creel to fish in the post war years. Increasing fishing pressure was common in the streams of New York, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. Anglers complained of the growing number of trout tourists and of streams getting fished out as soon as they were stocked. Anglers around the country created various conservation organizations to address these common problems. The attempt to create a cohesive, national organization were varied. Regional alliances were difficult to overcome to create broad based objectives that anglers could agree to. Another factor complicating a national fish conservation organization was the factional composite of anglers themselves. Anglers often sought the protection of their specific target species with little regard for the needs and concerns of fishermen and species beyond their interests. The tackle industry supported conservation as a method to protect the resources that it was dependent upon. Organizations that were too broad to be effective and others too narrow to be powerful were the result of these conflicting views.

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In 1949 the Sport Fishing Institute was started out of the University of Michigan’s Institute for Fisheries Research. The organization’s goal was to promote fishing conservation through the protection of resources, scientific research, and most importantly to encourage cooperation between conservation agencies. It was apparent that the country’s resources could not support the demand of 15 million anglers. Proposed increases in fishing license fees to support increased stocking of fish was viewed as a short sighted and discriminatory policy. R. W. Eschmeyer, a graduate of University of Michigan where he received his doctorate from the Institute for Fisheries Research stated, “In American fish belong to all of us. A high fee would be discriminatory-it would prevent many of the “owners” from using a resource which is theirs.”

Increased fees were inefficient and only supported the diminishing returns of stocking program. The Institute looked to create more interest in non game fish such as crappie, white bass, and catfish. It also suggested creating additional fishing water. The actual construction of fish ponds, reservoirs and lakes was suggested, but so too was increased access to existing public waters. Public accessible fishing was identified as the single most important fish conservation tool the Institute proposed.

The Institute’s criticism of stocking demonstrated that artificial propagation had fallen out of favor with some conservation minded anglers. Angler sport fishing license fees supported state stocking programs. Increased fishing pressure meant increased license revenue but it also placed incredible strain on the fisheries. The problem was that propagation provided diminishing returns. Streams could not be pumped full of fish beyond the stream’s natural carrying capacity. Early experiments on the Au Sable had

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placed millions of fish in the river, far exceeding the natural limits. Angling pressure only increased, and the fish that did not face natural mortality were easily caught and kept. A 1954 study found that despite the heavy stocking, the average number of trout per angler per season that could be expected to be caught was 16. ³ This was a far cry from the early days of stocking on the Au Sable when catches of 30 fish a day were common. Dr. Albert Hazzard of the University of Michigan Institute for Fisheries Research wrote,

Apparently the good old days when the average catch per hour was at least one legal trout ended in the early nineteen thirties. It is evident that heavy planting of catchable trout and extensive habitat improvement have not fully compensated for the increase in fishing pressure. ⁴

He added,

Since the fisherman can’t expect many more without a considerable increase in license fees, the only alternative seems to be fishing mainly for recreation. Certainly the skillful deception and the successful landing of a fine trout far outweigh the trophy or meat value. ⁵

By necessity fish conservation needed to diverge from artificial propagation and look toward other means of protecting fish. Hazzard continued the path towards angling recreation that William Mershon had advocated on the North Branch of the Au Sable. Brook trout were not to be treated as common food fish. Their value came from the aesthetic joy they provided recreational fishers and the economic boom they created in the form of tourists dollars. Efficient use of natural resources was at the heart of conservation. The early measures advocated by Mershon and other founders of Michigan’s fish conservation legacy were to be put to the test.

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⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
In 1955 the results of a study conducted on the North Branch were released. Researcher E. L. Cooper found that few trout in the Au Sable reached seven inches or more before being harvested. This meant that a limited number of fish had the opportunity to spawn. In 1949 the Fish Commission created a 10 inch limit on the North Branch in the upper waters from Lovells to Otsego County. The rest of the river kept the seven inch limit. The bag limit in this special section was limited to 10 trout with no more than five brook trout. In 1950 the fly only regulation was put back into effect. The special regulated section did not receive any stocked trout during the study. The seven inch section received 6,000 to 8,000 legal size brook trout stocked per year. In 1950 Jim Corbett of the Fish Commission began an electroshock study comparing the seven inch regulated sections to the 10 inch, fly fishing only, natural reproduction section. Corbett found that there was a steady increase in the number of wild 10 inch wild brook trout in the 10 inch section. There was no marked change in the number of fish in the seven inch section. An increase in poundage of fish in the 10 inch section found no such increase in the seven inch section. In correlation with the increase in individual fish length and overall fish poundage, the 10 inch section also had a greater number of older fish.\textsuperscript{6}

The report failed to describe other confounding variables such as fishing pressure. It is hard to know if anglers concentrated more on the seven or 10 inch section of the river. The significance of the study would be felt for years as local anglers took notice of the new forms of scientific trout management.

Another of Mershon’s theories was tested by the Commission. When the fly fishing only law was repealed for the last time on the North Branch in 1927 the Commission stated that some merit might have existed with the measure, but scientific

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
proof was needed. Mershon saw the defeat of this law as a great detriment to fish conservation. He firmly believed that fly hooked fish were more likely to live once released when compared to bait hooked fish. A 1950 study conducted by David Shetter and Leonard Allison in Michigan compared the mortality of worm hooked fish to fly hooked fish. In 1951 and 1952 five paired tests were conducted using three sizes of long shank bait hooks (2, 4, 6, 8) to two sizes of fly hooks (12, 14). The mortality rate of the worm hooked fish was 37.5%. Fly hooked fish died 1.7% of the time during the study.7 Mershon was vindicated with the study, and the fly fishing community quickly promoted the findings.

The research and experiments conducted by the Institute for Fisheries Research and the Michigan Fish Commission stirred a grassroots movement in Grayling. In January 1959 Art Neumann, a fly angler and rod builder promoted fish conservation following the tone of William Mershon, launched a conservation movement that took trout stewardship from the Au Sable to the world. Writing to The North Woods Call Neumann asked why anglers tolerated an inefficient fish management system that favored fishermen over the fish. New threats had emerged since Mershon’s days of letter writing advocacy. Pollution and farming practices were recently understood as threats to the trout ecosystem, but the familiar threats from spin fishermen and bait fishermen were still prominent concerns. Neumann wrote, “But the most flagrant, yet universally condoned abuse, is bait fishing. The conservationist does not take issue with the bait fisherman personally but he does take issue with his method of fishing.”8 Rather than basing his belief on his gut instinct and stream observations, Neumann cited the Institute

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7 Ibid.
of Fisheries Research. Proof was further provided by the results he personally observed in his fishing on the North Branch, which had special fly fishing regulations and strict bag limits. Neumann understood that successful fly fishing regulations depended upon a good public relations campaign. Unlike Merhson, he did not use political connections and favors to strong arm conservation measures through the state legislature. Neumann called for a new understanding on what trout represented. He wrote:

But there is still another abuse, perhaps more psychological than real. Some call it a lack of education but I like to think of it as a misunderstanding. Somehow, over the years, the general populace has acquired the notion that trout are food fish in the same sense that perch, bluegill, and crappies are food fish.9

Trout could not reproduce nearly as fast as these food fish, which according to Neumann out produced cold water fish 100 to 1.

Neumann called for the same restrictions that had worked so well on the North Branch to be applied to the rest of the state. Fly fishing only streams needed to be designated. Increased creel limits and size limits were necessary. The seven inch limit needed to be replaced with a nine or 10 inch limit. Five fish a day was more reasonable and realistic than 10. Finally, Neumann called for a departure from the tradition of stocking trout in streams capable of natural reproduction. He wrote about the North Branch and South Branch, “And, lest we forget, fish caught are ‘free’ fish, wild fish that nature produced, not expensive hatchery fish. For not a single state paid trout has been planted in these waters since the day they were declared restricted.”10

Neumann’s 1959 letter stirred the waters of fish conservation and a new agency was in the making. Based upon the studies conducted on hooked trout mortalities, and

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
the success of natural reproduction with special regulations, individuals from Grayling and the Institute of Fisheries Research began to form a grassroots organization. This group vowed to be different than other conservation organizations. Instead of depending on the tackle industry or a group of sport anglers, it focused on the fish. Advocating only scientific reforms, the group vowed to utilize the research of the University of Michigan.

Three main objectives were identified. One, the public needed to be educated that trout were for recreation and not for food. This would prepare the public for upcoming rigid controls and scientific management. Two, emphasis on natural propagation of trout where possible, rather than the put and take method of stocked fisheries. Fish were the focus, not the fishermen. Finally, continued research and development were vital to the lasting success of trout management. Scientific and graduate research would be supported by fellowships and endowments.¹¹ A national review board was to be created to guide the conservation group and make sure that it stayed true to its research based reforms. Casey Westell a founding member of Trout Unlimited wrote, “So often scientists are critical of the so-called ‘half-baked’ programs of the conservation organizations so here is their opportunity to indirectly help the whole field of trout management.”¹²

In the summer of 1959, on the banks of the Au Sable a group of concerned fishermen met and formed Trout Unlimited. Two of the main guiding forces were Neumann and George Griffith. The anglers hoped to form an organization that was based on the opinions that Neumann had shared earlier that year in The North Woods Call. Trout Unlimited was modeled after Ducks Unlimited, which had started in Saginaw by

¹² Ibid.
George Mason. Mason was a prominent fly fisher who owned a considerable stretch of land bordering both banks of the South Branch of the Au Sable. Trout Unlimited followed Mershon’s legacy of trout conservation, putting the fish before the fisherman. Where it diverged from his impact was its emphasis on scientifically supported conservation.

By 1962 the group sought national support and chapters were started in Ohio, Wisconsin, Illinois, New York, Oregon and Washington. The group’s effort to overturn “entrenched interests” was viewed as key to the success of its national drive.13 The Times wrote, “A large number of frustrated, unhappy trout fishermen across the nation are looking for a dynamic voice to educate and lead to the reclamation and restoration of trout fishing where an angler can practice a hard-learned skill.”14 Trout Unlimited went on to become the largest cold water fish special interest group in the world. Fly anglers are most often associated with the group, but it served the fish not the angler. Commercial wild salmon fishers supported Trout Unlimited as well as recreational spin fishermen.

The early days of the Au Sable recreational fishery established a legacy of conservation that lived on in the guides, anglers, boat builders, lodge owners and others who benefited from the commercial and aesthetic value of the river and its cold water resources. George Mason made one of the largest land donations in Michigan history when his South Branch property was set aside as recreational land. Today the Mason Tract is known for its backwoods trails, quiet solitude and quality fly fishing. In the 1970s the Stranahan and Knight families donated hundreds of acres aligning the river to

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14 Ibid.
provide better public access. Following Mason’s footsteps, these families established a new chapter in the Au Sable’s history where the greater angling public was considered over the personal benefits of privatization. The different land conservation grants established Guides Rest and Wa Wa Sum. Wa Wa Sum, a property dating back over 100 years provided educational nonprofits access to the river, lodge and hundreds of acres of pines. *Michigan Trout* wrote, “It is hoped that the properties will serve as examples to other owners of large tracts of valuable undeveloped watershed and give them an alternative to the erosion of high taxes or development.”

Time and changing economics had dictated a different attitude towards private land and public access. These vast acreages were too costly to maintain. By granting the land to the state or a nonprofit in the form of land conservancy, the public was regaining its traditional lands and river access points. This was a far cry from the early days when conservation meant the enclosure of land and water with fences, laws and guards. The public became a key component to protect land, water and game.

By the 1980s the argument had gone beyond the fish for food debate that had characterized earlier conservation measures. A conservation group called Anglers of the Au Sable combined forces with other conservation groups, Trout Unlimited and the Federation of Fly Fishers to propose mandatory catch and release restrictions for the Holy Water. This was a fly fishing only section of stream just downstream of Grayling. A Grayling citizen group called the Committee to Oppose Mandatory Catch and Release was formed to fight the regulation. The group feared the loss of tourist revenue as anglers focused on other streams with fewer restrictions. Dave Borgeson, the Assistant Chief of Fisheries Program for the Department of Natural Resources opposed the

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regulations. Borgeson and the Trout Unlimited disagreed on how different measures
affected the fish. Trout Unlimited felt that catch and release favored the fish that faced
high angling pressure. Borgeson believed that the harvest of fish was necessary to the
life cycle of the stream. Borgeson stated, “As long as you have fast-growing trout, like
you do on the South Branch, you’re going to get a lot of 13 to 18 inches. But if you
suddenly stop the harvest and you don’t stop the natural reproduction, you can change the
growth rather dramatically.”\textsuperscript{16} Borgeson was unpopular with fly anglers and bumper
stickers were printed stating, “Save Wild Trout-Send Borgeson to Kansas.”\textsuperscript{17} Despite the
protest from Borgeson and representatives of the local business community, the law did
pass and the Holy Waters has been fly fishing only, catch and release ever since.

Today the Au Sable conservation legacy lives on in the guides, tourist, Trout
Unlimited members, and businesses that depend upon the river’s angling heritage.
Guide, lodge owner, author and conservationist, Rusty Gates is perhaps the best
contemporary personification of that legacy. Gates, a former recipient of \textit{Fly Rod and
Reel’s} Angler of the Year award, demonstrates the important link between conservation
and economic sustainability. His lodge is one of the busiest on the river. With the help
of Trout Unlimited, Federation of Fly Fishers, and Anglers of the Au Sable, Gates has
successfully fought mining companies wishing to drill the Mason. Kolka Creek, the
headwaters of the Au Sable was the focus of his 2008 efforts.

What is the measure of the Au Sable’s early conservation measures? The river
has been managed for recreation, with a special emphasis on fly fishing. A legacy of
conservation and historic pride continues. The town’s library and local history museum

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Michigan Trout}. Vol. 1, No. 4 1981.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
prominently display artifacts from the area’s angling past. A small fly fishing museum is based in Lovells, the only one in the state. Weathered Au Sable boats are on display, along with faded photos of men posing with either exceptionally large fish or large stringers. The favorite tools of the trade are kept in display cases and hung on the walls. Bamboo rods, Orivs reels, and local fly patterns catch the attention of visitors who spend a half an hour or so paying homage to the stream’s past while waiting for a hatch to begin.

But, what was the legacy? Has it been a legacy of conservation, directed towards the protection of a native species? Was is a history of enclosure and separation? A history where division grew between politically connected fly anglers and the local subsistence fishermen. The North Branch of the Au Sable was the first public stream in the country to require flies only. The legacy of this restriction lives on to this day as almost all states with prominent trout populations have similar restrictions on some of their streams. The controversy of these regulations spurred the scientific study of trout, their habitat and fishing methods. As recreational sport fishing evolved so too did perceptions regarding the fish themselves. Sport was emphasized over subsistence. Sporting methods of capture were favored over more effective means. Sport anglers found enjoyment in the challenges of the means and not necessarily the ends. The relationship between the fish and angler evolved along with the developing theories of fish conservation. With artificial propagation the fish could be perfected, bred to fit the ideal angler demands. Fish were created to meet the growing demands of the angler until angler demands became too great. Then the trout became a symbol of sport and recreation. “Fishing for Fun” and other recreational angling programs emphasized the
The thrill of the outdoors, the pleasure of a well cast fly, and the smell of cool, clean water flowing through the cedars. Trout propagation could not keep up with angler demand. Trout moved up the pedestal. As time progressed so too did attitudes. Trout Unlimited and the growth of catch and release turned the tide of artificial propagation. Streams could return to a natural ecological equilibrium. Whereas in Mershon’s days wardens were needed to enforce regulations, today’s Au Sable anglers are more concerned with mining threats to the stream than they are worried about anglers cheating the regulations.

If Mershon were alive today he would certainly feel at home on his North Branch. What does this say about his conservation legacy? Has it been good for the stream, the fish, and the local community? The growth of fly lodges and guides seems to indicate that things have worked out. The answer may be a bit more muddied in terms of the general public’s perception. I recall a discussion I had with a colleague about the merits of fly fishing. He understood the point of fishing to catch something to eat, but to catch a fish and release it made little sense to him. I mentioned studies stating that fish do not feel the pain of the hook, but it made no difference. To him it seemed like a waste of time, if not a delusional way to torment innocent fish. This is the central argument between fly fishing conservationists and the larger public. Why make the fish’s capture more sporting, or more terrifying to the poor animal than it needs to be? Why spend more money on a rod and reel than is necessary? A cheap fly rod is almost always more expensive than even a modestly priced spinning rod. Why spend more? Does doing so make one a better angler? Or, is it a status symbol? Fly fishing by its nature is exclusive. The fly angling community has at times tried to shake this perception, and at others it has embraced it. The truth is that anyone who pursues fly fishing is doing so out of a less
tangible rationale than to catch fish. The means justify the ends, even if the ends rarely come to the net. The exclusive nature of the sport leads to all sorts of side arguments. One such argument is that fly fishers are generally committed to the conservation of their sport. Perhaps it is the better than average education or pay check that characterizes the general fly fisher. Or, perhaps the origins of fly fishing conservation come from the sport itself.

The fly fisher makes a natural choice to eventually become a student of his stream. Most fly anglers have their own stream. This is not to mean that they actually own the property rights to the water itself. The stream might be open to the public and loved by thousands, many of whom might think of the stream as their own. Or, it might be a hidden jewel, tucked away off the beaten path in some valley that feeds into a more popular, larger waterway. It might even be right beneath everyone’s nose. Everyday millions of commuters pass over such streams, whose finned diamonds in the rough are the secrets of closed lipped urban anglers. When a fly fisher identifies his stream as his own, his equity has been paid in terms of hours of casting, exploring and often times cleaning up after others. Once one identifies a stream as his own, his window into this aquatic ecosystem broadens. No two visits are the same, and the stream environment is forever changing. Streams are in a constant state of erosion. Banks are forever being undercut, rocks are on a constant migration down stream, and the vegetation reveals the cyclical cycles of change. A fly fisher becomes part of this environment. It is impossible for him to remain separate. Despite the effort of modern outerwear companies to separate the fisher from the elements, one is immediately a part of this natural world.

The trip begins on the walk to the water. Through fields, clearing branches to make way
for rods and the release of methane from streamside bogs force nature upon the fisher. Nature surrounds the pursuer of trout. The music of cascading water, crashing over rocks, dancing over gravel, or sliding through sweeping cedar branches is a symphony of nature in motion.

The predominant trout diet consists of aquatic insects. This especially applies to trout under about 14 inches, as larger fish, especially brown trout, are carnivorous and will feed upon crayfish, fry, worms, mice and other vertebræ. In the case of prolific hatches, such as the Au Sable’s famous Hexigenia limbata, even the stream’s largest trout will rise time and time again to eat their fill of insect life. It is at these times the fly fisher takes the greatest notice of his stream’s environment. Trout are often considered the canary in the coal mine when it comes to stream habit health. In truth, the stream invertebrates are the truest precursors of stream health. Certain insects can only tolerate certain conditions. Healthy trout streams produce multiple hatches at a time, which can be maddening to the fly fisher to pinpoint the exact one the fish are actually feeding on. Mayflies are at the apex of the stream insect hierarchy. Mayflies are followed by caddis flies, stoneflies, and the most common flies of all, midges. To stand any chance of success fly fishers must be able to not only identify the specific type and size of fly the fish are feeding on, but also the stage of life the fly is in. Aquatic flies vary in their time actually in flight, but this short period of airborne life may only last 24 hours, during which mating and egg laying must take place. Most of the time these various flies are found within the stream itself, attached to twigs, rocks, or buried deep in the streambed. In the cycles of seasons and fly hatches, the fly fisher acquaints himself with the total environment in order to better understand his prey. It is this reason that fly fishers and
conservation have historically been linked. Fly fishers, when wading, as most do, are within their environment, not sitting above it in a boat. They carry stream muck and gravel home in the trunks of their cars embedded in their boots. Their vests and nets are smeared with the protective slime of past trophies. The success of the fly fishing season depends upon the health of the entire ecosystem. Fly fishers notice a new two track cut through a streamside meadow, or a fresh scar in the bank at a popular access point. The clanging noise of a gas drill reminds the angler of industrial intrusions that threaten the groundwater supply with toxic seepage. Runoff from building projects, leaking septic tanks, and the overflow of storm water systems stain and pollute the water. A fly fisher notices these changes. Wading through the stream, with half his body injected into the aquatic world, with his upper half sensing the atmosphere, he is a temporary part of this ever changing environment.

Trout fishermen were collectively one of the first recreational groups to view conservation as part of the total ecological system. They understand their quarry as part of this system, where even the smallest intrusions from humans can have a detrimental impact upon the total ecological system. This is one of the many reasons that trout fishers have been the carriers of the conservation tradition throughout angling history. Their angling success depends upon this physical contact with system.
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**Maps**

Fig. 1. Au Sable River Map from Michigan Department of Natural Resources. http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,1607,7-153-30301_31431_31442-95630--00.html (accessed April 29, 2009).

Fig. 1. Michigan Department of Conservation Crawford County Map from The Lovells Historical Society.

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