

If the Kinni could speak, h

Nearsighted Jon had a Panther Martin brand spinning lure tangled in the branch of a willow tree. His fishing line was pulled taught across the width of the Kinni.

He yanked and pulled, side-stepped a few feet parallel to the river, yanked again but the lure didn't come free.

There is a stockpile of short stories and anecdotes about the Kinnickinnic River floating in my subconscious.

Years ago, neighborhood boys would build a sweat lodge somewhere on the riverbank outside of town. They'd heat river rocks and concoct strange chants and take a steam.

A young man was meditating on the bank a couple hundred yards down from the lower dam listening to the shallow water rush across the



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bed of small round rocks. It sounds like applause he explained to his pals. Now deceased, his memory lives on in the shallows he named "Clapping Waters."

I've heard a few stories about river bank hikers quietly trying to side-step people engaging in revealing, intimate activities. I've been told of a revealing man who drifts along the Kinni naked in a canoe. He calls it "ca-nude-ing."

Once a friend of mine

approached a man he thought was throwing an empty beer can in the river. It turns out the fellow was from somewhere in Eastern Europe and was using some kind of puffy baseball-sized surface lure. Minutes later he landed a long lanky trout the size of a grown man's forearm.

An angler's catch is not limited to water however. Another guy told me he caught a small brown airborne bat that mistook his dry fly for the real thing.

Then there are the numerous stories of errant casts yielding a barbed hook in the cheek of a panic stricken angler.

Minutes after being afloat in a canoe on my first upper Kinnickinnic River voyage, I noticed a large dark reflection in the water move quickly to

Here's some stories she'd tell

my left and then dart right and finally disappear. I looked to the sky to see if a fast moving cloud had quickly passed in front of the sun. As it occurred again I realized I was looking at "clouds" of brown trout below the surface of the water.

A later trip down the lower Kinnl saw the canoe my friend and I were riding swallowed by a large hardwood that had fallen across the river. The force of the rushing water sucked the canoe under the trunk bending it into a "V." We succeeded in dislodging it, after 45 minutes. It was a practical lesson in physics combined with the fine poetry of stringing together experiences that had hitherto never followed each other.

I've had a six-hour, full-body shiver, by way of an

inner tube down the Kinnl, and I've had a six-minute canoe trip with a senior citizen who gracefully declined to go any further after several pirouettes following our departure at the lower dam.

I began by telling that story about Jon.

He's an experienced fisherman of 20 plus years who has landed some decent sized browns. He'll part his palms 22 inches but he means 16.

Jon uses spinning lures. "Spin to win," some folks say, as opposed to the more challenging fly-fishing. It's a rare occurrence for him to have a lure snagged on a branch. Myself? I've lost \$98.56 in lures to the Kinnickinnic: Panther Martins, Thunder Bugs and my favorite loss, the Swedish Pimple.

My regret lies in leaving

those small pieces of pollution in trees, under rocks or deep in the mouth of a wonderful brook or brown. I'm too clumsy to find the grace it takes to be a fly guy and I'm too much of a cheapskate to acquire the necessary gear. Now on the infrequent occasion that I fish, I drown worms. For me a rod and reel in hand is simply a tether to which I can connect with the river — an opportunity to create another story.

But sometimes simply being in her presence is enough. In the days following 9/11, I visited a quiet place on the riverbank to try and make sense of the madness. I prayed for peace between the religions. Somehow the river reminded me that she's been

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flowing long before the prophets and would likely be flowing long after the world's religions have evolved or ceased to be.

She's honest, a divine creation but with a cold heart, perfect for swimming on a sweltering summer day. Especially during a time when central air-conditioning was rare.

In the book he co-authored with Norman Foss called "Kinnickinnic Years," John Prucha recalls the hot summer days of the 1930s. He and his family made regular trips to a deep swimming hole back in the woods on the Rocky Branch near County Road FF. Today a large housing development is changing this area and would be unrecognizable to townsfolk of that

era. The river itself becomes transformed, concurrently serving as a symbol for the passage of time.

Lost in the ether of time are the stories of the sparse population of Chippewa and Dakota people that lived here prior to Joel Foster's arrival in the late 1840s. When I visit the confluence of the South Fork and the Kinni, my imagination wanders to the time of Foster's first year in a nearby cave.

Recalled in a memoir, one of his more haunting stories is his discovery of a dead man and a whisky cask at the head of the Rocky Branch. The man died from exposure and lay frozen in the snow. He was attempting to deliver the heavy parcel of booze from Diamond Bluff to Prescott and had veered off course in

a snowstorm.

Speaking of veering off course, we were considering the story of Jon, but there is another story of peril to mention.

Last April a college freshman couple, having little understanding of geography, and weather conditions, underestimated the Kinnickinnic. They found themselves in her company for 16 hours in nothing but springtime attire.

The paddlers, who had never canoed, departed from the lower dam with a borrowed craft around 4 p.m. They overturned numerous times. On one occasion the canoe was briefly stuck under a fallen log. The girl's leg was injured during the incident and she lost a shoe. After day turned to night they huddled

old

In sleep on the riverbank under a damp blanket of 40-degree air. As morning broke they pressed on while the young girl fought back the pain of her injured leg.

A resident living a few hundred yards east of County Road P near Kinnickinnic State Park was walking her dog in a bathrobe and was startled by the paddlers, now on foot, approaching her home. "How much further to our car?" asked the young man desperately. The resident said the parking lot was not far downstream.

As the conversation progressed it was revealed that the young students hadn't told anyone they were going canoeing and they assumed they would somehow arrive back at the lower dam where their vehicle was parked.

Imagine a river that flows in a circle. Apparently some of us do. The resident took them in to get warm, gave them a harsh talk about river safety and drove them back to River Falls.

Which brings us back to Jon and his entangled lure.

Jon continues to slide-step down the bank seeking a better angle to free his lure. With rod tip raised high and standing tip-toed, he pulls the rod back without success. In frustration he decides he's more interested in freeing his rig rather than retrieving the lure. He stretches the line further, and further, and then twang, crack!

His vision is blurry. Startled, he looks around and then down toward the ground. He makes out what appears to be two pairs of

eyeglasses?

Picking them both up he realizes the lure struck the bridge of his frames, dead center, and parted his eyeglasses in two pieces. With a little blood dripping from the bridge of his nose, he made his way out of the woods and drove himself home by using one of the lenses as a monocle.

True story.

A resident of River Falls for nine of the past 13 years, Mike Woolsey is married and has two children. He is employed by UW-River Falls and occasionally contributes to Falcon Features, the campus alumni publication. His interest in area history inspired him to write about the river he enjoys.