

The romance of Soderbeck's Ferry

Dorman Lehman

Today a little-used gravel road leads east from Pine City, past small farms, to end on the bank of the St. Croix.

Not too many years ago the road didn't end at the river, but continued on to Grantsburg, Wis., with a steady flow of traffic, for here was Soderbeck's Ferry.

The ferry was a small, low, one-car barge, looking a bit like a wooden bridge with low iron siderails. The landing ramps bent and groaned when used by even the small cars of the day, some of the deck boards were loose and the whole thing leaked; but Soderbeck's Ferry was, to me, the grandest vessel between Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Soderbeck's was more than just the ferry; there was the big farmhouse beside the road, with its well-tended garden; the ice house where cold blocks of pure river ice lay beneath great dunes of warm sawdust; the tents and cabins of weekend visitors; and the sawmill.

The sawmill was an endless expanse of wooden sheds, concrete foundations, roller conveyors, gears and cables and machinery that a boy could explore for days. Almost hidden in a corner of the main shed was the community pump, which, when properly primed, yielded water just one degree above freezing.

And there was Soderbeck himself. I never heard anyone use his first name, or any sort of title, but to me he was king of all this, and I liked him. He must have liked kids also, for he had the most complete set I have ever known. He was a little man, at least a hundred years old, and walked with a limp caused, as far as I could tell, from wearing boots with one sole built up 3 or 4 inches. I never mentioned this to him.

Soderbeck tolerated my endless questions about the sawmill, the ferry and the river. He ignored my advice about gardening, but marveled at my few small fish. He was properly impressed with my new Fourth-of-July six-guns, and he let me ride the ferry.

He taught me how to adjust the chains to the up-stream cable so the current would help propel the ferry. He showed me how to "walk" the lower cable the length of the hull, and let go soon enough so as not to be left dangling above open water; and he let me man the pump, back and forth on the giant upright lever until from somewhere deep below came the slurping sounds of the last few drops.

Those frequent weekend days at Soderbeck's were paradise — swimming, exploring, berry picking, hunting wild creatures or even being allowed to go upriver fishing with the big people — but the evenings were the best of all.

Late on a warm summer night, after we had heard the evening whippoorwill, the last cup of coffee had been drained into the fire and the day's events had been exaggerated to the limit, I would lie in our tent and listen to the night.

From somewhere across the river an auto horn would blow and I would lift the tent flap to see headlights

flickering through the trees.

A screen door would slam, I would hear Soderbeck's footfalls, and then the sounds of the ferry scraping away from shore. It would silently drift across the dark river, and then after an unvarying sequence of small sounds, float back to home. Headlights would dust away in the darkness, a screen door would slam and all would be quiet. And I would wonder about that late-night traveler. Dillinger perhaps? I never knew.

The convenience of new bridges and paved roads pretty-much put an end to Soderbeck's Ferry. The second World War put an end to my visits there, and time has deprived us of Soderbeck. But whenever I hear a whippoorwill, or a lonesome auto horn in the night, I remember.

Dorman Lehman, of Grand Rapids, grew up in the Minneapolis area, and as "the son of a dedicated fisherman," he spent many happy days around the St. Croix. Soderbeck died, he recalls, in 1941, but one of the many boys kept the ferry running until 1951.

They came and out in the electric