

The Cass River Greenway – Providing a clear and bright future for the Thumb's historic Cass River.

By Tom Lounsbury

Needless to say, there is a whole lot of history surrounding the Thumb's Cass River. Fort Saginaw was created in 1816 at present day Saginaw to meet the needs of a new and growing nation. In September of 1819 General Lewis Cass would gather Native Americans together on the banks of a river that would soon bear his name, near where it feeds into the Saginaw River (not far from present day Bridgeport) to ratify the Treaty of Saginaw that would cede six million acres to the United States. There is a large and beautiful stained glass window in the Tuscola County Courthouse which commemorates this very historic occasion on the Cass River.

In 1831 Alex de Tocqueville was sent to America by a Paris newspaper to write about the last frontier. His travels would bring him to Saginaw. Upon gazing at the Saginaw River he wrote: "In a few years these impenetrable forests will have fallen." When viewing the Cass River he wrote: "A turf covered point projecting above the river in the shade of great trees served us as a table and we sat down to luncheon with a view of the river whose waters clear as crystal, snaked through the wood."

In the fall of 1852 Oliver Hazard Perry ("The Hunting Expeditions of Oliver Hazard Perry") of Ohio, would venture to the Thumb's wilderness along the Cass River in search of elk and deer. He would travel by steamship to Port Huron and would then go overland on foot to the Cass River, hunting along the way. He and his companion (a seasoned outdoorsman Perry hired to accompany him) would literally live off the land on their trip and his journal describes a sheer wilderness of dense forests and swamps. He would bag a huge (8 X 8) bull elk in Sanilac County, and subsisting on jerked meat made from it along with wild berries, he and his companion, their clothing in tatters, would eventually find their way along the Cass River to "Indian Fields" near present day Caro. He mentions some slight sign of lumbering activities along the banks of the Cass River but it is still pretty much an untouched wilderness. At Indian Fields where many Native Americans had recently gathered for their annual fall hunting pow-wow, Perry then purchases an Indian canoe and heads 16 miles downstream to a small settlement called "Vassar" to refit and re-supply, and then heads back out for further elk and deer hunting upstream near "the first forks" of the Cass River (where it was a well reputed elk hunting hotspot near present day Cass City, and why the township there is called "Elkland").

On his canoe trip downstream to Saginaw upon conclusion of his hunting expedition, Perry mentions the small settlements (their locations obviously dependant upon the river) he passes through. He clearly describes Tuscola, Vassar, Dutch Town (Frankenmuth) and Bridgeport in their beginning stages, with a settler noticed hacking out a clearing here and there along the way between settlements (and also a dramatic change from what Alex de Tocqueville observed along the Cass River just 21 years before). At that time the atmosphere was just beginning to become what we have today. Besides lumbering and clearing land for agriculture, there would also be the big Fire of 1881. What Perry witnessed along the Cass River in 1852 entailing the giant trees and dense forests would quickly be changed forever in just a few short decades. It was fast changing times, and timber from near the river would be used for the progress of a steadily growing country.

I have a nearly a lifetime association to the Cass River. I caught my first fish in its waters when I was just a toddler, thanks to the assistance of my mother (this occurred near the M-53 Bridge on the "South Branch" where my mother grew up. Folks of her era referred to that particular stretch of the Cass River as the "Dead Waters" due to its very slow current). With our family farm just a short bicycle ride away, I spent most of my free time while growing up enjoying what the Cass River has to offer. I've also canoed down both the Upper and Lower Branches (from M-53 – however it is best to only attempt the South Branch during the high early spring runoff due to frequent very

shallow areas, and the North Branch features countless fallen trees into the river, creating a true obstacle course). I've also paddled my way from Cass City downstream to as far as Frankenmuth and it is now my goal to paddle all the way to Saginaw, thanks to the new "Fish Passageway" at Frankenmuth which replaces the old dam, and features a convenient portage trail which allows canoes and kayaks to continue on downstream.

The one thing I have noticed over the years is that the Cass River didn't have the notoriety or even respect as other Michigan Rivers, especially in regards to recreational avenues. I've even heard some folks imply that it is a "trashy" river (much to my chagrin), but that is changing. I was very pleased to find out about the "Cass River Greenway", a group that was first organized in Frankenmuth in 2007 by resident volunteers seeking to enhance the use and environment of the Cass River. It has since expanded to involve other Cass River communities. What first entailed local concerns has steadily grown and will no doubt eventually include the entire Cass River system. The Cass River Greenway has three primary goals that entail developing recreational opportunities, encouraging preservation of natural lands and improving water quality. Since their founding, the organization has received the support of municipal, county, state and federal agencies. They have also received grants to help them achieve their primary goals.

I can remember first meeting with Cass River Greenway members Bob Zeilinger and Joe Toth, both of Frankenmuth several years ago. Our meeting place was of course on the riverbank right next to the Frankenmuth Dam (which Frankenmuth replaced with the Fish Passageway in 2015). It was clear from the get go that both men have a deep and reverent respect for the river, and from them I learned what had been accomplished and the direction the group was heading and I was indeed very impressed. I must admit their optimistic enthusiasm tended to be contagious. The Cass River Greenway has annual cleanup days on various stretches of the river as well as developing canoe/kayak launch sites per public access (including restrooms) along the river. They put in a floating dock in Frankenmuth that features handicap accessibility due to a special roller and railing system that allows ease in getting in and out of the canoe or kayak as well as launching and coming back out.

Quite frankly, the older I get, the more ready I am to accept anything that will help me to get in and out of a canoe easier, as well as launch and land (I've been known to take a "spill" during such moments and why my camera, wallet and you name it all go into Ziploc plastic bags). It is the goal of the Cass River Greenway to install these special floating docks (where water levels will allow- which can vary during the warm months on the Cass River in certain stretches) at

participating locations. They have also contacted all the municipalities associated with the Cass River to perform regular water quality testing and have received full support. The group is also addressing the phragmites issue which entails removing a highly invasive plant that has dramatically taken over and is ruining Michigan wetlands.

During my conversation with both Bob Zeilinger and Joe Toth, it was very apparent that both want to see the Cass River becoming "clear as crystal", as de Tocqueville had viewed it, and so do I.

The Cass River Greenway offers a great brochure featuring detailed maps (including for both canoe/kayak and bicycle trips), and is seeking more resident volunteers along the river. Ultimately they wish to be able to cover the entire Cass River, something I hope they will accomplish, because this group certainly gets my vote.

My favorite stretch of the Cass River is of course that which is close to my home and thus very accessible for me, and this entails from Cass City to Caro. I was truly excited to recently discover that the Village of Cass City will be hosting one of the Cass River Greenway's annual "River Clean-up" projects on June 10th. The first 50 volunteers will receive a Cass River Greenway Clean – Up t-shirt. Those interested in helping with this worthwhile project should bring waders and a life jacket (if they have them), and to wear old clothes and footwear that can get wet and muddy.

Canoes will be supplied by the city of Vassar, and gloves, sun block, hand tools and trash containers will be distributed at the Safety Orientation Meeting which begins at 8:30 AM at the Cass City Waste Water Treatment Plant (3998 Doerr Road). Clean-up will begin at 9:00 AM and volunteers will be divided into groups which will cover a one mile section, with a goal of cleaning up a total of 4 miles. Breakfast sandwiches, fruit, donuts, coffee, juice and bottled water will be provided. If you have questions or are interested in volunteering to help at this year's clean-up, please contact: Nancy Barrios at 810-358-3844, Dennis McCabe at 989-550-9088 or Gene Suuppi at 989-325-1548.

To obtain more information about the Cass River Greenway as well as its other summer clean-up projects and (fun) activities, go to www.cassriver.org.