

BOULDER JUNCTION

SOME THINGS never change, and the world's all the better for it. Up in Boulder Junction at Wildcat Lodge, nestled along Wildcat Lake, a pair of hopeful anglers are doing exactly what anglers have been doing there since 1927: hurrying to finish breakfast before their guide arrives. The bill of fare's substantially the same, too: bacon, eggs, flapjacks, coffee—high-octane sportsman fuel.

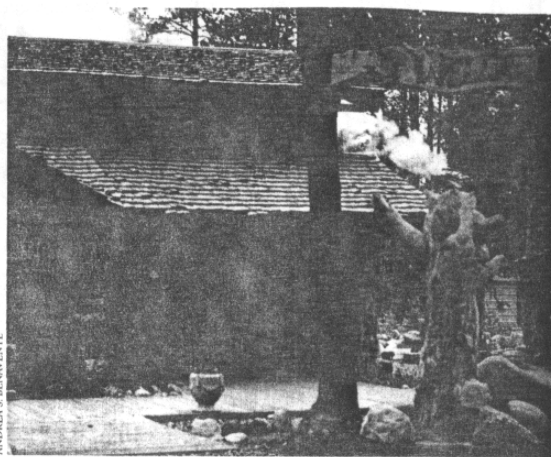
"We're going to fish wall-eyes this morning," one of them informs me between forkfuls, "and try for muskies in the afternoon." Sounds like a winning combination to me, I reply. This, after all, is the official Musky Capital of the World—the U.S. Patent Office awarded Boulder Junction the trademarked title in 1971.

The guide, who's characteristically tight-lipped about which of the area's 200-odd lakes he plans to fish, shows up and hustles his eager sports out the door. Their wives linger at the table, plotting their own adventures. Shopping seems to be at the top of the agenda, followed by reading, maybe even a nap. There's no particular sense of urgency—exactly the way a vacation ought to be.

As we head out to tackle those muskies, I can't help but smile. The air is crisp, the autumn woods smolder with color, the day seethes with promise. And within the knotty-pine, tradition-rich confines of Wildcat Lodge, anything goes.

Boulder Junction—by which I mean the vaguely defined sprawl of wild country that the village anchors and lends its name

**A village that anchors
a generous cut of the
wild North Woods.**



Upscale businesses, characterized by "contemporary rustic" storefronts, have transformed Boulder Junction into a retail mecca.

to—is about as generous a cut of the North Woods as you can fit on one plate. There's a profusion of lakes with alluring, evocative names, such as Fishtrap, Lost Canoe, Firefly and Tenderfoot, to name a few. The crown jewel, though, is Trout Lake, big, deep, clear, a magnet to vacationers for over a century. When the loggers took the timber in the late 1800s, their roads and rail lines made these waters accessible. The landscape was breathtakingly desolate; still, resorts were built (some of them quite grand), and Boulder Junction, a sleepy whistle stop in the middle of the cutover, became a fashionable destination.

It was especially attractive to fishermen—still is—and to muskie fishermen most of all. (It's said that their dollars built the schools in this part of the state.) This

robust sporting heritage is marvelously preserved by an exhibit of classic tackle, wooden boats, photographs of legendary guides like "Barefoot" Dean, and other fascinating memorabilia at the Vilas County Historical Museum in Sayner. I must confess that these artifacts interest me far more than the collection of vintage snowmobiles (including the rickety-looking Carl Eliason machine that spawned the whole noisy race) for which the museum is best known. Also, check out the exhibit of antique outboard motors loaned to the museum by Wayne Schoepke of Wausau, who's been collecting these old eggbeaters for over 30 years.

Another happy consequence of the logging era is that vast expanses of unwanted second growth became, for one reason or another, public property. Established in 1925, the North-

ern Highland-American Legion State Forest cradles Boulder Junction amid its 223,000 acres. It's truly a recreational wonderland, laced with multipurpose trails and dotted with campsites. Camping facilities range from the primitive to those at some larger units that offer showers and restrooms. The forest's 900-plus lakes provide myriad opportunities as well for the outdoor-minded. And with 400 miles of snowmobile trails and nine cross-country ski trails, the activity tapers off little in winter.

A gentle rain patters down as I set off on the Star Lake Nature Trail, an easy mile-and-a-half hike that presents a microcosm of the northern Wisconsin environment. Crimson maple leaves carpet my path; markers interpret the story of the land

from the epoch of the glaciers through the ravages visited by logging to the enlightened stewardship practiced today. A boardwalk leads through a stand of brooding black spruces to a bog pond where, if you listen carefully, you can hear the echoing silence of wilderness.

By the time I drive to the Escanaba-Pallete Lakes Trail, also within the state forest, the veil of clouds has lifted. It's the kind of day you'd sign a lifetime contract for: cool, sunny, gorgeous. Pristine and comely, Pallete Lake reveals itself to be a reflecting pool for the hues of October, the enamel blue of the sky, the deep reds and blazing golds of the maples and birches.

Of course, the most spectacular views of foliage are composed within a frame of sky and water. This explains why a tour that begins in the village of Boulder Junction and connects Vilas County highways K, P, W, B and M, skirting some dozen lakes along the way, is so unforgettable. But then, you can wander just about anywhere in this neck of the woods and be rewarded, so it pays to be intrepid. (You can pick up a Vilas County map at the Chamber of Commerce office.)

Ambling down the trail, I cross paths with a couple on mountain bikes who say how lucky they feel to be out in the woods on such a glorious day. More and more fat-tire enthusiasts gravitate to Boulder Junction every year. The Boulder Area Trail System (BATS) features a scenic, well-marked 10.2-mile mountain bike route that brushes the north shore of White Sand Lake before hooking up with the popular Lumberjack Trail. There's also a three-and-a-half mile paved trail, suitable for skinny tires and fat ones alike, that extends from the village to the North Trout Lake picnic area, situated on a shady height of land overlooking the water. Not far from there, at Cathedral Point, the towering pines make for one of the area's prettiest picnic spots.

October in Wisconsin's North Woods also means grouse and woodcock hunting. And, with miles of hunter walking trails

(not to mention old logging roads), Boulder Junction's one of the state's more productive places to indulge in this rite of autumn. The Langley Lake Trail System, in the Vilas County Forest (another 40,000-acre swatch of public land), has a birdy

few of the more notable merchants include The Fisherman's Wife, which features an eclectic assemblage of clothing, gifts and collectibles; The Blueberry Patch, where the emphasis is on furniture and fashions with a country accent; and The Hayloft, offering accessories and furnishings for traditional north country camps and cottages.

If you need to refuel, stop at Crusts & Crocks for fresh-from-the-oven baked goods. The Grannyberry pie (raspberry-apple-rhubarb) is unforgettable, and the macaroon cookies put all imitations to shame.

But for a taste of the North Woods that's as authentic as a shore lunch, you must experience Pat's Bait Bucket. There aren't many places like it left—Frederickson's on Star Lake comes to mind—and they're damn sure not making any new ones. Pat DeWitt has been dipping minnows and purveying tackle at this tiny, cluttered bait shop on the shores of Plum Lake for 59 years now. And in all that time, she's never sold a minnow that

didn't catch fish—or die trying. She's never met a stranger, either. Maybe I'll buy a Mepps spinner or a jointed Rapala, I say to myself. But I honestly don't need anything. So, instead, I settle for a candy bar and a Pepsi. Mostly, I wanted to say hi to Pat.

Down the road a piece, at the venerable Plum Lake Golf Club, a delightful nine-hole track laid out in the '20s (as was the area's other premier course, the Trout Lake Golf & Country Club), I'm reminded again of how close to the surface the outdoor heritage runs. A yellow Lab is curled up in front of the clubhouse entrance, snoozing in the sun; muddy waders, boots and other waterfowling paraphernalia are piled nearby against the brown clapboards, where bags of clubs normally rest. It's a lovely tableau that speaks volumes about the enduring spirit of the north country.

It also says that if you have a tee time at Plum Lake, you take whatever measures are necessary in order to arrive punctually—even if it means showing up in muddy waders. 🦿



look to it, so I slip the dogs and sally forth. Wonder of wonders, I manage to scratch down a brace of beautiful grouse, the makings for a romantic candlelit dinner somewhere down the line.

Later, at We Tie It, a new fly shop in "downtown" Boulder Junction, I trade the proprietor all the grouse feathers he wants for a handful of soft-hackle bead-head patterns that he swears are the hottest tickets for bluegills since the angleworm. This reminds me that I need to stop at the Bookworm for a paperback, having forgotten to pack my reading material. Bright, inviting and well-stocked, it's one of a number of upscale specialty shops that have transformed Boulder Junction into a North Woods retail mecca. The many attractive, "contemporary rustic" storefronts also make it the most palpably charming village in this rough-hewn quadrant.

A leisurely stroll around the town, browsing as you go, is a must. And while you'll find purveyors of everything from kayaks to candy to Christmas ornaments, a

